

History 484
Final Assignment

Politics of Victory: How the Chinese Civil
War was Won and Lost in a War Without
Blood, 1945-49

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Alex Wen

Introduction

The Chinese Civil War was a key conflict of the 20th century. As with most things China, this conflict occurred on gargantuan proportions with offensives involving millions of men and equally gargantuan implications on the disposition of power in Asia for decades to come, forming the basis of the Chinese powerhouse dominating Asia for better or for worse, today. The period of fighting between the Nationalists (GMD) and Communists (CCP), before the Japanese invasion, set up the conflict, but the results did not truly become decisive until the sweeping offensives of 1945-1949, in which the Communists resoundingly took hold of the entire Chinese mainland. Yet when we look at this period, we cannot help but ask: why did the Nationalists, with American (and briefly, even Soviet) support, better equipment, better infrastructure, and control of the major cities, lose, and the Communists, a ragtag guerilla army for the first time in years emerging out of the countryside, win? We all know the outcomes of the major battles, and the military machinations that enabled them, but was this the only Nationalist shortcoming? In many cases, we see that the political dispositions, and differences, between the warring factions played a significant, if not critical role in determining victory. The distinction in political policy between the Nationalists and Communists is as clear as their names indicate, but how important was this difference? If the Communists were not as victorious on the battlefield, was victory still inevitable? Exactly to what extent did political policy and decision making affect the outcome of the Chinese Civil War? This paper will seek to answer this question.

Background

“The Japanese are a disease of the skin; the Communists are a disease of the heart.”

- Jiang Jieshi

In many ways, the Japanese invasion and occupation of China for the better part of a decade was only a hiatus to a conflict that was already raging within China. When Jiang Jieshi emerged from the warlord era as the de facto most powerful military commander in China, he was quick to turn his attention, after quelling rebellious warlords, to the Communists. He had always regarded the Communists as a grave ideological threat, and even though in the early 1920s the Communists were but a small party with few members or resources - not to mention completely lacking the military capability to realistically jeopardize Jiang's rule - he saw the need to launch violent all-out purges against Communist groups in cities all across China. During these initial skirmishes, several failed popular Communist uprisings and their heavy-handed Nationalist put-downs marked an asymmetrical beginning to a distinctively asymmetrical war.

This first stage of fighting in the 1920s and 30s before the Japanese invasion critically sets up the theme for the remainder of the conflict. The Nationalists would be the superior conventional army and succeed in driving the Communists into the rural countryside and mountains. The Communists, having little choice, would start to rely on guerilla warfare, making the most of their strategic position, but limited resources and manpower. This shapes Mao and Jiang's respective military philosophies and methods of combat, but often overlooked is the political implications these developments made. The nascent CCP would begin to experiment with soviets and land reform; their reliance on peasants and farmers during this period made them realize the

potential of courting China's peasants and laborers, 375 million¹ of them. Meanwhile the GMD domination in the cities and urban areas would grant them contact with their American allies, infrastructure, a more conventional economy, a bureaucracy, and to all intents and purposes, a politically and economically more complete image of a "state," one with all the organs of government and one where leaders did not have to live in caves in the mountainside.

As the Japanese invasion came, this disposition of GMD and CCP policies would remain this way. When they turned to fight the Japanese, their methods did not change; the Communists were still fighting their guerilla war, and living off the land, and the Nationalists, in true bureaucratic fashion, would move their capital city farther and farther inland while their troops fought delaying and defensive battles. Then, the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan; the Soviet Union invaded Manchuria; and, in March 1946, the Soviets withdrew; by this time, both the Communists and Nationalists eyed control of Manchuria. The stage was now set for the Civil War to resume between these two very different regimes.

¹ E. R. Hooton, *The Greatest Tumult: The Chinese Civil War, 1936-49* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 4.

Disparity

“Politics is war without blood, while war is politics with blood.”

- Mao Zedong

There is no doubt that the GMD political leadership was poor, and the biggest symptom of this was how poorly the Chinese economy fared under the GMD. This was not a new problem for Jiang; the GMD had trouble financing their war against Japan as well. Selling bonds was not enough; taxation was not enough; the only way forward for the GMD was to print paper currency.² This had disastrous consequences. People who had savings, and people with skills – in other words, the middle class – had their savings wiped out. Not only was this overall detrimental to the Nationalist economy and eroded the economic edge they had over the Communists by retaining over control the major population centers, this also had the added effect of exhausting any public support the GMD could have hoped for. This was the support of skilled workers, academics, teachers, and bureaucrats – the kind of people which the Communists had fewer of in the countryside, and which constituted a major part of the initial Nationalist advantage. This was exacerbated by the GMD revaluation of the *Fabi*,³ artificially setting at a rate which undermined the Japanese occupation currency, and which single-handedly

² Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 18.

³ Diana Lary, *China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 48.

crippled much of the people who had been living in occupied areas. All this meant that “throughout China, inflation roared out of hand.”⁴

Perhaps most critically, however, the economic chaos also affected the soldiers and their officers. Corruption became commonplace as soldiers could not support themselves; officers turned on their men, withholding wages.⁵ Embezzlement became the norm, and much of this strife fell on peasants and citizens, often the prey of soldiers’ extortion and the victims of the military hardware flowing into a black market. The economic impacts on the military had two main facets: it crippled morale, sapping the GMD soldiers’ will to fight, and it pitted the soldiers against the population, further reducing public support of the GMD. Such effects resulting from political and economic leadership had a lasting impact on the GMD as a fighting force, directly reducing its efficacy.

While the failure of the economy can be at least in part attributed to poor GMD leadership and policy, there were, of course, other factors that contributed to the economic and political disaster that were outside of GMD control, and worked to ensure that a recovery from their mistake would be very difficult, if not impossible. It must be remembered that the GMD, in a way, inherited many of their problems. In just a few short months after the Japanese surrender, the GMD would immediately go from controlling 15% of China’s land area to over 80%.⁶ This placed a colossal number of people under GMD rule, and suddenly the GMD was expected to

⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁵ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 19.

⁶ Westad, Odd Arne. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 69.

“show initiative, strength, and cohesion;”⁷ in such overwhelming circumstances it is difficult to imagine even the most capable, stable governments adapting to such change – for the GMD, only just emerging out of a war which crippled them, and laden with corruption, this task proved impossible, further explaining why the GMD lost popular support for its war. For many, it seemed that the GMD was more concerned with preserving its own power while its hungry soldiers preyed upon the population. For a country emerging from a brutal Japanese occupation, this is not the treatment people had expected. Even if Jiang had the hopes to right the course, it would be impossible, with the transportation infrastructure barely functioning. The war had taken its toll on railways, waterways, and roads, which above all hurt dense population centers like cities, and further paralyzed the economy hampering any hopes of recovery from the inflation. Communist guerillas actively destroyed rail and road links, which ultimately hurt the GMD more than anybody else as it stifled any kind of development in the cities.

Yet it was not the economy alone that jeopardized the GMD from within. During this time, a combination of deteriorating living conditions, resistance to continued war, and disgust at rampant corruption precipitated a massive nationwide student protest in May 1947.⁸ The GMD response was a public disaster: in Nanjing, student protestors were attacked by military units, hundreds were beaten, and newspapers that reported favorably on the movement were also attacked.⁹ This would become a public symbol of the GMD: shooting its own students in its own cities, showing its authoritarian and repressive tastes. The political effects were devastating. Although protests were quelled, this caused further public distrust in the GMD, especially from

⁷ Westad, Odd Arne. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 69.

⁸ *Ibid*, 102.

⁹ *Ibid*.

intellectuals and experts who saw this as a weakness in the GMD's control. Critically, however, the repression forced these student groups underground, into hiding, and ultimately, into the countryside,¹⁰ where the Communists awaited them with open arms. By late fall 1947, the Communists had control of the student movement.¹¹ Again, the Nationalists had played their political hand poorly, and this time, not only did they alienate their population further, they drove them directly over in support of the enemy.

In the countryside that they did control, the GMD fared little better; they (sometimes forcefully and violently) requisitioned grain from peasants, and introduced deeply unpopular land taxes that, paradoxically, had the poorest pay the most.¹² Thousands of peasants suffered immensely under these circumstances, and irresponsible rural policy only worked in unison with the rampant inflation to cause the government and landowners to be harsher and harsher to the peasants. As E. R. Hooton describes it, the countryside was "milked mercilessly;" the logical conclusion that Hooton also realizes is that peasants "often welcomed Communist rule to escape the crushing burden of the fiscal obligation imposed upon them."¹³ Nationalist policy in the countryside was an utter disaster that further drained public support, this time from peasants. This also ensured that the countryside would remain unproductive, exacerbating inflation and putting strain on the massive military.

The GMD in this period was not only politically incompetent, failing to realize the detrimental effects their policies were having, but also intent on cracking down on critical voices. These

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² E. R. Hooton, *The Greatest Tumult: The Chinese Civil War, 1936-49* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 44.

¹³ Ibid, 45.

actions collectively drained public support and hampered their soldiers from behind. They had no home front.

Yet now we must ask, was the home front of politics won by the Communists as much as it was lost by the Nationalists? Communist policy was based chiefly on the countryside; this meant that they would not run into many of the problems the Nationalists inherited, but they would certainly have problems of their own.

One of the most defining aspects of Communist rule in the Chinese Civil War period was that almost everything was geared towards total war in mind. Mao, himself familiar with the life-or-death struggles that threatened the party in the 1920s and 30s, realized that defeat would mean total annihilation. In this respect, the CCP was not so different from the GMD, but in general, the CCP were much more successful – though not flawlessly – both economically and in winning public support.

The hallmark of Communist rural policy was radical land reform, a fundamental shift of land ownership from the landowners to the peasants. In the most successful cases, these relieved landowners of their property and allocated land for each peasant;¹⁴ to many of them, this was a welcome and life-changing policy. The result of this was that these peasants directly supported the Communist war effort through providing supplies, intelligence, and recruits; in this sense, the politics of the Communists were successfully feeding their military.

¹⁴ Ibid, 46.

However, the land reforms were not completely successful. Land reform fundamentally involves taking the land of some and giving it to others; such a radical, sweeping policy lacking the bureaucratic nuance meant that in many cases land was being taken from local village leaders who had worked with the Communists and were considered invaluable allies due to their leadership and familiarity with local affairs.¹⁵ CCP leaders were wary of the threat of losing such support, and consequently relaxed land reform in 1947 by introducing certain exemptions that retained the support of such leaders. The Communists demonstrated an ability to enact peaceful, successful changes to retain public support when such a problem arose; comparatively, the Nationalist approach was of heavy-handed repression and the suppression of problematic groups and dissidents. This clear difference between the Communist and Nationalist approaches contributed to the disparity of public support that was enjoyed.

The Communists were ultimately, however, still at war, and the instant tactical requirements of war took precedence over considerations of preserving public support when the two were in conflict. For example, over 5 million unarmed civilians including children were mostly forced to support the Communist fighting by carrying food and supplies.¹⁶ In some cases, they were forced to act as human shields for the advancing CCP infantry, being mowed down by gunfire in the front line with no means to fight back.¹⁷ This would have no doubt crippled public support for the Communists in certain pockets of disgruntled peasants, but it no doubt made a sizeable contribution to the Communist military success. The CCP was extremely good at balancing their

¹⁵ Westad, Odd Arne. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 116.

¹⁶ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

needs; they maintained high public support to support their fighting, but in cases where it was needed this public support could be sacrificed for an important military objective. This way, they were able to maintain acceptable levels of satisfaction in the population as well as supplement their military when needed. This kind of versatility was something the Nationalists acutely lacked.

A summary of Communist policy could be boiled down to “not perfect, but good enough.” So long as the CCP made an effort to retain the support of the population, they were already doing better than the GMD, whose political blunders were actively undermining theirs, even if the CCP were sometimes willing to march unarmed civilians into battle.

Outcome

It is clear now that the Communists through their policies had the superior public support of their population base, while the Nationalists were actively eroding theirs. What did this mean for the war? It means that the Communists could rely on millions of people and locals for intelligence, could recruit millions of (often willing and enthusiastic) soldiers, and could satisfy the colossal logistical requirements, on an already-paralyzed transportation system, to meet the demands of a war on this scale.

This public support eluded the Nationalists, who had the opposite situation. Their soldiers deserted by the unit or by the garrison. They could not pay their soldiers and did not even have a robust ideological basis with which to push their miserable people on when there was no money to do the job. The presence and lack of public support, as we see, directly influences how effective the military was. Then it is perhaps no surprise that the Communist victory was so decisive.

Conclusion

The political disparities of the Chinese Civil War *created* its military disparities. It is precisely because the CCP had more popular policies that they were able to field larger, more enthusiastic armies, while the GMD's unpopular policies and incompetent economic management demoralized their soldiers and guaranteed that there would be few replacements. The outcome of the Chinese Civil War is one which superficially appears to be the product of a superior military fighting an inferior one. But upon a closer look, we realize that it is because of the politics of

popular support and economics that gave one military such an advantage over another. This explains a source of our initial curiosity – whereas the war started as a group of ragtag guerillas against a modern, conventional army, the politics of the conflict transformed the guerillas into a larger, much more potent force. Hence, even if the CCP commanders were not as talented, and suffered more defeats than they had, there is no doubt that the CCP only would have gotten stronger with time while the GMD would have gotten weaker.

The outcome of the Chinese Civil War was guaranteed by the politics, which in themselves, I would argue, played a greater role than the military could, as the strength of the military was always dependent on the politics supporting from behind. Perhaps this is not a surprising result; after all, this was pointed out by Sunzi over two millennia ago.

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