

**Key terms**

**Politburo:** short for political bureau. This group of 14 senior members of the Party, elected by the larger Central Committee, was the Party's major decision-making body. In practice, the smaller Standing Committee of the Politburo made most of the day-to-day decisions.

**People's Republic of China (PRC):** on 1 October 1949, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China.

**Key profile**

**Peng Dehuai**

Peng Dehuai (1898–1974) was a veteran of the Communist Party's struggles during the 1930s, particularly the Long March, and had been a communist commander during the Second World War. He joined the Party **Politburo** in 1945. After 1954 Peng Dehuai became Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the PLA, following his successful command over the Chinese forces during the Korean War (1950–3).

By late September, with most of China under communist control, Mao called a Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. Although dominated by the Communists, there were representatives from 14 other parties at the conference. This conference elected the members of the new central government of the **People's Republic of China (PRC)**, including Mao Zedong as its Chairman. Desperate to avoid capture by the Communists, Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island of Taiwan and established a Guomindang government there.

**Activity**

**Revision exercise**

Copy and complete the table below. In the second column list the main battles/events of each phase of the Civil War. In the last column, select one key event for each phase that marked an important turning point in the war and write a short explanation to show why it was important.

	Major events of each phase of the Civil War	Key turning points and their importance
Phase 1		
Phase 2		
Phase 3		

**Summary questions**

- 1 Explain why civil war was likely by August 1945.
- 2 Explain why civil war broke out in 1946.

**War and communist victory**

*In this chapter you will learn about:*

- the political and military strengths of the Communist Party in 1946
- the strengths and weaknesses of the Guomindang in 1946 and the role of Chiang Kai-shek
- the impact on the people of communist discipline and land reforms
- the reasons for communist victory
- the role of Mao Zedong in achieving that victory.

I missed the first contingents of infantry and cavalry, as well as part of the motorised units. But in what I did see, lasting about an hour, I counted over 250 heavy motor vehicles of all kinds – tanks, armoured cars, trucks of soldiers, trucks mounted with machine-guns, trucks towing heavy artillery. Behind them followed innumerable ambulances, jeeps and other smaller vehicles. As probably the greatest demonstration of military might in history, the spectacle was enormously impressive. But what made it especially memorable to Americans was the fact that it was primarily a display of American military equipment, virtually all of it captured or obtained by bribe from Guomindang forces in the short space of two and a half years.

**1** *An American observer reports on the PLA's march into Beijing, February 1949*

**The political and military strength of the Communist Party in 1946**

**Table 1** *Estimated strength of nationalist and communist forces in China, August 1945*

	Nationalists	Communists
Troops	2,800,000	320,000
Artillery pieces	6,000	600

*Note: These figures are estimates. Other sources give estimates of communist strength at around 800,000 to 900,000 troops in 1945. However, all sources agree that the Communists had far fewer troops than the Nationalists.*

*Source: J. D. Spence, The Search for Modern China, 1990*

Table 1 shows that, at the end of the Second World War, the nationalist forces in China had an overwhelming advantage over the Communists in both numbers of troops and equipment. You should note also that the Nationalists had an air force with aircraft supplied by their American allies whereas the Communists had no aircraft. The communist forces were concentrated in 19 base areas including their main base in Yan'an; over the country as a whole the CPC ruled over some 90 million people in a country of about 600 million. During the course of 1945 and early 1946, nationalist forces drove the Communists out of most of their base areas. From a military point of view, therefore, it appeared that the Nationalists had the best chance of winning the Civil War. There were, however, a number of political and military factors that strengthened the Communists' position.



**Fig. 1** *Mao Zedong (left) and other leading communists at the Seventh Party Congress of the CPC in 1945*

### Exploring the detail

#### Rival factions in the Communist Party

The early CPC was dominated by leaders who followed a strict Marxist line for Chinese Communism.

This group was referred to as the '28 Bolsheviks' or the 'returned students'. Mao opposed this group because he believed that the CPC should concentrate on building its support among the peasants in the countryside who, in his eyes, showed great revolutionary enthusiasm. This was the opposite of the returned students' approach, which was to concentrate on building support among workers in the cities.

### Exploring the detail

#### Mao's tactical flexibility

Although the Communist Party's ultimate aims involved class struggle against landlords, businessmen and other members of the bourgeoisie, Mao showed flexibility in adapting his tactics to different situations. In the war against the Japanese, for example, he emphasised that this was a national struggle in which all classes should cooperate.

### Key term

**Bourgeoisie:** a term adopted by Marx to describe the owners of businesses in a capitalist system. Mao often referred to the 'national bourgeoisie' in China, meaning the owners of businesses but also members of the professions such as lawyers, doctors, professors and engineers.

### Activity

#### Revision exercise

Summarise the main sources of communist strength at the start of the Civil War under the following headings: Political strengths; Military strengths; other strengths.

### Political unity

In its first 20 years, the Communist Party of China had been split by disputes between rival factions. By 1945, this was in the past. During the period the Communists spent in Yan'an, Mao established himself as the undisputed leader of the Party, either by outwitting and removing his opponents or by winning the arguments. His leadership was authoritarian and he was determined to ensure that his political line – Mao Zedong Thought – was accepted and followed by the rest of the Party. Debates over policy and strategy were allowed within the top Party leadership but these no longer became the focus for bitter divisions within the Party. Mao's reputation had been established during the Yan'an years because his policy of building a party based on the peasants and his strategy of fighting a guerrilla war had been proved to be the most practical strategy to follow.

Party unity was the foundation on which communist success was built. It gave the leadership of the Communist Party, including the top-ranking political and military leaders, an aura of confidence and authority. This impressed not only lower-ranking Communists but also people who were not members of the Party.

### Democratic dictatorship

In areas under communist control – the so-called 'liberated areas' – Mao imposed a form of government that combined elements of dictatorship with elements of democracy. All political activity and decision making was under the leadership and guidance of the Communist Party, but at a local level there was scope for non-members from among the peasants and other classes to participate in 'revolutionary committees' and mass meetings. These committees dealt with education, health, farming and land reform as well as political and military training. This mass participation was an important factor in building up support for communist rule in these areas. The system of local government established by the Communists in rural areas was the first effective local administration these areas had ever experienced.

### Experience on the battlefield

Communist forces had developed their skills of fighting a guerrilla war during the long struggle against the Japanese. These skills would be of great value in the coming Civil War against the Nationalists. The communist forces did not, however, have experience of fighting conventional battles, which would prove to be a disadvantage in the early stages of the war.

### Motivation

Mao firmly believed that a successful army needed troops who were motivated by an ideological commitment to the struggle. Political indoctrination of communist troops, therefore, was a vital part of their training. Not only would this mean that communist forces would endure the dangers and sacrifices of a long and hard military campaign better than their less committed opponents, but they would also be a vital means by which communist propaganda was spread. When communist troops entered an area not previously under their control, they would be the first Communists the local inhabitants would encounter. They had an important role in winning over the local population to the communist cause.

## The strengths and weaknesses of the Guomindang in 1946

### Military

As Table 1 on page 21 shows, the Guomindang possessed an army that was far larger and better equipped than the communist forces at the beginning of the Civil War. They also had an air force that could provide their troops on the ground with aerial support, something that military strategists believed was crucial in modern warfare. Although nationalist forces had not achieved much success in the war against Japan, they had gained experience of fighting conventional battles which communist forces were lacking.

On the other hand, many nationalist troops were poorly trained, low on morale and lacking in discipline. When taking over areas formerly controlled by Communists, nationalist troops gained a reputation for brutality and ill-discipline among local populations who were often terrorised into submission. This was a mainly conscript army in which ordinary soldiers had little incentive to fight. Troops often went days without food and water and their pay was frequently stolen by their officers. Heavy losses in battle and desertions severely weakened the nationalist armies.

There is good evidence that apathy, resentment and defeatism are spreading fast in nationalist ranks, causing surrenders and desertions. Main factors contributing to this are: Communists ever mounting numerical superiority; nationalist soldiers' discouragement over prospects of getting reinforcements; better solidarity and fighting spirit of Communists; losses and exhaustion of Nationalists.

2

*Adapted from a report from an American consul in Shenyang, May 1947*

### Territorial control

Territorially, the Nationalists controlled more territory than the Communists. Not only did the GMD have, in theory at least, most of the Chinese population under their rule, they also crucially controlled most of China's large cities, most of the railway network and most of the main waterways.

Nationalist 'control' in many areas, however, was never complete. Many warlords had not been defeated by the Guomindang. Instead, compromises had been reached that left warlords in control over their own areas while the Nationalists were in charge of the central government. Lack of effective control over the whole country weakened the ability of the Nationalists to mobilise the whole nation in support of their struggle.



Fig. 2 Mao Zedong talks to soldiers of the PLA

### Foreign support

Foreign support was a major asset to the Nationalists. The Guomindang government was recognised by foreign powers, including the Soviet Union, as the legitimate government of China. The Americans supplied military equipment to the Nationalists and American transport aircraft airlifted nationalist troops to the north in August 1945 so that they could be in position to accept the Japanese surrender.

Foreign support, however, came at a cost to the Nationalists. Chiang Kai-shek's dependence on foreign aid undermined his claim to be the true defender of the nation's interests. At the same time, Chiang's allies grew increasingly critical of his style of government and his personal failings. The Americans' frustration with Chiang is well reflected in the comment by the American general Joseph Stilwell, who was sent to China during the Second World War to liaise with the Nationalists. 'Chiang same as ever,' he wrote, 'a grasping, bigoted, ungrateful little rattlesnake.'

### Key profile

#### Joseph Stilwell

Joseph Stilwell (1883–1946) was the American military commander in the China–Burma–India theatre of operations during the Second World War. As such, he was the American officer who had the responsibility for liaising with the leader of the nationalist Chinese government, Chiang Kai-shek. Stilwell's clashes with Chiang caused him to be replaced in 1944 by another American general. He gained the nickname 'Vinegar Joe' because of his reputation for being difficult to work with and his sharp tongue.

### Lack of popular support

The Guomindang's three principles – Nationalism, democracy, people's livelihood – had attracted widespread support for the Party in the 1920s and 1930s among China's educated middle classes. The failure of the nationalist government to deliver on any of these promises had seen much of this support ebb away. The party had failed to defend national interests; had created a dictatorial, not a democratic, regime; and had done little to improve the livelihood of the people. The Guomindang as a party stood aloof from society and had not tried to build mass support. Instead, Chiang's regime depended for its survival on the financial backing of wealthy businessmen and landlords and on the ruthlessness of the secret police in removing political opposition. Assassinations of political opponents, and the torture and execution of suspected Communists without trial, were all used to maintain Chiang's one-party State.

### Corruption and inefficiency

The Guomindang regime was both corrupt and inefficient. Local officials abused their powers to enrich themselves by taking bribes and extorting money from local people. Taxes that should have been used to pay for the costs of administration and the armies were not collected in a fair and efficient way and much of the tax revenue failed to reach central government. The result was that Chiang's government was forced to borrow heavily and was permanently in debt.

Corruption was so widespread that the Guomindang set up a special organisation to combat it. It was the 'Tiger-Beating Squad' because people compared corrupt officials to fearsome tigers, and it invited people to send in their complaints. But it soon became apparent that this was a means for the really powerful to extort money from the rich. 'Tiger-Beating' was a lucrative job.

3

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, 1992

### Chiang's leadership

As President of the Republic of China and leader of the Guomindang Party, Chiang Kai-shek was primarily responsible for the failures of his government:

- His regime was weak and divided by factional rivalry.
- He was hard-working and ruthless but he could not delegate power to his subordinates. He tried to control what his commanders on the battlefield were doing even though he was far removed from the action. Often his decisions were impractical and contradictory.
- He was a poor judge of character. He trusted those people whom he liked, even when it became apparent that some of them were incompetent or, even worse, working against him.
- He had a close network of supporters in the nationalist army and in business circles whom he rewarded with jobs and contracts. On the other hand, he was suspicious of more independent-minded men, especially among his commanders. Promotion and advancement in the nationalist army depended not on ability but on loyalty and connections.
- He did not act decisively to stamp out corruption or to remove incompetent officials.



Fig. 3 Chiang Kai-shek's weaknesses

Chiang's American allies had noted his weaknesses as a political leader and military commander during the Second World War. They had also commented on his stubbornness and inability to change. In the fast-moving events of the Civil War that was about to begin, Chiang's inflexible and dictatorial nature were serious disadvantages. Many of the serious strategic mistakes that were made by the nationalist forces were the result of decisions made by Chiang Kai-shek alone.

### The impact on the people of communist discipline and land reforms

In an overwhelmingly rural society such as China in the 1940s, the support of the peasants was crucial to the success of any political party. Ever since the CPC had been driven out of major cities like Shanghai in 1927, it had concentrated on building up support with China's millions of peasants, particularly among the poorest peasants who Mao believed were the most revolutionary. Mao's strategy for winning peasant support had two main elements: discipline and land reforms.

### Activity

#### Revision exercise

- 1 Summarise the main weaknesses of the Nationalists in the Civil War under the following headings: Political weaknesses; Military weaknesses.
- 2 Compare the leadership of Chairman Mao with that of Chiang Kai-shek. What were Mao's main strengths in comparison to Chiang?