

### Exploring the detail

#### The People's Liberation Army

Communist forces in the 1930s had generally been referred to as the Red Army, although in practice there were a number of separate forces (field armies) in different parts of China. In 1946, the various armies were reorganised into the People's Liberation Army, with a single command structure. The choice of the name reflected the Communists' term for the Civil War: the 'war of liberation'.



Fig. 4 Mao Zedong in northern Shaanxi during the Civil War, 1947

### Disciplined behaviour by communist troops

Since 1928, Mao had impressed on soldiers in the communist forces the need for proper discipline and to treat the civilian population with respect. These rules were added to over the years and were then reissued to the army, now known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from 1946.

Three main rules of discipline:

- 1 Obey orders in all your actions.
- 2 Don't take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.
- 3 Turn in everything captured.

Eight points for attention:

- 1 Speak politely.
- 2 Pay fairly for what you buy.
- 3 Return everything you borrow.
- 4 Pay for anything you damage.
- 5 Don't hit or swear at people.
- 6 Don't damage crops.
- 7 Don't take liberties with women.
- 8 Don't ill-treat captives.

4 *Instructions from the general headquarters of the PLA, 1947. From Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

These instructions were designed to fulfil Mao's promise that the 'army and the people are one'. Mao believed that the PLA had a vital political role to play in spreading communist ideology in areas that they occupied, and he also believed that actions were as important as words in convincing people that the Communists genuinely offered a better future.

Mao's communist guerrillas also appealed to the peasants on another level. Many peasants were nationalistic in their outlook, desiring a China that was free and independent of foreign interference and control. They especially supported the national struggle against the Japanese invaders. Mao's Communists were able to present themselves as a truly patriotic fighting force, in contrast with Chiang's nationalist forces which depended on American aid and had weakened the struggle against the Japanese by fighting against the Communists.

### Land reforms

In areas controlled by the Communists, land reforms were introduced to benefit the poorest peasants and win their support for the communist cause. In Yan'an in the 1930s, for example, confiscation of land from the landlords and wealthier peasants and its redistribution among the poorest peasants had helped to cement popular support for the Communists in the countryside. During the Second World War, however, in order to maintain a United Front with the Nationalists against Japan, the Communists moderated their land reform programme. They implemented rent reductions and taxed richer peasants so that they were forced to sell off some of their land to poorer peasants, rather than antagonising the landlords by forcibly confiscating their land. In 1945, therefore, Mao was taking a cautious approach to land reform.

### Activity

#### Challenge your thinking

'Land reform was the key to the Communists' success in the Civil War.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

### Cross-reference

Details on Party cadres can be found on page 43.

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#### The reign of terror

It has been estimated that as many as 16 million people were subjected to some degree of physical abuse or humiliation, with the numbers killed running into hundreds of thousands. In one village in Shandong province in 1948, 120 people were beaten to death, including two boys aged seven.

Rent reduction must be the result of mass struggle, not a favour from the government. Only then can we persuade the masses and enable them to understand that it is in the interests of the peasants and the people as a whole to allow the landlords to make a living so that they will not help the GMD. The present policy of our Party is still to reduce rents, not to confiscate land.

5 *Mao's land reform policy, November 1945. From Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

As the Civil War got under way and the PLA began to occupy new areas, land reform policy became more radical.

After the Japanese surrender the peasants urgently demanded land and we made a timely decision to change our policy from reducing rent and interest to confiscating the land of the landlord class for distribution among the peasants. The Outline Land Law provides for equal distribution of land per head based on the principle of abolishing the land system of feudal exploitation and putting into effect the system of land to the tillers. To carry out the land reform resolutely and thoroughly it is necessary to organise in the villages first of all poor peasants' leagues composed of poor peasants and farm labourers and their elected committees.

6 *Mao's land reform policy, December 1947. From Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

In 1946, when the Civil War began, the Communists returned to their more radical policy of confiscation of large estates in their 'land to the tillers' programme. In other words, the Party reverted to class struggle and began to move away from the United Front policies pursued earlier. Violence was an integral part of this process. At village rallies organised by CPC cadres, landlords and richer peasants were denounced and subjected to humiliation and violence. In many cases whole families were the victims – the children of landlords were labelled 'little landlords'. By early 1948, the campaign of terror had become so violent that some CPC members began to petition Mao for restraint. Mao called a halt, claiming that the excesses had been due to the mistakes of lower level communist officials.

The fear of revenge by landlords if the GMD recaptured control of an area also pushed the peasants towards supporting the Communists. The GMD used landlords' militias to regain control of villages. Once back under control, landlords exacted revenge on peasants who had participated in land reform. The land was forcibly taken back, rent arrears were collected at gunpoint and there were executions. In some cases landlords executed one member of every family that had participated in land reform.



Fig. 5 A painting showing peasants denouncing a landlord during a land reform campaign

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Labourers in Manchuria

In Manchuria the CPC conscripted 1.6 million labourers who were employed in digging trenches, demolishing captured fortifications and transporting ammunition and the wounded. These peasant auxiliaries were crucial to the PLA in freeing regular troops to concentrate on fighting.

Under pressure from both Communists and Nationalists, and with the incentive of land reform, it was not surprising that the ranks of the PLA were swelled with new recruits from the peasants. The PLA also relied on a vast army of peasant auxiliaries to support the regular troops.

The reasons for the ultimate Communist victory



Fig. 6 People in Nanjing await the arrival of PLA troops, April 1949

The Communist victory in 1949 was primarily a military victory. Any explanation of the reasons for this victory, therefore, must begin with an examination of the tactics and strategy of the PLA. In such a complex historical event as the Chinese Civil War, however, a range of other factors – political, economic, social and diplomatic – played their part in determining the final outcome. We have already seen in Chapter 1 how, despite the larger size of the nationalist forces in 1946, the Communists started the war with several advantages over their opponents. As the war went on, nationalist weaknesses and communist strengths had a decisive impact on the outcome of the war.

Military factors

In the war against the Japanese the Communists had learned valuable lessons in how to fight against numerically superior forces. Guerrilla warfare had proved to be highly effective against the Japanese and was to be equally successful against the Nationalists in Manchuria, an area that was geographically well suited for this type of warfare because of its hilly terrain and large forested areas. Mao had written in the 1930s that,



Fig. 7 Mao believed that guerrilla warfare was like the battle between an elephant and a tiger. In a straight battle, the elephant would win because of its size. If the tiger, however, kept attacking and then running, the elephant would eventually die from blood loss and exhaustion

when fighting a superior enemy, communist forces should establish base areas in the mountains and fight a campaign of surprise attacks against the enemy's weakest points. Using these tactics of 'wear and tear', the Communists were able to pick off nationalist units one by one, thereby gradually reducing their numerical advantage. They were also able to seize the initiative in the war, dominating rural areas and striking at vital communications routes such as railway lines, while the GMD forces were increasingly isolated in their city strongholds.

Communist military leadership

In Lin Biao, Mao had a military commander of outstanding ability. During 1947 he successfully transformed the PLA into a conventional army. The PLA absorbed much of the army of the Manchukuo puppet government in Manchuria and increased its strength with new recruits from peasant supporters. Later in the war, the PLA's main source of new troops was from nationalist units that had surrendered. Through intensive training in the use of weapons captured from the enemy and political indoctrination of the troops at large rallies, the PLA became a formidable fighting force. Lin Biao and the other PLA commanders moved over to an offensive strategy which brought victory first in Manchuria and later in northern, central and finally southern China.

Table 2 Estimated strength of nationalist and communist forces in China, June 1948

	Nationalists	Communists (PLA)
Troops	2,200,000	1,560,000
Artillery pieces	21,000	22,800

Note: These figures are estimates. Other sources have calculated that communist troop numbers in 1948 were much higher.

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

Nationalist errors

Chiang's first serious error was to send his best troops into Manchuria without securing complete control over northern and central China. In

The basis of guerrilla war is to spread out and arouse the masses [to join in the struggle], and concentrate regular forces only when you can destroy the enemy. Fight when you know you can win. Don't fight battles you may lose.

In their operations guerrilla units have to concentrate the maximum forces, act secretly and swiftly, attack the enemy by surprise and bring battles to a quick decision. The basic principle of guerrilla warfare must be offensive and guerrilla warfare is more offensive in its character than regular warfare. The offensive, moreover, must take the form of surprise attacks.

7

By Chairman Mao. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

Activity

Source analysis

Study Source 7 and figure 7.

- 1 What were the basic principles of guerrilla warfare as outlined by Mao?
- 2 Why was it necessary for the PLA to adopt guerrilla warfare at the start of the Civil War?

Exploring the detail

The Manchukuo puppet government

After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Japanese renamed the area Manchukuo and established a government that was under their control.

Activity

Revision exercise

Using information in this chapter, summarise the main reasons why the Communists had been able to increase their military strength.

Manchuria his forces were spread too thinly, their supply lines were too long and they were highly vulnerable to the Communists' guerrilla warfare. The loss of Manchuria in early 1948 was a crucial defeat for Chiang. Corrupt and incompetent leadership of GMD forces also played its part in their defeat. A mainly conscript army, which was often left for days without adequate food and water, lacked fighting spirit; deaths from cold and hunger as well as desertions sapped the strength of nationalist forces and left many of them only too willing to surrender to the Communists.

#### Communist agents in the nationalist forces

Although nationalist troops often lacked the will to fight, many of their commanders were, in fact, communist agents. The nationalist commander in Manchuria, Wei Lihuang, was a communist agent who handed the initiative in this vital campaign to PLA forces and kept his forces in Manchuria long after their position had become hopeless, thereby ensuring that they suffered an even more catastrophic defeat. During the Beijing-Tianjin campaign, the nationalist commander Fu Zuoyi was loyal to Chiang Kai-shek but his daughter, who had access to all her father's campaign plans, was a communist agent who fed information to the PLA. In the battle for Nanjing, two senior nationalist generals, Lin Fei and Guo Rugui, were working for the Communists. The value to the Communists of having these 'moles' working at the highest levels in the GMD command was immense. The Nationalists, however, were unsuccessful in their efforts to infiltrate the Communists. Mao was innately suspicious and determined to root out any enemy agents. His ruthless use of terror to enforce control meant that there was no space within which agents could operate effectively.

#### Broadening the base of communist support

Under Mao's leadership, the Communists had concentrated on establishing themselves as a mainly peasant-based party. Communist policies of land reform were crucial in attracting peasant support for the Party. As peasants formed the vast majority of China's population, this was the best course of action for a party that aspired to be a mass movement. The PLA was largely made up of recruits from the peasants. The Communists' main bases were in the countryside. In order to take control over the government of China, however, it was necessary to take over the cities that were the centres of administration, industry, trade and communications.

During the course of the struggles against the Japanese and the Nationalists, the Party began to broaden the base of its supporters. In Manchuria during the Second World War, CPC members arrested by the Japanese came from a wide variety of occupations. They included peasant farmers, factory and railway workers, teachers, students and policemen. There were also some communist supporters among the middle classes who had been drawn to the Party by its patriotic record in the fight against the Japanese. Until the final stages of the Civil War, however, the CPC had only limited support in large cities. Although the Communists had infiltrated trades unions in large

### Activity

#### Talking point

Discuss why the presence of communist agents at the highest levels in the nationalist forces gave the Communists such an advantage during the Civil War.

### Cross-reference

For more on communist policies regarding land reform, see pages 26–8.

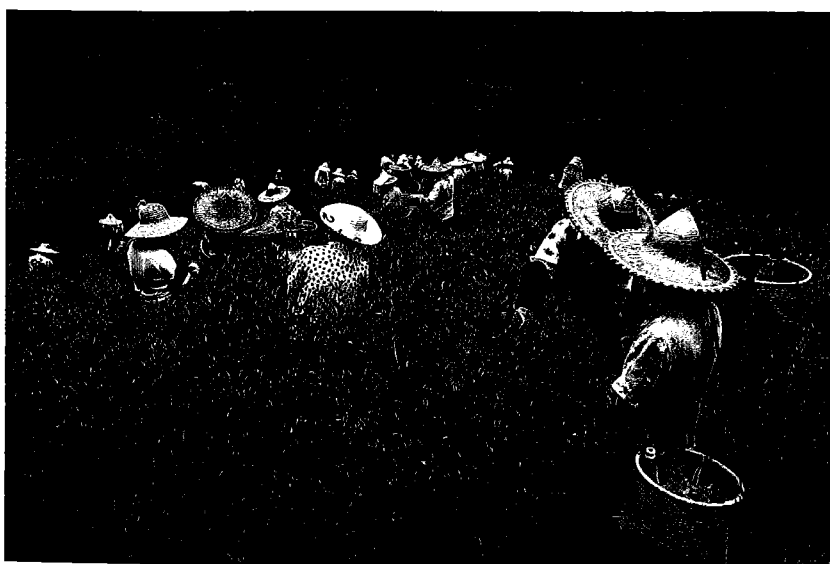


Fig. 8 Tea leaf pickers in China – one aspect of Chinese agriculture

industrial cities such as Shanghai and were able to use this to undermine the GMD by organising strikes, there was only limited CPC organisation in these cities before they were captured by the PLA.

From 1927 to the present the centre of gravity of our work has been in the villages. The period for this method of work has now ended. The period of the city leading the village has now begun. The centre of gravity of the Party's work has shifted from the village to the city.

8

By Chairman Mao, 5 March 1949. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

Having captured a city, however, the Communists were adept at attracting support through a variety of means. They were skilled at using newspapers, films and radio to spread communist propaganda. PLA troops were well disciplined and under orders not to loot and plunder the cities they captured – in marked contrast to the unruly behaviour of GMD troops. In the early stages of the war, Harbin in northern Manchuria was the only city controlled by the Communists; it was there that they learned how to administer a large urban area efficiently. Communist officials were effective in preventing crime, controlling the distribution of scarce food supplies and introducing a fair system of taxation. The experience gained in Harbin was then applied in other cities as they fell under communist control. By the spring of 1949, the PLA had captured so many cities that the Party had to reorientate its policies to reflect the changing situation. Now the priorities were to feed large urban populations, maintain production and prevent inflation of prices. Although they did not completely succeed in their efforts, their labours were praised by both foreign and Chinese observers.

#### Economic mismanagement by the nationalist government

**15 May 1947.** Rice prices have more than doubled in the past two weeks and the riots are spreading even to the countryside. Students and teachers are becoming increasingly violent and many heads were cracked in the Nanjing demonstrations today.

**28 September 1947.** (Shanghai) Big strikes started here yesterday and the city is half paralysed. Despite the current economic problems and the price jumps, the strikes are not economically motivated. Rather they are protests against the Guomindang and the secret police.

9

A diary of life during the Civil War. From J. F. Melby, *The Mandate of Heaven*, 1968

Serious mismanagement of the economy by the nationalist government weakened its support. In order to finance heavy expenditure on the Civil War, Chiang's government printed more bank notes. This had the effect of causing prices to rise and devaluing the currency.

■ By May 1946, prices had risen by 1,000 per cent over their September 1945 levels and the inflationary spiral continued to accelerate. In February 1947, the rate of inflation reached 3,000 per cent and during 1948 and 1949 the rate of price increases could be measured in the tens of thousands.

■ Those living on their savings and on fixed incomes were the worst hit by the inflation. Workers in large cities such as Shanghai could use their trades union organisations to strike for higher wages. The government's response was to attempt to buy off the workers through increased wages but this only forced manufacturers to put up prices even further.

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#### The effects of inflation

The prices of basic foodstuffs show the effects of this inflation on ordinary consumers. In June 1948, a standard sack of flour sold for 6.7 million yuan; by August the price had risen to 63 million yuan.

**Activity**

**Thinking point**

'Problems with their management of the economy were the most important factor in explaining why the Nationalists lost the Civil War.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

Not until the summer of 1948 did Chiang's government take any decisive action to control the situation. In August 1948, the old bank notes in circulation were withdrawn and a new currency – the gold yuan – was introduced. The government also began to introduce rationing of food and other basic commodities, together with controls on wages and prices and new taxes. These reforms were too little, too late. Despite bringing a brief respite from inflation, the reforms failed and, by 1949, there was economic collapse in the areas controlled by the Nationalists. Paper money had become worthless and been replaced by a barter economy. Support for nationalist rule in China's large cities, even among the middle classes, was draining away long before the PLA captured control.

**The role of foreign powers**

**American support for the Nationalists**

Despite American reservations about Chiang Kai-shek, the USA provided financial and military assistance to the Nationalists. In total, the Americans gave nearly \$3 billion in aid to the GMD government, in addition to the large quantities of arms they had supplied during the Second World War. The Americans transported nationalist troops by air and sea from their southern China bases to the north at the end of the war and American marines occupied Tianjin and Beijing temporarily until the arrival of nationalist forces. All of this was designed to forestall a communist takeover in the north at the end of the war. Despite this American assistance, however, the serious weaknesses in the nationalist regime and its armed forces led inexorably to the defeat of the Guomindang. Indeed, Mao was able to point to the fact that Chiang Kai-shek relied on American aid as evidence that China could never be truly independent under a nationalist government.

**Soviet assistance to the Communists**

In August 1945, Soviet troops occupied Manchuria. In some ways this was advantageous to the Chinese communists as they could expect to receive assistance from the Soviet Union. During the time they were occupying Manchuria – they remained until May 1946 – the Red Army provided much-needed training and equipment to the PLA. Many PLA officers were sent to Russia for training while, in Manchuria, the Red Army established 16 military training institutions including artillery and engineering schools. Captured Japanese arms and equipment were handed over to the PLA and released Japanese prisoners of war were employed in training Chinese

pilots to fly. Soviet help was therefore vital to the PLA in helping it to transform itself into a formidable fighting machine. However, long-standing animosities between Mao and Stalin, the Soviet leader, were an obstacle to cooperation between them.

Soviet assistance, however, was not provided unconditionally. Stalin put the interests of the Soviet Union above those of the Chinese Communists. Anxious to avoid a confrontation with the USA, he did not wish to be seen to be giving assistance to the Chinese Communists. He



Fig. 9 On one of his rare visits outside China, Mao Zedong is seen at the 70th birthday celebration of Joseph Stalin in Moscow, December 1949

also signed a treaty with Chiang Kai-shek in which he promised to hand over territory occupied by the Red Army to the Nationalists. In line with this policy, in November 1945 Soviet commanders in Manchuria ordered the PLA to withdraw from all major cities there. 'If you do not leave,' the Soviet commander told the Communists, 'we will use tanks to drive you out.' Isolated and under pressure from nationalist forces at the time, Mao had no choice but to comply. Later in the war, in the spring of 1949, Stalin urged Mao to consolidate his position in northern China and not send his forces across the Yangzi River into the south. Once again, Stalin was anxious to avoid American intervention in China's Civil War but, by this time, Mao was strong enough to defy Stalin. Having conquered Manchuria and northern and central China largely without Russia's assistance, he was no longer willing to be dictated to by Stalin.

**Indirect American help to the Communists**

Perhaps foreign intervention provided one vital lifeline to Mao. In the spring of 1946, communist forces in Manchuria were under severe pressure from the Nationalists. Having been forced by the Russians to abandon the cities, they had nevertheless hung on to Harbin but a renewed GMD offensive meant that they were on the point of abandoning this last city stronghold. At this point President Truman's envoy in China, George Marshall, persuaded Chiang to agree to a ceasefire. Initially meant to last two weeks, the ceasefire was extended to four months. During this vital breathing space the PLA was able to regroup, train its troops and organise its defences. When the Civil War resumed in October 1946, Chiang was unable to break the PLA defences in northern Manchuria.

**Mao's leadership**



Fig. 10 Mao Zedong embarks on a trip to meet Chiang Kai-shek for peace talks in 1945

Our principle is that the Party commands the gun and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.

10 By Chairman Mao. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

From his base in Yan'an, and later Shensi, Mao orchestrated the campaigns of the PLA. By 1945 he was the undisputed leader of the CPC and, even

**Cross-reference**

To recap on George Marshall, see page 14.

**Questions**

- 1 Did the Russians help or hinder the Chinese Communist Party in the Civil War?
- 2 What was the impact of foreign intervention on the outcome of the Chinese Civil War?

from his remote headquarters, he was able to direct military operations. It was Mao who decided on the strategy of guerrilla warfare in the early stages of the war, he who announced the change to more conventional warfare in 1948 and it was again Mao who drew up the overall plans for the campaigns in the final stages of the war, although he left the details of the fighting to his commanders in the field. However, sometimes his over-riding self-confidence led him to make serious errors of judgement:

- In November 1945, he overruled his commander Liu Shaoqi and ordered PLA forces to defend the strategic pass between China and Manchuria against nationalist forces, a task for which they were neither equipped nor trained. Having been overrun by nationalist forces, the PLA was forced to fall back on Liu's original plan which was to concentrate its forces in northern Manchuria.
- Mao lacked experience in dealing with foreign powers, never having travelled beyond China's frontiers at this time. In 1945–6, he naively clung to the belief that the USA would force Chiang to form a coalition government with the CPC, thus avoiding a civil war, yet at the same time he was making plans to fight a civil war. During this year his policy was a series of bewildering zigzags from war to peace and back to war again.

**Key profile**

**Liu Shaoqi**

Originally from Henan province, Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) had been trained in the USSR in the 1920s as a communist organiser and theorist. A close ally of Mao during the Yan'an years, Liu was an effective organiser of the communist resistance in north and central China. From 1943, Liu Shaoqi was recognised as Mao's chosen successor.



Fig. 11 A Chinese postage stamp from 1965, commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Long March

Nevertheless, through all of these twists and turns of his policies his position as Chairman of the CPC remained unchallenged. The personality cult surrounding Mao, which had been developing during the years he spent in Yan'an, gave him complete sway over the Communist Party and its military wing, the PLA.

**Activity**

**Revision exercise**

Copy and complete the table below, setting out the main factors that led to communist victory in the Civil War. Note that you will need to re-read parts of Chapter 1 as well as this chapter to help you complete this activity.

Factors	Nationalists	Communists
Military factors		
Political factors		
Economic factors		
Popular support		
International support		
Leadership		

*Learning outcomes*

In this section you have examined the relative strengths of the Communists and Nationalists in China at the end of the Second World War. You have also looked at the story of how the PLA won the Civil War and the range of factors that enabled the Communists to win. After reading this section, you should be able to identify the main causes of the communist victory and make an assessment of the relative importance of the different factors.

**AQA Examination-style questions**

- (a) Explain why the Communists' guerrilla warfare strategy was effective in the war against the Guomindang. (12 marks)



Remember that these are essay-style questions and examiners will be looking for a clear line of argument running through your answers. The introduction should demonstrate that you have understood the question and that you are setting out the main argument that you are going to develop. Answers should be focused on the question throughout. This question requires you to show your knowledge and understanding of the guerrilla warfare strategy adopted by the Communists and explain why it was effective. This can be done in terms of an assessment of communist strengths and weaknesses and a comparison between these and the situation of the Guomindang armies. It would be useful to refer back to the Communists' use of guerrilla tactics against the Japanese and how this influenced the development of their military thinking.

- (b) 'Mao's leadership was the crucial factor in leading the Communists to victory in the Civil War of 1946 to 1949.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view. (24 marks)



This question requires you to assess the importance of one factor – Mao's leadership – against a range of other factors. The examiner will be looking for both range of factors and balance in your answer. Your conclusion should summarise the argument you have been developing and offer some judgement in terms of whether Mao's leadership was more important than other factors in explaining the reasons for communist victory.