

# Mao and the triumph of communism in China

PAUL CHAPMAN

On 1 October 1949 Mao Zedong proclaimed the creation of the People's Republic of China (see Source A). The most populous country in the world had become Communist and the long years of revolutionary struggle had ended. How and why did the Communists triumph in their decades-long struggle with the Nationalists in China? And how did a young librarian emerge from obscurity to be its leader?

## Origins of the Communist Rising

In the late nineteenth century the once proud and self-sufficient Manchu empire, technically very backward compared with the West, was forced to open its frontiers to international trade and exploitation. By 1912 the imperial dynasty had become so discredited that a new republic was proclaimed. But China continued to experience

internal conflicts and a complicated struggle for power. Central authority had largely collapsed in the old empire and powerful war-lords gained control of large areas of the country for their own benefit, threatening the lives of the peasants and robbing them of food and other possessions. These problems continued after the First World War.

The most effective force struggling to unite China was the Guomindang (the National People's Party, or Nationalists), founded by Dr Sun Yatsen in 1905. Sun was briefly President in 1912 but had stood down to try to win the support of military leaders. When he died in 1925 he was succeeded as Nationalist leader by his protégé, Chiang Kai-shek (Source B). Chiang led an all-out assault on the war-lords from 1926, and by 1928 he had captured Peking (now Beijing) and could claim that he had successfully gained control of the country.

### SOURCE B

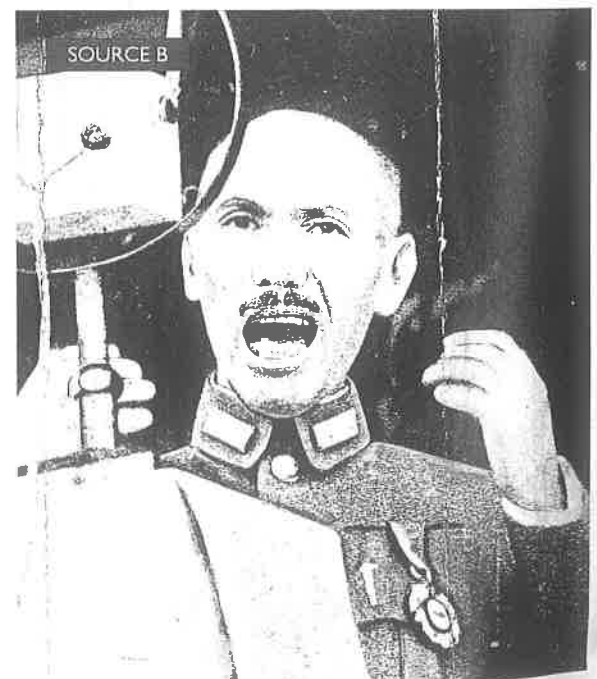
The leader of the Guomindang, Chiang Kai-shek.

- 1 Read Source A.
- (a) What did Mao mean when he claimed that China had been an 'insulted nation'?
- (b) Why did he claim that China had 'stood up'?

### SOURCE A

*Our work will be written down in the history of mankind, and it will clearly demonstrate the fact that the Chinese, who comprise one quarter of humanity, have from now on stood up.... We have united ourselves and defeated both our foreign and domestic oppressors by means of the People's War of Liberation and the People's Great Revolution, and we announce the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Our nation will from now on enter the large family of peace loving and freedom loving nations of the world. It will work bravely and industriously to create its own civilisation and happiness and will, at the same time, promote world peace and freedom. Our nation will never again be an insulted nation. We have stood up.*

Mao Zedong's proclamation of the People's Republic of China. From a speech in Peking, 1 October 1949.





Japanese were very successful, capturing major Chinese cities.

The Communists and Nationalists officially suspended operations against each other in order to fight the invader. The former had aid from the USSR and the latter from Britain and America, but there was little cooperation between the two (see Source D). As the war against Japan drew to an end the rival factions in China manoeuvred for position. Bitter fighting resumed between the Nationalists and Communists. At first, with massive aid from the West, the Nationalists appeared to be victorious. But the Communists fought back and succeeded in gaining control of the whole of the Chinese mainland by 1949. Chiang fled to the island of Formosa (present-day Taiwan), setting up his Nationalist government there. To this day this remains independent of mainland China, under the protection of the United States.

## Reasons for Communist Victory

### Nationalist weaknesses

It is true to say that the Nationalists in power generally appeared to be much stronger than they really were.

- After generations in which large landowners had ruthlessly exploited peasants, the seeds of a possible revolution existed.

- Chiang's government had seemed to promise democracy and reform but its failures since 1927 had eroded popular support:
  - No real move was made towards greater democracy; in fact the Guomindang seemed to want a one-party state.
  - The government increasingly appeared to depend on industrialists, bankers and landowners, and had an air of corruption and privilege. In particular it was accused of favouring the 'Four Great Families'.
  - There was no significant improvement in the living standards of industrial workers and peasants.
  - In the early 1930s there had been a series of droughts and bad harvests, resulting in shortages and the hoarding of grain.
- The tactical disadvantages and mistakes made by the Nationalists during the war against Japan and in the civil war against the Communists proved fatal:
  - The government did not raise enough from taxation to pay for the war. This led to high inflation, which damaged popular morale.
  - The Nationalists had the disadvantage of very long supply lines which were often difficult to maintain, particularly because of Communist guerrilla action.
  - The Nationalists were associated with foreign powers and thus appeared unpatriotic.

### SOURCE E

#### Events in the rise of the Communist Party in China

<b>1912</b>		<b>1944</b>	Negotiations between Nationalists and Communists break down.
<i>1 January</i>	Proclamation of the new Republic of China.		
<b>1919</b>	Mao joins the 'May the Fourth' movement, which springs up in reaction to the failure to gain full national self-determination for China at the Paris Peace Conferences.	<b>1945</b>	
		<i>August</i>	Japan surrenders; Communists launch an offensive to seize Japanese positions and weapons as the civil war resumes.
<b>1921</b>	Foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, with Russian aid.	<b>1946–47</b>	Nationalists initially successful, controlling major cities.
<b>1925</b>	Chiang Kai-shek succeeds Sun Yatsen as leader of the Guomindang.	<b>1948</b>	
<b>1926</b>	Chiang begins his 'northern march' to defeat the war-lords.	<i>March</i>	Mao begins an offensive against the Nationalists.
<b>1927</b>	Chiang expels Communists from the Guomindang, with arrests and executions.	<i>April</i>	Chiang re-elected as President.
<b>1931</b>	Japan launches an attack on Manchuria.	<i>November</i>	Final phase of the campaign begins.
<b>1930–34</b>	Five 'extermination campaigns' against the Communists by the Nationalists.	<b>1949</b>	
<b>1933</b>	Chiang launches his 'New Life' movement to try to revive national spirit and resist communism.	<i>January</i>	Peking falls to the Communists.
<b>1934–36</b>	Mao's 'Long March' to Yenan.	<i>May</i>	Shanghai falls; the Nationalists have lost the will to fight.
<b>1937</b>	Full-scale war with Japan begins; Nationalists and Communists fight the invader but with minimal mutual cooperation.	<i>1 October</i>	Mao proclaims the People's Republic of China.
		<i>December</i>	Chiang and the Nationalists flee to Formosa (Taiwan).
		<b>1950</b>	
		<i>January</i>	Britain formally recognises the Communist government of China.
		<i>February</i>	Communist China signs a 30-year treaty of friendship with Soviet Russia.
		<i>October</i>	China invades Tibet as part of its programme of recapturing all former imperial territories.

Although they received considerable material help from the USA and Britain, this did not make up for the bad light in which foreigners were viewed in China as a result of generations of exploitation.

- Chiang decided to launch an all-out attack on the Communists in 1945 instead of consolidating his hold on the territories he controlled.
- Chiang and the Nationalist leaders were unwilling to lose face by withdrawal when a retreat might have enabled them to recover and regroup; for example they would not pull back from Manchuria in 1947.
- In 1948 the Guomindang seized all gold, silver and US dollars in return for a new paper currency. This was popularly said to be for the benefit of the 'Four Great Families'.
- Civilian morale collapsed. There were high taxes and forced labour, while some entrepreneurs were clearly getting rich. There were food riots in Nanking and Shanghai; martial law had been imposed by 1948-49.
- In the end, Nationalist generals and troops deserted in huge numbers. The will to fight had gone.

### Communist strengths

- Ideological fervour and indoctrination through effective propaganda:
  - Mao linked the Communists to earlier reform movements in Chinese history. This was significant in such a traditionalist society.
  - Posters, slogans and other simple, cheap forms of propaganda were well used (Sources F and G).
  - The Communists were fighting for a cause in which they truly believed.
- The leadership of Mao and others:
  - They lived apparently simple lives, in clear contrast to the perceived corruption of the Guomindang.
  - After the Long March, Mao and his followers appeared as heroes.
- Peasant support. The Communists were seen as champions of equality and offered a real chance for peasants to gain control of their own land. This was seen in 1931 in Jiangxi, where they proclaimed a soviet and redistributed land to the peasants.
- Effective use of guerrilla warfare (see Source H).

### SOURCE F

#### A Red Army slogan

*The enemy advances, we retreat;  
The enemy camps, we harass;  
The enemy tires, we attack;  
The enemy retreats, we pursue.*



### SOURCE H

*The capture of Houma cost the Reds 200 killed and wounded but brought them 1,800 prisoners....The Nationalists do not bother to destroy their weapons before they surrender....The lack of fighting spirit shown by the common soldier demonstrates the degree to which the Nationalist army has disintegrated....Their troops do not want to fight....The American aid they get ends...in the hands of the Communists.*

Fighting between the Nationalists and Communists, reported by a French observer. L. M. Chassin, *The Communist Conquest of China*, 1965.

- The Communists were seen as having been successful against the Japanese. They appeared more patriotic than the Nationalists, who at times seemed more concerned with fighting the Communists than the foreign enemy.
- The Communists received some Russian help, particularly in Manchuria.

## Conclusion

Any explanation of the triumph of communism in China has to focus heavily on the weaknesses and mistakes of the Nationalists. Chiang chose to launch an attack to get rid of the Reds in 1927 but he failed to destroy them. He failed to win the support of the urban workers or rural masses of China, despite long years in power. He failed to exploit the opportunities that Western assistance gave him. Nonetheless, communism's survival in those early years and its ultimate success owe a tremendous amount to the sheer determination and resourcefulness of its leaders, especially Mao Zedong. **HS**

### SOURCE G

*A Communist propaganda poster celebrating the victory of the People's Liberation Army.*

- 4 Study Source G. If you had not been told that this was a Communist poster, how could you work out from the picture what it was?

- 5 Read Source H. Why did the Nationalist troops no longer want to fight?

- 6 'The triumph of communism in China was above all the result of the leadership of Mao Zedong.' How far do you agree with this viewpoint?