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| Reasons for the Communist victory in 1949: CCP strengths |  | HistoryThe Chinese Civil War 1946-9  |
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**Why were the Communists ultimately successful in the civil war?**

Mao described the CCP’s victory as having come in 3 main stages:

* The CCP’s success in holding on to Manchuria.
* The defeat of the GMD’s ‘strong point offensive’ in 1947-8
* The PLA’s counteroffensives in 1948-9

There is no denying the accuracy of Mao’s judgment, but, as he so often stressed to his followers, the critical victories were not simply military affairs. The Communists’ overthrow of the GMD in 1949 was also a triumph in terms of politics, propaganda and public relations. Later accounts written by his supporters described Mao as having followed a carefully planned path to victory. They suggested that Mao disregarding the half-hearted support of the Soviet Union and the meddling of the USA, had confidently followed his own judgment. By enlightened policies in the countryside he had formed an unbreakable bond with the Chinese people and led them in a great social revolution against Chiang and the GMD.

The narrative became the official CCP version of what had happened. However, what modern historians, including Chinese writers, suggest is that the critical factor in Mao’s success was not his long-term planning but his opportunism. When the civil war was renewed in 1946, Mao’s most optimistic hope was that the CCP would be able to retain the bases it had acquired by the end of the Japanese struggle. He did not foresee that within three years his Communist forces would have taken the whole of China. It was the Nationalists who made that possible by throwing way their initial superiority.

**Mao’s dominance of the CCP and the PLA**

What is difficult to dispute in the Communist legend is that, without Mao Zedong’s power and ability as a leader, the CCP would not have won the war. His self-belief and conviction of his own correctness inspired the PLA’s commands and men. Mao possessed the strength of will that wins political and military struggles. It had expressed itself in the ruthlessness with which he had suppressed opposition within his own party in the rectification programme of the early 1940s. Indeed it was his absolute domination of the party that enabled him to have the final word in the organizing of the PLA’s campaigns during the civil war. It was that control that allowed him to overcome the doubts of many of his commanders and change from a defensive to an offensive strategy at a critical stage of the civil war.

**Mao’s leadership**

In the list of military factors accounting for the CCP’s ultimate victory, Mao’s leadership ranks as one of the most significant.

It was under him that PLA, which had been rural guerilla force in 1945, had, by 1948, become a modern army capable of conducting a modern war. The most impressive illustration of this was Mao’s decision to undertake the 3 gigantic campaigns fought between 1948 and 1949. Overcoming the reservations of those of his commanders who doubted that warfare could be sustained on such a scale, Mao drove his armies on to a set of victories that assured the ultimate triumph of the Communists in the civil war.

**Mao’s leadership**

Why was the Soviet Union so reluctant to support the CCP during the civil war?

There is a sense in which Mao’s victory in the civil war also marked a victory over the Soviet Union. Since the 1920s, Stalin had refused to believe that the Chinese Communists could achieve a genuine revolution. He held that they were too few in number to be significant and that the best thing for them was to merge with the Nationalists. The low estimation in which Moscow held Mao and the CCP was revealed in Aug 1945 when the Soviet Union formally signed a treaty of friendship with Chiang Kaishek’s Nationalist government. The treaty declared that its terms ended ‘all outstanding grievances’ between China and the USSR. The British newspaper *The Observer* commented on the significance of the Soviet Union’s abandoning of the Chinese Communists: ‘The cynic may be inclined to regard Russia’s part in the conclusion of the treaty with China as a sacrifice of the Yanan regime for the sake of greater prestige and influence in Chungking and hence over all China’.

Subsequent events confirmed the accuracy of the *Observer’s* assessment. It cannot be appreciated that the friendship treaty complemented the Soviet Union’s declaration of war on Japan in Aug 1945 in the last days of the conflict in China. The USSR was maneuvering itself into a position occupied from which it could seize Chinese territory. Soviet armies occupied Manchuria between Aug 1945 and May 1946 and did not withdraw until they had stripped the region of its economic resources.

**Stalin’s continued recognition of Chiang Kaishek**

The upshot of this was that, when the Japanese grip on China was broken and the GMD-CCP civil war resumed, the Soviet Union remained a largely impotent onlooker. It made occasional gestures of goodwill towards Mao Zedong, and the Kremlin continued to send its representatives to CCP gatherings, but, even when the Red Army began to drive the Nationalists from their bases, Stalin could not bring himself to change tack. As late as 1949 the year in which the Reds forced the GMD off the Chinese mainland, the USSR persisted in recognizing Chiang Kaishek as China’s leader. Stalin believed throughout this period that the USA would not tolerate a Communist victory in China. Anxious not to provoke further American intervention in the Far East, he urged Mao to come to terms with the Nationalists, even if this meant accepting a China divided between the Red in the north and the GMD in the south.

That both the USA and the Soviet Union continued to support the GMD until almost the last moment vindicated Mao Zedong’s long held belief that salvation for China was possible only from within China itself. The unfolding of events he read as a justification for the independent Marxist line that he had taken since the mid-1920s. By 1949, he was more than ever convinced that, for China, the Chinese way was the only way. Given the different national, cultural and ideological standpoints from which they started, there had never been a real likelihood that Mao and Stalin would come to share a common purpose and vision. Mao’s success in 1949 owed nothing to Stalin and the Soviet Union. Indeed, had Mao heeded Stalin’s advice there would have been no Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War.

**Summary of Communist strengths**

* Mao’s military genius.
* Mao’s control of the CCP.
* PLA’s rapid transition from a guerilla force to a modern army.
* Skilled generalship of Mao’s commanders.
* PLA’s success in expanding its volunteer army.
* Appropriation of American supplies.
* Mao’s following an independent line from the urged by Stalin