

THE MAN WHO LOST CHINA

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Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek went from being one of the most powerful men in the world, with control over the majority of the world's largest population and control over armies totaling three million, to the dictator of Taiwan living in nearly constant fear that the country he had fought for since his twenties would invade his fiefdom. This fall from power occurred in just five years, from 1945-49.¹ While clearly in the dominant position following the Japanese surrender, Chiang's position was marred by a failing economy, an inefficient and corrupt government, a disloyal and logistically crippled army, and non-committal American allies. Chiang had the distinction of being the undisputed head of the Nationalist government as its President, commander and chief of its armies, and the Kuomintang's chief ideologue as chairman of the party's central committee.² Chiang Kai-Shek was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving a unified China under nationalist control because he failed to adjust his national strategy to post-WWII economic, military, and diplomatic realities.

The Chinese Civil War cannot be examined independently from the warlord period that bore the nationalist movement and the "White Terror" that marked the split between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). The aspect that unites both turning points for China in the twentieth century was the involvement of Chiang Kai-Shek at their forefront. Chiang was born into the family of a salt merchant in rural Southern China. He was bright and was eventually selected to be an officer cadet in the Imperial Japanese artillery school.³ This tutelage in Japan would have a lasting effect on his ideological development and would culminate with Chiang's lasting hatred for imperialism. Chiang became involved with the Chinese republican movement, the Xinhai Revolution, in its infancy, and he

¹ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-3.

² Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 166.

³ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 584.

became incredibly close with Sun Yat-Sen under whose guidance Chiang rose to be one of the foremost military strategists of the Chinese Republic. Following Sun's death in 1925, Chiang maneuvered himself into power. While newly in office as the first secretary of the KMT, Chiang became worried about the growing influence of the communist party's cadre in the National Revolutionary Army.⁴ Consequently, Chiang and the KMT split with the Chinese Communist party in 1925 in the "White Terror", despite the fact that Chiang remained a supporter of communist ideology and the Soviet-led struggle against imperialism while maintaining that the class struggle that had been prescribed by Karl Marx was not appropriate for the primarily agrarian China.⁵

Chiang would go on to unify most of the country under Nationalist control during the Northern Expedition and end the warlord era in China. During this time, Chiang continued to consolidate power and institute limited democratic reforms while chasing down the last remnants of the CCP and its People's Liberation Army (PLA). This lasted until the Second Sino-Japanese war and the greater Second World War. The war devastated China and sapped away the best soldiers and supplies that Chiang and the Nationalists possessed.⁶ While Nationalist Armies fought the Imperial Japanese head-on, the People's Liberation Army of the CCP fought a protracted guerrilla struggle from bases in rugged northwest China. So devastating was the war with Japan for the Nationalists that Mao once remarked to Japanese politicians that "he owed Tokyo thanks for without the war, he might still be living in a cave in Yan'an."⁷ During the war, both the United States and the Soviet Union supported the fledgling "Second United Front" that temporarily united the KMT and CCP against their common Japanese enemy. Following the peace in Tokyo Bay, this support continued upon strict ideological lines and set the stage for a renewed chapter of the Chinese Civil war that would leave Chiang and his government on Taiwan.

⁴ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 49-97.

⁵ Andrew Carter, "Writing Requirement 1". (West Point, NY, 2019), 1.

⁶ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 194-245.

⁷ Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003) 460.

Chiang's government failed to address China's failing economy, which resulted in an internal conflict that further weakened the Nationalist's hold on power while strengthening the position of the communists. The massive government spending that had occurred during the war with Japan had been somewhat alleviated with the peace and the reoccupation of Chinese industrial zones by the Nationalists, often with these reoccupation forces being delivered on the decks of American warships. Chiang's temporary reprieve ended when the civil war began again, and he faced a newly rearmed PLA. As government spending increased, largely to buy American munitions, inflation increased exponentially. During one month in 1946, the wholesale prices in Shanghai rose 45%.⁸ Chiang directed the government not to pursue any austere financial measures that would increase their unpopularity.⁹ The Nationalist's lack of action directly contributed to the wave of civil unrest that followed the rampant inflation and destroyed the middle class and honest officials. From 1946-47 Shanghai was the host of over 4,200 strikes.¹⁰ While these strikes were for the most part not organized by the communists, by 1947 the communist cadre had taken charge of most student groups and factory organizations.¹¹ In response to this upheaval, Chiang directed his secret police to break up these strikes, which they did quickly and violently. After one particular student rising in Kunming, the police arrested 1,000 students and held them until midnight before pulling them out of their cells into a gravel yard while soldiers waved bayonets over their heads and shouted at them to confess to being communists.¹² This type of brutality was more the rule than the exception in Chiang's final years on the mainland and further eroded his popularity and decreased the number of those willing to pay already beleaguered tax revenue. Looking back on his failure on the mainland, Chiang wrote in his journal, "The blame lay with the Kuomintang for having done nothing to reform society and promote the people's welfare."¹³ Chiang's government failed to make the necessary economic reforms necessary to both placate the people and deprive his politically skilled communist

⁸ Ibid. 474.

⁹ Ibid. 485.

¹⁰ Ibid. 474.

¹¹ Ibid. 472-485.

¹² Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003) 475.

¹³ Ibid. 489.

enemies form gaining a foothold in his urban financial and manpower base. This strategic failure hastened the end of nationalist rule on the mainland.

Chiang failed to reform the decrepit National Revolutionary Army to address the needs of the Chinese Civil War. Chiang's direct implication in this offense was his unwillingness to share the burden of command with anyone, let alone his commanders in the field. Nowhere is this clearer than in the battles for Manchuria that marked the PLA's transition from guerilla tactics to a conventional fight. Chiang was constantly at odds with his commander in the region, Wei Lihuang, and frequently wrote contradictory orders from his headquarters in Nanking that often came too late to be relevant and without consulting his generals in the field.¹⁴ The crisis in Manchuria came to a head when "Chiang himself displayed a lack of resolution that made him willing to shift several times before ordering Wei to withdraw."¹⁵ This lack of decisiveness eventually resulted in the destruction of Wei's three army groups when they withdrew too late and were encircled by 1.3 million PLA troops.¹⁶

Further blunting the National Revolutionary Army's (NRA) fighting ability was Chiang's preference for loyalty over competence. Largely due to the many assassination attempts, coups and warlord betrayals that had been commonplace in Chiang's long career, he "went on appointing commanders for their perceived loyalty rather than their skill."¹⁷ This lack of effective leadership plagued the army and caused factionalism and personal rivalries that made it almost impossible to emulate the PLA's unified command system.¹⁸ Chiang leveraged control over all aspects of the army and often placed the blame for military defeats on his subordinates or on the lack of equipment. However, as General David Barr, Commander of the American Military Advisory Group in China put it: "setbacks in Manchuria and

¹⁴ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 161-180.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 162.

¹⁶ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 4.

¹⁷ Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003) 475.

¹⁸ Chang Jui-te, "The National Army from Whampoa to 1949," in *A Military History of China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 207.

North China were not due to a lack of ammunition: it was a lack of competent leadership and planning.”¹⁹

Perhaps the greatest strategic failure on Chiang’s part was the atrocious logistical chain of the NRA. Despite Chiang’s persistent pleas for American military aid, the Nationalist government possessed millions of tons of captured Japanese war materials as well as those made domestically. In addition to this, between 1945 and 1949 Chiang received over \$1 billion of military aid from the United States and \$2 billion in civilian aid.²⁰ These amounts were far in excess of the aid given to the PLA by the Soviet Union. It was not the number of munitions that possessed by Chiang’s government that was the problem, but rather the inability of those munitions to arrive where they were needed in a timely manner or at all. One of the largest problems facing Chinese logisticians was the immense size and breadth of the Nationalist arsenal. This is best summarized in Chang Jui-te’s writing on the nationalist army during the civil war years:

They [Weapons] ranged from centuries-old spears and lances to the very latest automatic rifles and antiaircraft guns. It seemed that no weapon was too old or too exotic for the Chinese, and they had in service at any given time weapons from countries such as Japan, Germany, France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland, along with the products of their own diverse arsenals. As the army planners were well aware, such a hodgepodge of weapons made for a logistical nightmare.²¹

This complex web of foreign weaponry was further exasperated by the influx of American motorized forces that Chiang had hoped would be a game-changer. The fuel-thirsty American vehicles and the heavy artillery they were intended to tow, although rugged, succumbed to supply shortages within weeks of being received and were abandoned to the advancing PLA.²² Supply misappropriations were compounded by the fact that Chiang lacked an effective general staff, forcing individual combatant commanders to beg Chiang directly for limited

¹⁹ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 170.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 277.

²¹ Chang Jui-te, “The National Army from Whampoa to 1949,” in *A Military History of China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 207.

²² *Ibid.* 205.

supplies. The result was massive stockpiles of weapons being sent to political favorites rather than to places where they would have the greatest effect.²³ While the Nationalists were failing in logistics, the PLA was thriving with the help of Soviet advisors. Before the communist push into Manchuria in 1947, the Soviet Union sent 300 railway engineers to the PLA. These 300 engineers trained some 5,000 PLA troops in railway operations, which allowed the communists to create reliable supply lines through some of the most difficult terrain in China.²⁴

The NRA was further weakened by the refusal of Chiang to raise wages and keep his soldiers politically motivated. Even compared to the low wages of the time, pay for nationalist conscripts was incredibly low and had only declined since the 1930s. The monthly payment for a private second class in the nationalist army of 1943 was equivalent to 7.5 American cents.²⁵ This meant that families who had to resort to military service were seen as little better than beggars in Chinese society.²⁶ Further complicating Chiang's attempt to recruit from among his vast population was the association of the army with looting, pillaging, and rape that had been commonplace for armies during the warlord era, even among Chiang's troops. This led to a pervasive thought in nationalist China that, "good men do not become soldiers."²⁷ This same problem did not exist in areas under the control of the PLA. Following the "Long March", Zhu De, the PLA's brilliant marshal, published rules of conduct for soldiers in which they were tasked never to take from the populace, to pay for everything they used, and to aid the peasantry in their labor. This allowed the PLA to win Chinese hearts and minds in a way not adopted by Chiang and his armies.²⁸

²³ *Ibid.* 198.

²⁴ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 179-180.

²⁵ Chang Jui-te, "The National Army from Whampoa to 1949," in *A Military History of China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 204.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ William Wei, "'Political Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gun': Mao and the Red Army," in *A Military History of China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 345.

In this same vein, the PLA maintained a robust commissar system that Chiang had helped institute before the “White Terror.” This allowed the PLA to ensure ideological cohesion amongst its ranks. Chiang had maintained a similar system in the NRA, but due to the commissars being promoted from above in the KMT rather than from within the military, the system was wholly insufficient by the time of the civil war.²⁹ When reflecting on his defeat on the mainland in his journal, Chiang believed his biggest failure was, “not effectively maintaining the commissar forces within the nationalist armies after 1945.”³⁰ Chiang failed to remedy the many flaws that were clearly visible in the Nationalist army following the Japanese surrender and refused to make the necessary changes that may have thwarted Chiang’s monopoly on power.

Until the final days of the Nationalists’ presence on the mainland in 1945, Chiang hoped for a direct American intervention that never came. Despite a large amount of aid sent to China by the Truman administration, China was never a priority to the United States, a fact made abundantly clear by both the administration and the State Department. American opinion of the Chiang regime is best told through the words of the Ambassador to China, John Leighton Stuart: “No amount of military advice or material from us will bring unity and Peace to China unless these reforms are sufficiently drastic to win back popular confidence and esteem.”³¹ The ambassador cited the need for democratic reform in a regime that to American eyes seemed to be growing more fascist than democratic by the day. Chiang responded to this criticism in order to look more favorable to both the administration and the American people by creating a National assembly “that was to be characterized by multiparty membership but dominated by the Kuomintang.”³² In this new government over which Chiang still reigned as supreme leader, both the Communists and China Democratic League, the two largest rival parties to the Kuomintang, were banned from participating. This ruse of a democratic government fell flat in the court of American public opinion and weakened the China Lobby’s

²⁹ Chang Jui-te, “The National Army from Whampoa to 1949,” in *A Military History of China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 207.

³¹ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 168.

³² *Ibid.* 166.

efforts in Washington.³³ Efforts by Chiang and his affluent wife, Madame Chiang, were all for naught after 1948 as the State Department's planning chief at the time, George Kennan, made it clear to the president that "China was an insignificant sideshow compared to Europe."³⁴ The primacy of affairs in post-war Europe and the growing threat of the Soviet Union combined with blatant American racism made direct American intervention impossible. As Ambassador Stuart put it, "traditional Chinese concepts themselves, deeply rooted in society, made constructive change impossible."³⁵ In the end, Chiang hoped for the defeat of Truman by Dewey and a Republican party more sympathetic to his cause, but this was not to be, and his nominal acts of democratization were too little too late to ensure direct American support.

Chiang Kai-Shek was doomed by his inability to adapt his national strategy to the realities of the post-war order. His longevity had made him leery of losing power to competent military leaders, and he feared, albeit accurately, that the will of the war-weary Chinese people was not in his favor. In the end, his inaction on these fronts cost him the land that he had fought so dearly for the majority of his life. The American support he came to rely on in the last months on the mainland failed to appear, and he was forced into exile on Taiwan only to regain American support following the outbreak of the Korean War. Ironic as it seems now after decades of American intervention during the Cold War, Ambassador Stuart summed up the reason for withdrawal of U.S. support because "if the U.S. supported Chiang much longer it may find itself accused of violating the democratic principle of the right of self-determination by aiding a dictatorship which does not represent the popular will."³⁶ In the end, Chiang fell victim to an American regime and that at the time was unwilling to use its political capital, for a brief moment, to fight another war in Asia following the devastation of WWII.

³³ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 168.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 169.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-Shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015) 280.

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