

## **What impact did war have on China?**

China in the mid-1930s was a country split irretrievably by dissent, corruption, political factions, and a long history of turmoil stretching back well over thirty years. The invasion of the Japanese – who, in strength, were bent upon conquest – made a huge change to the balances of power in the country.

Before the war, the struggle for China had been between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. The GMD had the definite upper hand after forcing the Communists from their strongholds in Jianxi and other southern areas, though due to the Long March the CCP survived and was based in Yanan in northern China. The GMD were relatively close to finally re-unifying China under their rule, though there was discontent in many areas.

The Japanese invasion first hit Manchuria. The northernmost province of China, Manchuria had for a long time in the 1920s been separate under the Warlord Zhang Zuolin, being geographically separated from China proper. Zuolin was partially controlled by the Japanese, who maintained a strong army in the province. They later assassinated him when he proved ineffective in stopping the spread of the GMD (and thus a stronger China), but this backfired when his son, Zhang Xueliang, turned on the Japanese and joined the GMD as a senior northern commander. His army was that of Manchuria, and was both on the front lines against Mao and the CCP and against the Japanese invasion.

Thus, when the Japanese invasion came, it was natural for Xueliang to want to press against the Japanese and both re-take his own power base in Manchuria and revenge his father's murder. His troops, too, wanted to fight for their homes; neither they nor Xueliang strongly supported the GMD ideologically beyond the fact that they stood for a strong unified China. So when Chiang Kai-Shek, leader of the GMD, decided that he wanted to ignore Japan and fight the CCP to ensure unity the Manchurians were unlikely to react well.

It was not just the Manchurians, either; there was little real public antagonism towards the CCP – it can possibly be said that few other than Kai-Shek and his fellows really estimated the CCP as the greater enemy. The Chinese public had long disliked the Japanese, particularly after their gains in the long era of unequal treaties and the failure of western powers to hand back Japanese territorial gains in the First World War. Kai-Shek's unwillingness to fight Japan and weaken his crusade against the communists would become a major point of dissatisfaction among the populace throughout the war, and ultimately helped the CCP.

The reason the CCP were able to gain so much from Kai-Shek's unwillingness to fight Japan was their utterly contrary policy. Their stand against the invaders – if admittedly fuelled by the fact that their base in Yanan was in vulnerable Northern China – was popular and did much to endear them to those looking for Chinese unity.

Among those it did much to endear them to was Zhang Xueliang, who in 1936 was based in Xian. When Kai-Shek ordered Xueliang into an extermination campaign – like the long and bloody affairs he himself had fought in the south to eliminate Jianxi – the Manchurian refused, and opened negotiations with Zhou Enlai, a senior Communist, to try and end the civil war. Kai-Shek flew to Xian in the hope of persuading Xueliang, but found himself imprisoned by his own general. Zhang thus forcibly brought Kai-Shek (for the GMD) to talks with the Russians and the CCP. Eventually Kai-Shek had to agree to a United Front, where under GMD leadership Mao's Red Army became the Eighth Route Army of the Chinese forces.

The Japanese finally pushed south in 1937, when at the Marco Polo bridge they took a crucial access point to Beijing. The city, China's traditional capital, fell soon afterwards. Not before time had the United Front been formed; Shanghai was invaded by the Japanese, and the weaker GMD forces were progressively pushed back. Kai-Shek's military capability was weakened immensely in the early stages of the war as the GMD saw its men and (almost more importantly) its officer class wiped out trying to defend their cities from a technologically advanced and numerically strong Japanese force.

On both sides, the central commands had little to no control over their armies; Kai-Shek was hampered constantly by the fact that his generals – many of whom were former warlords – had a great degree of independence, and because his power bases in the cities could not be held against the Japanese. The Japanese command themselves were unwilling to escalate the war beyond Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing but found that their forces were utterly out of control, killing, burning, raping, pillaging and destroying in a fury of sickening cruelty across China.

Without a good base of peasant support, Chiang Kai-Shek and his government moved progressively further inland to cities that the Japanese could not stretch their supply lines enough to take, using a scorched earth policy. While this preserved a government that could not have held had it tried to hold a city (Shanghai and subsequent battles had destroyed much of the GMD's war machine), it meant that many Chinese were left open to the Japanese killings or even found themselves being attacked by their own government. In one case, thousands of civilians were drowned when the GMD ordered dams to be broken in order to slow the Japanese advance. This led to a weakening of support for the GMD and Kai-Shek as people felt abandoned, but it was unavoidable; there simply weren't the men or resources to take the Japanese on in a traditional conflict.

The CCP found themselves well able to capitalise on the misfortunes of their unsteady ally; the lessons of fighting the conventional armies of the extermination campaigns had been well learned, and the Japanese marauders were not overly concerned with consolidation of their gains. The countryside was often passed by, certainly in areas where the Japanese were not directly passing through, and so the CCP found that not only were they not attacked but also that they were able to counterattack and expand into the gaps left over by their enemies.

The fundamental policy of the CCP was that of land reform and a peasant-based society; the Red Army (as, with the GMD unable to control its own forces let alone Mao's, it can once more be known) had a strong discipline policy that forbade antagonising the peasantry. When faced with Japanese who murdered for fun, or the Guomindang who were unable to defend effectively, the populace in areas the CCP came to welcomed the communists. Zhu De, Mao, and other communist leaders also enjoyed an ability to control their own men that eluded the other two factions. This meant that they could use guerrilla warfare to destroy Japanese supply lines and communications – heroic, effective, not requiring major losses of men, and thus another popularity gain.

The GMD, embattled and sitting it out in Chongqing (dubbed “the most bombed city in the world”) did themselves few favours either. Their generals were out of control and their officials corrupt. Kai-Shek was unable to counterattack, and so could do nothing until the Japanese, pressed elsewhere by the entry of America into the war, began to tentatively pull back. Dismayed by the GMD's failures, many people became more keen to throw their lot in with the communists. Mao's CCP was

seen as braver, less corrupt, and more keen to protect Chinese people than the morally and militarily bankrupt Guomintang.

The GMD and CCP split and argued frequently during the war, and rarely to the GMD's benefit. By the time the Japanese had properly begun to retreat, the two sides were entirely ready to be at each other's throats again, although the Americans were keen to try and broker peace between the two sides.

The CCP, already having spread influence over northern China, took land as the Japanese retreated from it. Their land reforms were extremely popular amongst peasants, and this meant that they could control vast swathes of countryside with most of the inhabitants being supportive of them. It was hard for the GMD or Japanese to counter this without protracted, brutal, costly and unpopular extermination campaigns, whereas the GMD's power bases in the cities were far weaker and easier to influence or capture. Ultimately the victors of the Chinese theatre of war were the Communists; American aid was nowhere near enough to bring victory for the Guomintang, who in any case were barely fit to govern and had paid dearly for their static defence of China's cities with several years of unpopular impotence and the loss of their better trained troops and officers. Whether they were capable of running the country, though, was only half the matter; they had to be capable of fighting a civil war with an opponent that had gone from strength to strength even as the Japanese had destroyed the Guomintang's ability to fight.

From the days before the war, when the CCP were an embattled force that had taken huge losses against superior forces, the situation had changed utterly. The Guomintang had seen their strong position as masters of China wiped away by an enemy with superior technology, deadly aggression, and shocking fanaticism. The CCP had fought back against and won widespread support that they had been unable to attain under pressure from Kai-Shek; the generalissimo, as he looked at post-war China and compared it to where he had been in 1936, must have felt that all his fears had been realised.

All of that, though, was politics, and for the Chinese mourning was as prominent even as they steeled themselves for yet another turbulent civil war. Four million Chinese had died in those bloody years; thirty million had lost their homes. Civilians had been bombed not only indiscriminately but also intentionally; the looting, rape, torture, and murder committed by Japanese forces created a list of war crimes so great and so terrible that they will never be compiled in full. While the CCP would come from the war rejuvenated to eventually take control of the country, the war years had been a great burden for those they claimed to represent. The real impacts were felt in an indescribable sorrow – and they were felt not by the CCP, or the GMD, or any political entity; they were felt by the people of China.