

# Chapter 19

## China, 1900–49

### SUMMARY OF EVENTS

China had a long history of national unity and since the mid-seventeenth century had been ruled by the Manchu or Ch'ing dynasty. However, during the 1840s, the country moved into a troubled period of foreign interference, civil war and disintegration, which lasted until the communist victory in 1949.

The last emperor was overthrown in 1911 and a republic was proclaimed. The period 1916 to 1928, known as *the Warlord Era*, was one of great chaos, as a number of generals seized control of different provinces. A party known as the *Kuomintang (KMT)*, or Nationalists, was trying to govern China and control the generals, who were busy fighting each other. The KMT leaders were Dr Sun Yat-sen, and after his death in 1925, General Chiang Kai-shek. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1921, and at first it co-operated with the KMT in its struggle against the warlords. As the KMT gradually established control over more and more of China, it felt strong enough to do without the help of the communists, and it tried to destroy them. The communists, under their leader Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung), reacted vigorously, and after escaping from surrounding KMT forces, they embarked on the 6000-mile Long March (1934–5) to form a new power base in northern China.

Civil war dragged on, complicated by Japanese interference, which culminated in a full-scale invasion in 1937. When the Second World War ended in defeat for the Japanese and their withdrawal from China, the KMT and the CCP continued to fight each other for control of China. Chiang Kai-shek received help from the USA, but in 1949 it was Mao and the communists who finally triumphed. Chiang and his supporters fled to the island of Taiwan (Formosa). Mao Zedong quickly established control over the whole of China, and he remained leader until his death in 1976.

### 19.1 REVOLUTION AND THE WARLORD ERA

#### (a) Background to the revolution of 1911

In the early part of the nineteenth century China kept itself very much separate from the rest of the world; life went on quietly and peacefully with no great changes, as it had done since the Manchus took over in the 1640s. However, in the mid-nineteenth century China found itself faced by a number of crises. The prolonged period of relative peace had led to a rapid increase in the population – between 1741 and 1841 the population rose from 140 million to 410 million. This made it difficult to produce enough food for subsistence, forcing many peasants to turn to robbery and banditry as a means of survival. The ensuing chaos encouraged foreigners, especially Europeans, *to force their way into China* to take advantage of trading possibilities. The British were first on the scene, fighting and defeating the Chinese



in the Opium Wars (1839–42). They forced China to hand over Hong Kong and to allow them to trade at certain ports. Other western nations followed, and eventually these ‘barbarians’, as the Chinese regarded them, had rights and concessions in about 80 ports and other towns.

Next came *the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64)*, which spread all over southern China. It was partly a Christian religious movement and partly a political reform movement, which aimed to set up a ‘Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace’ (*Taiping tianguo*). The movement was eventually defeated, not by the Manchu government troops, which proved to be ineffective, but by newly-formed regional armies. The failure of the government forces was a serious blow to the authority of the Ch’ing dynasty. It left them dependent on regional armies that they did not control. This began the process in which provinces began to assert their independence from the central government in Beijing (Peking), culminating in the Warlord Era (1916–28).

*China was defeated in a war with Japan (1894–5)* and forced to hand over territory, including the large island of Formosa. By the end of 1898 Britain, Germany, France and Russia had leased large areas of land from the Chinese government which they proceeded to treat as if they were no longer Chinese territory. There was a story in circulation that outside a British-run park in Shanghai, there was a sign reading NO DOGS OR CHINESE. The sign never actually existed, but the story showed the outrage felt by ordinary Chinese people at the intrusive foreign presence in their country. A Chinese uprising – *the Boxer Rising* – against foreign influence took place in 1898–1900, but it was defeated by an international army, and the Empress Tz’u-hsi was forced to pay massive compensation for damage done to foreign property in China. More territory was lost to Japan as a result of the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), and China was clearly in a sorry state.

In the early years of the twentieth century thousands of young Chinese travelled abroad and were educated there. They returned with radical, revolutionary ideas of overthrowing the Manchu dynasty and westernizing China. Some revolutionaries, like Dr Sun Yat-sen, wanted a democratic state modelled on the USA.

## **(b) The 1911 revolution and the Twenty-One Demands (1915)**

The government tried to respond to the new radical ideas by introducing reforms, promising democracy and setting up elected provincial assemblies. However, this only encouraged the provinces to distance themselves still further from the central government, which was now extremely unpopular. *The revolution began among soldiers in Wuchang in October 1911, and most provinces quickly declared themselves independent of Beijing.*

The government, ruling on behalf of the child emperor Puyi (who was only 5 years old), in desperation sought help from a retired general, Yuan Shikai, who had been commander of the Chinese Northern Army, and still had a lot of influence with the generals. However, the plan backfired: Yuan, who was still only in his early fifties, turned out to have ambitions of his own. He did a deal with the revolutionaries – they agreed to his becoming the first president of the Chinese republic in return for the abdication of Puyi and the end of the Manchu dynasty. With the support of the army, Yuan ruled as a military dictator from 1912 until 1915.

Meanwhile the Japanese sought to take advantage of the upheaval in China and the outbreak of the First World War. A few days after the war began they demanded that Germany should hand over all their rights in the Chinese Shantung peninsula to Japan. This was followed up in January 1915 by *Japan’s Twenty-One Demands to China*. These were divided into five groups. First they wanted Chinese approval of Japan’s concessions in Shantung (seized from the Germans), including the right to build railways and to begin

new mines; similar rights in south Manchuria; in Hanyehping, the right to continue developing the coal mines at Wuhan; similar rights in Fukien province; and finally the demand that China should accept Japanese 'advisers' in political, economic and military matters, and must allow the police forces in some large cities to be jointly organized by Japanese and Chinese. As soon as the demands became public there was a wave of anti-Japanese feeling and a boycott of Japanese goods. Yuan delayed accepting the demands until the Japanese eventually agreed to drop the final group. An agreement accepting the rest was signed on 25 May 1915. In fact the agreement made very little difference to the situation: it simply restated the concessions that Japan already had. It was group five of the demands that revealed Japan's motives. Acceptance of those would have reduced China almost to a colony or a protectorate of Japan. However, Japan had another strategy in mind: they knew that Yuan had developed a desire to become emperor, and in return for his acceptance of the demands, they secretly promised that they would support him in his ambitions. A new emperor who owed his position to Japanese support would be an excellent alternative method of controlling China. In December 1915 it was announced that there was to be a return to the monarchy in the person of Yuan himself, who would become emperor on 1 January 1916. This turned out to be a fatal mistake: most people saw the ending of the new republic as a backward step, and his support dwindled rapidly. The army turned against him and forced him to abdicate. He died in October 1916.

### (c) The Warlord Era (1916–28)

The abdication and death of Yuan Shikai removed the last person who seemed capable of maintaining some sort of unity in China. The country now disintegrated into literally hundreds of states of varying sizes, each controlled by a warlord and his private army. As they fought each other, it was the ordinary Chinese peasants who suffered untold hardships (see Illus. 19.1). However, *two important positive developments took place during this period.*

- The May the Fourth Movement began on that date in 1919 with a huge student demonstration in Beijing, protesting against the warlords and against traditional Chinese culture. The movement was also anti-Japanese, especially when the 1919 Versailles settlement officially recognized Japan's right to take over Germany's concessions in Shantung province. It was this humiliation at the hands of Japan that seemed to stir up the whole country to support the movement. Thousands of university students went on strike at the failure of the government to protest strongly enough at Versailles. Once again there was a boycott of Japanese goods. This was popular with Chinese industrialists, who benefited from the boycott; they supported the students, many of whom had been jailed, while factory workers and railway workers went on strike in sympathy. It was a remarkable show of mass patriotism. The government finally had no choice but to give way: the students were released; the ministers who had signed the Twenty-One Demands agreement in 1915 were sacked, and the Chinese delegation at Versailles refused to sign the peace treaty.
- The other problems addressed by May the Fourth Movement – the need to tame the warlords, and the desire to modernize Chinese culture – took longer to achieve. However, as the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party gradually grew stronger, they succeeded in bringing the warlords under control by 1928. Chinese culture was partly based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher, Confucius, who died in 478 BC. He had developed his philosophy during a period of anarchy in China and it was designed to solve the problems of how best to organize society so that all could live together in peace. He stressed the necessity for loyalty in all relationships





Illustration 19.1 **A street execution in China in 1927, towards the end of the Warlord Era**

and for the strict upbringing of children. 'Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, and a son a son.' If people acted properly according to their place in society, then the moral integrity and social harmony of the nation would be restored. For centuries Chinese emperors and rulers had embraced Confucianism because it justified their autocratic and conservative rule. After the 1911 revolution and May the Fourth 1919, some writers began to produce questioning and challenging works calling for modernization in politics, science and individual rights in place of traditional Confucianism. But the practical effect of these writings was limited; the warlords were totally unmoved by this new thinking, and Chiang's Nationalists suppressed intellectual and political freedom after they had set up their government in Nanjing in the late 1920s. They even promoted Confucianism because of its conservatism and because it was a good means of distinguishing themselves from Mao and the communists. It was not until the student protests of 1989 that the May the Fourth ideas surfaced again (see Section 20.3).

## 19.2 THE KUOMINTANG, DR SUN YAT-SEN AND CHIANG KAI-SHEK

### (a) The Kuomintang

The main hope for the survival of a united China lay with the Kuomintang, or National People's Party, formed in 1912 by Dr Sun Yat-sen. He had trained as a doctor in Hawaii and Hong Kong and lived abroad until the 1911 revolution. He was dismayed by the disintegration of China and wanted to create a modern, united, democratic state. Returning to China after the revolution, he succeeded in setting up a government at Canton in southern China (1917). His ideas were influential but he had very little power outside the Canton area. The KMT was not a communist party, though it was prepared to co-operate with the

communists, and developed its own party organization along communist lines, as well as building up its own army. Sun himself summarized his aims as *the Three Principles*:

*nationalism* – to rid China of foreign influence and build the country into a strong and united power, respected abroad.

*democracy* – China should not be ruled by warlords, but by the people themselves, after they had been educated to equip them for democratic self-government.

*land reform* – sometimes known as ‘the people’s livelihood’; this was vague – although Sun announced a long-term policy of economic development and redistribution of land to the peasants and was in favour of rent restraint, he was opposed to the confiscation of landlords’ property.

Sun gained enormous respect as an intellectual statesman and revolutionary leader, but when he died in 1925 little progress had been made towards achieving the three principles, mainly because he was not himself a general. Until the KMT armies were built up, he had to rely on alliances with sympathetic warlords, and he had difficulty exercising any authority outside the south.

## **(b) Chiang Kai-shek**

General Chiang Kai-shek became leader of the KMT after Sun’s death. He had received his military training in Japan before the First World War, and being a strong nationalist, joined the KMT. At this stage the new Russian Soviet government was providing help and guidance for the KMT in the hope that Nationalist China would be friendly towards Russia. In 1923 Chiang spent some time in Moscow studying the organization of the Communist Party and the Red Army. The following year he became head of the Whampoa Military Academy (near Canton), which was set up with the help of Russian cash, arms and advisers to train officers for the KMT army. However, in spite of his Russian contacts, Chiang was not a communist. In fact he was more right-wing than Sun Yat-sen and became increasingly anti-communist, his sympathies lying with businessmen and landowners. Soon after becoming party leader, he removed all left-wingers from leading positions in the Party, though for the time being he continued the KMT alliance with the communists.

In 1926 he set out on *the Northern March* to destroy the warlords of central and northern China. Starting from Canton, the KMT and the communists had captured Hankow, Shanghai and Nanking by 1927. The capital, Beijing, was taken in 1928. Much of Chiang’s success sprang from massive local support among the peasants, who were attracted by communist promises of land. The capture of Shanghai was helped by a rising of industrial workers organized by *Zhou En-lai*, a member of the KMT and also a communist.

*During 1927 Chiang decided that the communists were becoming too powerful.* In areas where communists were strong, landlords were being attacked and land seized; it was time to destroy an embarrassing ally. All communists were expelled from the KMT and a terrible ‘purification movement’ was launched in which thousands of communists, trade union and peasant leaders were massacred; some estimates put the total murdered as high as 250 000. The communists had been checked, the warlords were under control and Chiang was the military and political leader of China.

*The Kuomintang government proved to be a great disappointment for the majority of the Chinese people.* Chiang could claim to have achieved Sun’s first principle, nationalism, but relying as he did on the support of wealthy landowners, no moves were made towards democracy or land reform, though there was some limited progress with the building of more schools and roads.



## 19.3 MAO ZEDONG AND THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

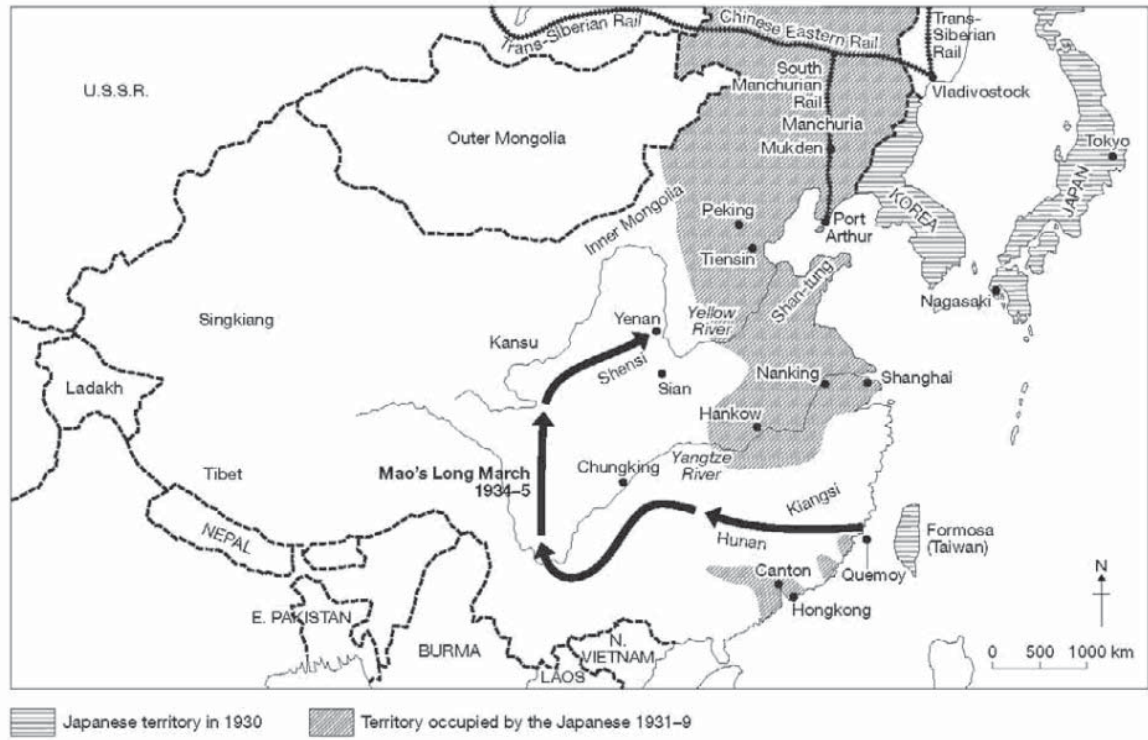
### (a) The early years

The party had been officially founded in 1921; at first it consisted mostly of intellectuals and had very little military strength, which explains why it was willing to work with the KMT. Mao Zedong, who was present at the founding meeting, was born in Hunan province (1893) in south-east China, the son of a prosperous peasant farmer. After spending some time working on the land, Mao trained as a teacher, and then moved northwards to Beijing where he worked as a library assistant at the university, a centre of Marxist studies. Later he moved back to Hunan and built up a reputation as a skilful trade union and peasant association organizer. After the communist breach with the KMT, Mao was responsible for changing the Party's strategy: they would concentrate on winning mass support among the peasants rather than trying to capture industrial towns, where several communist insurrections had already failed because of the strength of the KMT. In 1931 Mao was elected chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Party, and from then on, he gradually consolidated his position as the real leader of Chinese communism. The Chinese Soviet Republic was proclaimed at Juichin in 1931, and on 7 November 1931 the first All-China Congress of Soviets was held there. It was attended by delegates from 15 soviet areas.

*Mao and his supporters spent most of their energies on survival* as Chiang carried out five 'extermination campaigns' against them between 1930 and 1934. They took to the mountains between Hunan and Kiangsi provinces and concentrated on building up the Red Army. However, early in 1934 Mao's base area was surrounded by KMT armies poised for the final destruction of Chinese communism. Mao decided that the only chance of survival was to break through Chiang's lines and set up another power base somewhere else. In October 1934 the breakthrough was achieved and almost 100 000 communists set out on the remarkable *Long March*, which was to become part of Chinese legend. They covered about 6000 miles in 368 days (see Map 19.1) and, in the words of American journalist Edgar Snow:

crossed 18 mountain ranges, 5 of which were snow-capped, and 24 rivers. They passed through 12 different provinces, occupied 62 cities, and broke through enveloping armies of 10 different provincial warlords, besides defeating, eluding, or out-manoeuvering the various forces of government troops sent against them.

Eventually the 20 000 survivors found refuge at Yen'an in Shensi province: this was the last surviving communist base in China and was controlled by the guerrilla leader Kao Kang. The Shensi communists, not entirely willingly, accepted Mao as leader, and a new base and a soviet were organized. Mao was able to control the provinces of Shensi and Kansu. However, according to writers Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in their book *Mao: The Unknown Story*, published in 2005, the march was vastly exaggerated and was in fact nothing like as heroic as legend claimed. They even suggested that Mao's 'breakout' in October 1934 was actually permitted by Chiang Kai-shek because he preferred the communists to be in the north where he could box them in while he extended the KMT control over the south-west. This interpretation was welcomed by Mao's critics, but historians generally gave a more balanced judgement: while agreeing that there had been some exaggeration in accounts of the march in order to show Mao and the communists in the best possible light, they rejected the Jung Chang/Halliday interpretation as 'more fantasy than fact'. *During the ten years following the Long March the communists continued to gain support, while Chiang and the KMT steadily lost popularity.*



Map 19.1 China after the First World War



## **(b) Why did Mao and the communists gain support?**

### *1 The inefficiency and corruption of the KMT in government*

The KMT had little to offer in the way of reform, spent too much time looking after the interests of industrialists, bankers and landowners, and made no effective attempts to organize mass support. This provided the main opportunity for Mao and the communists to win support.

### *2 There was little improvement in factory conditions*

Poor industrial working conditions continued, in spite of laws designed to remove the worst abuses, such as child labour in textile mills. Often these laws were not applied: there was widespread bribery of inspectors and Chiang himself was not prepared to offend his industrial supporters.

### *3 There was no improvement in peasant poverty*

In the early 1930s there was a series of droughts and bad harvests which caused widespread famine in rural areas. At the same time there was usually plenty of rice and wheat being hoarded in the cities by profiteering merchants. In addition there were high taxes and forced labour. In contrast, the land policy followed in areas controlled by the communists was much more attractive: at first in the south, they seized the estates of rich landlords and redistributed them among the peasants. After the temporary truce with the KMT during the war with Japan, the communists compromised, and confined themselves to a policy of restricting rents and making sure that even the poorest labourers got a small piece of land. This less drastic policy had the advantage of winning the support of the smaller landowners, as well as the peasants.

### *4 Chiang's 'New Life Movement' was controversial*

In the early 1930s Chiang began to advocate a return to the traditional values of Confucianism, the traditional Chinese religion. In 1934 he introduced the New Life Movement which, he claimed, was a unique secular, rational and modern Chinese version of Confucianism. It was meant to mobilize the population and to revive the country's 'innate morality', thereby helping to create a healthy society and a strong and united country. However, in the words of historian Rana Mitter: 'The movement was not ultimately successful, as its formal prescriptions, including not spitting in the street, and queuing up in an orderly fashion, came over as trivial in comparison with the much larger issues of national coherence which dogged twentieth-century China.' Unfortunately many May the Fourth supporters and other modern progressive thinkers protested that this was another backward step designed to return China to its oppressive imperial past.

### *5 The KMT put up no effective resistance to the Japanese*

This was the crucial factor in the communist success. The Japanese occupied Manchuria in 1931 and were obviously preparing to bring the neighbouring provinces of northern China under their control. Chiang seemed to think it was more important to destroy the communists than to resist the Japanese, and moved into south Shensi to attack Mao (1936). Here a remarkable incident took place: Chiang was taken prisoner by some of his own troops, mostly Manchurians, who were incensed at the Japanese invasion. They demanded that Chiang should turn against the Japanese, but at first he was unwilling. Only after the prominent communist Zhou En-lai came to see him at Sian did he agree to a fresh alliance with the CCP and a national front against the Japanese.

*The new alliance brought great advantages for the communists:* the KMT extermination campaigns ceased for the time being and consequently the CCP was secure in its Shensi base. When full-scale war broke out with Japan in 1937, the KMT forces were



quickly defeated and most of eastern China was occupied by the Japanese as Chiang retreated westwards. This enabled the communists, undefeated in Shensi, to present themselves as patriotic nationalists, leading an effective guerrilla campaign against the Japanese in the north. This won them massive support among the peasants and middle classes, who were appalled at Japanese arrogance and brutality. Whereas in 1937 the CCP had 5 base areas controlling 12 million people, by 1945 this had grown to 19 base areas controlling 100 million people.

However, a recent biographer of Chiang Kai-shek, Jay Taylor, has suggested that he deserves more credit than the Americans and British have given him. For example, the American General Stilwell used to refer to him as 'Peanut', while the British Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke described him as 'a cross between a pine-marten and a ferret'. Without trying to ignore Chiang's brutality and his mistakes, Taylor argues that, given the enormity of the problems facing him, he governed the country with reasonable skill and certainly understood the challenges facing him far better than his American advisers did.

## **19.4 THE COMMUNIST VICTORY, 1949**

### **(a) China and the Second World War**

When the war began, Chiang Kai-shek was in a dilemma: China had already been in a state of undeclared war with Japan since 1937, yet he had great admiration for Japan's ally Germany, and for the German military tradition. It was only after the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1942–3 that he decided to commit China to the Allied side. However, relations between China and the USSR were strained because of Chiang's campaigns against the communists, so that Stalin refused to take part in any meeting at which Chiang was present. As an encouragement, in January 1943 the USA, Britain and several other states renounced their territorial rights and concessions in China (though Britain insisted on keeping Hong Kong), and promised that Manchuria and Formosa would be returned to China after the war. The irony was that most of these territories were occupied by the Japanese at the time – unless Japan could be defeated, none of it would happen. Nevertheless the agreements were important because they showed that at last China was being treated as an equal among the great powers, and was promised a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Japanese reaction to these developments was to launch an offensive by troops moved from Manchuria. Striking southwards from the Yangtse Valley, they eventually reached the frontier with Indochina, cutting off the south-east coast from the interior. The Nationalist forces were disorganized and ineffective, and their sporadic attempts to repel the Japanese advance were swept aside. Fortunately for the Chinese, time was running out for the Japanese in other areas (see Section 6.6(e)). In August 1945 the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and within a few days Japan surrendered. The Chinese contribution to the defeat of Japan had been to keep hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops bogged down in what was, for them, only a sideshow.

### **(b) Victory for the communists was still not inevitable**

When the Japanese were defeated in 1945, the KMT and the CCP became locked in the final struggle for power. Many observers, especially in the USA, hoped and expected that Chiang would be victorious. The Americans helped the KMT to take over all areas previously occupied by the Japanese, except Manchuria, which had been captured by the Russians a few days before the war ended. Here the Russians obstructed the KMT and



allowed CCP guerrillas to move in. In fact the apparent strength of the KMT was deceptive: in 1948 the ever-growing communist armies were large enough to abandon their guerrilla campaign and challenge Chiang's armies directly. As soon as they came under direct pressure, the KMT armies began to disintegrate. In January 1949 the communists took Beijing, and later in the year, Chiang and what remained of his forces fled to the island of Taiwan, leaving Mao Zedong in command of mainland China. In October 1949, standing at Tiananmen (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) in Beijing, Mao proclaimed the new People's Republic of China with himself as both Chairman of the CCP and president of the republic.

### (c) Reasons for the CCP triumph

The communists continued to win popular support by their restrained land policy, which varied according to the needs of particular areas: some or all of a landlord's estate might be confiscated and redistributed among the peasants, or there might simply be rent restriction; communist armies were well disciplined and communist administration was honest and fair.

On the other hand the KMT administration was inefficient and corrupt, much of its American aid finding its way into the pockets of officials. Its policy of paying for the wars by printing extra money resulted in galloping inflation, which caused hardship for the masses and ruined many of the middle class. Its armies were poorly paid and were allowed to loot the countryside; subjected to communist propaganda, the troops gradually became disillusioned with Chiang and began to desert to the communists. The KMT tried to terrorize the local populations into submission, but this only alienated more areas. Chiang also made some tactical blunders: like Hitler, he could not bear to order retreats and consequently his scattered armies were surrounded, and often, as happened at Beijing and Shanghai, surrendered without resistance, totally disillusioned.

Finally the CCP leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou En-lai, were shrewd enough to take advantage of KMT weaknesses and were completely dedicated. The communist generals, Lin Biao, Chu Teh and Ch-en Yi, had prepared their armies carefully and were more competent tactically than their KMT counterparts.

### FURTHER READING

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## QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain why there was a revolution in China in 1911 and assess the consequences of that revolution.
  - 2 Explain why it took the Nationalists (Kuomintang) so long to establish their authority over China after the revolution of 1911.
  - 3 'Chiang Kai-shek was popular during the second half of the 1920s, but after he came to power, his Kuomintang government proved to be a disappointment to the majority of Chinese people.' How far would you agree that this is a fair assessment of the career of Chiang Kai-shek?
  - 4 'The communist victory in 1949 was due as much to the shortcomings of the Kuomintang as it was to the leadership of Mao Zedong.' How far would you agree with this assessment?
  - 5 Assess the view that popular support was the main reason why the communists were able to achieve power in China in 1949.
- ✎ There is a document question about the communist victory in China on the website.