

The Chinese Civil War

The Chinese Civil War was a civil war in China fought between the Kuomintang (KMT)-led government of the Republic of China (ROC) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) lasting intermittently between 1927 and 1949.

The Civil War ended in victory for the communist forces who still rule China to the present day.

This article will give details about the Chinese Civil War within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

Background of the Chinese Civil War

The roots of the Chinese Civil War went back to the revolution of 1911. The overthrow of the Manchu emperors led to a period of political turmoil throughout China as Chinese political forces struggled to find a post-imperial state which could command widespread allegiance.

The first Chinese president, Yuan Shih-k'ai, elected in 1912, though nominally in favour of constitutional democracy by 1915 turned his office into a virtual dictatorship based on the military forces of the northern Chinese generals. When he tried to make himself emperor in 1916, his allies deserted him. His death a few months later ushered in a period of warlord rule which lasted until 1927. China fragmented into a number of military dictatorships whose forces fought among themselves for regional advantage.

In the absence of a settled central government, the other powers maintained the privileged positions that had enjoyed under the Manchu emperors, dominating Chinese trade, customs, railways, even the post office, while enjoying extraterritorial rights on Chinese soil.

The emergence of Rival Factions

The rise of warlordism and the continued presence of foreigners prompted a nationalist revolt in the 1920s. The call for national unity and sovereignty was loudest in China's universities, where students demanded social reform. The May 4th Movement, named after a demonstration by Peking students in May 1919, sparked a wave of strikes and boycotts which were brutally suppressed. The "New Culture Movement" that followed produced a period of intense intellectual debate on the path of modernization China should follow.

Two major political groups emerged from the debate. The first was based on Sun Yat-sen's National People's Party (Kuomintang), first founded in 1912 and revived by Sun in 1924; the second was the Chinese Communist Party, set up in July 1921. The two co-operated on the shared goal of anti-imperialism, the communists winning support among the working class and the Kuomintang recruiting from among the educated urban classes and native Chinese businessmen of the south.

Following Sun's death in 1924, a Kuomintang government was set up in Canton as a rival to the government in Peking dominated by the northern warlords. Sun had learned from the warlord era and the Kuomintang had its own trained army by the mid-1920s, run by a young officer, Chiang Kai-shek, who by 1925 was the leading figure in the movement.

The outbreak of the Chinese Civil War

In July 1926 Chiang began a year-long war against the north - the so-called Northern Expedition - which led a year later to the consolidation of much of China under one regime, based at Chiang's new capital at Nanking. Up to this point, Kuomintang and communists co-operated, but Chiang's fear of a broader social revolution turned him against communism.

In 1927 his forces destroyed the communists in the major cities. However, one young communist leader, Mao Tse-tung, kept resistance alive in the province of Kiangsi and when Chiang attacked his group in 1934, the fragments of the communist forces trekked 6000 miles to the northern provinces of Shensi. In the 1930s Chiang became the undisputed leader of the new national China; sovereignty was largely restored though China remained reliant on western help. The social issue of China's millions of poor peasants and workers remained unresolved.

But the civil war was far from over, as the communist conducted guerilla warfare against the Kuomintang government holding sway over the northern and western regions of China. But a new threat was that would put both the Kuomintang and the communists on the backfoot which would lead to the bloodiest phase of the Chinese Civil War - the invasion by a resurgent Japanese Empire.

The Second Sino-Japanese War

The Japanese had overrun the Manchurian province in 1934, setting up the puppet government of Manchukuo from which they would carry out further campaigns to take the rest of China. Despite the Japanese being the obvious threat, Chiang refused to ally with the communist to throw out the Japanese as he believed that the communists were a bigger danger.

He was still carrying out punitive expeditions against the communists when the Japanese launched an invasion of Eastern China in 1937, sparking the second Sino-Japanese War. The well-equipped troops of Japan overran Kuomintang defenders in northern and coastal China.

Forced to ally in the face of a common enemy, the Kuomintang and the communists turned their attention in cooperating against the Imperial Japanese army. But this cooperation was in name only

While the Kuomintang faced the Japanese in conventional battles, the communists favoured guerilla warfare. The result was the Kuomintang suffering devastating losses against the technologically advanced Japanese army. Even after World War II broke out in the 1940s, both

the factions vied for territorial control of each other's lands and fought the Japanese at the same time.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to convince the two that the in-fighting between them would only serve the interests of the Japanese but to little avail.

In general, developments in the Second Sino-Japanese War were to the advantage of the communists, as its guerrilla war tactics had won them popular support within the Japanese-occupied areas. But it was Chiang's forces who bore most of the fighting, which would prove disastrous when the Japanese would surrender later.

Japan launched its last major offensive against the Kuomintang, Operation Ichi-Go, in 1944; this resulted in the severe weakening of Chiang's forces. The communists also suffered fewer losses through its guerrilla tactics.

By the end of the war, the Red Army had grown to more than 1.3 million members, with a separate militia of over 2.6 million members. About one hundred million people lived in communist-controlled zones.

Resumption of Hostilities and End of the Civil War

After the surrender of the Japanese and their subsequent withdrawal from the mainland, US negotiators tried to effect a reconciliation between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung. The following spring, when Soviet forces had evacuated Manchuria, a full-scale civil war broke out once again between the communists and the Kuomintang. Early victories persuaded Chiang that he could be victorious. In April 1948 he was appointed president by a new national assembly. The communists worked to achieve the support of the peasantry and their army swelled in number.

In late 1948 the nationalists were defeated in Manchuria and by September 1949 the nationalist's cause had collapsed. Mao Tse-Tung became the head of a new communist republic in October 1949 and Chiang fled to Taiwan. The Chinese Civil War had finally come to an end

The Kuomintang set up a new government in Taiwan under the name of the Republic of China (ROC) while the communists would set up the PRC (People's Republic of China). Mao would rule mainland China until his death in 1976. Chiang would pass away in 1975.

The international implication of this event would be that a new communist China would emerge as a major player during the Cold War era. But this would also mean that the PRC would not be admitted into the United Nations until On 25 October 1971, when the UN expelled the ROC, which had been a founding member of the United Nations and was one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Representatives of Chiang Kai-shek refused to recognise their accreditations as representatives of China and left the assembly. Recognition for the People's Republic of China soon followed from most other member nations, including the United States.