A very Brief History of the Chinese Civil War

1. The Chinese Civil War was a war fought between the Guomindang (GMD)-led government of the Republic of China and the Communist Party of China (CPC). Although particular attention is paid to the four years of Chinese Communist Revolution from 1945 to 1949, the war actually started in August 1927, with the White Terror at the end of Generalissimo Jiang Jieshi’s Northern Expedition, and essentially ended when major hostilities between the two sides ceased in 1950.

2. The conflict took place in two stages: the first between 1927 and 1937, and the second from 1946 to 1950, with the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937–1945 separating them. The war marked a major turning point in modern Chinese history, with the Communists gaining control of mainland China and establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and forced the Republic of China (ROC) to retreat to Taiwan.

3. The war represented an ideological split between the communist CPC and the nationalist GMD. Conflict continued intermittently until late 1937, when the two parties came together to form the Second United Front to counter the Imperial Japanese Army threat and to prevent the country from crumbling. Full-scale civil war in China resumed in 1946, a year after the end of hostilities with the Empire of Japan in September 1945. Four years later came the cessation of major military activity, with the newly founded People's Republic of China controlling mainland China (including the island of Hainan), and the Republic of China's jurisdiction restricted to Taiwan, Penghu, Quemoy, Matsu and several outlying islands.

4. Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in the aftermath of the Xinhai Revolution, China fell into a brief period of civil war before Yuan Shikai assumed the presidency of the newly formed Republic of China. The administration became known as the Beiyang Government, with its capital in Peking. After the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, the following years were characterized by the power struggle between different cliques in the former Beiyang Army. In the meantime, the Guomindang, led by Sun Yat-sen, created a new government in Guangzhou to resist the rule of Beiyang Government through a series of movements.

5. Sun's efforts to obtain aid from the Western countries were ignored, thus he turned to the Soviet Union in 1921. For political expediency, the Soviet leadership initiated a dual policy of support for both Sun and the newly established Communist Party of China, which would eventually found the People's Republic of China. Thus the struggle for power in China began between the GMD and the CPC.
6. In 1923, Sun sent Jiang Jieshi, one of his lieutenants, for several months of military and political study in the Soviet capital, Moscow. By 1924, Jiang became the head of the Whampoa Military Academy, and rose to prominence as Sun's successor as head of the GMD. The Soviets provided the academy with much educational material, organization and equipment, including munitions. They also provided education in many of the techniques for mass mobilization. With this aid, Sun was able to raise a dedicated "army of the party," with which he hoped to defeat the warlords militarily. CPC members were also present in the academy, and many of them became instructors, including Zhou Enlai, who was made a political instructor.

7. Communist members were allowed to join the GMD on an individual basis. The CPC itself was still small at the time, having a membership of 300 in 1922 and only 1,500 by 1925. As of 1923, the GMD had 50,000 members. However, after Sun died in 1925, the GMD split into left- and right-wing movements. GMD members worried that the Soviets were trying to destroy the GMD from inside using the CPC. The CPC then began movements in opposition of the Northern Expedition, passing a resolution against it at a party meeting. Then, in March 1927, the GMD held its second party meeting where the Soviets helped pass resolutions against the Expedition and curbing Chiang's power. Soon, the GMD would be clearly divided.

**Northern Expedition and GMD-CPC split**

8. In early 1927, the GMD-CPC rivalry led to a split in the revolutionary ranks. The CPC and the left wing of the GMD had decided to move the seat of the GMD government from Guangzhou to Wuhan, where communist influence was strong. However, Jiang and Li Zongren, whose armies defeated warlord Sun Chuanfang, moved eastward toward Jiangxi. The leftists rejected Jiang's demand to eliminate Communist influence within GMD and Jiang denounced them for betraying Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People by taking orders from the Soviet Union. According to Mao Zedong, Chiang's tolerance of the CPC in the GMD camp decreased as his power increased.

9. On April 7, Jiang and several other GMD leaders held a meeting, during which they proposed that Communist activities were socially and economically disruptive and had to be undone for the Nationalist revolution to proceed. On April 12, in Shanghai, many Communist members in the GMD were purged through hundreds of arrests and executions on the orders of General Bai Chongxi. The CPC referred to this as the April 12 Incident or Shanghai Massacre. This incident widened the rift between Chiang and Wang Jingwei, another warlord who controlled the city of Wuhan.

10. Eventually, the left wing of the GMD also expelled CPC members from the Wuhan government, which in turn was toppled by Jiang. The GMD resumed its campaign against warlords and captured Beijing in June 1928. Soon, most of eastern China was under the control
of the Nanjing central government, which received prompt international recognition as the sole legitimate government of China. The GMD government announced, in conformity with Sun Yat-sen, the formula for the three stages of revolution: military unification, political tutelage, and constitutional democracy.

11. On 1 August 1927, the Communist Party launched an uprising in Nanchang against the Nationalist government in Wuhan. This conflict led to the creation of the Red Army. On August 4, the main forces of the Red Army left Nanchang and headed southwards for an assault on Guangdong. Nationalist forces quickly reoccupied Nanchang while the remaining members of the CPC in Nanchang went into hiding. A CPC meeting on August 7 confirmed the objective of the party is to seize the political power by force, but the CPC was quickly suppressed the next day on August 8 by the Nationalist government in Wuhan led by Wang Jingwei. On August 14, Jiang Jieshi announced his temporary retirement, as the Wuhan faction and Nanjing faction of the GMD were allied once again with common goal of suppressing the Communist Party after the earlier split.

12. Attempts were later made by the CPC to take the cities of Changsha, Shantou and Guangzhou. The Red Army consisting of mutinous former National Revolutionary Army (NRA) soldiers as well as armed peasants established control over several areas in southern China. KMT forces continued to attempt to suppress the rebellions.\(^1\) Then, in September, Wang Jingwei was forced out of Wuhan. September also saw an unsuccessful armed rural insurrection, known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising, led by Mao Zedong.

13. In November, Jiang went to Shanghai and invited Wang to join him. On December 11, the CPC started the Guangzhou Uprising, establishing a soviet there the next day, but lost the city by December 13 to a counter-attack under the orders of General Zhang Fakui. On December 16, Wang Jingwei fled to France. There were now three capitals in China: the internationally recognized republic capital in Beijing, the CPC and left-wing GMD at Wuhan and the right-wing GMD regime at Nanjing, which would remain the GMD capital for the next decade.

14. This marked the beginning of a ten-year armed struggle, known in mainland China as the "Ten-Year Civil War" which ended with the Xi'an Incident when Jiang was forced to form the Second United Front against invading forces from Japan. In 1930 the Central Plains War broke out as an internal conflict of the GMD. The attention was turned to root out remaining pockets of Communist activity in a series of five encirclement campaigns. The first and second campaigns failed and the third was aborted due to the Mukden Incident. The fourth campaign (1932–1933) achieved some early successes, but Jiang's armies were badly mauled when they tried to penetrate into the heart of Mao's Soviet Chinese Republic. During these campaigns, GMD columns struck swiftly into Communist areas, but were easily engulfed by the vast
countryside and were not able to consolidate their foothold. Finally, in late 1934, Chiang launched a fifth campaign that involved the systematic encirclement of the Jiangxi Soviet region with fortified blockhouses. Unlike previous campaigns in which they penetrated deeply in a single strike, this time the GMD troops patiently built blockhouses, each separated by about five miles, to surround the Communist areas and cut off their supplies and food sources.

15. In October 1934 the CPC took advantage of gaps in the ring of blockhouses (manned by the forces of a warlord ally of Jiang’s, rather than regular GMD troops) and broke out of the encirclement. The warlord armies were reluctant to challenge Communist forces for fear of losing their own men and did not pursue the CPC with much fervor. In addition, the main GMD forces were preoccupied with annihilating Zhang Guotao’s army, which was much larger than Mao’s. The massive military retreat of Communist forces lasted a year and covered what Mao estimated as 12,500 km. It later became known as the Long March.

16. The Long March was a military retreat taken on by the Communist Party of China, led by Mao Zedong to evade the pursuit or attack of the GMD army. It consisted of a series of marches, during which numerous Communist armies in the south escaped to the north and west. Over the course of the march from Jiangxi the First Front Army, led by an inexperienced military commission, was on the brink of annihilation by Jiang’s troops as their stronghold was in Jiangxi. The Communists, under the command of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, "escaped in a circling retreat to the west and north, which reportedly traversed over 9,000 kilometers over 370 days". The route passed through some of the most difficult terrain of western China by traveling west, and then northwards towards Shaanxi. "In November 1935, shortly after settling in northern Shaanxi, Mao officially took over Zhou Enlai’s leading position in the Red Army. Following a major reshuffling of official roles, Mao became the chairman of the Military Commission, with Zhou and Deng Xiaoping as vice-chairmen." This marked Mao’s position as the pre-eminent leader of the Party, with Zhou in second position to him.

17. The march ended when the CPC reached the interior of Shaanxi. Zhang Guotao's army, which took a different route through northwest China, was largely destroyed by the forces of Jiang and his Chinese Muslim allies, the Ma clique. Along the way, the Communist army confiscated property and weapons from local warlords and landlords, while recruiting peasants and the poor, solidifying its appeal to the masses. Of the 90,000–100,000 people who began the Long March from the Soviet Chinese Republic, only around 7,000–8,000 made it to Shaanxi. The remnants of Zhang's forces eventually joined Mao in Shaanxi, but with his army destroyed, Zhang, even as a founding member of the CPC, was never able to challenge Mao's authority. Essentially, the great retreat made Mao the undisputed leader of the Communist Party of China.
18. The GMD used Khampa troops—who were former bandits—to battle the Communist Red Army as it advanced and to undermine local warlords who often refused to fight Communist forces to conserve their own strength. The GMD enlisted 300 "Khampa bandits" into its Consolatory Commission military in Sichuan, where they were part of the effort of the central government to penetrate and destabilize local Han warlords such as Liu Wenhui. The government was seeking to exert full control over frontier areas against the warlords. Liu had refused to battle the Communists in order to conserve his army. The Consolatory Commission forces were used to battle the Red Army, but they were defeated when their religious leader was captured by the Communists.

19. In 1936, Zhou Enlai and Zhang Xueliang grew closer, with Zhang even suggesting that he join the CPC. However, this was turned down by the Comintern in the USSR. Later on, Zhou persuaded Zhang and Yang Hucheng, another warlord, to instigate the Xi'an Incident. Jiang was placed under house arrest and forced to stop his attacks on the Red Army, instead focusing on the Japanese threat.

20. During Japan's invasion and occupation of Manchuria Jiang, who saw the CPC as a greater threat, refused to ally with them to fight against the Imperial Japanese Army. Jiang preferred to unite China by eliminating the warlords and CPC forces first. He believed that he was still too weak to launch an offensive to chase out Japan and that China needed time for a military build-up. Only after unification would it be possible for the GMD to mobilize a war against Japan. So he would rather ignore the discontent and anger among Chinese people at his policy of compromise with the Japanese, and ordered GMD generals Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng to carry out suppression of the CPC; however, their provincial forces suffered significant casualties in battles with the Red Army.

21. On 12 December 1936, the disgruntled Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng conspired to kidnap Chiang and force him into a truce with the CPC. The incident became known as the Xi'an Incident. Both parties suspended fighting to form a Second United Front to focus their energies and fighting against the Japanese. In 1937 Japan launched its full-scale invasion of China and its well-equipped troops overran GMD defenders in northern and coastal China.

22. The alliance of CPC and GMD was in name only. Unlike the GMD troops, CPC shunned conventional warfare and instead engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. The level of actual cooperation and coordination between the CPC and GMD during World War II was at best minimal. In the midst of the Second United Front, the CPC and the GMD were still vying for territorial advantage in "Free China" (i.e., areas not occupied by the Japanese or ruled by Japanese puppet governments such as Manchukuo and the Reorganized National Government of China).
23. The situation came to a head in late 1940 and early 1941 when clashes between Communist and GMD forces intensified. In December 1940 Chiang demanded that the CPC's New Fourth Army evacuate Anhui and Jiangsu Provinces due to its provocation and harassment of GMD forces in this area. Under intense pressure, the New Fourth Army commanders complied. In 1941 they were ambushed by GMD forces during their evacuation, which led to several thousand deaths. It also ended the Second United Front, which had been formed earlier to fight the Japanese.

24. In 1941 the Soviet Union, with its closer alliance to the CPC, also sent an imperative telegram to Mao warning that the civil war would also make the situation easier for the Japanese military. Due to the international community's efforts, there was a temporary and superficial peace. In 1943 Jiang attacked the CPC with the propaganda piece *China's Destiny*, which questioned the CPC's power after the war, while the CPC strongly opposed Jiang's leadership and referred to his regime as fascist in an attempt to generate a negative public image. Both leaders knew that a deadly battle had begun between themselves.

25. In general, developments in the Second Sino-Japanese War were to the advantage of the CPC, as its guerrilla war tactics had won them popular support within the Japanese-occupied areas, while the GMD's had to defend the country against the main Japanese campaigns to take over the country, since it was the legal Chinese government, and this proved costly to Jiang and his troops. In 1944 Japan launched its last major offensive, Operation Ichi-Go, against the GMD that resulted in the severe weakening of Chiang's forces. Also, the CPC suffered fewer losses through their 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 CPC-controlled zones.

26. Under the terms of the Japanese unconditional surrender dictated by the United States, Japanese troops were ordered to surrender to GMD troops and not to the CPC, which was present in some of the occupied areas. In Manchuria, however, where the GMD had no forces, the Japanese surrendered to the Soviet Union. Jiang ordered the Japanese troops to remain at their post to receive the Guomindang and not surrender their arms to the Communists.

27. The first post-war peace negotiation was attended by both Jiang and Mao Zedong in Chongqing from 28 August 1945 and concluded on 10 October 1945 with the signing of Double Tenth Agreement. Both sides stressed the importance of a peaceful reconstruction, but the conference did not produce any concrete results. Battles between the two sides continued even as peace negotiations were in progress, until the agreement was reached in January 1946.
However, large campaigns and full-scale confrontations between the CPC and Chiang's troops were temporarily avoided.

28. As postwar negotiations between the Nationalist government in Nanjing and the Communist Party failed, the civil war between these two parties resumed. This stage of war is referred to in mainland China and Communist historiography as the "War of Liberation." On 20 July 1946, Jiang Jieshi launched a large-scale assault on Communist territory in North China with 113 brigades (a total of 1.6 million troops). This marked the first stage of the final phase in the Chinese Civil War.

29. Knowing their disadvantages in manpower and equipment, the CPC executed a "passive defense" strategy. It avoided the strong points of the GMD army and was prepared to abandon territory in order to preserve its forces. In most cases the surrounding countryside and small towns had come under Communist influence long before the cities. The CPC also attempted to wear out the GMD forces as much as possible. This tactic seemed to be successful; after a year, the power balance became more favorable to the CPC. They wiped out 1.12 million GMD troops, while their strength grew to about two million men.

30. In March 1947 the GMD achieved a symbolic victory by seizing the CPC capital of Yan'an. The Communists counterattacked soon afterwards; on 30 June 1947 CPC troops crossed the Yellow River and moved to the Dabie Mountains area, restored and developed the Central Plain. At the same time, Communist forces also began to counterattack in Northeastern China, North China and East China.

31. By late 1948, the CPC eventually captured the northern cities of Shenyang and Changchun and seized control of the Northeast after suffering numerous setbacks while trying to take the cities, with the decisive Liaoshen Campaign. The New 1st Army, regarded as the best GMD army, was forced to surrender after the CPC conducted a brutal six-month siege of Changchun that resulted in more than 150,000 civilian deaths from starvation.

32. The capture of large GMD units provided the CPC with the tanks, heavy artillery and other combined-arms assets needed to execute offensive operations south of the Great Wall. By April 1948 the city of Luoyang fell, cutting the GMD army off from Xi'an. Following a fierce battle, the CPC captured Jinan and Shandong province on 24 September 1948. The Huaihai Campaign of late 1948 and early 1949 secured east-central China for the CPC. The outcome of these encounters were decisive for the military outcome of the civil war.

33. The Pingjin Campaign resulted in the Communist conquest of northern China. It lasted 64 days, from 21 November 1948, to 31 January 1949. The PLA suffered heavy casualties while securing Zhangjiakou, Tianjin along with its port and garrison at Dagu and Beiping. The CPC
brought 890,000 troops from the northeast to oppose some 600,000 GMD troops. There were 40,000 CPC casualties at Zhangjiakou alone. They in turn killed, wounded or captured some 520,000 GMD during the campaign.

34. After achieving decisive victory at Liaoshen, Huaihai and Pingjin campaigns, the CPC wiped out 144 regular and 29 non-regular GMD divisions, including 1.54 million veteran GMD troops, which significantly reduced the strength of Nationalist forces. Stalin initially favored a coalition government in postwar China, and tried to persuade Mao to stop the CPC from crossing the Yangtze and attacking the GMD positions south of the river. Mao rejected Stalin's position and on 21 April, Communist began the Yangtze River Crossing Campaign. On 23 April they captured the GMD's capital, Nanjing. The GMD government retreated to Canton (Guangzhou) until October 15, Chongqing until November 25, and then Chengdu before retreating to Taiwan on December 10. By late 1949 the People's Liberation Army was pursuing remnants of GMD forces southwards in southern China, and only Tibet was left.

35. On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China with its capital at Beiping, which was renamed back to the former name Beijing. Jiang and approximately two million Nationalist soldiers retreated from mainland China to the island of Taiwan in December after the PLA advanced into the Sichuan province. Isolated Nationalist pockets of resistance remained in the area, but the majority of the resistance collapsed after the fall of Chengdu on 10 December 1949, with some resistance continuing in the far south. A PRC attempt to take the ROC-controlled island of Quemoy was thwarted in the Battle of Kuningtou, halting the PLA advance towards Taiwan. In December 1949, Jiang proclaimed Taipei the temporary capital of the Republic of China and continued to assert his government as the sole legitimate authority in China.