How Significant Was the Contribution of Guerrilla Warfare to the Chinese Civil War?

1. The Chinese Civil war took place between 1927 and 1949, and resulted in victory for the CCP, which then consolidated its control in China. The experience of the lengthy war laid the foundations for the new People's Republic, and the militarization of society that occurred throughout the war allowed the CCP to establish their authoritarian rule. Having won the support of peasants during the course of the war, it was much easier for the party to introduce their domestic campaigns without significant resistance. Arguably though, there are several other major factors that contributed to the successes of the CCP, although guerrilla warfare was a central part of Mao’s plan.

2. The war was primarily between two forces, and the immediate trigger for the beginning of the war was an attack from the GMD on the CCP. They had previously united to form a ‘United Front’ that enabled them to defeat the warlords that divided China. The two parties however, had significantly different ideologies and so separated. The Communists (CCP) had already gained much support from industrial workers and peasants due to the promise of land that they had made. Jiang Jieshi, leader of the GMD, was sympathetic to the middle classes, and to the warlords. He would not tolerate the actions of the peasants, who attacked warlords and seized land, and the party that the peasants supported, the CCP, could no longer be tolerated either. He set out to destroy the CCP in order to bring about the unification of China, ruled by the GMD. Attacks were carried out on communist members and the CCP was nearly gone in 1927. Believing it to be their only hope of survival, the CCP fled to the mountains in Jiangsi, followed by the GMD, and this was the beginning of the Civil War.

3. The actions of the CCP in what was to become known as the ‘Long March’ began to develop into guerrilla tactics, as they retreated further and further into the mountains they increased their support, setting up camps as they went and recruiting more fighters among the peasants. The vast majority of the population of China were rural workers, so the CCP already had the potential for advantage of numbers and an army that knew the territory well. The GMD had strong and numerable forces, but were unable to defeat their rivals. GMD tactics were not as strategic and organised as the Communists, who allowed the GMD to enter their territory and begin to round up CCP members before attacking the split army, effectively fighting several small forces rather than one large one. The GMD were not as knowledgeable about the landscape, and so they were at a disadvantage in terms of organising when and where to strike, whereas the CCP could make plans and place certain groups of fighters in certain places to have the most effective outcome. Zhu De believes that
knowing the terrain and the support that the CCP had were central to their success: ‘They [GMD] failed because such guerrilla warfare requires not only a thorough knowledge of the terrain of the battle area but also the support of the common people’.

4. The traditional tactics used by the GMD were also part of their downfall, they advanced in one column, whereas the CCP split into small units that infiltrated the enemy forces and divided them, using hit and run tactics to reduce their own casualties. The knowledge that they had of the landscape allowed them to hide once they had attacked, something the GMD would not have been able to do because they did not have this knowledge. Guerrilla warfare was found to be more effective than traditional techniques, and so Mao created this idea of ‘revolutionary warfare’ that incorporated several stages in which the Communists needed to teach their ideology to the peasants to educate them, gaining their trust and support. They wanted to take over the region, spreading the ideology to create a following that believed in what they would be fighting for. Examples throughout history have provided evidence that ideology is a major factor in success in warfare, as soldiers must not only be willing to fight, but willing to die for their cause. Italian soldiers during WWII for example did not believe that they were fighting for a just cause, and so refused to do so. It could be argued that had they been behind the purpose of the war, the Italians would have had more success. The way in which Mao treated the peasants contrasted with what they had previously had to endure. Life was seemingly better under the CCP, and so they were popular with the poor because they offered respect, justice and fairness.

5. With the end of the first phase of the civil war, which resulted in the joining of Mao’s guerrilla forces into a conventional army, the second phase came into effect. The CCP had survived the Long March, arguably due to their guerrilla tactics which allowed them to strengthen their own support and weaken the GMD forces. Historian James Sheridan argues that this type of warfare was the main reason why the communists were able to win the civil war: ‘... the central factor was unquestionably the mobilization of vast numbers of Chinese, primarily peasants, into new political, social, economic, and military organizations, infused with a new purpose and a new spirit. This mobilization largely accounted for the communist victory...’ What Sheridan is saying is that although many other factors contributed to the outcome of the war, guerrilla warfare was the most important because of the huge movement that it created and the way in which it changed people’s ideologies allowed the Communists to take control.

6. The civil war was interrupted just as the CCP were gaining momentum by the invasion of China by the Japanese and the subsequent outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war. The CCP and GMD were forced together again to form a second united front in 1937. Although it came just as it seemed the CCP were about to win the war, the Communists saw it as an opportunity to gain legitimacy as a party, to dispel the reputation as ‘bandits’ that they had acquired. They also hoped that the war might exhaust the GMD forces, giving them a better chance of being able to emerge as victors. The GMD did little to resist the Japanese, hoping
that the US would step in to stop Japan. As the Japanese took over the capital and large areas of the GMD’s support base, the GMD began to lose not only popularity but also money. The revenue from taxes were no longer coming in, and so Jiang Jieshi decided to print more currency, which proved to be disastrous when inflation levels soared. The middle classes that had been behind the GMD were wavering, hit hard by the economic impacts of the Sino-Japanese war. Eventually the GMD lost control and respect among the public, corruption and divisions were rife within the party and it was significantly weakened by the end of the war with Japan and were not strong enough to emerge as victors after the second phase of the Civil War which commenced in 1946.

7. Although foreign powers such as the USA were keen to see a coalition government formed between the CCP and GMD during the second phase of the war, but the two groups ignored American efforts and went to battle in Manchuria to decide who would rule China. Despite the potential for recruits that the CCP had, they were still vastly outnumbered four million to one million by the GMD. The Nationalists (GMD) were then able to gain much control over China again, however, they were corrupt, and conditions for the public were no better than they had been under the Japanese and their popularity declined. Jiang Jieshi had the support of the U.S, but they did not wish to see a single party in power in China, so they encouraged a ceasefire which may have prevented the CCP from being defeated overall. They were then able to retrain their forces and Mao introduced land reforms which gained him even more support from the peasants, a weakened CCP were becoming stronger again. Fighting resumed in March 1947 and Mao again used guerrilla tactics to overcome the huge enemy forces, splitting them up and attacking in units and in a year the CCP gained control of Manchuria. They then turned to more conventional methods to gain more control within the country, firstly the remainder of northern China, then Nanjing and Shanghai, followed by Guangzhou where resistance from the GMD was crushed. The CCP had been victorious and Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

8. Whilst the Communists had used guerrilla warfare throughout the war and had eventual success, it did not always work. It could be argued that guerrilla warfare would have been failure had it not been for the actions of the USA in enforcing a ceasefire which bought the CCP time to rejuvenate their forces. They were perhaps on the brink of defeat prior to the halt in fighting, and could well have been defeated by the GMD. This then suggests that guerrilla warfare alone would not have ensured victory, and that it is therefore not as important as it may seem. After all, had it not been for the Sino-Japanese war and the intervention from the USA, there would have been no respite for the CCP, and so they would not have been able to reorganise, rearm and retrain their forces. Historian Immanuel Hsu believes that the Sino-Japanese war was extremely significant for the outcome of the civil war: ‘Had there been no civil war, the situation in China would have been very different…[M]any of the disastrous repercussions of the war… continued to plague the Nationalists during their struggle with the Communists.’ This suggests that it was not the
strengths of the CCP and the tactics that they used such as guerrilla warfare, but the weaknesses of the GMD that primarily led to their defeat. However, had the CCP not been so strategic and had they not spread their ideology to gain support, they would not have been a threat to the GMD, and no matter how weak the GMD were, they would not have been able to be defeated since they still had power in numbers and resources from the USA. Then again, Jieshi relied heavily on the USA, not making significant effort for the GMD to defeat the Japanese, and making poor decisions in terms of the economy. Michael Lynch suggests that economic problems in China had the greatest effect on the outcome of the war: ‘...it is arguable that the single most powerful reason for the failure of the GMD government was inflation... Even had the Nationalists not been defeated in civil war and driven from the mainland it is difficult to see how Jiang Jieshi and the GMD could have continued to hold power in China.’ So, had Jieshi not made so many mistakes, perhaps the GMD would have retained their popularity among the middle classes and not been as easy for the CCP to shift, but they paid for the errors that they made and were unlikely to have legitimate power in China because of them.

9. Although guerrilla warfare was a major part of the stages of Mao’s revolutionary warfare, historians argue whether it was really that significant, or if another, or a number of other factors were more central to the outcome. There is evidence to back up several different opinions on which was the most important, however the most convincing seems to be a balance between the strengths of the CCP and the weaknesses of the GMD at a time where China was in an ‘era of revolution’, people were tired of the old regime and open to the new communist ideas and the promise of a better future in China. A combination of ideology, military tact and the successes of guerrilla warfare, foreign intervention and poor decision by the GMD ultimately led to victory for the Communist forces and they established a new republic under an authoritarian regime. The USA had failed to prevent a one party state and Mao became leader of the People’s Republic of China.

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