

Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)

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INTRODUCTION

Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek (30 October 1887 to 5 April 1975) was a Chinese statesman, Director-General of the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), and served as President of the Republic of China (ROC) from 1948 to his death in 1975.¹ This article will relate Generalissimo Chiang's policies and actions as the leader of the KMT and China during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

XI'AN INCIDENT AND SECOND UNITED FRONT

Through technically not part of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Xi'an Incident of 1936 played an important part in establishing a truce that united both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against increasing Japanese aggression in northern China throughout the early 1930s.

Despite the threat posed by Japan, Chiang had decided to focus on defeating the CCP first,² creating discontent among the Chinese populace.³ He claimed that the Japanese "were a disease of the skin" and the communists "were a disease of the heart."⁴ On the other hand, CCP rhetoric that "Chinese don't fight Chinese" won over many supporters who advocated active resistance against Japan

and were frustrated with Chiang's policy of appeasement towards the Japanese.⁵

Although warlords Zhang Xueliang of Manchuria and Yang Hucheng of Shaanxi province had been ordered by Chiang to suppress the communists in Xi'an, Zhang instead attempted to form an anti-Japanese coalition with the CCP.⁶ Chiang was taken prisoner when he flew to Xi'an to investigate the activities of the warlords and was released only when he agreed to a ceasefire with the CCP and set up a United Front against the Japanese.

MARCO POLO BRIDGE INCIDENT – WAR BREAKS OUT

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, also known as the Lukouchiao Incident,⁷ marked the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The relatively minor skirmish between Japanese and Chinese soldiers quickly escalated to full scale war.⁸ After capturing Peiping (Beijing) and Tianjin, the Japanese set their sights on Shanghai. Chiang decided to take a stand during the Battle Of Shanghai (August 1937), as he believed that this would trigger foreign intervention to expel the invaders.⁹ The battle destroyed most of the elite KMT forces, built up with German assistance over the past decade.¹⁰ However, foreign aid



Chiang Kai Shek, leader of wartime China

largely did not materialize: only the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) provided assistance to the Chinese. Stalin did not want the Japanese government to conclude that the USSR was a military ally of the ROC, and thus stopped short of providing overt military aid.

As a result of the Second United Front, the CCP reorganised themselves as part of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) and were assigned to the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army.¹¹ These two units initially assisted KMT units in engagements such as the Battle of P'ingsing Pass, nominally under the command of Yen Hsi-shan.¹² After his defeat, both units focused on guerilla warfare against the Japanese primarily in northern China till the surrender of the Japanese in 1945.

CHUNGKING GOVERNMENT – TRADING SPACE FOR TIME

After the fall of Shanghai and the subsequent “Rape Of Nanking,” Chiang ordered Yu

Dawei to oversee the evacuation of industrial technology, books, gold and other items to Chungking in Sichuan province and set up his military headquarters in the city of Wuhan in 1938.¹³ He promulgated the strategy of “trading space for time,” which was to delay and exhaust the Japanese through numerous engagements, allowing China time to recover and regain the initiative.¹⁴

In June 1938, in order to delay the Japanese advance onwards to Wuhan via Zhengzhou, a plan to destroy the dikes of the Yellow River near Zhengzhou was proposed. It was hoped that the Japanese would be deterred from invading through northern China by the resulting floods. Though conscious of the fact that there would be many casualties and refugees, Chiang nevertheless ordered the proposal to proceed; deciding that the strategic benefits outweighed the costs. The waters ravaged numerous provinces and there were almost a million casualties as a result.¹⁵ Despite the tremendous sacrifice, the Japanese were able to detour around the floods and captured Wuhan just a few months later in October 1938.¹⁶

Following the capture of Wuhan, the fall of Changsha, capital of Hunan province, seemed imminent as the governor of Hunan, Zhang Zhizhong, was told that “Japanese cavalry were within twenty miles” of the city.¹⁷ This report probably contributed to the decision to set the whole city ablaze to deny its resources to the invaders. The official investigation by Chiang

resulted in the execution of three public officials and the sacking of the governor.¹⁸ Ironically, the Japanese were forced to halt well short of the burning city due to logistical problems.¹⁹ Furthermore, the defenders of the city were able to repel three Japanese assaults between 1937 to 1944, only succumbing in August 1944.²⁰

After the fall of Wuhan, the ROC government moved to Chungking and the city served as its wartime capital from 1939 until the Japanese surrender in 1945. The wartime ROC government thus became known as the Chungking government.

AMERICAN AID TO CHUNGKING

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii in December 1941, America joined the war on the side of the Allies. The Americans promised aid to Chungking in the form of loans and matériel, although this was extremely limited since the Japanese had occupied most of China’s ports and land routes to Xinjiang from Soviet Central Asia were too remote.²¹ The fall of British Burma in 1942 cut the only other land route into China and Chungking could only receive supplies flown in over the Himalayas from Assam, northeastern India, to Yunnan province.²²

American aid also came with a price; General Joseph W. Stilwell was appointed the Chief of Staff of Chiang’s China Theatre, but also as “commander of American forces in the China-Burma-India theatres and supervisor of Lend-

Lease matériel" in 1942.²³ He spoke fluent Mandarin and was one of the United States (US) Army's China Experts, having served as a Military Attaché in the US Embassy to the ROC from 1935 to 1939.²⁴ He was known as "Vinegar Joe," for his caustic remarks and prided himself on giving "untarnished opinions."²⁵ This proved problematic for Chiang later on during the war.

Initially, the relationship between the two men was rather cordial; Chiang was in fact optimistic about the whole arrangement and actually pushed to let Stilwell have supreme command over both British and Chinese troops in Burma. Chiang lost faith in Stilwell's abilities due to the bungled First Burma Campaign in May 1942, which resulted in a general retreat of the Allies to Assam and Yunnan.²⁶ Stilwell's obstinate insistence on carrying out his own plans led to a deterioration of the relationship between the two men.²⁷ Chiang's brother-in-law T.V. Soong unsuccessfully attempted to relieve Stilwell of his duties from command in September 1943.²⁸ Stilwell was only removed in September 1944 after demanding full control of the China theatre; Chiang responded by asking Roosevelt to send a replacement.²⁹

General Albert C. Wedemeyer was appointed by Roosevelt to relieve Stilwell. He was a "self-confident, tactful, and observant officer"³⁰ and was much less confrontational. He remained until the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

CONCLUSION

The Second Sino-Japanese War had profound consequences for Chiang; it exposed the inadequacies of the KMT government and drove disaffected peasants and intellectuals into the CCP camp. The cost of eight years of war with the Japanese reversed most of the gains made by the KMT during the Nanking Decade (1928-1937). His policies and decisions must be viewed in light of the desperate circumstances at the time, as Chinese cities fell one after another to the Japanese.

The benefits, however, were that China obtained great power status by earning a seat with the great powers of the era such as Britain and the US. Chiang's international prestige rose during and after the war and he was recognised as the legitimate ruler of China until the US withdrew recognition of the ROC in 1979. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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3. *World Book Encyclopedia*, 504.
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5. *New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 16 (US: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1997), 137; Embree, *Encyclopedia Of Asian History*, Vol. 1, 275.

6. Commire, *Historic World Leaders*, 94.
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9. Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek And The Struggle For Modern China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 2009), 148.
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11. Wu T'ien-wei, "The Chinese Communist Movement," in *China's Bitter Victory: The War With Japan 1937-1945*, eds. James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 80.
12. *Ibid.*, 83.
13. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 152.
14. Ch'i Hsi-Sheng, *Nationalist China At War: Military Defeats And Political Collapse, 1937-45* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Of Michigan Press, 1982), 54.
15. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 154-155.
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17. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 159.
18. *Ibid.*, 160.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Ch'i, *Nationalist China At War*, 77.
21. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 208.
22. *Ibid.*; Ch'i, *Nationalist China At War*, 63.
23. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 192.
24. Embree, *Encyclopedia Of Asian History*, Vol. 4, 11.
25. Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 191.
26. *Ibid.*, 202-209.
27. *Ibid.*, 202.
28. *Ibid.*, 237-238.
29. *Ibid.*, 288-295.
30. *Ibid.*, 296.