Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 4 of the KW. Last time we looked at Stalin’s eastern domains, the extent of the support for communism, his worsening relationship with Yugoslavia and his propensity to overplay his hand. If Stalin wasn’t especially skilled diplomatically, then he had in spite of himself built up a bloc of states which were united ideologically and through fear. The Red Army remained an irresistible tool for leveraging loyalty and obedience out of the eastern neighbours, and Western acceptance of this new order enabled Stalin to further entrench his power through the use of show trials, rampant propaganda and further five year plans. The agricultural basis of these countries destroyed, poverty and starvation became bedfellows for much of the Romanian, Bulgarian and Hungarian populations, who Stalin could feel justified in ‘punishing’ since they had, after all, fought for the Axis.

His domestic situation largely resolved, or at least the context in which Stalin ruled having been established by us, we can now turn our attentions fully towards the high diplomacy which Stalin pursued with that other great scion of communism, Mao Zedong. Mao was the new kid on the bloc where Stalin was concerned, and in this episode we’ll look at the relationship between the two individuals, what both wanted out of the other, and how a rivalry somehow developed into the stunning scene where Mao appeared in Moscow in December 1949, a guest and friend of Stalin. The Truman administration’s strategy of driving a wedge between Stalin and Mao, and of pitting one against the other, had evidently failed. In this episode then we’ll examine the three overlapping issues – how Mao came to establish his communist regime in China, how he got on with Stalin, and where the Americans believed they would be able to gain some kind of advantage. With all that said, let’s begin, as I take you to the mysterious land of China.

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In keeping with the tradition established by the previous episode, our song of the week-ish this time is the anthem of the PRC, but without words, because I couldn’t seem to find one with words. It should still serve its purpose of getting us in the mood for what’s to come, so enjoy it and we’ll be back with episode 4 of the KW…

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In his book *The Rise and Fall of Modern China*, historian J Fenby issued the following withering critique of Mao Zedong’s legacy and tenure in office. He said:

Mao's responsibility for the extinction of anywhere from 40 to 70 million lives brands him as a mass killer greater than Hitler or Stalin, his indifference to the suffering and the loss of humans is breath-taking.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Fenby’s views remind us of the uncomfortable fact which we’ve surely learned by now. Not all the victors of the SWW, or those that triumphed in history, can be categorised as the ‘good guys’. Apologists for Mao Zedong, much like apologists for Josef Stalin, would argue that the transformation of their homeland would not have been achieved without some losses – the whole ‘can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs’ argument. However, it’s pretty clear that Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward programme of the late 1950s, as much as Stalin’s punitive famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, were deliberate, methodical efforts to advance their version of an ideal society without considering the costs. It is very hard to like or fairly represent either Stalin or, in this episode, Mao, since between them they’re responsible for as many as 90 million deaths – which is nearly double the accepted casualty list of the SWW by the way.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Of course, we’re all talking in estimations, and there is no need, mercifully, for me to like these figures even while I examine their impact of the pace of events which led up the KW. However, I will say that Truman seems like a breath of fresh air in comparison to the murderous regimes he cooperated with, and I do prefer analysing the American or European side of things, since it makes me less…queasy. Obviously, I picked the wrong conflict if I’m looking for uncontroversial individuals or unanimous character judgements, but I feel that, in case you weren’t aware, yes it does bother me that history looks generally quite fondly on men like Stalin and Mao,[[3]](#footnote-3) thanks to their legacies if nothing else. Mao, like Stalin, greatly benefited from the image boost provided by the experience of the SWW, which had the effect of whitewashing their crimes and creating the triumphant image of the struggling hero.

Mao was born to a wealthy peasant family in a village called Shaoshan in Hunan province, the day after Christmas in 1893. Born in the twilight era of the declining Imperial Chinese regime, Mao’s life was to be frequently interrupted by the transformation underway in China from an early stage. His secondary school education was cut short when the republican revolution under Sun Yat Sen spread to his school in 1911, and Mao joined the republican army. At this point, Mao was most interested in ridding China of its foreign powers, and of restoring China to its old powers and prestige; incredible as it may sound, representative democracy was Mao’s banner at this point, but not for very long. By 1921, Mao had become a convinced Marxist, and in conversations with his colleagues, two of whom were also credited with founding the Chinese Communist Party, it was decided that their burgeoning movement should collaborate with the Republican Chinese.

What was the purpose of such a collaboration? Mao and his peers were thinking of the bigger picture, and sought to bring about the same result later engineered by the infiltration of the communists into the social democratic parties in the aftermath of the SWW. For much of 1920s though, the major goal was to create an allied opposition to the occupation of various portions of China by the Japanese. Mao wanted to modernise his country, yet he also clung to a brand of Chinese nationalism which would also influence his later reluctance to kowtow to Stalin. Attempting to have it both ways, the 1920s were something of a learning curve for Mao, as he increased the outreach of his party, created new contacts across the massive country and welcomed in hundreds of thousands, then millions, of new recruits to the communist ideal.

Attitudes towards the Republicans were forcibly hardened when the so-called Northern Expedition was launched by the new leader of the republicans, Chiang Kai-Shek, against the warlords of northern China in 1926. While on paper the subduing of the independently minded warlords in the north would have a stabilising effect on Chinese society, the power vacuum in the region caused a peasant uprising against the landlord class as a result, angering those members of the Republican Party who had been landlords themselves, and drawing the cooperation of some segments of the communists. ‘A revolution’, Mao said:

Is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In time, Mao threw his lot in with the aggrieved peasants, and when Chiang Kai-Shek returned from his northern expedition, he determined to turn on the communists, who by this stage numbered only in the tens of thousands. This date, in 1927, is when the Chinese Civil War’s first phase is generally recorded as beginning. It would end a decade later with the outbreak of war with Japan, and the second phase of the civil war would begin in 1946, lasting until, if you believe some accounts, the current day, but mostly considered closed once the republicans/nationalists withdrew to Taiwan in December 1949. In the space of 22 years then, the communist movement went from a few thousands members to ruling over the most populous state on earth, and it remains a remarkable feat that Mao managed to mobilise and expand his party’s reach in such a way. Taking advantage of his party’s image, and the idea that it would stand for the far more numerous peasants, Mao’s party was able to garner support from the traditionally downtrodden and maligned in society, to create a stable base from which further attacks could be launched on the republicans or Kuomintang.

For several years, Mao and his reduced band of followers were surrounded by forces loyal to the KMT, and the bitterness of the civil war increased. Mao even lost his second wife when she was captured and beheaded by a warlord loyal to the republicans. The period is often overlooked by historians, and unfortunately we don’t have time to go into it in much detail here, but two things stand out from the period 1927-34. The first is that Mao came to command nearly 3 million citizens by virtue of his control over certain pockets of the country. In these pockets, the Chinese were given an indication of what was to become the state policy, as the agricultural reforms, the hostility towards landlords and the removal of non-communist elements characterised Mao’s style of rule. Such a determination to implement his ideology even before communism had reached throughout the country demonstrated the ideological zeal which characterised the younger portion of Mao’s life. A pattern of behaviour which was mirrored in Stalin, Mao began his movement with a zeal for ideology, and by its end possessed mostly just a zeal for power.

Yet Mao’s experience in rule did demonstrate what he was capable of, and it suggested that over a larger demographic, Mao would be just as willing to implement the teachings of Marx and the transformative policies therein regardless of the consequences. These consequences lead us to point two which we can take from the experience, as Mao’s guerrilla resistance, his frequent escapes and his recruitment for the communist party undermined what was already a fragile state system in China by the early 1930s. The divisions in China from the 1920s had reached new levels of bitterness and hostility, and Chiang Kai-Shek was thoroughly preoccupied by Mao’s on-going campaigns up until the point, in 1931, that the Japanese upped the tensions and took advantage of their neighbour’s divisions with an invasion of Manchuria. By 1933 Japan had left the League of Nations and had also been diplomatically isolated, and events were beginning their familiar march towards the terrible cataclysm of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The early 1930s thus saw Japan take full advantage of the situation, which must have sufficiently stung Mao, as he began to divide his forces from 1933 to take on not merely the republicans, but also the Japanese. Mao instructed a guerrilla campaign to continue against the Japanese occupation of Manchuria from 1935, and he was able to issue such orders because in January of that year, Mao had been appointed leader of the Chinese Communist Party’s political and military arm. His rise apparently complete, Mao was in fact still in the process of completing the so-called Long March, a heavily mythologised event in Chinese history and in the cult of personality surrounding Mao Zedong, where Mao and his followers trekked from the south-east coastal region of China to the northern hilly interior, in a total distance of over 9,000 KM. During this trek Mao and his followers escaped the republicans’ advance, and Mao re-established his regime


Mao’s long march involved a distance of 9,000 KM and took 370 days.

The event was, in short, a strategic retreat from the strongest republican forces, and a chance for Mao’s army to recuperate after years of guerrilla warfare. Yet, the fact that only a tenth of those that began the march lived to see the other side should tell us all we need to know about the typically high cost of such a political statement. In Mao’s mind, it was as much a strategic necessity as it was a political statement, and he noted on the Long March that:

The Long March is a manifesto. It has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes, while the imperialists and their running dogs, Chiang Kai-shek and his like, are impotent. It has proclaimed their utter failure to encircle, pursue, obstruct and intercept us. The Long March is also a propaganda force. It has announced to some 200 million people in eleven provinces that the road of the Red Army is their only road to liberation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The march did indeed increase the profile and reputation of Mao’s forces, who were instructed not to harm or steal from the peasants during their trek. This inured a level of respect for communism in the same peasants, and Mao was eventually vindicated on the value of his 370 day march, which ended in October 1935. Settling in the Ya’an province, recast as the Ya’an Soviet, Mao was made aware of the continued success of Chiang Kai-Shek in surrounding and destroying the communists elsewhere in China, reducing the communist Red Army by 90% in the process. Chiang couldn’t destroy the communists completely though, and remained deeply concerned at the Japanese intentions, which were made clear in September 1937 when an invasion of China was launched.

The destruction and atrocities which followed the Japanese invasion convinced many to join the army against the Japanese, and Mao’s forces ballooned from 50k to 500k by the end of 1937. In addition, by December of 1937 Mao formed the Second United Front with Chiang Kai-Shek, and arranged to cooperate with his former enemy until the Japanese had been expelled. The civil war, it seemed, was put on hold.


Bitter enemies become allies – Mao (left) and Chiang (right) agree to join forces against the Japanese, but all the while Mao remained transfixed on the post-war arrangement which he would eventually dominate.

This cooperation was not to last. In the portions of China where the Japanese hadn't reached, running battles over control of these regions remained bitterly contested struggles that undermined any concept of cooperation between Mao and Chiang Kai Shek. Predictably, atrocities were reciprocated by further atrocities, and by 1940 the alliance was essentially over. The picture was further clouded by the appearance on the scene of the collaborationist Chinese nationalist regime sponsored by the Japanese. In a bid to co-opt the support of the republicans, the nationalist forces attempted to attack only the communists, and billed itself as a zealous member of the anti-comintern pact. Granted limited independence as a Japanese puppet state, the nationalists were led by a former peer of Chiang Kai-Shek’s, but the republican leader never considered siding with the Japanese to destroy the communists, and the initially impressive effort by the Japanese to further divide China would eventually cease to bear fruit.

By the end of the war which had so horrifically ravaged the countryside, destroyed the country’s infrastructure and led to the deaths of so many of its people, it was plain that affairs were not as clear cut as they had been before. The communists were now far stronger than they had been since Mao’s Long March away from superior republican forces, and the war had also forced Mao’s forces to organise and modernise on a scale not seen in previous years. In addition, while he was declared Chairman of the CCP in 1943, the scale of corruption underway in Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime ensured that the leadership of the republicans faced far more problems. Regional expressions of loyalty, the need to consistently exercise bribes and the increasing presence of bands of peasants determined to spread the communist message all contributed to a situation of parity between the two sides.

If the gap between Mao and Chiang Kai-Shek was shrinking, then in the realm of diplomacy normative relations remained in place between the US and the Republic of China, and between the *Soviet Union* and the Republic of China. In both cases, different reasons existed for the Americans and Soviets supporting Chiang’s regime. Washington had traditionally supported the more appealingly western Chiang Kai-Shek – the Christian pro-American with the beautiful wife – above the harder sell of Mao Zedong, who represented a threat to the western capitalist system if he could establish a communist China in tandem with the USSR. For a while Stalin appeared to follow the American lead, and in August 1945 he signed a treaty of friendship with the Republic that granted Moscow great concessions in land and trade with Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime. In reality though, Stalin continued to trade with the communists behind Chiang Kai-Shek’s back, and his cynical double dealing was characteristic of his attitude towards China.

In the years to come as we’ll see, Stalin seemed not always certain of what he wanted. Initially support for Mao Zedong had been strong, and one of Mao’s greatest assets was the support of the Soviet leader for Mao’s communist leadership, which had been offered as early as 1935. As the years passed, Stalin continued to send Mao advice and encouragement while China was plunged into a desperate situation. Yet, as time passed, Stalin had come to see Mao as, if not a challenge, then too independently minded and ambitious for his own good. These concerns of Stalin’s were aggravated first, by Mao’s refusal to hold back when asked during the second phase of the civil war, and second, by the emergence of Josip Tito’s Yugoslav regime placed in opposition to Moscow by the end of 1948. By the end of 1948, Mao essentially had the civil war won, and had achieved an incredible feat in the process.

The ideological fervour of his troops frequently enabled him to triumph over far larger republican forces, and this belief in the power of ideology against greater numbers would in time cost Mao’s military plans dearly, such as the occasions when he attempted to seize some of the islands surrounding Taiwan in late 1949, with heavy losses. Yet the communists had more than merely zealous activism on their side, they also possessed the superior tactics, and thanks to their containment in mostly the north-west, they had avoided the same kind of casualties endured by the republicans in the war against the Japanese.

Such comparative inaction by Mao’s troops likely aided the western image that Chiang Kai-Shek was the true Chinese patriot fighting against the evil Japanese occupiers, and this image seriously bolstered the republicans’ immediate post-war prospects. The republicans were, as I mentioned, favoured by Washington, and it was the Republic of China rather than Mao’s communists that gained a seat on the newly incepted UN Security Council. Each one of these five permanent seats was to be occupied by one of the allied powers of the war, with a seat going to America, Britain, the Soviets and France, and it thus seemed like a vindication of his struggle when Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime acquired the fifth seat in defiance of Mao’s distant guerrilla forces in 1945.

All such events were still to come in the Chinese quagmire, which raged with increasing bitterness over the late 1940s. Mao’s tactics revolved around guerrilla warfare, and of permitting the larger forces of the republic to occupy important towns and cities which had already come under the sway of communist teachings in the name of the bigger picture. The Chinese Red Army proved incredibly effective at fighting this protracted war, while Chiang Kai-Shek saw his advantages disappear and his armies be bled dry. The communists were far more popular with the peasantry, and Mao was far better at mobilising the people of China for a single united purpose than the republican regime. In addition, the corruption and familial ties of so much of the republic’s organisations cast a negative shadow over Chiang Kai-Shek’s regime, while the succession of strategic mistakes which that leader made also dulled his once glorious reputation.

Hyperinflation also undermined the efforts of the republicans to rebuild China after the war with Japan, and the savings of the Chinese middle classes were largely wiped out thanks to the failure of the republican regime to keep a handle on it. In comparison, Mao’s subordinates were united under his command, had the benefit of their appeal to so many hundreds of millions of peasants, and could further draw on an element of the personality of Mao to entice more supporters. Mao had a charisma and attraction which Chiang Kai Shek could not match, and Mao’s ability to speak to the lowest rungs of Chinese society enabled him to reach a far greater audience. This is in addition to the fact that Mao was an active writer and released several straightforward pamphlets to the masses in the 1930s and 40s, increasing the appeal of the communist party still further.

By the time Nanking was captured in April 1949, the heart of the republican regime had already been torn out. Contrary to the wishes of Stalin, who had come to desire a coalition government take shape in China to prevent the triumphant Mao from stealing any of his communist thunder after the war, the communists advanced rapidly down south. By 10th December 1949, the republicans escaped to the island of Taiwan where their successor regime remains to this day. Up until 2008, both the PRC and the Republic of China in Taiwan claimed to be the sole government of China, demonstrating the extent to which the conflict remains relevant in China to this day. Mercifully, once again, we don’t have to get into such topics as that, but we have at least now placed you guys in a position so that you can understand better the concerns and aims of Mao Zedong as he sought to renegotiate his deal with the Soviet Union. Certainly, it wouldn’t be until the presidency of Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s that normal relations with the Chinese would properly be established, while Taiwan remained diplomatically linked to Washington, a balancing act which Carter explained in the following clip:

***Carter on establishing relations with PRC.***

One goal above all and one threat more than any other – the republicans in Taiwan – kept Mao awake at night. Convinced that the US would intervene at any moment, he aimed to get the Soviets on side to first establish the PRC in a firm position, and then to present China as to the world on its firmer foundations. On 1st October 1949 the PRC was proclaimed by Mao Zedong, but his task was far from over. As the Americans scrambled diplomatically to keep the two communist titans apart, Mao was seeking to renegotiate that unfavourable treaty signed between the republicans and the Soviets in 1945. Stalin, at least, now accepted that Mao represented the true government of China, but it remained to be seen how the Soviet Chairman would act with this new ideological ally. Next time, we’ll examine the policy of the US towards China. Now that the background has been set for the three major actors, we can set to assessing the really juicy diplomacy which underpinned their relations. I hope you’ll join me then history friends, but until then, my name is Zack, and you have been listening to WDF’s series on the KW. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. J Fenby, *Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present* (2008, New York), p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This figure is reached by taking the estimates of the casualties from Mao’s regime, which reaches as high as 70 million, and the casualties resulting from Stalin’s tenure in office, which certainly exceeds 30 million. Historian Robert Conquest, which in itself is a cool name, wrote that ‘I suggest about eleven million by the beginning of 1937, and about three million over the period 1937–38, making fourteen million. The eleven-odd million is readily deduced from the undisputed population deficit shown in the suppressed census of January 1937, of fifteen to sixteen million, by making reasonable assumptions about how this was divided between birth deficit and deaths.’ See Robert Conquest, ‘Excess Deaths in the Soviet Union’, available: https://newleftreview.org/I/219/robert-conquest-excess-deaths-in-the-soviet-union

If the figure of 14 million stands by 1938, we must consider the years which followed 1938 to add the remainder. This figure includes famines started under Stalin’s direction or from his negligence, purges, ‘deserters’, those shot as ‘spies’ and further executions. The historian Simon Sebag Montefiore in his book *Young Stalin* estimated that Stalin was ultimately responsible – directly or indirectly – for up to 25 million deaths. See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin*. (2007, New York), p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Stalin’s case, 35% of Russians said they would vote for Stalin in 2008. See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-big-question-why-is-stalin-still-popular-in-russia-despite-the-brutality-of-his-regime-827654.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\_1900\_mao\_war.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in https://web.archive.org/web/20081212212710/http://english.pladaily.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2006-08/14/content\_554037.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)