



Red China: Mao Crushes Chiang's Kuomintang, 1949 by Gerry van Tonder.

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To begin with, *Red China: Mao Crushes Chiang's Kuomintang, 1949* is a misleading title, suggestive of a campaign history of the final year of the Chinese Civil War, or, as it is called in the People's Republic of China (PRC), "The War of National Liberation." Instead, however, its author, military historian Gerry van Tonder, presents his readers with a potted military history of China, beginning with the Revolution of 1911 and moving breathlessly through to 2017. This is especially curious in a volume in a series entitled "Cold War 1945-1991." Moreover, the book is heavily illustrated and peppered with boxed inserts offering snippets of text from British newspapers (e.g., the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*) without comment on the significance or accuracy of the events reported. The text is extremely brief, considering the ground the author is attempting to cover.

The first two of the book's seven chapters concern twentieth-century China up to the surrender of Japan (15 Aug. 1945). Chapter 3 deals with the postwar international negotiations about the future of China and its government. Chapter 4 sketches the history of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its precursor, the First Workers' and Peasants' Army, touching on aspects of the civil war. Chapter 5 surveys the main events of the Chinese civil war and 6 discusses—again, too briefly—the founding of the PRC (1 Oct. 1949) and the implications of the Communist victory. Chapter 7 considers China's place in the world today. Throughout, the author's very succinct treatment of such a broad sweep of China's history leads to oversimplification.

To be fair, the summary of the civil war in chapter 5—the longest in the book—is a decent attempt to describe the course of the struggle between the PLA and the Nationalist Kuomintang forces (KMT). Van Tonder argues that the Communists' success stemmed, in part, from their ability to shift gradually from guerrilla operations to full-scale conventional warfare. He notes, too, that their tactical intelligence was far superior to the KMT's. In addition, the PLA's more egalitarian promotion system, based on combat-tested military competence, gave Mao's troops a growing advantage over Chiang Kai-Shek's.

Elsewhere, however, the author's explanations of the Nationalists' loss of initiative in the civil war are inadequate. He writes, for example, that the "Nationalist armies ... were shattered and demoralized from the long conflict with the Japanese occupiers. Consequently, the fresh and highly motivated PLA was able to score many victories over the KMT" (94). While this contains an element of truth, it ignores major reasons for the PLA victory: the steadily rising number of defections from the KMT to the PLA during the second half of the conflict, and PLA commanders' adept integration of captured KMT troops into their own combat formations.

The book's campaign narratives are problematic as well. The Pingjin Campaign (21 Nov. 1948-31 Jan. 1949), which culminated in the decisive battle for the port city of Tianjin, gets only a couple of pages. Considering the size of the armies involved—890,000 PLA versus ca. 600,000 KMT (Chiang Kai-shek lost 520,000 men killed, wounded, or captured)—the battle deserved a fuller, more detailed narrative and analysis. Another serious deficiency of the book is a paucity of

adequate maps illustrating major military operations,¹ though many photographs are provided throughout.

It was not clear to me which audience the author was writing for. Specialists will learn little from the book's broad-brush treatment of its subject; on the other hand, general readers will dislike the superficial handling of the civil war in particular.² Other irritants include inappropriately placed photographs. For instance, a photo just beneath a sentence about the proclamation of the People's Republic of China shows Mao Tse-tung and Zhou Enlai holding little red books at a rally some twenty years later. Lay readers will regret the absence of a bibliography or at least suggestions for further reading.

In short, this would have been a much better book if the author had expanded his treatment of the civil war and reduced the broad historical background, not to mention his thumbnail sketches of extremely complex historical developments. To be charitable, Gerry van Tonder has made a brave effort to cover a century of Chinese history in less than a hundred (large-print) pages. Whether he should have attempted such a task in the first place is a different question.

1. The book contains just three maps: one a crude 1930s Western map of Asia, showing the Manchuko puppet state; one showing the route of the Communists' "long march"; and one indicating Communist offensives of Apr.–Oct. 1949 with three arrows pointing toward southern China.

2. For a good, concise account of the Chinese Civil War with useful maps, see Suzanne Pepper, "The KMT-CCP Conflict 1945–1949," in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 13: *Republican China, 1912–1949*, part 2, ed. John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1986) 723–88.