
THE
TRAGEDY OF
LIBERATION

A HISTORY OF THE CHINESE
REVOLUTION, 1945-57

FRANK DIKÖTTER



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‘[W]in over the majority, oppose the minority and crush all enemies separately.’

Mao Zedong

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Preface

The Chinese Communist Party refers to its victory in 1949 as a 'liberation'. The term brings to mind jubilant crowds taking to the streets to celebrate their newly won freedom, but in China the story of liberation and the revolution that followed is not one of peace, liberty and justice. It is first and foremost a history of calculated terror and systematic violence.

The Second World War in China had been a bloody affair, but the civil war from 1945 to 1949 also claimed hundreds of thousands of civilian lives – not counting military casualties. As the communists tried to wrest the country from Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists, they laid siege to one city after another, starving them into submission. Changchun, in the middle of the vast Manchurian plain north of the Great Wall of China, was blockaded for five months in 1948. Lin Biao, the commander in charge of the communist troops, ordered that it be turned into a 'city of death'. He placed sentries every 50 metres along a perimeter around the city and prohibited starving civilians from leaving, putting more pressure on the grain reserves of the nationalists. People tried to survive by eating grass, insects and tree bark. A few turned to human flesh. Anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery bombarded the city day and night. At least 160,000 people died of hunger and disease during the siege.

A few months later, the People's Liberation Army moved into Beijing unopposed. Other cities also fell without firing a shot, unwilling to endure a prolonged blockade. In parts of the country sympathetic crowds even welcomed the communists, relieved that the war had come to an end and hopeful of a better future. Across the country people accepted liberation with a mixture of fear, hope and resignation.

In the countryside, land reform followed liberation. Farmers were given a plot of land in exchange for overthrowing their leaders. Violence was an indispensable feature of land distribution, implicating a majority in the murder of a carefully designated minority. Work teams were given quotas of people who had to be denounced, humiliated, beaten, dispossessed and then killed by the villagers, who were assembled in their hundreds in an atmosphere charged with hatred. In a pact sealed in blood between the party and the poor, close to 2 million so-called 'landlords', often hardly any better off than their neighbours, were liquidated. From Hebei, Liu Shaoqi, the second-in-command, reported that some of them had been buried alive, tied up and dismembered, shot or throttled to death. Some children were slaughtered as 'little landlords'.

Less than a year after liberation came a Great Terror, designed to eliminate all the enemies of the party. Mao handed down a killing quota of one per thousand, but in many parts of the country two or three times as many people were executed, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. Entire villages were razed to the ground. Schoolchildren as young as six were accused of spying for the enemy and tortured to death. Sometimes cadres simply picked a few prisoners at random and had them shot to meet the quota. By the end of 1951, close to 2 million people had been murdered, sometimes during public rallies in stadiums, but more often than not away from the public eye, in forests, ravines, beside rivers alone or in batches. A vast network of prisons scattered across the length and breadth of the country swallowed up many more.

Violence was the revolution, to paraphrase Simon Schama's observation about the French Revolution. But violence needed to be inflicted only occasionally to be effective. Fear and intimidation were its trusted companions, and they were widely used. People were encouraged to transform themselves into what the communists called 'New People'. Everywhere, in government offices, factories, workshops, schools and universities, they were 're-educated' and made to study newspapers and textbooks, learning the right answers, the right ideas and the right slogans. While the violence abated after a few years, thought reform never ended, as people were compelled to scrutini

their every belief, suppressing the transitory impressions that might reveal hidden bourgeois thoughts behind a mask of socialist conformity. Again and again, in front of assembled crowds or in study sessions under strict supervision, they had to write confessions, denounce their friends, justify their past activities and answer queries about their political reliability. One victim called it a 'carefully cultivated Auschwitz of the mind'.

Yet much of the regime was founded on far more than mere violence and intimidation. The history of communism in China is also a history of promises made and promises broken. The communists wanted to woo before they tried to control. Like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Mao achieved power by promising every disaffected group what they wanted most: land for the farmers, independence for the minorities, freedom for intellectuals, protection of private property for businessmen, higher living standards for the workers. The Chinese Communist Party rallied a majority under the banner of the New Democracy, a slogan promising co-operation with all except the most hardened enemies of the regime. Under the façade of a 'united front', a number of non-communist organisations such as the Democratic Party were co-opted into power, although they remained under the leadership of the communist party.

One by one these promises were broken. Mao was a master of strategy: 'win over the majority, oppose the minority and crush all enemies separately'. One by one a whole range of opponents were eliminated with the unwitting help of the enemies of tomorrow, those who were cajoled into co-operating with the authorities. Immediately after the bloody terror of 1951, the regime turned against the former government servants it had asked to stay on a few years earlier. Their services no longer needed; over a million of them were sacked from their jobs or thrown in gaol.

The business community was attacked in 1952. Entrepreneurs were dragged to denunciation meetings where they had to confront their employees, who were worked up into a fever pitch of hatred – real or feigned. In a mere two months, more than 600 entrepreneurs, businessmen and shopkeepers killed themselves in Shanghai alone. Many others were ruined. Everything that stood between the entrepreneur and the state was eliminated. All existing laws and judicial organs were abolished and replaced by a legal system inspired by the Soviet Union. Free speech was curtailed. Independent courts were replaced by people's tribunals. Autonomous chambers of commerce were taken over by local branches of the state-controlled All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. In 1956 the government expropriated all private enterprises – whether small shops or large industries – under the so-called 'redemption-purchase policy', although the policy entailed neither purchase nor redemption.

In the countryside, despite fierce resistance to collectivisation and the devastation it produced, in 1956 farmers lost their tools, their land and their livestock. They also lost their freedom of movement and were compelled to sell their grain to the state at prices mandated by the state. They became bonded labourers at the beck and call of local cadres. Already by 1954, by the admission of the regime itself, farmers had a third less food to eat compared to the years before liberation. Almost everybody in the countryside was on a starvation diet.

When Mao turned against intellectuals in 1957, sending half a million of them to the gulag, it was the culmination of a series of drives by the party to eliminate all opposition, whether it came from ethnic minorities, religious groups, farmers, artisans, entrepreneurs, industrialists, teachers and scholars or doubters within the ranks of the party itself. After a decade of communist rule, there was hardly anybody left to oppose the Chairman.

But even as every promise was broken, the party kept on gaining followers. Many were idealists, some were opportunists, others thugs. They displayed astonishing faith and almost fanatic conviction, sometimes even after they themselves had ended up being devoured by the party machinery. A few party intellectuals purged in 1957 actually volunteered to work in the Great Northern Wilderness, a vast swamp infected with mosquitoes where prisoners were sent to reclaim

wasteland. They saw it as an opportunity to redeem themselves and seek self-renewal in the hope of being allowed to serve the party again.

‘Is there *any* good that the Chinese Communists have done?’ Valentin Chu asked in a landmark book entitled *The Inside Story of Communist China*, published a decade after the communist conquest. His answer was that a single act or a single programme, when isolated from the broader picture, may very well have been invaluable: a dam that worked, a nursery where children fared well, a prison where the inmates were treated humanely. The campaign to eliminate illiteracy in the countryside was laudable until it was given up. But when seen in the overall context of what happened to the country between 1949 and 1957, these isolated achievements did not amount to a broad trend towards equality, justice and freedom, the proclaimed values of the regime itself.

People from all walks of life were caught up in this huge tragedy, and they are at the heart of this book. Their experiences have often been silenced, not least by the official propaganda that produced a seemingly endless flow of pronouncements from the leadership. The propaganda was about the work in the making, not about the reality on the ground. It was a world of plans, blueprints and models featuring model workers and model peasants, not real people of flesh and blood.

Historians, too, have sometimes confused the abstract world presented by propaganda with the complicated individual tragedies of revolution, buying all too readily into the gleaming image that the regime so carefully projected to the rest of the world. Some have called the years of liberation the ‘Golden Age’ or a ‘Honeymoon Period’, in contrast to the cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966. On a more popular level, keepers of the faith continue to portray the Chinese revolution as one of the greatest events in world history, all the more so as other communist dictators like Russia’s Joseph Stalin, Cambodia’s Pol Pot and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, have lost much of their credibility. But, as this book shows, the first decade of Maoism was one of the worst tyrannies in the history of the twentieth century, sending to an early grave at least 5 million civilians and bringing misery to countless more.

The bulk of the evidence presented in this book comes from party archives in China. Over the past few years vast amounts of material have become available, and I draw on hundreds of previously classified documents, including secret police reports, unexpurgated versions of important leadership speeches, confessions extracted during thought-reform campaigns, inquiries into rebellions in the countryside, detailed statistics on the victims of the Great Terror, surveys of working conditions in factories and workshops, letters of complaint written by ordinary people, and much more. Other sources include personal memoirs, letters and diaries, as well as eyewitness accounts from people who lived through the revolution. Sympathisers of the regime have unjustly discarded many of the claims of these earlier eyewitnesses, but these can now be corroborated by archival evidence, giving them a new lease of life. Taken as a whole, these sources offer us an unprecedented opportunity to probe beyond the shiny surface of propaganda and retrieve the stories of the ordinary men and women who were both the main protagonists and the main victims of the revolution.

The Tragedy of Liberation is the second volume of the *People’s Trilogy*. It precedes chronologically an earlier volume, *Mao’s Great Famine*, which looks at the man-made catastrophe that claimed tens of millions of lives between 1958 and 1962. A third and final volume on the Cultural Revolution will follow in due course. The nature of the archival evidence that underpins the *People’s Trilogy* is explained in greater detail in an essay on the sources in *Mao’s Great Famine*.

Chronology

6 and 9 August 1945:

Atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

8 August 1945:

Stalin declares war on Japan and Soviet troops invade Manchuria.

21 August 1945:

A formal surrender ceremony between China and Japan concludes the Second World War in the Pacific.

April 1946:

Soviet troops withdraw from Manchuria after allowing the communists to take over the countryside.

May 1946:

Mao calls for radical land distribution and all-out class struggle in the countryside.

June 1946:

The nationalists pursue the communists all the way to the northern border of Manchuria, but are forced to halt their advance as George Marshall, President Truman's envoy, imposes a ceasefire.

The communist troops regroup and are trained by the Soviets.

September 1946–July 1947:

Truman imposes an arms embargo.

December 1946–December 1947:

The nationalists keep on pouring their best troops into Manchuria, which turns into a death trap.

December 1947–November 1948:

The communists win the battle of Manchuria after blockading all major cities.

22 January 1949:

Beijing surrenders to the communists after a forty-day siege.

November 1948–January 1949:

The nationalists lose the battle of Xuzhou in central China, opening up the Yangzi Valley and all of the south to communist conquest.

April–May 1949:

Nanjing, the nationalist capital on the south bank of the Yangzi, falls to the communists. After a protracted siege, the communists conquer Shanghai.

30 June 1949:

On the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao announces that China should 'lean to one side' and embrace the Soviet Union.

1 October 1949:

Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China on Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

10 December 1949:

After the fall of Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek abandons China and flees to Taiwan.

December 1949–January 1950:

Mao is in Moscow to obtain recognition and help from Stalin. On 14 February 1950 China signs the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union.

June 1950–October 1952:

The communists implement land reform in the south.

25 June 1950:

North Korea invades South Korea, drawing condemnation from the United Nations Security Council and a counter-offensive under General Douglas MacArthur.

7 October 1950:

The People's Liberation Army invades Tibet.

10 October 1950–October 1951:

A Great Terror unfolds, called the 'Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries'.

18 October 1950:

China enters the Korean War.

November 1950:

Start of a campaign to 'Resist America, Aid Korea'.

1951–1953:

Once the land has been redistributed, villagers are pooled into 'mutual-aid teams' in which the have to share their tools, working animals and labour.

October 1951–June 1952:

A 'Three-Anti Campaign' aims to purge the ranks of the government.

October 1951:

Start of a thought-reform campaign designed to regiment and absorb the educated elite into the state bureaucracy.

January–June 1952:

Mao declares war on the private sector in a campaign known as the 'Five-Anti Campaign'.

February–April 1952:

Beijing alleges that the United States is waging germ warfare.

5 March 1953:

Stalin dies.

27 July 1953:

A ceasefire brings an end to the Korean War.

November 1953:

Introduction of a state monopoly over grain, as cultivators are forced to sell all 'surplus' grain to the state at prices determined by the state.

1953–1955:

The mutual-aid teams are turned into co-operatives, with tools, working animals and labour now shared on a permanent basis and the land pooled.

February 1954–May 1955:

Gao Gang and other senior leaders are purged for 'treachery' and 'splitting the party'.

April–December 1955:

Hu Feng and other intellectuals are denounced for heading a 'counter-revolutionary' clique. More than 770,000 people are arrested in a campaign against counter-revolutionaries.

June 1955:

A household-registration system restricts the movement of people in the countryside.

Summer 1955–spring 1956:

As part of a push to accelerate the collectivisation of the countryside, called the 'Socialist High Tide', farmers are herded into collectives in which they no longer own the land. In the cities most industry and commerce are nationalised.

February 1956:

Khrushchev denounces Stalin and the cult of personality in a secret speech in Moscow. Criticism of Stalin's disastrous campaign of collectivisation strengthens the position of those opposed to the Socialist High Tide in China. Mao perceives deStalinisation as a challenge to his own authority.

September 1956:

A reference to 'Mao Zedong Thought' is removed from the party constitution, the principle of

collective leadership is lauded and the cult of personality is decried. The Socialist High Tide abandoned.

October 1956:

Encouraged by deStalinisation, people in Hungary revolt against their own government, prompting Soviet forces to invade the country, crush all opposition and install a new regime with Moscow backing.

Winter 1956–spring 1957:

Mao, overriding most of his colleagues, encourages a more open political climate with the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign to avoid the social unrest that led to the invasion of Hungary. Students and workers demonstrate, protest and strike across the country.

Summer 1957:

The campaign backfires as a mounting barrage of criticism questions the very right of the party to rule. Mao changes tack and accuses these critical voices of being 'bad elements' bent on destroying the party. He puts Deng Xiaoping in charge of an anti-rightist campaign, which persecutes half a million people – many of them students and intellectuals deported to remote areas to do hard labour. The party finds unity behind its Chairman, who unleashes the 'Great Leap Forward' a few months later.

Map



Conquest (1945–49)

Siege

When workers in Changchun started digging trenches for a new irrigation system in the summer of 2006, they made a gruesome discovery. The rich black soil was clogged with human remains. Below a metre of earth were thousands of skeletons closely packed together. When they dug deeper, the workers found several more layers of bones, stacked up like firewood. A crowd of local residents gathered around the excavated area, was taken aback by the sheer size of the burial site. Some thought that the bodies belonged to victims of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Nobody except an elderly man realised that they had just stumbled on remnants of the civil war that had resumed after 1945 between Mao Zedong's communists and Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists.

In 1948 the communists had laid siege to Changchun for five months, starving out a nationalistic garrison stationed inside the city walls. Victory came at a heavy cost. At least 160,000 civilians died of hunger during the blockade. After liberation the communist troops buried many of the bodies in mass graves without so much as a tombstone, a name plate or even a simple marker. After decades of propaganda about the peaceful liberation of China, few people remember the victims of the communist party's rise to power.¹

Changchun, in the middle of the vast Manchurian plain north of the Great Wall of China, was a minor trading town before the arrival of the railway in 1898. It developed rapidly as the junction between the South Manchurian Railway, run by the Japanese, and the Chinese Eastern Railway, owned by the Russians. In 1932 Changchun became the capital of Manchukuo, a puppet state of imperial Japan which installed Henry Puyi, later known as the last emperor, as its Manchu ruler. The Japanese transformed the city into a modern, wheel-shaped city with broad avenues, shade trees and public works. Large, cream-coloured buildings for the imperial bureaucracy appeared beside spacious parks while elegant villas were built for local collaborators and their Japanese advisers.

In August 1945, the Soviet army took over the city and, so far as they could, dismantled the factories, machines and materials, sending the war booty back by the trainload to the Soviet Union. Industrial installations were demolished, and many of the formerly handsome houses were stripped bare. The Soviets stayed until April 1946, when the nationalist army took over the city. Two months later, the civil war began, and Manchuria once again became a battlefield. The communist armies had the initiative and moved down from the north, cutting the railway that connected Changchun with nationalist strongholds further south.

In April 1948, the communists advanced towards Changchun itself. Led by Lin Biao, a gaunt man who had trained at the Whampoa Military Academy, they laid siege to the city. Lin was considered one of the best battlefield commanders and a brilliant strategist. He was also ruthless. When he realised that Zheng Dongguo, the defending commander in Changchun, would not capitulate, he ordered the city to be starved into surrender. On 30 May 1948 came his command: 'Turn Changchun into a city of death.'²

Inside Changchun were some 500,000 civilians, many of them refugees who had fled the communist advance and were trapped in their journey south to Beijing after the railway lines had been cut. A hundred thousand nationalist troops were also garrisoned inside the city. Curfew was imposed almost

immediately, keeping people indoors from eight at night to five in the morning. All able-bodied men were made to dig trenches. Nobody was allowed to leave. People who refused to be searched by sentries were liable to be shot on the spot. Yet an air of goodwill still prevailed in the first weeks of the siege, as emergency supplies were dropped by air. Some of the well-to-do even established a Changchun Mobilisation Committee, supplying sweets and cigarettes, comforting the wounded and setting up tea stalls for the men.³

But soon the situation deteriorated. Changchun became an isolated island, beleaguered by 200,000 communist troops who dug tunnel defences and cut off the underground water supply to the city. Two dozen anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery bombarded the city all day long, concentrating their fire on government buildings. The nationalists built three defensive lines of pillboxes around Changchun. Between the nationalists and the communists lay a vast no man's land soon taken over by bandits.⁴

On 12 June 1948 Chiang Kai-shek cabled an order reversing the ban on people leaving the city. Even without enemy fire, his planes could not possibly parachute in enough supplies to meet the needs of an entire city. But the anti-aircraft artillery of the communists forced them to fly at an altitude of 3,000 metres. Many of the airdrops landed outside the area controlled by the nationalists. In order to prevent a famine, the nationalists encouraged the populace to head for the countryside. Once they had left they were not allowed back, as they could not be fed. Every departing refugee was subject to rigorous inspection. Metallic objects such as pots or pans as well as gold and silver and even salt, seen as a vital commodity, were prohibited. Then the refugees had to cross the no man's land, a dark and dangerous terrain dominated by gangs, usually army deserters, who preyed on the defenceless crowd. Many had guns and even horses; some used passwords. The most skilful refugees managed to conceal a piece of jewellery, a watch or a fountain pen, but those found to be hiding an earring or a bracelet or a seam of their clothing risked being shot. Sometimes all their clothes were snatched. A few saved their best belongings by bundling them deep inside a burlap bag filled with dirty rags, including urine-soaked baby clothes, in the hope that the smell would repel robbers.⁵

Few ever made it past the communist lines. Lin Biao had placed a sentry every 50 metres along barbed wire and trenches 4 metres deep. Every exit was blocked. He reported to Mao: 'We don't allow the refugees to leave and exhort them to turn back. This method was very effective in the beginning but later the famine got worse, and starving civilians would leave the city in droves at all times of day and night, and after we turned them down they started gathering in the area between our troops and the enemy.' Lin described how desperate the refugees were to be allowed through communist lines, explaining that they:

knelt in front of our troops in large groups and begged us to let them through. Some left their babies and small children with us and absconded, others hanged themselves in front of sentry posts. The soldiers who saw this misery lost their resolve, some even falling on their knees to weep with the starving people, saying, 'We are only following orders.' Others covertly allowed some of them through. After we corrected this, another tendency was discovered, namely the beating, tying up and shooting of refugees by soldiers, some to death (we do not as yet have any numbers for those injured or beaten to death).

Half a century later, Wang Junru explained what had happened when he was a soldier: 'We were told they were the enemy and they had to die.' Wang was fifteen when the communists forced him to enrol in the army. During the siege he joined the other soldiers ordered to drive back hungry civilians.⁶

By the end of June, some 30,000 people were caught in the area between the communists, who would not allow them to pass, and the nationalists, who refused to let them back into the city. Hundreds died every day. Two months later, more than 150,000 civilians were pressed inside the death

zone, reduced to eating grass and leaves, doomed to slow starvation. Dead bodies were strewn everywhere, their bellies bloated in the scorching sun. 'The pungent stench of decomposition was everywhere,' remembered one survivor.⁷

The situation inside the city was little better. Besides the airdrops for the garrison, some 330 tonnes of grain were required daily to feed the civilians, although at best 84 tonnes were delivered by four or five planes, and often much less. Everything was requisitioned in the defence of Changchun. Chiang Kai-shek even prohibited private trading in August, threatening to shoot any merchant who contravened his order. Soon the nationalist soldiers turned on the civilians, stealing their food at gunpoint. They slaughtered all the army horses, then dogs, cats and birds. Ordinary people ate rotten sorghum and corncobs before stripping the bark from trees. Others ate insects or leather belts. A few turned to human flesh, sold at \$1.20 a pound on the black market.⁸

Cases of collective suicide occurred all the time. Entire families killed themselves to escape from the misery. Dozens died by the roadside every day. 'We were just lying in bed starving to death,' said Zhang Yinghua when interviewed about the famine that claimed the lives of her brother, her sister and most of her neighbours. 'We couldn't even crawl.' Song Zhanlin, another survivor, remembered how she passed a small house with the door ajar. 'I entered to have a look and saw a dozen bodies lying all over the place, on the bed and on the floor. Among those on the bed, one was resting his head on a pillow, and a girl was still embracing a baby: it looked as if they were asleep. The clock on the wall was still ticking away.'⁹

Autumn saw temperatures plunge, and the survivors struggled to stay warm. They stripped floorboards, rooftops, sometimes entire buildings in the search for fuel. Trees were chopped down and even signboards were pilfered for wood. Asphalt was ripped from the streets. Like a slow-moving implosion, the gradual destruction of the city started in the suburbs and gradually rippled towards the centre. In the end 40 per cent of the housing went up in smoke. Heavy bombardment by artillery at point-blank range added to the misery, as ordinary people sheltered in shanties strewn with debris and decomposing bodies, while the nationalist top brass took refuge behind the massive concrete walls of the Central Bank of China.¹⁰

Soldiers absconded throughout the siege. Unlike the civilians who were driven back, they were welcomed by the communists and promised good food and lenient treatment. Day and night loudspeakers beamed propaganda encouraging them to defect or rebel: 'Did you join the Guomindang army? You were dragged into it at a rope's end . . . Come over to us . . . There is no way out of Changchun now . . .' Desertion rates soared after the summer, as the troops received a reduced ration of 300 grams of rice and flour a day.¹¹

The siege lasted 150 days. In the end, on 16 October 1948, Chiang ordered General Zheng Donggu to evacuate the city and cut southwards to Shenyang, the first large city along the railway leading towards Beijing. 'If Changchun falls, do you really think Peiping [the name for Beijing before 1949] will be safe?' Zheng was asked. He gave a sigh: 'No place in China will be safe.'¹²

Zheng had two armies to withdraw: the Sixtieth, composed mostly of dispirited soldiers from the subtropical province of Yunnan, and the New Seventh Army, made up of tough US-trained veterans who had fought on the Burma front. The Seventh stormed out as ordered, but failed to break through the blockade. The Sixtieth refused to leave, and in any event the soldiers were too weak to march all the way to Shenyang. They turned their guns against the Seventh and handed the city over to Lin Biao.

Hailed in China's history books as a decisive victory in the battle of Manchuria, the fall of Changchun came at huge cost, as an estimated 160,000 civilians were starved to death inside the area besieged by the communists. 'Changchun was like Hiroshima,' wrote Zhang Zhenglong, a lieutenant in the

People's Liberation Army who documented the siege. 'The casualties were about the same. Hiroshima took nine seconds; Changchun took five months.'¹³

War

On 6 August 1945 a B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later Nagasaki was erased in a blinding flash of light. Within a week Emperor Hirohito had ordered his armies to lay down their weapons.

The unconditional surrender of Japan was met with jubilation across China, ending one of the bloodiest chapters in the history of the country. In Chongqing, the wartime capital of Chiang Kai-shek, shouts and firecrackers erupted all over the city, 'sporadic at first but growing to a volcanic eruption of sound and happiness within an hour'. Searchlights festively danced across the sky. A flood of cheering, laughing and crying people poured through the streets, overwhelming every US soldier they could find with gifts of cigarettes. After Chiang had read his message of victory over the radio, dressed in a simple khaki uniform without any decorations, he walked out of the broadcasting studio and was engulfed by a joyous crowd. Well-wishers crawled through police lines, others hung from balconies, yelled from rooftops or held their children high above the crowd to see the Generalissimo.

The eight-year war had plumbed the depths of human depravity. After Japanese troops took the capital Nanjing in December 1937, civilians and disarmed soldiers were systematically slaughtered in a six-week orgy of violence. Captives were rounded up and machine-gunned, blown up with landmines or stabbed to death with bayonets. Women, including infants and the elderly, were raped, mutilated and killed by soldiers on the rampage. No accurate death toll has ever been produced, but estimates range from a minimum of 40,000 to an upper limit of 300,000 deaths. During the last years of the war, in retaliation against guerrilla resistance, a pitiless policy of scorched earth devastated parts of northern China, as whole villages were burned to the ground. Men between the ages of fifteen and sixty suspected of being enemy were rounded up and killed.

Throughout their occupation, the Japanese had used biological and chemical weapons. Lethal experiments were conducted on prisoners of war in a string of secret laboratories stretching from northern Manchuria to subtropical Guangdong. Victims were subjected to vivisection without anaesthesia after being infected with various germs. Others had their limbs amputated, their stomachs excised or parts of their organs surgically removed. Weapons, including flamethrowers and chemical agents, were tested on prisoners tied to stakes. In Unit 731, a notorious compound near Harbin that came complete with an aerodrome, a railway station, barracks, laboratories, operating rooms, crematoria, a cinema and even a Shinto temple, contaminated fleas and infected clothing were developed to spread plague, anthrax and cholera when dropped on civilians in encased bombs.² To escape the Japanese and their collaborators, tens of millions of refugees fled southwards towards Yunnan and Sichuan, where the nationalists had their wartime bases. But even in unoccupied territory people lived in fear, as massive air raids were mounted on civilian targets in the capital Chongqing and other major cities, leaving millions dead, injured and homeless.³

With the prospect of peace, the tide of humanity that had flowed from the coast to the interior started to turn. A rickshaw puller spelled out the meaning of Japan's capitulation after reading one of Chongqing's wall newspapers, mumbling, 'Japan is defeated. Can we go home now?' Across China's vast hinterland, millions of involuntary exiles began selling their makeshift furniture, preparing to trek back home and pick up the threads of their former lives, rebuilding families, homes and businesses. Along the banks of the Yangzi River, people searched for boats to float downstream

others pushed carts and trudged on foot in the scorching heat.⁴

The government, too, prepared to return home. The formal surrender ceremony between China and Japan took place on 21 August 1945 at the Zhijiang Airfield in Hunan. In the shade of a cherry tree, Major General Takeo Imai handed over a map showing the positions of his 1,000,000 troops in China. They were allowed to retain their arms and maintain public order until the arrival of nationalist troops. They rushed to all the key cities south of the Great Wall in a spectacular sea-transport and airlift operation executed under the command of General Albert Wedemeyer, one of the most senior US military officers in East Asia. In the largest aerial troop movement of the Second World War, some 80,000 soldiers of the Sixth Army were flown to Nanjing to retake their erstwhile capital. In Shanghai, the shabbily clothed soldiers of the Ninety-Fourth Army who stepped out of giant transport aircraft blinked at the sight of a large crowd waving banners on the runway. 'The peasant soldiers came timidly down the steep ladders, trying to salute, dazed by this overwhelming glimpse of the people they had come to liberate. The liberated wore silken gowns and leather shoes; the liberators' feet were dusty in straw sandals.'⁵

On the streets of Shanghai cheering crowds put up huge portraits of Chiang Kai-shek, decorated with garland flowers and crêpe paper. All along the coast, when troops of the national government entered the cities, 'multitudes of people lined the streets and shouted themselves hoarse to welcome the liberators'. A third army was flown to Beijing, as US air forces landed between 2,000 and 4,000 nationalist regulars daily in a race against the clock. By early November, the last Japanese south of the Great Wall were being rounded up and disarmed.⁶

But Chiang Kai-shek was not the only one making a claim on the territory of China. Two days after Hiroshima had been bombed, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, keeping to a promise Joseph Stalin had made to Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt at Yalta in February 1945. At the Soviet holiday resort on the Black Sea, Stalin had demanded control of the Manchurian seaports Dalian and Port Arthur as well as joint control with China over Manchuria's railways in exchange for breaking his non-aggression pact with Japan. Roosevelt made these concessions without consulting his wartime ally Chiang Kai-shek. Stalin also requested two months' supply of food and fuel for an army of 1.5 million men. This, too, Roosevelt accepted, as hundreds of shiploads of lend-lease materials were sent to Siberia, including 500 Sherman tanks.⁷

As a result, even as they raced to reach Berlin and occupy half of Europe before the Americans, the Soviets still managed to keep almost a million troops in Siberia. On 8 August 1945 they poured across the Amur River into Manchuria with tactical aircraft in support. Armoured trains carrying elite troops moved east along the Chinese Eastern Railway towards Harbin, making gains of up to 70 kilometres a day. A separate drive from Vladivostok was launched southwards into Korea, where the port of Rashin was soon captured. The Japanese had few aircraft and offered little effective opposition. Within days the Russians had won control of all strategic points in Manchuria.⁸

Not far away, a mere hundred kilometres south of the Great Wall, Mao Zedong was counting his troops. After several years of collaboration, a civil war had erupted between the communists and the nationalists in 1927, and in 1934 Mao Zedong and his supporters had been forced to retreat deep inland to evade Chiang Kai-shek's forces. A year later, some 20,000 survivors of the Long March had set up headquarters in land-locked Yan'an, far behind enemy lines, many of the troops living in cave dwellings. After a decade of consolidating his authority, Mao controlled some 900,000 guerrilla fighters in rural pockets across the north of China. He was ready to strike.

But Mao could be overly optimistic in his assessment of the balance of power. He had grandiose plans to incite a rebellion in Shanghai and take over the country's financial powerhouse. Impulsively he ordered 3,000 undercover troops to enter the city and prepare for a general uprising, which, I

hoped, would precipitate a revolution. When reports indicated that his forces were hopeless and outnumbered, with little popular support, he persisted with his strategy. Stalin intervened, telling him to restrain his troops and avoid open confrontations with the nationalists. Mao reluctantly agreed. As the Red Army occupied Manchuria, Mao came up with a new vision: his aim was now to link up with the Russians and claim a belt of territory reaching from Outer Mongolia across all of Manchuria. Formed groups moved north, including 100,000 troops of the Eighth Route Army under the command of Lin Biao. They soon met up with the Red Army.⁹

But Stalin's immediate concern was to ensure the departure of the American military from China and Korea. The United States, after all, had a monopoly on the atom bomb and Stalin was wary of another world war. In order to achieve this goal, he openly proclaimed his support of the Chinese National Government and in the Sino-Soviet Treaty recognised Chiang Kai-shek as the leader of a united China. On 20 August 1945, Stalin also sent a message to Mao asking that his troops avoid an open confrontation with the nationalists and consolidate their position in the countryside instead. Mao was obliged to reverse course.¹⁰

In a weak and divided China, a fearsome prospect unfolded: the Soviet Union could prop up the Chinese Communist Party, leading to the division of the country into a Russian-dominated north and an American-protected south. Negotiations between Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek resumed the day the Red Army invaded Manchuria. In Moscow, T. V. Soong, one of Chiang's most eminent statesmen, had few bargaining chips to put on the negotiating table. In his dealings with Stalin, he had to agree to the concessions Roosevelt had made at Yalta: Port Arthur, a natural harbour on the south tip of Manchuria, would become a Russian naval base, while the Soviets would use the modern port of Dalian on equal terms with China. The Soviet Union and China would co-own the South Manchurian Railway and the Chinese Eastern Railway, both built by imperial Russia. In exchange Stalin recognised the sovereignty of the Chinese National Government over all of China and pledged to turn Manchuria over to Chiang Kai-shek.

With the Sino-Soviet Treaty in his pocket and assured of Moscow's backing for his government, Chiang invited Mao to join peace negotiations and discuss the country's future. At considerable personal risk, Mao flew to Chongqing in the company of Patrick Hurley, the American ambassador. Chiang and Mao had not seen each other for twenty years, and put on contrived smiles at a formal reception held on the first night, toasting each other with millet wine. Mao stayed a full six weeks wrangling for concessions even as pitched battles between the communists and the nationalists continued on the ground. Eventually, on 18 September, Mao proclaimed: 'We must stop [the] civil war and all parties must unite under the leadership of Chairman Chiang to build a modern China.' A formal statement was made on 10 October, the anniversary of the 1911 revolution that had led to the overthrow of the Qing empire. Back in Yan'an a few days later, Mao explained to his comrades-in-arms that the agreed statement in Chongqing was 'a mere scrap of paper'.¹¹

Stalin had publicly given his support to Chiang, but he also wanted to strengthen the Chinese Communist Party as a check on the Chinese National Government – and its American backers. In August he allowed the communists to take over Kalgan. In the nineteenth century, caravans of camels regularly assembled from all over the empire in this key gateway through the Great Wall to carry tea chests to Russia. Kalgan was still called 'Beijing's Northern Door': whoever controlled the old city was in a strategic position to attack Beijing. The Japanese had turned it into an economic and industrial centre, and also left behind an enormous cache of ammunition and weapons, including six tanks.¹²

In other cities in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, Soviet troops were instructed to equip communist units with Japanese arms and vehicles. The exact amount of logistical and military assistance the Soviets gave to the communists is difficult to estimate, but Moscow later claimed that 700,000 rifles

18,000 machine guns, 860 aircraft and 4,000 artillery pieces were handed over. Behind the scenes, the Soviets recommended that the communists deploy most of their troops in Manchuria. Mao, still in Chongqing, ordered the main force of his guerrilla units to pour across the Great Wall into Manchuria in September. There, with Soviet acquiescence, the communists took in demobilised soldiers, puppet troops and bandit fighters. By the end of the year, Mao had managed to assemble a motley army of 500,000 troops.¹³

Chiang knew full well that the Soviets were co-operating with the communists in Manchuria, but he was in no position to quarrel with Stalin. He also understood the strategic and economic significance of Manchuria, with its steel mills, huge reserves of iron ore and coal, dense forests and rich farmland. He put General Du Yuming in charge of reclaiming the region. His troops were denied permission to land in Port Arthur and Dalian, now under Soviet control following the Sino-Soviet Treaty. When in October 1945 ships from the US Seventh Fleet sailed instead to Yingkou, a minor harbour with rail connections to the interior, they found a communist garrison. Disembarking further south on Qinhuangdao, General Du breached the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan and lunged forward along the railway, meeting little opposition from communist troops. He covered the 300 kilometres from the Great Wall to the industrial base of Shenyang in less than three weeks. Chiang pleaded with Moscow in the hope of being allowed at least to partition Manchuria. Under pressure to fulfil the commitments to the nationalist government, the Soviets relented and allowed nationalist troops to be airlifted into Changchun, further north along the railway from Shenyang.¹⁴

The reason for Soviet reluctance soon became apparent: cities had been subjected to a wave of looting by the Red Army. James McHugh, one of the first businessmen allowed into Shenyang, reported that the troops had been let loose 'for three days of rape and pillage'. They 'stole everything in sight, broke up bathtubs and toilets with hammers, pulled electric light wiring out of the plaster, built fires on the floor and either burned down the house or at least a big hole in the floor'. Women cut their hair and dressed like men in order to avoid rape. In Shenyang, 'factories lay like raddled skeletons, picked clean of their machinery'. The city, one reporter wrote, 'has been reduced from a great industrial city into a tragic, crowded way station on the Russian-controlled railway to Dairen [Dalian]'. The systematic plundering of Manchuria's industrial infrastructure would later be valued at US\$2 billion.¹⁵

The Soviets delayed the withdrawal of their troops from Manchuria for five months, and the last of their tanks only rumbled across the border in April 1946. They handed the countryside over to the communists, and allowed Lin Biao to deploy his forces on the outskirts of all major cities. His Eighth Route Army, equipped with Japanese weapons, attacked the nationalist garrison in Changchun and killed most of its 7,000 soldiers. Harbin, Manchuria's ice city bordering Russia, was turned over to Mao on 28 April.

President Truman, instead of assisting his wartime ally Chiang Kai-shek, sent George Marshall to broker a coalition government between the nationalists and the communists. Chiang was dependent on continuing American economic and military assistance and had little choice but to acquiesce, even though the prospect of any lasting agreement between both camps seemed more remote than ever. The communists, on the other hand, had nothing to lose: they used the truce to regroup and expand even further in Manchuria, entrenching themselves in the countryside away from major cities and the railways. The suave and unassuming Zhou Enlai, Mao's envoy to the peace talks, was a master of deception, cultivating a close relationship with Marshall to present the communists as agrarian reformers keen to learn from democracy. Zhou even persuaded Mao solemnly to declare that 'Chinese democracy must follow the American path.' Mao would agree to almost anything on paper, as long as nobody was checking what he was doing on the ground. When the Red Army pulled out of Manchuria, Marshall came to believe that Stalin had given up on China. His willingness to help Chiang started

waver.¹⁶

Chiang realised that American support was slipping, but was determined to dislodge the communists from Changchun. His troops met little opposition. In early June 1946, Lin Biao and his army of 100,000 men beat a chaotic retreat towards the north. Chiang's New First and New Sixth Armies were in pursuit, harrying the communists across the Sungari River. Chiang's troops were now within striking distance of Harbin, the only city still in communist hands. Lin Biao's troops were in a state of collapse, as soldiers deserted in large numbers. When interviewed, Zhao Xuzhen, who was a soldier at the time, remembered that even military officers, party members and political instructors absconded in a chaotic retreat: 'some went home, some became bandits, and some surrendered.' But once again Marshall advised Chiang to halt the nationalist advance and proclaim a ceasefire. The American envoy had just visited Yan'an, where Mao had skilfully projected an image of liberal reform and democracy. Marshall even wrote to Truman that the communist forces in Manchuria were 'little more than loosely organised bands'.¹⁷

The communists used the peace talks to recondition their troops, integrate the 200,000-strong army that had served under the Japanese and recruit more soldiers from the countryside. Other recruits were prisoners of war, criminal elements, Korean units and Manchurian exiles returning from the Soviet Union. All were subjected to harsh training and ruthless discipline, often with the help of hundreds of Soviet technical advisers and military experts. The Russians even opened sixteen military institutions including air force, artillery and engineering schools. Some Chinese officers went to the Soviet Union for advanced training, others were given refuge in the Russian enclaves of Port Arthur and Dalian. While the Soviets stripped much of Manchuria's wealth, they left the military arsenals of Dalian untouched. With the help of Japanese technicians and local workers, these were put to work, churning out bullets and shells by the million. Logistical support also continued to arrive across the borders, by rail and by air. In North Korea alone, a full 2,000 wagons were allocated to the task. In return, the Chinese communists sent shipments of more than a million tons of grain as well as other products across the border from Manchuria to Russia in 1947.¹⁸

While the Russians were helping the communists transform their ragtag army of guerrilla fighters into a formidable war machine, the Americans became so disillusioned with the nationalists that they started cutting off deliveries of armaments. As trainloads of equipment moved back and forth across the border between Manchuria and the Soviet Union, the United States began refusing to license military equipment for China, including sales for which the government had already paid. Then, in September 1946, Truman imposed an arms embargo. It lasted until July 1947 – when the nationalists were allowed to purchase a three-week supply of infantry ammunition.¹⁹

For a while the nationalists battled on, trying to hold on to the cities along the railway that cut through the extensive Manchurian plain, enclosed by heavily forested mountain ranges. In the ebb and flow of warfare, the nationalists lost several cities only to recapture them in bloody battles with retreating communist troops. These were no longer skirmishes in a guerrilla war: hundreds of thousands of troops clashed in giant confrontations that involved artillery and air support, often at temperatures that fell to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Manchuria, by 1947, was turning into a death trap. Chiang kept on pouring his best troops into Manchuria, but Mao never let up, determined to wear down his enemy in a pitiless war of attrition. In Manchuria alone the communists recruited and conscripted approximately 1 million men. In battle after battle, Chiang's best government troops were destroyed. The nationalists also suffered from poor morale, their troops ensconced in cities for months on end, badly paid and without adequate provisions. Supply lines were extended to breaking point, running through the Great Wall along the Beijing–Changchun railway, which was often sabotaged by communist demolition squads. Military equipment was worn out, and in some cases soldiers were so short of ammunition that they could not fire a single practice shot. Lorries were for the most part

broken down, but could not be repaired as the sale of spare parts was prohibited under the arms embargo.²⁰

As Zhang Junmai, a veteran diplomat, campaigner for parliamentary democracy and unsparing critic of the nationalist government, later noted, even if an efficient government had existed it would have been no match for the combined forces of Moscow and Yan'an. But Chiang's government barely functioned. The nationalists faced a mammoth task in taking over a country the size of a continent and one that had been laid waste by eight years of warfare. Even south of the Great Wall, they endured constant harassment from guerrilla troops: the communists plundered towns, looted villages and left behind millions of homeless people. They controlled large parts of the countryside in Hebei and Shandong, cutting off fuel, energy and food supplies to the cities and feeding inflation. Transport, the key to recovery, had been gravely impaired by the Japanese and was now shattered by the communists who blew up railways and dynamited bridges. In pitiless partisan warfare, everything that tore society apart operated to the communists' advantage.²¹

Most of all, the nationalists were caught in a vicious cycle that predated their clash with the communists. Ever since Japan had invaded China in 1937, they had been unable to finance the war by selling bonds. Taxation covered only a small portion of the cost of the war. The only way forward was to issue paper currency. This meant that the brunt of the war effort fell on the middle classes, undermining the standard of living of people on fixed incomes such as schoolteachers, college professors, government employees and, of course, nationalist soldiers and officers. 'In 1940, 100 yuan bought a pig; in 1943, a chicken; in 1945, a fish; in 1946, an egg; and in 1947, one-third of a box of matches.' By 1947 the cost of living was approximately 30,000 times what it had been in 1936, a year before Japan attacked China. Chiang tried to tame inflation in 1947 by banning the export of foreign currency and gold bullion, imposing a ceiling on interest rates and freezing all wages, but these measures had no lasting effect. By 1949 people could be seen wheeling their money in carts.²²

For army officers or tax collectors alike, the salaries of government employees were held down to extraordinarily low levels. Soldiers were grossly underpaid, and even officers could not support their wives and children on their regular income. Graft, embezzlement and corruption therefore became rampant in many forms. Tax collectors accepted bribes. The police extorted money by threatening the poor with arrest and imprisonment. In the army, officers withheld salaries, inflated the bills for so-called military equipment on the black market. There was no easy solution to the problem. Raising government salaries would have increased inflation, which in turn would have affected the cost of living, leading quickly to the absorption of salary rises and the reappearance of corruption.

The nationalists needed help. They required financial assistance to curb inflation, rebuild the country and buy arms and munitions. Beginning in April 1948, the Marshall Plan, designed by the very man who had tried against all odds to engineer a coalition between Chiang Kai-shek and the communists, provided US\$13 billion in economic and technical assistance to help the recovery of Europe. This sum did not include the \$12 billion in aid that Europe had received between the end of the war and the start of the Plan. Even after Truman had been obliged to abandon the arms embargo on China, which was no longer consistent with the Truman Doctrine – proclaimed by the president in March 1947 and committing the United States to supporting Greece and Turkey with economic and military aid to prevent their falling under Soviet influence – support for the nationalists was minimal. The United States failed to deliver a paltry \$125 million of military help in time even after a Republican majority finally pushed Congress to provide an aid package, which was only passed in April 1948, bringing the total military aid received by China after Victory over Japan Day to something between \$225 and \$360 million.²³

The tide turned in 1948. For months on end the communists had launched one assault after another in Manchuria, continually hammering the nationalist-held cities. Chiang, determined to hold on at all costs, kept on pouring more troops into the region to make up for the dead and wounded. The loss of Manchuria, he confided in his private journal, would open all of north China to the communists. He was staking everything he had on one huge gamble rather than retreating and holding the line along the Great Wall.²⁴

In December 1947, in more than a metre of snow and a temperature of minus 35 degrees Celsius, Lin Biao launched a massive assault across the frozen Sungari River. The People's Liberation Army, as the communist troops now called themselves, had no air cover, but a thick, icy mist and glacial weather severely limited the nationalists' use of aeroplanes. Pressing their military advantage, most of the 400,000 troops swarmed south and laid siege to the cities along the railway, destroying several government divisions.²⁵

Shenyang, just south of Changchun, was Manchuria's stronghold, and one of the country's best arsenals. Lin Biao cut the railway between Beijing and Shenyang and laid siege to the city. Inside the island of dwindling resistance, a civilian population of 1.2 million, swollen to 4 million by people fleeing the communists, was blockaded for ten months. Also trapped were 200,000 nationalist soldiers. Drove of people soon abandoned beleaguered Shenyang. Planes of General Claire Chennault's commercial airline shuttled in and out, evacuating about 1,500 passengers to safety each day, but few could afford to bribe their way on board. Fights broke out at the airfield, as the crack of artillery could be heard in the distance. At night people huddled together in a bomb-blasted hangar. The majority, over 100,000 a month, left by train, rattling west towards the edge of the city's defence perimeter where the line came to an end.²⁶

People who were too poor or too sick to leave were soon starving. As early as February, Shenyang was short of food, fuel and ammunition. Vitamin deficiencies caused thousands to go blind, while countless others, many of them children, were wasted by noma, a gangrenous disease that destroyed the face, by pellagra, by scurvy and by other diseases of malnutrition. As a foreign reporter noted: 'I walked down the desolate streets past the emaciated bodies of the dead in the gutters, pursued by unbearably pitiful child beggars and women crying out for help.' Shops along empty streets were boarded up, the red-brick factories standing derelict, many of them bombed during the war and then looted by Soviet troops in 1946. People survived by eating bark and leaves and by pressing soybean cakes, normally used as fertiliser or as cattle fodder. Others picked through the debris on the streets.²⁷

A flood of misery poured out of Manchuria – refugees escaping from beleaguered cities, farmers fleeing a bloodied countryside, most of them stumbling forward on foot, a few hobbling on crutches or sticks. In the summer of 1948, some 140,000 pressed their way through the military lines around Shenyang and joined the exodus every month. Then they had to trek across a stretch of wilderness infested with armed gangs who capitalised on the chaos of civil war. But an even greater danger loomed 30 kilometres north of Jinzhou, where the railway crossed the Daling River. The nationalists stood guard on the opposite shore, and fired on anybody who tried to wade, swim or take a boat towards them. The only way across the river was through the twisted girders of the blasted railway bridge. For a fee, local guides would strap the refugees on their backs with rope and pick a passage over the broken bridge, their human burden looking down in terror at the swirling waters far below. From Jinzhou they were packed on refugee trains to Shanhaiguan, where the Great Wall dipped into the Bohai Sea. Here they found a makeshift refugee centre serviced by a single tap with running water. Many people quickly moved on to Beijing and Tianjin, even though few could be housed or adequately fed.²⁸

The coup de grâce came in September 1948. Lin Biao staged a frontal attack on Shenyang and

deployed close to 300,000 men to encircle Jinzhou, the lifeline to Manchuria. Military engineers blew holes in the city walls. After sustaining 34,000 casualties, Jinzhou fell on 15 October, its remaining 88,000 prisoners being marched off by the People's Liberation Army. A rescue force of 90,000 men hacking its way through enemy lines outside Shenyang, walked straight into a trap: they were outnumbered and crushed a week later by Lin Biao. In Changchun, the remaining 80,000 troops handed over the city to the communists. Fighting continued in Shenyang for a week, often in bloody hand-to-hand combat inside the city after the walls had been demolished by artillery fire. When the senior remaining officer surrendered on 1 November, the battle for Manchuria was over.²⁹

Overnight prices in Shanghai rose four- or fivefold. On the international market the gold yuan sank to a tenth of its original value. A wave of defeatism swept nationalist China. The United States began to ship out the wives and children of its military personnel and advised its citizens as far south as Nanjing and Shanghai to evacuate the area. All over the country panic set in, as an army of 750,000 communist fighters, reinforced with tanks, heavy artillery and other weapons captured from the nationalists, marched across the frozen plains of Manchuria through the Great Wall in a southward thrust against Beijing.

General Fu Zuoyi, the nationalist commander in the north, stood little chance as the communists swiftly moved to cut the railway lifelines along the Northern Corridor, which stretched from Kalgan to the port of Dagu. They surrounded Tianjin, China's third largest city, in November 1948, and soon forced Fu Zuoyi to pull his troops back inside the walls of Beijing. Lin Biao drew a siege ring around the city and cut off electricity and water supplies. Within a week the airfields outside the city walls were in communist hands. Soon a strange silence set in over the imperial capital, only occasionally disturbed by shell explosions or machine-gun bursts. At first Fu, one of the most distinguished military leaders in the war against Japan, seemed determined to defend Beijing. Trenches were dug and street barricades hastily erected as soldiers went from house to house commandeering billets. To allow cargo planes to deliver supplies, an airstrip was built on the polo ground of the old legation quarter, in the very heart of the ancient city. In the freezing winter, gangs of padded-gowned forced labour pulled down telephone poles, trees and even buildings on the approach to the runway. Martial rule was imposed. Lorries with teams of policemen and soldiers carrying sub-machine guns and broadswords careened through the streets, reminding the population of their military presence. Outside the city walls, thousands of homes were needlessly levelled, ostensibly to provide a good field of fire for the defending troops.³⁰

But everybody in Beijing knew what had happened to Changchun, turned into a 'city of death' by the very general who was now camping outside the city walls. Fu Zuoyi fell into a depression, tormented by the prospect of seeing Beijing, the cultural heart of China, desecrated for no good reason. At first he asked Chiang for permission to resign, but when the Generalissimo refused, he resumed the secret negotiations he had opened with the People's Liberation Army through his daughter, who was a member of the communist party. After a forty-day siege, a surrender document was signed on 22 January 1949. All of the 240,000 troops under Fu were absorbed into the communist army. The treatment that he and his troops received served as an inducement to other nationalist commanders and officers to defect.³¹

For eight days the imperial capital seemed to float in a twilight zone, as the nationalists, some of them still armed, wandered about the city freely as it awaited the communists. Very little changed. In this strange vacuum, Beijing celebrated the Chinese New Year as best it could. Shops were crammed with lanterns traditionally placed outside front doors to welcome the New Year – in the shape of lions, brilliant green rabbits or yellow tigers. But Chiang Kai-shek's portrait on Tiananmen Square was removed.

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