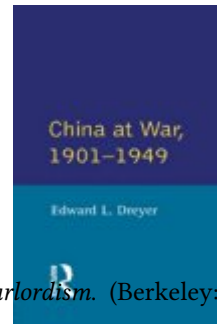


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward L. Dreyer. *China at War 1901-1949*. London: Longman, 1995. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-05125-6; \$52.00 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-05123-2.

Reviewed by Edward A. McCord (George Washington University)
Published on H-War (September, 1995)



Professor McCord is the author of *Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

This new addition to the Longman “Modern Wars in Perspective” series gives us the first complete history, in a single work, of war and warfare in China in the first half of the twentieth century. This is an intrinsically important book because of the centrality of war in this period of Chinese history. Within the half century covered by this study, China experienced a revolutionary war that brought down the last imperial dynasty, followed immediately by a series of military struggles to define the Republic established in its place, which soon degenerated into a succession of major civil wars and minor military conflicts among competing military commanders, or “warlords,” seeking to establish their own political dominance. In the mid- 1920s, the Nationalist Party (KMT), in an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), established its own party army and initiated a military campaign (the “Northern Expedition”) to eliminate warlordism and reunite the country. Before this task was completed, however, the KMT and CCP alliance broke apart, generating a prolonged military struggle between the two parties for political power. While the attempt to eliminate residual warlordism and the civil war between the KMT and CCP continued, China was threatened by Japan’s imperialist designs. The Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 was a prelude to further conflicts that ultimately led to the outbreak of the Sino- Japanese War in 1937. With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the conflict in China became one theatre of the Second World War. After Japan’s defeat, the illusion of a “united front” that had been established between the KMT and the CCP during the war against Japan was broken, and civil warfare between the two parties renewed, leading ultimately to the Communist victory in 1949.

My attempt here to summarize the wars that occurred in China in the first half of the twentieth century gives some idea of the task Edward Dreyer faced in even trying to construct a history of war in China in this period. It is a task, however, that Dreyer completes with a fair amount of success. He does a particularly good job of presenting the often overlapping military conflicts of this period in an organized and understandable fashion. Beyond his basic narrative, though, Dreyer also seeks to provide some interpretive framework for these conflicts, often taking positions that challenge conventional understandings.

Dreyer chooses 1901 to begin his study because this is the year in which the Manchu dynasty initiated a systematic, nation-wide attempt to modernize its army. According to Dreyer, it is this military modernization that set the stage for the succeeding half century of military conflict—beginning with the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty by its newly modernized armies. Some might argue, however, that the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 would have been a better starting point for a study of modern China’s wars, if not in its own right then even within Dreyer’s framework of military modernization. There had, in fact, been some attempts at military modernization prior to this war (the introduction of modern weapons into the army and, even more importantly, the attempt to create a modern navy). China’s defeat in this war proved the limits of this early modernization, particularly its emphasis on military technology without accompanying institutional changes. In the immediate aftermath of this war, several important military units were organized on Western standards, which ultimately served as models for the broader 1901 program of military modernization. Thus

Dreyer's exclusion of the 1895 Sino-Japanese War from the parameters of his study seems ill-justified, even by his own criteria.

Although examining the wars of the early Republic and the warlord period in some detail, Dreyer focuses most of his critical attention to more contested issues raised concerning the military struggles between the KMT and the CCP and the conflict with Japan between 1937 and 1945. In the first case, Dreyer stands with those who believe that the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek actually developed a strategy by the mid-1930s that, if not interrupted by the conflict with Japan, might have led to the successful suppression of the Communist movement. Following techniques used in the suppression of mid-19th century rebellions, fortified villages and an encircling band of blockhouses separated Communist guerrilla fighters from popular bases of support and forced them into set battles where they could be defeated by numerically superior and better armed KMT forces. Thus Dreyer challenges those who criticize Chiang Kai-shek for his overly military approach to the problem of Communist rebellion. From Dreyer's standpoint, one can conclude that the factors that many scholars cite to suggest the inevitability of CCP victory (its organizational ability, its popular program, Mao's guerrilla strategy, etc.) were in the end no match to appropriately applied conventional military power.

One obvious reason for China's poor showing against Japan in the war that began in 1937 was the relative inferiority of the Chinese army's arms and equipment. Not stopping there, though, Dreyer also shows that China's losses were increased by Chiang Kai-shek's poor command practices (for example, attempting to manage campaigns far from the front with little attention to actual conditions) and by political factors—such as factional divisions within Chiang's army and distrust between the KMT and CCP. According to Dreyer, "Chinese were willing to die for their country in large number, but her leaders were still not willing to cooperate in her defense" (p. 206).

Dreyer is very critical of the performance of both KMT and CCP armies in the war against Japan, particularly in regard to their reluctance to engage the enemy in the later stages of the war. After suffering enormous casualties at the beginning of the war, Chiang Kai-shek retreated into the interior where he spent the rest of the war attempting to preserve his most loyal forces from further losses. Dreyer accepts the view of many American observers from the period that Chiang saw that America's

entry into the war in 1941 as assuring Japan's eventual defeat. While the United States fought Japan, then, Chiang sought to hoard the military supplies he obtained from his new allies to prepare his army for a post-war struggle with the CCP. This view is similar the CCP's own criticism of Chiang's inactivity in the war against Japan. Dreyer is not, however, willing to subscribe to the other side of the CCP's view—namely that the struggle against Japan was primarily carried out by Communist forces. He acknowledges that the CCP carried out a phenomenal expansion of its own military forces during the war by developing guerrilla bases behind Japanese lines. (Here Dreyer subscribes to the view of Chalmers Johnson that the main reason for CCP success in this period was its ability to portray itself as a nationalist force). However, Dreyer questions the efficacy of the guerrilla campaign carried out by the CCP in doing anything but minimal damage to the Japanese. According to Dreyer, "a declared strategy of guerrilla warfare may often be merely a rationalization for the desire to avoid battle" (p. 238). In his view, the CCP was no less guilty than the KMT in looking primarily to reserve its forces for a post-war confrontation with the KMT.

Dreyer's criticism of the wartime performance of the KMT and the CCP is, of course, little different from the views of many contemporary Western observers and later Western scholarship on the war. Where Dreyer breaks ranks with the conventional Western view, though, is his rejection of the one contribution of the Chinese war effort that is most commonly cited—namely that if nothing else the Chinese tied down large numbers of Japanese troops that might otherwise been used against the Western allies on other fronts. According to Dreyer, the Chinese front actually served the Japanese as a training ground for new forces and did not limit their ability to transfer sufficient forces to other fronts as needed. Rather than making a contribution, then, Dreyer charges that, "the existence of the China theatre in 1941-5 may have hindered the overall war effort against the Axis, by diverting resources that might have been better used elsewhere" (p. 262).

Dreyer's main contribution in discussing the post-war political struggle between the KMT and the CCP is to focus attention on the military factors behind the CCP's ultimate success. Dreyer is first of all critical of the military failures of the KMT, particularly Chiang Kai-shek's abandonment of the strategy that had nearly led to the extermination of the CCP prior to the war with Japan. By attempting to re-assert KMT military power in all the major cities in territories recovered from the Japanese, Chi-

ang dispersed his military strength, leaving KMT forces vulnerable to encirclement by CCP armies rather than the other way around. At the same time, Chiang's attempt to micro-manage the war against the CCP from afar, and his distrust of nominal KMT forces who lacked a history of personal loyalty to himself, hindered the coordination of an effective anti-CCP campaign. Such views are, of course, part of the stock explanations given for the failure of the KMT. Dreyer takes a much more provocative position when discussing the military factors behind the CCP's success.

Dreyer directly challenges the view that the CCP victory was the result of the effective application of a strategy of "People's War." The emphasis on the development of a unique strategy of guerrilla warfare based on peasant mobilization was, of course, important in Mao Zedong's efforts to claim the special importance of the Chinese experience for international Communism. Contrary to this claim, though, Dreyer proposes that the CCP victory was in fact more the result of conventional military science. In contrast to the limited, and fairly ineffective, guerrilla tactics used by the CCP against Japan, which tended to avoid major battles, Dreyer shows that CCP victory in the civil war was predicated on winning major battles that effectively destroyed large segments of the KMT army. According to Dreyer, the battles of "encirclement and annihilation" fought by the CCP in this period owed more to conventional military tactics than to any strategy of guerrilla warfare.

Dreyer does not, however, see the CCP victory only in terms of military tactics. He suggests that the other side of the equation for CCP success was a relatively unified political leadership that made its effective military campaigns possible. He notes that CCP field armies, like KMT armies, had their own individual histories rather than representing a single unified army (a heritage of the warlord era). Nonetheless, the CCP commanders were ideologically united and their willingness to cooperate gave them an advantage over KMT forces that remained divided by competing factional interests. While this analysis seems to be supported by the behavior of the two armies in the civil war, it does lead naturally to the question, still hotly contested, as to why the CCP was able to attain this unity of purpose while the KMT was not. While Dreyer fails to address this question, he does at least balance his focus on the importance of appropriate military tactics with an understanding that tactics must be allied with suitable political conditions.

If there is any weakness in Dreyer's book, it is in the

thinness of his sources. The book was based entirely on secondary materials, and English language ones at that. Furthermore, large sections of the book seem to have relied on single sources, when other, often more comprehensive sources were available. Indeed, given the limited number of works that have been written in English about this subject, it is surprising that Dreyer failed to consult a number of important sources that would seem critical to his study. One example is Edmund S. K. Fung's *The Military Dimension of the Chinese Revolution* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), which is the most comprehensive source on the role of late Ch'ing modernized armies in the 1911 Revolution. His discussion of warlord politics seems to have ignored one of the most important works in this area, Andrew Nathan's *Peking Politics, 1918- 1923: Factionalism and the Failure of Constitutionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Given his stress on military modernization and technology, it seems incredible not to have referred to Anthony B. Chan's *Arming the Chinese: The Western Armaments Trade in Warlord China, 1920-1928* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), the only detailed study of how the warlords actually obtained weapons for their armies. While this reviewer's book, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), may have come out too late for Dreyer to consult, the same is not true for the dissertation on which it was based (Edward A. McCord, "The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism: Military Power and Politics in Hunan and Hubei," University of Michigan, 1985). Given the importance of Manchuria to Dreyer's story, one would have expected him to have used both Chong-Sik Lee's *Revolutionary Struggle in Manchuria: Chinese Communism and Soviet Interest, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and Steven I. Levine's *Anvil of Victory: The Communist Revolution in Manchuria, 1945-1948* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

Dreyer's narrative and analysis could no doubt have benefited by references to a greater range of sources, such as these just listed. Even more importantly, though, use of these sources might have corrected some factual problems in his narrative. For example, based, it seems, on a 1954 source, Dreyer notes that Manchuria under the Japanese, "remained free of guerrilla disturbances until the Chinese Communists entered the area post-war" (p. 246)—a claim which Dreyer uses to suggest at least grudging acceptance by the Chinese in Manchuria to Japanese rule. The book by Chong-Sik Lee cited above, though, shows that there were indeed numerous guerrilla

forces active in Manchuria in this period, albeit forces that the Japanese were largely able to defeat or destroy. Lee's study would have provided a useful companion to Dreyer's discussion of the successful KMT anti-guerrilla campaign before the war, as well as a contrast to less successful campaigns against the Communists by the Japanese in North China during the war and by the KMT after the war.

In my own area of expertise, the history of warlordism in Hunan and Hubei, I also found Dreyer's text peppered with inaccurate or questionable statements. For example, Dreyer cites Wang Chan-yuan as "nominally" being the military governor of Hubei from 1916 to 1921 (p. 88). In fact, there was nothing "nominal" about Wang's rule over this province. Later Dreyer states that Wang in 1921 was the military governor of both Hubei and Hunan, and that Wu Pei-fu kept Wang's "provinces" for himself after Wang's ouster (p. 97). In fact, although the Peking government awarded Wang the concurrent title of Hunan military governor at one point, this province remained outside Wang's actual control. A similar problem exists with Dreyer's reference here and elsewhere (pp. 92, 99) to Wu as the warlord of both Hubei and Hunan, whereas in fact, as Dreyer himself notes in another place, Hunan rebuffed Wu's efforts to control it (p. 133). In another example, Dreyer implies that when Chao Heng-t'i became governor of Hunan in 1921, the

former governor T'an Yan-k'ai and another Hunan military leader Ch'eng Ch'ien took "their armies" to Kwangtung to join Sun Yatsen (p. 92). In fact, Ch'eng had left Hunan, without his armies, even before Chao came to power. Likewise, when T'an resigned he left the entire Hunan army under Chao's control. It was only later in 1923 that T'an organized a revolt among his and Ch'eng's followers in Hunan against Chao, and it was only after his defeat in this attempt that T'an led these forces to Kwangtung. In some of these cases, Dreyer seems to be merely repeating the errors of his sources. At the same time, Dreyer might have caught some of these errors by consulting a broader number of sources.

While scattered errors such as these weaken the book's ability to serve as a reference, they seldom harm the broader value of Dreyer's narrative or his interpretations. If nothing else, the book refocuses attention on war as a central feature of China's modern experience. Far too often historians of this period have tended to ignore the importance of military factors in the events they describe. Dreyer's book goes a long way toward redressing this neglect. At the same time, Dreyer himself balances his appraisal of the effects of military technology and tactics with careful attention to political circumstances. The end result is a history of China's wars that could almost serve as a textbook for the political history of China.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Edward A. McCord. Review of Dreyer, Edward L., *China at War 1901-1949*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=168>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.