COMBAT

China 1937–38

Chinese Soldier VERSUS Japanese Soldier

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Introduction

The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) had its origins in many decades of poor relations between China and Japan that regularly escalated into warfare. Following a series of wars and rebellions in the 19th century, China saw vast tracts of its territory annexed by the Russians. In 1894–95, a newly industrialized Japan soundly defeated China in the First Sino-Japanese War, in which China lost not only its centuries-long hold on Korea, then a tributary state, but for the first time territories such as Taiwan and the Liaodong peninsula. Further humiliations for China followed during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901).

Frustrated, the Chinese began to seek ways to recover, replacing the monarchy with a republic in 1911. Civil war among regional factions and warlords ensued; there were two governments, one in the north and one in

The key to the spread of Japanese influence into China before the outbreak of total war in 1937 was through the development of the Japanese-owned Manchu–Japanese Railway. The need for railway security was the excuse for deployment of Japanese troops deep inside Chinese territory. The land on either side of the track was considered to be Japanese territory, not unlike the arrangement made by the Americans over Panama, where lands astride the canal were US territory. Here, in 1931, Japanese troops guard a key railway bridge. (adoc-photos/Corbis via Getty Images)

FAR LEFT
Lt-Gen Zhang Zhi-zhong is shown here in 1933, making a speech at the graduation ceremony of the Whampoa/ Central Military Academy. His leadership of the Chinese Army during the 1932 battle of Shanghai aided his rise to national prominence. He wears the modernized uniform of the Chinese Army, with German features such as the ski cap and grey battledress tunic. His rank is displayed on his collar. (Evergreen Photos)

LEFT
During 1937–38, many of the Chinese Army's auxiliary units were equipped with the *dadao*, a machete-like sabre. Paid for by the unit commanders, these swords were of no single design, being made by local artisans. Although the sword was popular in night raids, where surprise was the key, the fact remains that its use in the mid-20th century was a testament to China's weakness and poverty at that time. (ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

the south, but by the late 1920s, Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), a military strongman from the southern faction, began to emerge as China's undisputed leader. Even so, many of the regional governors paid only lip-service to Chiang's authority, their stake in the trade in exotic minerals and opium enabling them to build their own power base and protection. Also, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) grew from humble beginnings in 1921 to become a threat to Chiang's rule. From 1927, the CCP mounted an armed rebellion against Chiang, prompting him to rate the CCP threat greater than that posed by the Japanese and other foreign forces intervening in Chinese affairs.

In 1932, Japan annexed the whole of Manchuria and renamed it Manchukuo, further expanding this puppet state after defeating the Chinese in the battle of Rehe (1933). The real power in Manchukuo was the Kwantung Army (KA), the Japanese garrison. Many long-serving KA officers began to dabble in illicit trade such as opium; flush with funds, some entertained the illusion of being 'independent' from Tokyo. While some extremists began to foment thoughts of coups and assassinations, others repeatedly urged the use of war as the only means to solve the 'China problem'.

Sensing that the Chinese were preoccupied with the Japanese, the Soviets quickly forced the Chinese to give up Mongolia and created a new allied state. The success of Manchukuo led to the creation of more puppet states, including the East Hebei Autonomous Council and the Jicha Political Council; these actions were masterminded entirely by KA officers and had nothing to do with Tokyo. By the mid-1930s, Japanese forces had encircled Beijing except for a narrow corridor in the south-west where the Beijing–Wuhan railway ran. By early 1937, Japan's China Garrison Army (CGA) had Beijing surrounded on three sides, while the KA fielded the equivalent of another eight divisions – 1st, 2nd, 4th, 7th, 8th, 11th and 12th divisions, plus five independent brigades and an air force – supported by a sizeable contingent of local troops. Japan could also draw upon the Korea and Taiwan garrisons (the 19th and 20th divisions). By comparison, the Chinese were

North-eastern China, 1937–38

MAP KEY

In July 1937, the area controlled by Chiang Kai-shek was really quite small. The East Hebei Autonomous Council and the Jicha Political Council were both separatist local councils controlled by the Japanese. At the beginning of what became known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the main force of the China Garrison Army (CGA) was in Tianjin, with outposts in Tong County, Fengtai and along the Manchukuo railway line. In the days before 8 July, the Japanese were exceptionally busy with military exercises, making the Chinese increasingly nervous. After shooting started on the 7th the Chinese reinforced Beijing and the Japanese responded with troops from Korea and Manchukuo.

In the battle of Tai'erzhuang (14 March–8 April 1938), Japan's II Corps, having occupied Jinan, ordered the 10th Division and 5th Division to capture Xuzhou, the headquarters of China's Fifth War Zone. Seeking to link up with II Corps, the Japanese 13th Division was stopped by Chinese forces at the Huai River, and was unable to break through until late May 1938. After Tai'erzhuang, the Japanese attempted to encircle the escaping Chinese, but Japan's 14th Division was caught in the Yellow River flood and the 9th, 3rd and 13th divisions were unsuccessful in trying again to encircle the Chinese fleeing west.

After the fall of Nanjing to Japanese forces on 13 December 1937, the Chinese administrative capital moved to Wuhan. To capture Wuhan, Japan's Central China Expedition Army (CCEA) pushed a southern pincer west along the Yangtze River, while a northern pincer moved south through the Dabie Mountains. The strength of the Chinese effort during the battle of Wanjialing (23 July–17 October 1938) meant that extra Japanese reinforcements were deployed, including the reservists of the 101st and 106th divisions, along with the Hata Detachment.

shackled by the 1933 Tanggu Truce that created a demilitarized zone covering much of northern China. The 1935 He-Umezu Agreement further weakened Chinese sovereignty by forcing the Chinese to appoint a provincial leader known for his suspect loyalty as the garrison commander of Tianjin and Beijing – Gen (2nd Grade) Song Zhe-yuan.

The KA sought to cultivate the local Chinese leaders to rebel against Chiang. Song and Chiang had an uneasy relationship as they had once fought each other during the warlord era. While the Japanese were wooing Song, he retreated to his family home in Shandong province. In 1937, Song was not only the military commander of Beijing and Tianjin, but also the Chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee of Hebei and Chahar Province as well as the head of the Jicha Political Council. Through his subordinates, Song extended his reach into the fabric of northern China.

Even so, the Japanese premier, Hirota Koki, still hoped to find a peaceful solution to the China issue because he believed Japan had to avoid becoming embroiled in a drawn-out war with China while the Soviets posed such a threat. However, the 'hawks' – such as Lt-Gen Tojo Hideki, the KA's CoS who later became the infamous prime minister of wartime Japan – were clamouring for a belligerent solution to the China problem. To counter any moves on Beijing by the KA, Tokyo decided to bolster the CGA with an additional ten companies of infantry and one combined-arms regiment, hoping it could act as a counterweight. Unknown to Tokyo, this force also contained many who shared Tojo's hawkish views – and the Japanese did not forewarn the Chinese of this provocative move, thereby contributing to the increasingly tense atmosphere. Soon after, the enlarged CGA began to conduct exercises using live ammunition and extend its military presence beyond what was permitted by the Boxer Protocol of 1901. A key development was the occupation in 1935 of an old British Army barracks in Fengtai, on the western outskirts of Beijing, only 5km from the strategically important Marco Polo Bridge.


MANCHUKUO
Zhang-Jia-Kou
Baotou
Da Tong
Tong County
Fengtai
Beijing
Tianjin
Tanggu
Dalian
Lüshun (Port Arthur)
Bohai Sea
Cangzhou
Shi-Jia-Zhuang
Taiyuan
Jinan
Huai County
Qingdao
CHINA
Yellow
Linyi
Yellow Sea
Tongguan
Luoyang
Zhengzhou
Kaifeng
Shangqiu
Tai'erzhuang
Lianyun-Gang City
Xuzhou
Flooded area
Lake Hongze
Meng County
Bengbu
Lake Gaoyou
Huai
Zhenjiang
Hefei
Nanjing
Suzhou
Lake Tai
Shanghai
DABIE MOUNTAINS
Yangtze
Wuhan
Hangzhou Bay
Hangzhou
Jiujiang
Hukou
N
0
100 miles
0
100km
Lake Dongting
Lake Po Yang
East Hebei Autonomous Council
Jicha Political Council
Great Wall

The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS, RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Chinese

In the 1930s, China's National Army (NA) consisted of two major groups, the Central Army and the Provincial Army. Because the country was highly factionalized, the Chinese forces were equipped, dressed and organized in a variety of ways, depending upon their origins and loyalties to regional leaders. On paper, on the eve of war with the Japanese, the NA fielded 177 infantry divisions plus 60 independent infantry brigades and 43 independent infantry regiments, and nine cavalry divisions plus five independent cavalry brigades and three independent cavalry regiments. There were also four artillery brigades, 18 independent artillery regiments and 15 independent artillery battalions; two engineer regiments; three transport regiments; two signal regiments; and 11 regiments and three independent battalions of military police. In theory, this total – not including forces loyal to the CCP – amounted to 2,029,000 all ranks.

Traditionally recruited from peasant communities (80 per cent were from a farming background), Chinese recruits usually joined the Army as a means to escape poverty. Some recruits were aged as young as 14, but the bulk were of prime fighting age (late teens to around 35 years). They were fit, tough and hardy individuals, obedient and demanding little in return. Most – some 85–90 per cent – were illiterate, however; although this hampered training, especially in the technical arms such as signals, engineering and artillery, the Chinese soldier could pick up skills and techniques much faster than a comparable Western soldier could. An American military observer commented that a typical Chinese soldier could be proficient in the use of a flamethrower in just two days and even the slowest learner could master the skill in less than four, whereas an average American soldier required at least four if not five days to learn how to operate the same weapon.

During the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese would win battle after battle, but on the rare occasions when the Chinese were victorious, they prevailed while sustaining a much greater number of casualties. Several factors contributed to this outcome. Not only were the Chinese deficient in key weaponry such as artillery, but also – more importantly – they were short of trained and experienced personnel to operate these weapons. Indeed, by the end of 1936, there were only 17,490 soldiers who had completed secondary education and only 880 who been through tertiary education.

If the average soldier was poorly educated, training staff were little better. Good officers gravitated towards active fighting units that offered better pay and chances for promotion, while the less capable ones were assigned to training units. Many languished in the training establishments for years, holding on to obsolete tactics and doctrine; they failed to appreciate the devastating killing power provided by a few well-placed automatic weapons and continued to promote the closely packed troop formations that so often contributed to the NA's high casualties in 1937–38. It must be remembered that at this time, China was a desperately poor country. One bullet cost the same as 3.5kg of rice or 35 eggs, the cost of ammunition severely restricting training to cover only the most basic of soldiering skills. Poverty forced the Chinese to emphasize classroom education rather than outdoor training.

Although the average soldier's low level of education could be detrimental to the NA's overall fighting effectiveness, under good leadership the NA soldier could perform impressively well. For example, with only one platoon, Gen Sun Lian-zhong, OC 2nd Army Group, was able to defend a key crossroads in Tai'erzhuang against a much stronger foe. This was partly due to Sun, a practical man at heart, alway emphasizing field exercises and plentiful time on the range ahead of theory and time in the classroom.

ABOVE LEFT
In the 1930s, the Chinese Army was far from unified. This soldier probably comes from Guangdong in the south, a region close to Hong Kong, meaning it was influenced by the British in terms of the supply of arms and equipment. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
The German-trained and -equipped force was Chiang's pride and joy, but would be largely destroyed during the battle of attrition around Shanghai and Nanjing in the latter part of 1937. In this case, German influence is limited to the helmet and elements of his weaponry – his locally made Mauser rifle and German-style stick grenade. (Photograph by Malcolm Rosholt. Image courtesy of Mei-fei Elrick, Tess Johnston and Historical Photographs of China Project, University of Bristol)