

The Early Modernization of Chinese Air Force

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Abstract

The early modernization of China's air force of the Nanjing National Government was shaped by shifting foreign influences and wartime exigencies. Initially competed between "American" and "Italian," and later "Soviet" training doctrines. The lack of standardized methods and rigorous discipline resulted in an underprepared force. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Chiang Kai-shek empowered U.S. advisor Chennault to overhaul training, leading to the full adoption of American methods. As Sino-U.S. cooperation deepened, the Nationalist government expanded its training infrastructure overseas, ultimately consolidating a U.S.-style system that proved effective in the latter stages of the Pacific War. However, this reliance on foreign expertise—a defining feature of China's early air force modernization—also meant that training remained dependent on external support. Wartime disruptions and the eventual breakdown in U.S.-China relations prevented the development of an independent, sustainable training model, leaving the air force's modernization incomplete.