



THE HISTORY OF CHINA'S MOST  
DEVASTATING CATASTROPHE

1958-1962

MIAO'S  
GREAT  
FAMINE

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‘Revolution is not a dinner party.’

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Mao Zedong

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Between 1958 and 1962, China descended into hell. Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up with and overtake Britain in less than fifteen years. By unleashing China's greatest asset, a labor force that was counted in the hundreds of millions, Mao thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors. Instead of following the Soviet model of development, which leaned heavily toward industry alone, China would 'walk on two legs': the peasant masses were mobilised to transform both agriculture and industry at the same time, converting a backward economy into a modern communist society of plenty for all. In the pursuit of a utopian paradise, everything was collectivised, as villages were herded together in giant communes which heralded the advent of communism. People in the countryside were robbed of their work, their homes, their land, their belongings and their livelihood. Food, distributed by the spoonful in collective canteens according to merit, became a weapon to force people to follow the party's every dictate. Irrigation campaigns forced up to half the villagers to work for weeks on end on giant water-conservancy projects, often far from home, without adequate food and rest. The experiment ended in the greatest catastrophe the country had ever known, destroying tens of millions of lives.

Unlike comparable disasters, for instance those that took place under Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin, the true dimensions of what happened during the Great Leap Forward remain little known. This is because access to the party archives has long been restricted to all but the most trusted historians backed up with party credentials. But a new archive law has recently opened up vast quantities of archival material to professional historians, fundamentally changing the way one can study the Maoist era. This book is based on well over a thousand archival documents, collected over several years from dozens of party archives, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing and large provincial collections in Hebei, Shandong, Gansu, Hubei, Hunan, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan and Guangdong to smaller but equally invaluable collections in cities and counties all over China. The material includes secret reports from the Public Security Bureau, detailed minutes of top party meetings, unexpurgated versions of important leadership speeches, surveys of working conditions in the countryside, investigations into cases of mass murder, confessions of leaders responsible for the deaths of millions of people, inquiries compiled by special teams sent in to discover the extent of the catastrophe in the last stages of the Great Leap Forward, general reports on peasant resistance during the collectivisation campaign, secret opinion surveys, letters of complaint written by ordinary people and much more.

What comes out of this massive and detailed dossier transforms our understanding of the Great Leap Forward. When it comes to the overall death toll, for instance, researchers so far have had to extrapolate from official population statistics, including the census figures of 1953, 1964 and 1982. Their estimates range from 15 to 32 million excess deaths. But the public security reports compiled at the time, as well as the voluminous secret reports collated by party committees in the last months of the Great Leap Forward, show how inadequate these calculations are, pointing instead at a catastrophe of a much greater magnitude: this book shows that at least 45 million people died unnecessarily between 1958 and 1962.

The term 'famine', or even 'Great Famine', is often used to describe these four to five years of the Maoist era, but the term fails to capture the many ways in which people died under radical collectivisation. The blithe use of the term 'famine' also lends support to the widespread view that

these deaths were the unintended consequence of half-baked and poorly executed economic programmes. Mass killings are not usually associated with Mao and the Great Leap Forward, and China continues to benefit from a more favourable comparison with the devastation usually associated with Cambodia or the Soviet Union. But as the fresh evidence presented in this book demonstrates, coercion, terror and systematic violence were the foundation of the Great Leap Forward. Thanks to the often meticulous reports compiled by the party itself, we can infer that between 1958 and 1962 by rough approximation 6 to 8 per cent of the victims were tortured to death or summarily killed, amounting to at least 2.5 million people. Other victims were deliberately deprived of food and starved to death. Many more vanished because they were too old, weak or sick to work – and hence unable to earn their keep. People were killed selectively because they were rich, because they dragged their feet, because they spoke out or simply because they were not liked, for whatever reason, by the man who wielded the ladle in the canteen. Countless people were killed indirectly through neglect, as local cadres were under pressure to focus on figures rather than on people, making sure they fulfilled the targets they were handed by the top planners.

A vision of promised abundance not only motivated one of the most deadly mass killings of human history, but also inflicted unprecedented damage on agriculture, trade, industry and transportation. Pots, pans and tools were thrown into backyard furnaces to increase the country's steel output, which was seen as one of the magic markers of progress. Livestock declined precipitously, not only because animals were slaughtered for the export market but also because they succumbed en masse to disease and hunger – despite extravagant schemes for giant piggeries that would bring meat to every table. Waste developed because raw resources and supplies were poorly allocated, and because factory bosses deliberately bent the rules to increase output. As everyone cut corners in the relentless pursuit of higher output, factories spewed out inferior goods that accumulated uncollected by railway siding. Corruption seeped into the fabric of life, tainting everything from soy sauce to hydraulic dams. The transportation system creaked to a halt before collapsing altogether, unable to cope with the demands created by a command economy. Goods worth hundreds of millions of yuan accumulated in canteens, dormitories and even on the streets, a lot of the stock simply rotting or rusting away. It would have been difficult to design a more wasteful system, one in which grain was left uncollected by dusty roads in the countryside as people foraged for roots or ate mud.

The book also documents how the attempt to leap into communism resulted in the greatest demolition of property in human history – by far outstripping any of the Second World War bombing campaigns. Up to 40 per cent of all housing was turned into rubble, as homes were pulled down to create fertiliser, to build canteens, to relocate villagers, to straighten roads, to make room for a better future or simply to punish their occupants. The natural world did not escape unscathed either. We will never know the full extent of forest coverage lost during the Great Leap Forward, but a prolonged and intense attack on nature claimed up to half of all trees in some provinces. The rivers and waterways suffered too: throughout the country dams and canals, built by hundreds of millions of farmers at great human and economic cost, were for the greatest part rendered useless or even dangerous, resulting in landslides, river silting, soil salinisation and devastating inundations.

The significance of the book thus is by no means confined to the famine. What it chronicles, often in harrowing detail, is the near collapse of a social and economic system on which Mao had staked his prestige. As the catastrophe unfolded, the Chairman lashed out at his critics to maintain his position as the indispensable leader of the party. After the famine came to an end, however, new factional alignments appeared that were strongly opposed to the Chairman: to stay in power he had to turn the country upside down with the Cultural Revolution. The pivotal event in the history of the People's Republic of China was the Great Leap Forward. Any attempt to understand what happened in communist China must start by placing it squarely at the very centre of the entire Maoist period. In



far more general way, as the modern world struggles to find a balance between freedom and regulation, the catastrophe unleashed at the time stands as a reminder of how profoundly misplaced the idea of state planning as an antidote to chaos.

The book introduces fresh evidence about the dynamics of power in a one-party state. The politics behind the Great Leap Forward has been studied by political scientists on the basis of official statements, semi-official documents or Red Guard material released during the Cultural Revolution but none of these censored sources reveals what happened behind closed doors. The full picture of what was said and done in the corridors of power will be known only once the Central Party Archives in Beijing open their doors to researchers, and this is unlikely to happen in the near future. But the minutes of many key meetings can be found in provincial archives, since local leaders often attended the most important party gatherings and had to be kept informed of developments in Beijing. The archives throw a very different light on the leadership: as some of the top-secret meetings come to light, we see the vicious backstabbing and bullying tactics that took place among party leaders in all their rawness. The portrait that emerges of Mao himself is hardly flattering, and is far removed from the public image he so carefully cultivated: rambling in his speeches, obsessed with his own role in history, often dwelling on past slights, a master at using his emotions to browbeat his way through a meeting, and, above all, insensitive to human loss.

We know that Mao was the key architect of the Great Leap Forward, and thus bears the major responsibility for the catastrophe that followed.<sup>1</sup> He had to work hard to push through his vision by bargaining, cajoling, goading, occasionally tormenting or persecuting his colleagues. Unlike Stalin, he did not drag his rivals into a dungeon to have them executed, but he did have the power to remove them from office, terminating their careers – and the many privileges which came with a top position in the party. The campaign to overtake Britain started with Chairman Mao, and it ended when he begrudgingly allowed his colleagues to return to a more gradual approach in economic planning a few years later. But he would never have been able to prevail if Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, the next two most powerful party leaders, had acted against him. They, in turn, whipped up support from other senior colleagues, as chains of interests and alliances extended all the way down to the village – as documented here for the first time. Ferocious purges were carried out, as lacklustre cadres were replaced with hard, unscrupulous men who trimmed their sails to benefit from the radical winds blowing from Beijing.

But most of all this book brings together two dimensions of the catastrophe that have so far been studied in isolation. We must link up what happened in the corridors of Zhongnanhai, the compound which served as the headquarters of the party in Beijing, with the everyday experiences of ordinary people. With the exception of a few village studies based on interviews, there is simply no social history of the Maoist era, let alone of the famine.<sup>2</sup> And just as the fresh evidence from the archives shows how responsibility for the catastrophe extended far beyond Mao, the profuse documentation which the party compiled on every aspect of daily life under its rule dispels the common notion of the people as mere victims. Despite the vision of social order the regime projected at home and abroad, the party never managed to impose its grand design, encountering a degree of covert opposition and subversion that would have been unheard of in any country with an elected government. In contrast to the image of a strictly disciplined communist society in which errors at the top cause the entire machinery to grind to a halt, the portrait that emerges from archives and interviews is one of a society in disintegration, leaving people to resort to whatever means were available to survive. So destructive was radical collectivisation that at every level the population tried to circumvent, undermine or exploit the master plan, secretly giving full scope to the profit motive that the party tried to eliminate.

As famine spread, the very survival of an ordinary person came increasingly to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. As Robert Service points out, in the Soviet Union these phenomena were not so much the grit that stopped the machinery as the oil that prevented the system from coming to a complete standstill.<sup>3</sup> A 'perfect' communist state could not provide enough incentives for people to collaborate, and without some degree of accommodation of the profit motive it would have destroyed itself. No communist regime would have managed to stay in power for so long without constant infringements of the party line.

Survival depended on disobedience, but the many strategies of survival devised by people at all levels, from farmers hiding the grain to local cadres cooking the account books, also tended to prolong the life of the regime. They became a part of the system. Obfuscation was the communist way of life. People lied to survive, and as a consequence information was distorted all the way up to the Chairman. The planned economy required huge inputs of accurate data, yet at every level targets were distorted, figures were inflated and policies which clashed with local interests were ignored. As with the profit motive, individual initiative and critical thought had to be constantly suppressed, and a permanent state of siege developed.

Some historians might interpret these acts of survival as evidence of 'resistance', or 'weapons of the weak' pitting 'peasants' against 'the state'. But techniques of survival extended from one end of the social spectrum to the other. Just about everybody, from top to bottom, stole during the famine, so much so that if these were acts of 'resistance' the party would have collapsed at a very early stage. It may be tempting to glorify what appears at first sight to be a morally appealing culture of resistance by ordinary people, but when food was finite, one individual's gain was all too often another's loss. When farmers hid the grain, the workers outside the village died of hunger. When a factory employee added sand to the flour, somebody down the line was chewing grit. To romanticise what were often utterly desperate ways of surviving is to see the world in black and white, when in reality collectivisation forced everybody, at one point or another, to make grim moral compromises. Routine degradations thus went hand in hand with mass destruction. Primo Levi, in his memoir of Auschwitz, notes that survivors are rarely heroes: when somebody places himself above others in a world dominated by the law of survival, his sense of morality changes. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi called it the grey zone, showing how inmates determined to survive had to stray from their moral values in order to obtain an extra ration. He tried not to judge but to explain, unwrapping layer by layer the operation of the concentration camps. Understanding the complexity of human behaviour in times of catastrophe is one of the aims of this book as well, and the party archives allow us for the first time to get closer to the difficult choices people made half a century ago – whether in the corridors of power or inside the hut of a starving family far away from the capital.

The first two parts of the book explain how and why the Great Leap Forward unfolded, identifying the key turning points and charting the ways in which the lives of millions were shaped by decisions taken by a select few at the top. Part 3 looks at the scale of destruction, from agriculture, industry, trade and housing to the natural environment. Part 4 shows how the grand plan was transformed by the everyday strategies of survival by ordinary people to produce something that nobody intended and few could quite recognise. In the cities workers stole, dragged their feet or actively sabotaged the command economy, while in the countryside farmers resorted to a whole repertoire of acts of survival, ranging from eating the grain straight from the fields to taking to the road in search of a better life elsewhere. Others robbed granaries, set fire to party offices, assaulted freight trains and, occasionally, organised armed rebellions against the regime. But the ability of people to survive was very much limited by

their position in an elaborate social hierarchy which pitted the party against the people. And some of these people were more vulnerable than others: Part 5 looks at the lives of children, women and the elderly. Finally, Part 6 traces the many ways in which people died, from accidents, disease, torture, murder and suicide to starvation. An Essay on the Sources at the end of the book explains the nature of the archival evidence in more detail.

# Chronology

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1949:

The Chinese Communist Party conquers the mainland and establishes the People's Republic of China on 1 October. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the defeated Guomindang, takes refuge on the island of Taiwan. In December Mao leaves for Moscow to pursue a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union and seek help from Stalin.

October 1950:

China enters the Korean War.

March 1953:

Stalin dies.

Autumn 1955–spring 1956:

Mao, displeased with the slow pace of economic development, pushes for the accelerated collectivisation of the countryside and for huge increases in the production of grain, cotton, coal and steel. His 'Socialist High Tide', also referred to by some historians as the 'Little Leap Forward', produces industrial shortages and famine in parts of the countryside. Zhou Enlai and other economic planners urge a slower pace of collectivisation in the spring of 1956.

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.

Autumn 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 is halted.

October 1956:

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

Winter 1956–spring 1957:

Mao, against the wishes of most of his colleagues, encourages a more open political climate with the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign to secure the support of scientists and intellectuals in developing the economy and avoid the social unrest that led to the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

Summer 1957:

The campaign backfires as a mounting barrage of criticism questions the very right of the party to rule. Mao turns around 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.

November 1957:

Mao visits Moscow. Impressed by the Soviet sputnik, the first satellite launched into orbit, he declares that the 'East wind prevails over the west wind.' In response to Khrushchev's announcement that the Soviet Union will outstrip the United States in economic production within fifteen years, he declares that China will overtake Britain in the same period.

Winter 1957–spring 1958:

In a series of party conferences Mao attacks Zhou Enlai and other senior leaders who opposed his economic policy. He promotes his own vision of mass mobilisation and accelerated collectivisation of the countryside, demanding increased agricultural and industrial targets. The slogan ‘going all out, aiming high, and achieving more, faster and more economical results’ becomes the party line.

Winter 1957–summer 1958:

A campaign of repression targets hundreds of thousands of party members critical of economic policy. Several provincial party leaders are purged and replaced by close followers of Mao. Opposition from within the party is silenced.

Winter 1957–spring 1958:

A massive water-conservancy campaign is launched, marking the start of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ for hundreds of millions of ordinary villagers compelled to work for weeks on end on remote projects, often without sufficient rest and food.

Summer 1958:

Khrushchev visits Beijing, but tensions appear as Mao decides to shell several islands in the Taiwan Strait without first consulting his Soviet ally, triggering an international crisis with the United States. Moscow is forced to take sides by throwing its weight behind Beijing, proclaiming that an attack on the People’s Republic of China would be considered an attack on the Soviet Union.

Summer 1958:

The mass mobilisation of villagers around huge water projects requires much larger administrative units in the countryside, leading to the amalgamation of farm collectives into gigantic people’s communes of up to 20,000 households. Everyday life in the communes is run along military lines. Almost everything, including land and labour, is collectivised. Communal dining replaces private kitchens, while children are left in the care of boarding kindergartens. A work-point system is used to calculate rewards, while even money is abolished in some communes. Backyard furnaces are used to melt all sorts of metal objects in order to contribute to the party’s escalating steel target. Famine conditions appear in many parts of the country.

November 1958–February 1959:

Mao turns against local cadres who produce inflated targets and promise an imminent transition to communism. He tries to rein in some of the worst abuses of the Great Leap Forward, but continues to push forward with collectivisation. He announces that mistakes made by the party are only ‘one finger out of ten’. In order to meet foreign obligations and feed the cities, food procurements in the countryside increase sharply. The famine spreads.

March 1959:

At a Shanghai conference Mao launches a withering attack on senior party members and presses for even higher procurement targets in the countryside, up to a third of all grain, despite widespread famine.

July 1959:

At the Lushan conference Mao denounces Peng Dehuai and other leaders as an ‘anti-party clique’ for criticising the Great Leap Forward.

Summer 1959–summer 1960:

A campaign of repression is launched against party members who expressed critical views similar to Peng Dehuai and his allies. Tens of millions of villagers die of starvation, disease or torture.

July 1960:

Soviet advisers are withdrawn from China by Khrushchev. Zhou Enlai and Li Fuchun move the trade structure away from the Soviet Union towards the West.

October 1960:

A report on mass starvation in Xinyang, Henan, is handed over to Mao by Li Fuchun.

November 1960:

An emergency directive is issued allowing villagers to keep private plots, engage in sideline occupations, rest for eight hours a day and restore local markets, among other measures designed to weaken the power of the communes over villagers.

Winter 1960–1:

Investigation teams spread over the countryside, bringing to light the full dimensions of the catastrophe. Large quantities of food are imported from the West.

Spring 1961:

Inspection tours by leading party members result in a further retreat from the Great Leap Forward. Liu Shaoqi places the blame for the famine on the shoulders of the party but absolves Mao of any responsibility.

Summer 1961:

The consequences of the Great Leap Forward are discussed at a series of party meetings.

January 1962:

At an enlarged party gathering of thousands of cadres in Beijing, Liu Shaoqi describes the famine as a man-made disaster. Support for Mao wanes. The famine abates, but continues to claim lives in parts of the countryside until the end of 1962.

1966:

Mao launches the Cultural Revolution.

# China in 1958



# The Pursuit of Utopia



## Two Rivals

Stalin's death in 1953 was Mao's liberation. For more than thirty years Mao had had to play supplicant to the leader of the communist world. From the age of twenty-seven, when he was handed his first cash payment of 200 yuan by a Soviet agent to cover the cost of travelling to the founding meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, Mao's life was transformed by Russian funds. He had no qualms about taking the money, and used the Moscow link to lead a ragged band of guerrilla fighters to ultimate power – but not without endless reprimands from Moscow, expulsions from office and battles over party policy with Soviet advisers. Stalin constantly forced Mao back into the arms of his sworn enemy Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the nationalist Guomindang that ruled much of China. Stalin placed little faith in Mao and his peasant soldiers, and openly favoured Chiang, even after the Guomindang had presided over a bloody massacre of communists in Shanghai in 1927. For the best part of a decade Chiang's troops relentlessly hounded an embattled Mao, forcing the communists to find refuge on a mountain base and then to traverse some 12,500 kilometres towards the north in a retreat later known as the Long March. When Chiang was kidnapped in Xi'an in 1936, Stalin promptly sent a telegram ordering Mao to release his hostages unharmed. After Japan had invaded China a year later, Stalin demanded that Mao again form a United Front with his arch enemy Chiang, sending planes, arms and advisers to the Guomindang regime. All Mao got during the Second World War was a planeload of propaganda leaflets.

Instead of confronting the Japanese, Mao strengthened his forces in northern China. At the war's end in 1945 Stalin, always the hard pragmatist, signed a treaty of alliance with the Guomindang, diminishing the prospects of support for the communists in the event of a civil war. Soon after Japan's surrender, full-scale war between the communists and the nationalists resumed. Stalin, again, stayed on the sidelines, even warning Mao to beware the United States, which had sided with Chiang Kai-shek, now recognised as a world leader in the Allies' defeat of Japan. Mao ignored his advice. The communists eventually gained the upper hand. When they reached the capital, Nanjing, the Soviet Union was one of the few foreign countries to permit its ambassador to flee alongside the Guomindang.

Even when victory seemed inevitable, Stalin continued to keep Mao at arm's length. Everything about him seemed suspicious to the Soviet leader. What kind of communist was afraid of workers? Stalin wondered repeatedly, as Mao stopped his army outside Shanghai for weeks on end, unwilling to take on the task of feeding the city? Mao was a peasant, a caveman Marxist, Stalin determined after reading translations of the Chinese leader's writings, which he dismissed as 'feudal'. That there was a rebellious and stubborn streak in Mao was clear; his victory over Chiang Kai-shek, forced to retreat to the way to Taiwan, would have been difficult to explain otherwise. But pride and independence were precisely what troubled Stalin so deeply, prone as he was to seeing enemies everywhere: could this be another Tito, the Yugoslav leader who had been cast out of the communist family for his dissidence against Moscow? Tito was bad enough, and Stalin did not relish the prospect of a regime that had come to power without his help running a sprawling empire right on his border. Stalin trusted no one, least of all a potential rival who in all probability harboured a long list of grievances.

Mao, indeed, never forgot a snub and deeply resented the way he had been treated by Stalin, but he had no one else to turn to for support. The communist regime desperately needed international

recognition as well as economic help in rebuilding the war-torn country. Mao declared a policy of 'leaning to one side', ~~swallowing his pride and seeking a rapprochement with the Soviet Union.~~

Several requests to meet Stalin were rebuffed. Then, in December 1949, Mao was finally asked to come to Moscow. But rather than being welcomed as the leader of a great revolution that had brought a quarter of humanity into the communist orbit, he was given the cold shoulder, treated as one guest among many other delegates who had travelled to Moscow to celebrate Stalin's seventieth birthday. After a brief meeting Mao was whisked off to a dacha outside the capital and left to wait in isolation for several weeks for a formal audience. With every passing day he was made to learn his humble place in a communist brotherhood which revolved entirely around the Soviet dictator. When Mao and Stalin met at last, all he got was \$300 million in military aid divided over five years. For this paltry sum Mao had to throw in major territorial concessions, privileges that harked back to the unequal treaties in the nineteenth century: Soviet control of Lüshun (Port Arthur) and of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria was guaranteed until the mid-1950s. Rights to mineral deposits in Xinjiang, China's westernmost province, also had to be conceded. But Mao did obtain a treaty providing for mutual protection in the event of aggression by Japan or its allies, in particular the United States.

Even before Mao and Stalin had signed the Alliance and Friendship Treaty, Kim Il-sung, the communist guerrilla fighter who seized control of the north of Korea after his country's division in 1948, had been contemplating the reunification of the peninsula by military force. Mao supported North Korea, seeing in Kim a communist ally against the United States. The Korean War broke out in June 1950, but it prompted American intervention in defence of the south. Faced with overwhelming air power and tank battalions, an embattled Kim was pushed back all the way to the Sino-North Korean border. Worried that the Americans might cross the Yalu River and attack China, Mao dispatched volunteers to fight in Korea, having been promised air cover by Stalin. A ferocious war followed, the casualties on the Chinese side all the higher as the planes that Stalin had pledged came only sparingly. When the conflict reached a bloody stalemate, Stalin repeatedly obstructed negotiations to bring it to an end. Peace was not in his strategic interests. To add insult to injury Stalin also demanded payment from China for the Soviet military equipment he had sent to Korea. His death in March 1953 brought about a rapid armistice.

For thirty years Mao had suffered humiliation at the hands of Stalin, willingly subordinating himself to Moscow out of sheer strategic necessity. The Korean War had made him even more resentful of the Soviet Union's patronage, a feeling widely shared by his fellow leaders who likewise craved a sense of equality in their country's dealings with Moscow.

The Korean War also deepened Mao's hold over his colleagues. The Chairman had led the party to victory in 1949. Korea, too, was his personal glory, as he had pushed for intervention when other leaders in the party had wavered. He was the man who had fought the United States to a stalemate, albeit at a huge cost to his own soldiers. He now towered above his peers. Mao, like Stalin, was incapable of seeing anybody as an equal, and, like Stalin, the Chairman had no doubt about his own role in history. He was sure of his own genius and infallibility.

After Stalin's death Mao finally saw a chance to secure independence from the Kremlin and claim leadership of the socialist camp. The Chairman naturally assumed that he was the leading light of communism, which was about to crush capitalism, making him the historical pivot around which the universe revolved. Had he not led his men to victory, bringing a second October Revolution to a quarter of the world? Stalin could not even claim to have presided over the Bolshevik revolution; still less could Nikita Khrushchev, the man who soon took charge in Moscow.

Coarse, erratic and impulsive, Khrushchev was viewed by many who knew him as an oaf limited

both ability and ambition. It was precisely this reputation which had allowed him to survive under Stalin, who treated him with an affectionate condescension that saved him from the fate of far more impressive colleagues who blundered in their dealings with the dictator. 'My little Marx!' Stalin once mockingly called him, gently tapping his pipe against Khrushchev's forehead and joking, 'It's hollow!'<sup>1</sup> Khrushchev was Stalin's pet. But he was as paranoid as Stalin, and underneath deceptive clumsiness was a cunning and hugely ambitious man.

Khrushchev was scathing of Stalin's handling of Mao, and resolved to outdo his former master by putting relations with Beijing on a new footing. He would be Mao's benevolent tutor, steering the peasant rebel towards a more enlightened form of Marxism. Khrushchev also played the role of beneficent patron, presiding over a massive transfer of technology as hundreds of factories and plants were financed with Soviet aid. Advisers in every domain, from atomic energy to mechanical engineering, were sent to China, while some 10,000 Chinese students were trained in the Soviet Union in the first years following Stalin's death. But instead of showing gratitude, leaders in Beijing saw the largesse as their due, seeking to extract ever greater amounts of economic and military support through a mixture of bargaining, begging and cajoling. Khrushchev gave in. Having overplayed his hand, he had to bully his colleagues in Moscow into accepting an aid package that far outstripped what the Soviet Union could afford.

Khrushchev went out on a limb to satisfy Beijing, and he expected a lot in return. Mao instead treated him with contempt, locking the man into the role of the boorish, immature upstart from which he had been so keen to escape. The key turning point came in 1956, when Khrushchev denounced the crimes of his former master in a secret report delivered at a party congress – without consulting Mao. The Chairman praised this speech, as he sensed that it would weaken Moscow's authority within the communist bloc. But he would never forgive Khrushchev, as he also saw deStalinisation as a challenge to his own authority, accustomed as he was to interpreting the world with himself at its centre. To diminish Stalin was to undermine Mao, who constantly compared himself to the Soviet dictator despite bearing a long list of grievances against him. Mao also thought that he alone occupied a moral position lofty enough to impart judgement on Stalin's mistakes and achievements. An attack on Stalin furthermore, could only play into the hands of the Americans.

Above all, the move against Stalin implied that criticism of Mao was also permissible. Khrushchev's secret speech gave ammunition to those who feared the Chairman's growing power and wanted a return to collective leadership. At the Eighth Party Congress in Beijing in September 1956, reference to 'Mao Zedong Thought' was removed from the party constitution, the principle of collective leadership was lauded and the cult of personality was decried. Constrained by Khrushchev's secret report, Mao had little choice but to go along with these measures, to which he contributed himself in the months prior to the congress.<sup>2</sup> But the Chairman felt slighted and did not hide his anger in private.<sup>3</sup>

Mao encountered another setback when his economic policy, known as the 'Socialist High Tide' was halted in late 1956, at the second plenum of the party congress. A year earlier an impatient Mao displeased with the slow pace of economic development, had repeatedly criticised those who favoured a more cautious tempo as 'women with bound feet'. He prophesied a leap in agricultural output brought about by the accelerated collectivisation of the countryside, and in January 1956 called for unrealistic increases in the production of grain, cotton, coal and steel. The Socialist High Tide – later referred to by some historians as the 'Little Leap Forward' – rapidly ran into trouble.<sup>4</sup> Industrial production in the cities suffered from all sorts of shortages and bottlenecks, as the required funds and raw materials for increased output were unavailable. In the countryside, collectivisation was met with widespread resistance as farmers slaughtered their animals and hid the grain. Famine appeared

some provinces by the spring of 1956. Trying to control the damage created by the shock tactics of their Chairman, premier Zhou Enlai and economic planner Chen Yun called for an end to 'rash advance' (*maojin*) and tried to reduce the size of collective farms, revert to a limited free market and allow greater scope for private production in the countryside. Frustrated, Mao saw this as a personal challenge. Atop a June 1956 editorial of the *People's Daily* criticising the Socialist High Tide for 'attempting to do all things overnight', forwarded to him for his attention, Mao angrily scrawled, 'I will not read this.' Later he wondered, 'Why should I read something that abuses me?'<sup>5</sup> His position was further weakened because Khrushchev, in his secret speech, had highlighted the failure of Stalin's agricultural policies, which included collectivisation of the countryside. Criticism of Stalin looked like an unintended assessment of Mao's drive towards collectivisation. The Eighth Party Congress scrapped the Socialist High Tide.

More humiliation followed after Mao, despite major reservations from other party leaders, encouraged open criticism of the party in the Hundred Flowers campaign launched in April 1957. His hope was that, by calling on ordinary people to voice their opinions, a small number of rightists and counter-revolutionaries would be uncovered. This would prevent the havoc created by deStalinisation in Hungary, where a nationwide revolt against the communist party in October 1956 had forced Soviet forces to invade the country, brutally crush all opposition and install a new government with Moscow's backing. In China, Mao explained to his reluctant colleagues, the party would break up and opposition into many small 'Hungarian incidents', all to be dealt with separately.<sup>6</sup> A more open climate, he surmised, would also help secure the support of scientists and intellectuals in developing the economy. The Chairman badly miscalculated, as the mounting barrage of criticism he had produced questioned not only the very right of the party to rule, but also his own leadership. His response was to accuse these critics of being 'bad elements' bent on destroying the party. He put Deng Xiaoping in charge of the anti-rightist campaign, which was carried out with extraordinary vehemence, targeting half a million people – many of them students and intellectuals deported to remote areas to do hard labour. Mao struggled to regain control, and the whole affair was a huge embarrassment, but his strategy was partly successful in that it created the conditions in which he could assert his own pre-eminence. Assailed from all sides, its right to rule having been called in question, the party found unity behind its Chairman.

The collapse of the Hundred Flowers campaign in June 1957 also confirmed the Chairman's suspicion that 'rightist conservatism' was the major ideological enemy, and that rightist inertia was behind the current economic stagnation. He wanted to revive the policies of the Socialist High Tide which had been discredited by an outpouring of criticism from the very experts he had tried to court. If so many of the intellectuals who had the professional skills and scientific knowledge to help with economic development were disaffected, it would be politically unwise to base the country's future on their expertise. This view was shared by Liu Shaoqi, the party's second-in-command, and he rallied behind the Chairman in pushing for higher targets in rural production.<sup>7</sup> In October 1957, with support from Liu, Mao had the slogan which crystallised his vision reinstated: 'Greater, Faster, Better and More Economical'. He also managed to replace the term 'rash advance' (*maojin*), with its connotations of reckless hurling forward, with 'leap forward' (*yuejin*): in the midst of a ferocious anti-rightist campaign, few party leaders dared to oppose it. Mao was having his way, and he was ready to challenge Khrushchev.

## The Bidding Starts

On 4 October 1957 a shiny steel sphere the size of a beach ball hurtled through the sky, reached its orbit and then started circling the globe at about 29,000 kilometres per hour, emitting signals that radio operators around the world picked up. Taking the United States completely by surprise, the Soviet Union had successfully launched the world's first earth satellite, opening a new chapter in the space race that was met with both awe and fear. To hurl an 84-kilo satellite into orbit, observers noted a rocket engine as powerful as an intercontinental ballistic missile was required, which meant that the Russians could also launch atomic bombs that would reach the United States. A month later a much heavier satellite whirled overhead, carrying the first living creature to travel around the earth through space: dressed in a custom-made space suit, a little dog called Laika made history as the passenger of *Sputnik II*.

In a bold move, Khrushchev inaugurated an era of missile diplomacy, backed up by ceaseless propaganda from Moscow about successful experiments with intercontinental ballistic missiles. The second satellite launch was designed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, to be celebrated in Red Square in the presence of thousands of communist party leaders invited from all over the world.

Yet, despite the triumph of the satellite launches, Khrushchev was in a vulnerable position. Less than half a year earlier he had barely survived an attempted coup against him by Stalinist hardliners Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich. Marshal Zhukov, a Second World War hero who had led the final assault on Germany and captured Berlin, used army transport planes to rush key allies to Moscow in defence of his boss. But Zhukov commanded an army, and could just as well throw his tanks against Khrushchev. Ever fearful of a military coup, the Soviet leader manoeuvred to have Zhukov deposed in early November. Justifying the purge of Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich, now referred to as an 'anti-party group', was one thing, but how could he explain the removal of the most decorated Soviet general to his foreign guests, who were already traumatised by his secret speech and the Hungarian revolt? Josip Tito, the fiercely independent leader of Yugoslavia who refused to take orders from the Soviet Union, was another potential source of opposition that could mar the anniversary. In mid-October he objected to a Soviet draft declaration to be published at the Moscow meeting of party leaders and declined to attend the event.

Khrushchev found a key ally in Mao, despite their differences on foreign policy and ideology. Mao in turn, had good reason to help his rival. He had badgered the Soviet leader repeatedly for assistance in acquiring nuclear weapons. Ever since the United States had started to provide military support for Taiwan, and after the Americans introduced tactical nuclear missiles in March 1955, Mao had been obsessed with having the bomb. Now, on the eve of the international summit, Khrushchev shored up support by signing a secret agreement with China on 15 October, providing for the delivery of a Soviet atomic bomb by 1959.<sup>1</sup>

Mao was ebullient. He knew that his moment had come. Khrushchev depended on him, and lavished the Chairman and his entourage with attention. Two Tu-104s were sent to fly the Chinese delegation to Moscow. The Soviet leader, flanked by some of the most senior party bosses, warmly greeted Mao at Vnukovo airport and personally escorted him to his quarters. China was the only delegation out of a

sixty-four attending the conference to be housed in the Great Kremlin Palace.

Mao was put up in Empress Catherine's private quarters, which were upholstered in damask and the ceiling painted with foliate volutes. The entire west wing was extravagantly furnished, with tall columns topped by bronze capitals, walls draped in water silk or panelled in walnut, gilded stucco on the vaults and thick carpets throughout. Mao seemed oblivious to it all and used his own chamber pot.<sup>2</sup>

On 7 November came the public climax of the anniversary gala: as Mao stood next to Khrushchev on top of the Lenin mausoleum to review the four-hour parade through Red Square, the Soviet armed forces showed off their new weapons. People waved Chinese flags and shouted 'Long live Mao and China!'

Despite all the privileges accorded Mao, he enjoyed carping about his hosts. He disparaged the food and was scornful of Russian culture, condescending to other party delegates and aloof with Khrushchev. 'Look at how differently they're treating us now,' he quipped to his doctor with a smile of disdain. 'Even in this communist land, they know who is powerful and who is weak. What snobs!'

But he delivered the crucial support on which Khrushchev counted. On 14 November, in front of a meeting of party delegates, he pronounced: 'We are so many people here, with so many parties, we must have a head . . . If the Soviet Union is not the head, then who is? Should we do it by alphabetical order: Albania? Vietnam with comrade Ho Chi Minh? Another country? China does not qualify to be the head, we do not have enough experience. We know about revolution, but not about socialist construction. Demographically we are a huge country, but economically we are small.'<sup>4</sup>

But if Mao gave his showpiece pledge of allegiance, he had also come to Moscow to show that he, rather than Khrushchev, was the true senior eminence of the communist camp. He missed few opportunities to diminish the Soviet leader, even telling him to his face that he had a bad temper which offended people.<sup>5</sup> Two days later, on 18 November, came the moment he had been anticipating. Brushing aside the conference protocol with an impromptu speech, Mao addressed the delegates from his seat, invoking his poor health for his refusal to stand up. As Khrushchev later recollected in his memoirs, Mao thought himself a cut above the rest.<sup>6</sup> In a long and rambling monologue, the Chairman turned to Khrushchev, offering him advice as if speaking to a pupil: 'No matter who, everyone needs support . . . There is a Chinese saying that while there is beauty in a lotus it needs the support of its green leaves. You, comrade Khrushchev, even though you are a lotus, you too need to be supported by green leaves.' As if this was not cryptic enough, Mao then declared that the showdown between Khrushchev and the Stalinist hardliners in June 1957 had been a 'struggle between two lines: one was erroneous and the other relatively correct'. Was this to be understood as faint praise or as a veiled barb? It was certainly lost on the translator, who muttered something vague about 'two different groups' in which one 'tendency led by Khrushchev won the day'. What exactly Mao said, the Yugoslav ambassador later recollected, 'nobody except the Chinese knew', but it produced a deathly silence.<sup>7</sup> Further embarrassing his host, Mao then went on to describe Molotov, one of the chief plotters of the July coup, as 'an old comrade with a long history of struggle'.<sup>8</sup>

The core of Mao's speech was more frightening to his Russian hosts. 'There are two winds in the world, an east wind and a west wind. We have a saying in China that if the east wind does not prevail over the west wind, then the west wind prevails over the east wind. I think that the key point of the international situation right now is that the east wind prevails over the west wind, that is to say that the forces of socialism have become overwhelmingly superior to the forces of capitalism.'

Mao continued with a review of the changing balance of power between the two camps, and then shocked party delegates with his musings about an impending world war.<sup>9</sup> 'Let us imagine how many people would die if war breaks out. There are 2.7 billion people in the world, and a third could be lost. If it is a little higher it could be half . . . I say that if the worst came to the worst and one-half die

there will still be one-half left, but imperialism would be erased and the whole world would become socialist. After a few years there would be 2.7 billion people again.’<sup>10</sup> The United States was nothing but a ‘paper tiger’, Mao continued, seemingly immune to the loss of life he was contemplating. He was bluffing, on this occasion and on others like it, but the point of all the sabre-rattling was to show that he, not Khrushchev, was a more determined revolutionary.

Mao not only totted up population figures for his audience. For some time, he had been carefully following Khrushchev’s push for a decentralisation of the economy and his undermining of desk-bound bureaucrats in Moscow in order to transfer power instead to new economic regional councils supervised by his own local henchmen. Khrushchev had criss-crossed the countryside lecturing peasants on how to increase agricultural yields: ‘You must plant potatoes in square clusters. You must grow cabbage as my grandmother did.’<sup>11</sup> He was scathing about economists with fancy pedigrees who were ‘arithmetically’ correct but failed to understand what the Soviet people were capable of: ‘Let the ideologists of the capitalist world go on prattling for too long a time. Let the comrade economists blush. Sometimes man must exceed his own strength by making a sudden spurt.’<sup>12</sup> And that sudden spurt, created by freeing the farmers from the dead hand of the Stalinist state, would create such abundance that even the United States would be overtaken economically: when ‘people come to know their own strength, they create miracles’. In May 1957 Khrushchev had crowed that within the next few years the Soviet Union would catch up with the United States in per-capita production of meat, milk and butter.<sup>13</sup> Now, in Moscow, in front of foreign party delegates, Khrushchev proclaimed the success of his economic drive in his keynote address to celebrate the October Anniversary: ‘Comrades, the calculations of our planners show that, within the next fifteen years, the Soviet Union will be able not only to catch up with but also to surpass the present volume of output of important products in the USA.’<sup>14</sup>

Mao wasted no time. He publicly took up the challenge and immediately announced that China would outstrip Britain – then still considered a major industrial power – within fifteen years: ‘This year our country has 5.2 million tonnes of steel, and after five years we can have 10 to 15 million tonnes; after a further five years 20 to 25 million tonnes, then add five more years and we will have 30 to 40 million tonnes. Maybe I am bragging here, and maybe when we have another international meeting in future you will criticise me for being subjective, but I speak on the strength of considerable evidence . . . Comrade Khrushchev tells us that the Soviet Union will overtake the United States in fifteen years. I can tell you that in fifteen years we may well catch up with or overtake Britain.’<sup>15</sup> The Great Leap Forward had begun.

## Purging the Ranks

In Moscow, Khrushchev had provided Mao with the ammunition to charge ahead. Not only had the sputnik demonstrated the ability of the relatively backward Soviet Union to take a lead over an economically advanced nation like the United States, but Soviet planners themselves were preparing a major economic drive similar to the Socialist High Tide the Chairman had been forced to abandon.

Back in Beijing, less than two weeks after his return from the Soviet Union, Mao secured the backing of senior vice-chairman Liu Shaoqi for a leap forward. A frugal and taciturn man, tall but slightly stooped with greying hair, Liu had dedicated his career to the party line, regularly toiling away through the night. He also saw himself as the Chairman's successor, a position he believed would come to him as a reward for years of hard and selfless work. A few months earlier Mao himself had indicated his intention of stepping down from the post of head of state, and may even have privately assured Liu that he supported him in his role as heir apparent.<sup>1</sup> Liu embraced Mao's vision: 'In fifteen years, the Soviet Union can catch up with and surpass the United States in the output of the most important industrial and agricultural products. In the same period of time, we ought to catch up with and overtake Britain in the output of iron, steel and other major industrial products.'<sup>2</sup> Before the end of the year press articles heralding great advances in water conservancy, grain production and steel output appeared all over the country. On New Year's day in 1958 the *People's Daily* published an editorial approved by Liu Shaoqi which captured the leader's vision: 'Go All Out and Aim High'.<sup>3</sup>

Li Fuchun, a bookish man with a self-effacing air who as head of the State Planning Commission regularly sent blueprints as thick as a telephone book to each province, detailing how much of each product should be produced, also lent his support to Mao. A fellow Hunanese and childhood acquaintance of the Chairman, a veteran of the Long March, Li was the first among the economic planners to jump on to the bandwagon of the Great Leap Forward, whether out of fear, conviction or ambition. He joined Liu Shaoqi in praising Mao's bold vision.<sup>4</sup>

Under the drumbeat of propaganda, and goaded and coaxed by Mao in private meetings and party conferences, provincial leaders threw their weight behind his go-all-out campaign, promising high targets in a whole range of economic activities. At a small gathering of party bosses in Hangzhou in early January 1958, Ke Qingshi, a tall man with a bouffant haircut who was mayor of Shanghai and lived in genuine awe of the Chairman, enthused about the 'new high tide in socialist construction' proposing that the country 'ride the wind and break the waves' by relying on the great masses. Surrounded by supporters, and energised by Ke Qingshi, Mao was no longer able to contain the anger pent up over several years, exploding in the face of Bo Yibo, one of the chief economic planners who had resisted his vision. Bo was a veteran revolutionary, but one of his concerns was to keep a balanced budget. 'I will not listen to that stuff of yours!' Mao yelled. 'What are you talking about? For the past few years I have stopped reading the budgets, but you just force me to sign off on them anyway.' Then he turned to Zhou Enlai: 'The preface to my book *The Socialist Upsurge in the Countryside* has had a tremendous influence on the entire country. Is that a "cult of personality" or "idolatry"? Regardless, newspapers and magazines all over the country have reprinted it, and it's had a huge impact. So now we have really become the "arch criminal of rash advance!"'<sup>6</sup> The moment had come to crack the whip and herd the planners on to the road to utopia.



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