



Looking back on the Great Leap Forward

Frank Dikötter explains how the gradual opening of Chinese archives has revealed the appalling truth about Chairman Mao's genocidal rule.

IN THE People's Republic of China, archives do not belong to the people, they belong to the Communist Party. They are often housed in a special building on the local party committee premises, which are generally set among lush and lovingly manicured grounds guarded by military personnel. Access would have been unthinkable until a decade or so ago, but over the past few years a quiet revolution has been taking place, as increasing quantities of documents

Blood on the tracks: a portrait of Mao adorns a freight train in Yuh sien County, Shansi Province, May 5th, 1958.

older than 30 years have become available for consultation to professional historians armed with a letter of recommendation. The extent and quality of the material varies from place to place, but there is enough to transform our understanding of the Maoist era.

Take, for instance, the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962, when Mao thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors by herding villagers across the country into giant people's communes. In pursuit of a utopian paradise, everything was collectivised. People had their work, homes, land, belongings and livelihoods taken from them. In collective canteens, food, distributed by the spoonful according to merit, became a weapon used to force people to follow the party's every dictate. As incentives to work were removed, coercion and violence were used instead ▶

to compel famished farmers to perform labour on poorly planned irrigation projects while fields were neglected.

A catastrophe of gargantuan proportions ensued. Extrapolating from published population statistics, historians have speculated that tens of millions of people died of starvation. But the true dimensions of what happened are only now coming to light thanks to the meticulous reports the party itself compiled during the famine. My study, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe* (2010), relies on hundreds of hitherto unseen party archives, including: secret reports from the Public Security Bureau; detailed minutes of top party meetings; unexpurgated versions of 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 police opinion surveys; letters of complaint written by ordinary people; and much more.

What comes out of this massive and detailed dossier is a tale of horror in which Mao emerges as one of the greatest mass murderers in history, responsible for the deaths of at least 45 million people between 1958 and 1962. It is not merely the extent of the catastrophe that dwarfs earlier estimates, but also the manner in which many people died: between two and three million victims were tortured to death or summarily killed, often for the slightest infraction. When a boy stole a handful of grain in a Hunan village, local boss Xiong Dechang forced his father to bury him alive. The father died of grief a few days later. The case of Wang Ziyou was reported to the central leadership: one of his ears was chopped off, his legs were tied with iron wire, a ten kilogram stone was dropped on his back and then he was branded with a sizzling tool – punishment for digging up a potato.

A murderous frenzy

The discriminate killing of 'slackers', 'weaklings' or otherwise unproductive elements increased the overall food supply for those who contributed to the regime through their labour. As report after report shows, food was also used as a weapon. Throughout the country those who were too ill to work were routinely cut off from the food supply. The sick, vulnerable and elderly were banned from the canteen, as cadres found inspiration in Lenin's dictum: 'He who does not work shall not eat.'

As the minutes of leadership meetings show, Mao was aware of the extent of the famine. At a secret gathering that took place in Shanghai on March 25th 1959, Mao specifically ordered the party to procure up to one third of all grain. He announced that: 'When there is not enough to eat people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.'

Other key events of the Maoist era are also being revisited thanks to party archives, more often than not by Chinese historians themselves. Yang Kuisong, a historian based in Shanghai, has cast new light on the terror that followed

'liberation' in 1949, showing how power seized with violence could only be maintained with violence. Up to a million people described as enemies of the people fell victim to a killing frenzy, in which ordinary citizens were encouraged to take part. In remote villages bystanders were sometimes allowed to cut the flesh from the dead and take it back home. The party itself decreed quotas for the killings, but these were often exceeded when mass murder was driven by personal vendettas and lineage feuds.

Fresh evidence is also being unearthed on the land reform that transformed the countryside in the early 1950s. In many villages there were no 'landlords' set against 'poor peasants' but, rather, closely knit communities that jealously protected their land from the prying eyes of outsiders – the state in particular. By implicating everybody in 'accusation meetings' – during which village leaders were humiliated, tortured and executed while their land and other assets were redistributed to party activists recruited from local thugs and paupers – the communists turned the power structure upside down. Liu Shaoqi, the party's second-in-command, had a hard time reigning in the violence,

as a missive from the Hebei archives shows: 'When it comes to the ways in which people are killed, some are buried alive, some are executed, some are cut to pieces, and among those who are strangled or mangled to death, some of the bodies are hung from trees or doors.'

The long road to transparency

There is hardly a topic that is not being explored thanks to fresh archival evidence, although the Cultural Revolution, for the greatest part, remains off limits. Even as vast masses of original party documents are gradually being declassified, much of the crucial evidence remains safely locked away, including most of the Central Party Archives in Beijing. A tantalising glimpse of the wealth of material that might one day become available is offered in Gao Wenqian's extraordinary biography of Zhou Enlai, first premier of the People's Republic. Gao, a party historian who worked with a team in the Central Archives in Beijing on an official biography of Zhou for many years, smuggled his notes out of the archives before absconding to the United States in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre. The premier portrayed in the ground-breaking biography Gao subsequently published is not the suave, well-mannered diplomat we are used to, but instead a devious figure, always willing to turn against his own friends in order to further his career. Gao describes him as Mao's 'faithful dog'. And Zhou was not only unique in his willingness to endure humiliation at the hands of his master as a way of surviving politically the many purges initiated by Mao: he acquiesced, as Gao puts it, in carrying Mao's 'execution knife'.

Why are these sensitive archives being declassified? A short answer is the general feeling of goodwill and transparency that emerged before the Beijing Olympics of 2008. This has since tightened noticeably. Let us hope it returns.

Frank Dikötter is the author of *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976* (Bloomsbury, 2016). His major survey of the Cultural Revolution will appear in the September issue of *History Today*.

What comes out of this massive dossier is a tale of horror. Mao emerges as one of history's greatest mass murderers

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