

Mao: The Unknown Story

Jung Chang and John Halliday

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The Changing Face of China From Mao to Market

John Gittings



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IN A SENSE, MAO ZEDONG DESERVES THIS BOOK. Previous biographers (with the exception of Philip Short) have tended to gloss over the horrors of his long reign (1949-76); Chang and Halliday, though, portray a Mao as monstrous as Hitler. They set the tone by quoting Mao's early writings that reveal him as totally selfish and self-centered, unconstrained by social norms. He confirmed this in the infidelity and brutal indifference that marked his relations with his wives – and virtually everyone else. He loved violence and destruction.

This is a novel and devastating account of Mao's career. In the 1920s, he was an incompetent party worker; he paid no attention to the peasantry till the Russians (whose support allowed him to rise) told him to. During his years in the mountains of Jiangxi (1927-1934), where the Chinese Soviet Republic was first established, Mao lived in luxury, betrayed or blackmailed his associates, purged and terrorized the Party, and presided over a Stalinist regime that acted like an army of occupation, virtually enslaving, decimating and impoverishing the locals. Here began the long association with Zhou Enlai, also not spared: he was a ruthless apparatchik, with a total lack of integrity.

The Long March comes in for the greatest revision. It was manipulated by Chiang Kaishek, who wanted to use the Reds against local warlords, then 'corral' them in the remote northwest. Its delays and detours reflect Mao's reluctance to join other forces that might reduce his role. The most heroic exploit of the March, capturing the Dadu bridge, was a total fabrication.

The Communist regime in Yen'an (1936-47), sometimes portrayed as a romantic time of selfless teamwork, was another fraud and horror. Mao did everything possible not to fight the Japanese, the Reds got rich by selling opium, his Rectification Campaign terrorized the Party into the submission that led to the cult of Mao Zedong's Thought, and the population was crushed by taxes, requisitions and inflation.

Mao's soldiers were ill-prepared to fight the Civil War. They only succeeded because of massive Soviet aid, betrayal of Chiang by his commanders and the American intervention that stopped Chiang from wiping out the Red forces in Manchuria. As they succeeded, the Communists ruthlessly exploited the locals and starved the population of Changchun, causing more deaths than the Japanese massacre of Nanjing.

During his first year in power, Mao had three million people killed, forcing the public to participate in order to brutalize and frighten them. He didn't frighten Stalin, though, who forced an unequal treaty on Mao

when he came to Moscow in 1950. Mao had to pay for everything he got from the USSR, often in food requisitioned from the peasants, who were herded into collectives to make extracting their grain easier. Grain was also consumed by China's nuclear program, whose technology Mao got from Khrushchev by exaggerating the threat from the United States. Cheap labour-intensive projects with their fast sloppy work led to a failure that, in the evocative words of this volume, gave China a rust bowl at the beginning, not the end, of industrialization. All this culminated in the Great Leap Forward; the famine that followed killed some 38 million. Mao knew but didn't much care. Food went on being exported, much of it in a vain effort to propel China into leadership of the Third World.

Sidelined after the famine, Mao burned for revenge. With the backing of army chief Lin Biao and the cooperation of the young generation he orchestrated the rampages of the Red Guards that appeared spontaneous. In the effort to destroy China's past, thousands of old books were carted off to Mao's office, which thus impressed Henry Kissinger as looking like a scholar's study.

Mao's prestige finally began to sink after the apparent attempted revolt of his chosen successor Lin Biao, with Watergate striking another massive blow: Mao had profited from the visit of President Nixon who conceded much and received nothing. By then, though, Mao was in fatal decline.

This book could destroy any lingering respect for Chairman Mao. But how much to believe? The authors have the real merit of exploiting new material, particularly from Soviet and Eastern European archives, and can therefore stress Stalin's prime role in all this. They relentlessly challenge long-accepted myths, and don't actually seem to be fab-

ricating their material. Their method is more rather like the ancient tradition of slanderous biography (Suetonius on Nero or Procopius on Justinian, say): accent the negative, ignore the positive, repeat useful gossip.

For example, the early work that these authors cite to demonstrate Mao's total selfishness also contains phrases like this: 'helping those in need and sacrificing oneself to save others are no more than duty, since I desire to do them, and only then will my mind be at rest'. Mao's role as journalist, writer, thinker, labour organizer in the 1920s is neglected or denigrated. His meticulous report on the Hunan peasantry (1927), usually regarded as a real tour de force, is presented simply as an expression of Mao's love of violence.

Seeing the Red armies of Jiangxi and Yen'an as occupying forces is valuable, but what about Mao's generally successful strategy for fighting the Nationalists, or his orders to his troops not to steal from the public? Or the rather sophisticated works he produced in Yen'an? In the Civil War, what about Jung Chang's own portrayal in her famed earlier work of the immense popularity of the Red Army and its land reform as it took over Manchuria? And so on. I suspect that every statement of this book will be criticized and questioned.

As it is, it brings a valuable corrective to established ideas, but best read with or after something more objective. This work has one advantage, though: it's a real page-turner, constantly surprising and entertaining.

By destroying the past, Mao left China's future open, but he was no modernizer. Once his incubus was removed in 1976, China could start its rapid social and economic transformation. John Gittings narrates and explains the transition from state socialism to state capitalism in lucid

detail. His unspoken hero is Deng Xiaoping who in Mao's fading years realised that China needed to modernize to maintain a serious position in the world.

Gittings' treatment of Mao, largely concerned with economics and not useful as a general overview, may seem soft, but he points out that the Chairman will never be understood by simply regarding him as a monster, and ignoring his actual ideas.

Once in power, Deng started to push China in a new direction. Proclaiming that it was no sin to get rich, Deng allowed important material incentives, starting with the countryside. Farmers could sell their products freely, generate capital, and soon employ workers and own their own land. Their prosperity stimulated business and industrialization in the countryside. China's archaic industry next succumbed to the reforms. Managers were allowed more flexibility, and private enterprise grew so fast that by 1986 its share was equal to that of the state. China imported foreign technology on a vast scale.

Economic change and contact with the outside world brought demands for political modernization. By the 1980's public respect for the often corrupt, incompetent or hidebound Party was at low ebb, but Deng wanted a stronger party to guide the economic reforms. Realizing that capitalism was successful and not about to collapse, he sponsored Special Economic Zones in the East, basically bastions of free enterprise and dynamic modernization. But dissent grew, with even the party chairman suggesting that Marx might be out of date. All this culminated at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Gittings devotes much attention to the 'massacre' and usefully stresses the active participation of the people of Beijing.

Suppression worked: Deng's critics were cowed.

China implicitly exchanged political freedom for unheard-of levels of economic prosperity and drastic social change. Since Deng had realized that major economic concessions were necessary for the people to accept if not enjoy one-party rule, he virtually threw Communism to the winds; economic restraints disappeared.

In the 1990s foreign investment poured in and the economy grew at 10 per cent a year. This brought a higher standard of living than people could have imagined in Mao's time. Skyscrapers littered the urban landscape, vast networks of rail, road and air transportation grew, and education spread, with students rushing to acquire MBAs. The mobile phone and the internet became symbolic of a New China. It all came with serious problems: pollution, water shortages, AIDS, prostitution, drugs, corruption, and dismal conditions for the poor thrown out of work by the closing of inefficient factories, a rural population, suffering from high taxes and the corruption of local officials. Life for the poor was made much worse by the state's withdrawal of social services that had been free and universal under Communism.

This leaves a transformed China, still controlled by one party (no longer recognizable as Communist), growing in prosperity and – one of Gittings' interesting insights – with a population becoming more and more like everyone else as consumer values sweep the country.

Gittings presents a valuable guide to a complex subject, but hardly a gripping read. This is serious stuff, clearly explained (except for the section on Mao's economics) but often slow going. For excitement, read Chang and Halliday; for the up-to-date facts, Gittings.

Clive Foss

A Writer at War Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945

Edited and translated by Antony Beevor
and Luba Vinogradova

Harvill xxi + 378pp £20 ISBN 1 84343055 X

Ivan's War The Red Army 1939-1945

Catherine Merridale

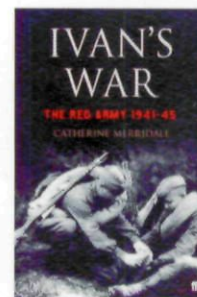
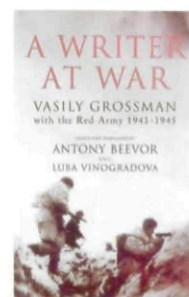
Faber and Faber xvii + 396pp £20 ISBN 0
57121808 3

AS THE EDITORS OF *A Writer at War* assert, 'Vasily Grossman's place in the history of world literature is assured by his masterpiece *Life and Fate*, one of the greatest

Russian novels of the twentieth century. Some critics even rate it more highly than Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* or the novels of Solzhenitsyn.' No doubt, cold war prejudices have played their part in giving a greater reputation to works which take a negative stance towards the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime that emerged from it rather than to those that depict the sacrifices and ultimate victory in what is still known as the Great Fatherland War. Indeed, this is a subject insufficiently discussed in the West until recently.

Grossman's wartime notebooks could hardly be more evocative. Near the beginning of the war, a doctor identifies human flesh picked out from an aircraft radiator as 'Aryan meat'. Grossman comments: 'Everyone laughs. Yes, a pitiless time – a time of iron – has come!'. In autumn, mud becomes 'a liquid, bottomless swamp, black pastry mixed by thousands and thousands of boots, wheels, caterpillars.' While 'General Mud and General Cold' helped the Red Army soldiers brought up to hardship, their German opponents had become too accustomed to easy victories. The generosity of peasants sharing their last potatoes with visiting soldiers, the selfless heroism of 'a kind of monastic austerity' born at the front, even among the *smertniki*, the dead men of the punishment companies composed of deserters and the disobedient, are vividly caught, along with the more

negative features of the German war for 'race extermination'. Stalingrad, the centrepiece of *Life and Fate*, inspired some of the finest writing in the notebooks: 'The white ice of the Volga is carrying tree trunks, wood. A big raven is sitting sulkily on an ice floe. A dead Red Fleet soldier in a striped shirt floats past. Men from a freight steamer take him from the ice. It is difficult to tear the dead man out of the ice. He is rooted in it. It is as if he doesn't want to leave the Volga where he has fought and died.' Treblinka and other death camps are described in graphic detail, as is some of the revenge inflicted in 'The Lair of the Fascist Beast' on the road to Berlin. Grossman could only hint at Stalinist deportation of suspect nationalities and other excesses, but enough to arouse suspicion and delay publication of *Life and Fate*. His descriptions in that novel of various kinds of bravery, of different orders of time in



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