

# Keeping the people stupid: the Cultural Revolution

## SOURCE A

Mao Zedong in 1949

● 1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Mao's own speeches as sources of evidence about the Cultural Revolution?

● 2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using eyewitness reports as sources of evidence about the Cultural Revolution? How might you get round the disadvantages?

**W**e in the West have struggled to understand Mao Zedong and the changes China has gone through since the Communist Party took power in 1949. Relying mainly on speeches and books published by Mao and his allies, historians have developed theories that explain and sometimes justify the killings and cruelty.

The most recent biography of Mao, however — *Mao: The Unknown Story*, by J. Chang and J. Halliday, published in 2005 — has used hundreds of interviews with surviving eyewitnesses. It presents a different picture from the one we are used to. It shows us a paranoid and ruthless Mao launching the Cultural Revolution in order to remove from China and the Communist Party any freedom of thought or activity that could stand up to him. Mao once told his inner circle of allies, 'We need the policy of "keep the people stupid".' With the Cultural Revolution Mao aimed to create a country and a party that would follow him unquestioningly.

## Pushed aside

With the collapse of the Great Leap Forward, Mao felt he had been pushed aside by the other Communist leaders and his ideas ignored. At a conference of China's top officials in January 1962 the normally quiet and submissive Liu Shaoqi (Source B) tore into Mao's policies, blaming them for the famine and starvation. Mao was forced to halt the Great Leap Forward. Liu and his colleagues then made major changes to Mao's policies, ending the commune system and scaling back the food levies taken from the regions for foreign export. Mao felt slighted and wanted revenge.

Fundamentally, Mao felt he was being treated like a 'dead ancestor': honoured but ignored. When he called for writers, artists and poets to be thrown out of the cities to live in poverty in the villages, claiming they were dangerous parasites, nothing hap-



pened. Believing that flowers and parks encouraged laziness, Mao wanted all gardeners removed. Party officials, however, ignored this or were deliberately slow in carrying it out. Mao wanted newspapers to condemn the play *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office* for being 'bourgeois'. But Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, was able to block his demands until Zhou Enlai, the premier, stepped in.

Mao was therefore faced with a situation where he felt China's culture was decadent, allowing too much freedom and creativity, but that the



Communist Party would not listen to him. Mao decided to tear down the party so he could bend it to his will. He therefore allied himself with Lin Baio, the head of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Lin (who had phobias about both water and draughts) saw an opportunity to gain power and revenge on those he hated; together he and Mao unleashed violence to shatter the party.

**SOURCE B**

Liu Shaoqi in 1965

**Creating the atmosphere**

Mao was already hugely popular; the reverence towards him was now whipped up into a quasi-religious fanaticism. Posters bearing Mao's image and pro-Mao slogans were created (Source C) and popular marches were organised with people chanting Mao's name. Everyone was taught not just that they should live according to the principles of Chairman Mao, but that they should defend him against those trying to undermine him. The *Little Red Book* was published by the PLA (see Source D). This contained the thoughts and sayings of Mao. It quickly became a mark of disloyalty to him not to have one.

Mao now set about creating violence and fear. From June 1966 students were encouraged to form themselves into 'Red Guards' and attack their

**SOURCE C**

Poster from the Cultural Revolution



● 3 Look at Source D. Using the article and your own knowledge, explain why Mao chose to use students to create an atmosphere of violence and fear in China.

teachers. Wearing red armbands, they dragged their teachers into the streets, beating and kicking, even sexually assaulting them. Teachers had their faces rubbed in dirt, their heads were shaved and they were forced to stand for hours wearing dunce's caps and with insulting banners hung around their necks. When Mao ordered all schools to be shut so students could be free to revolt, the violence escalated. Now anything old was attacked, as was anyone who looked too cultured (perhaps by having long hair, rich-looking clothes or shoes with a high heel). Red Guards broke into houses and burned books, paintings and records. Ancient monuments were smashed. Torture camps were set up in cinemas, stadiums and theatres. Anyone thought to represent old ways of thinking or to be lacking in devotion towards Mao, maybe by showing pity for those being attacked, was beaten and tortured.

Red Guards now rioted across China's towns and some parts of the countryside. Mao ordered that any Red Guard could travel for free on the trains. The police were ordered not to intervene to stop the violence. In fact they gave the Red Guards names and information, suggesting individuals they should target. Mao regularly appeared on top of the Tiananmen Gate in Beijing, urging the youths to greater acts of rebellion. Millions of them

flocked to see him, chanting his name. On one occasion one of the leaders of an attack on a headmistress (see Source E) was given the privilege of putting a red armband on Mao.

### Getting revenge

By September 1966 Mao had manufactured an atmosphere where no one dared oppose him. He now turned his focus on the party and government. For this he had new 'Red Guards' formed. These were more adult groups. They were told to attack those in the party who opposed Mao or who were, as he claimed, trying to take China down a 'capitalist road'. They were told to seize power from the party leaders and purge anyone who seemed disloyal to the chairman. Party officials and government workers were dragged before screaming crowds and beaten and tortured. They were held in the jet-plane position (where the person's arms are twisted violently backwards), cut with knives, forced to eat bread smeared with excrement, deliberately deafened or had their skulls beaten in. Mao had photographs taken and films made of these sessions, which he watched in his villa.

However, it was Liu Shaoqi upon whom Mao wanted particular revenge for his actions in ending the Great Leap Forward. In August Liu was named

#### SOURCE D

Red Guards with the Little Red Book at a mass rally



## SOURCE E

On 5 August, in a Beijing school, the headmistress, a fifty-year-old mother of four, was kicked and trampled by the girls, and boiling water was poured over her. She was ordered to carry heavy bricks back and forth; as she stumbled past, she was thrashed with leather army belts with brass buckles, and with wooden sticks studded with nails. She soon collapsed and died. Afterwards, leading activists reported to the authorities. They were not told to stop — which meant carry on.

A description of one of the attacks on teachers by the Red Guards in 1966. Quoted in J. Chang and J. Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 2005.

by Mao as 'the leading person in authority taking the capitalist road'. He was removed from his position in the government and the party. Posters appeared calling Liu the 'people's enemy' and Red Guards marched through the streets calling for his death. Hundreds camped outside the Zhongnanhai, the leaders' compound in Beijing, screaming insults at Liu, calling him a 'pile of dog shit'. Liu and his wife, who were devoted to each other, were arrested and brought before a gathering. Their children were brought out to watch while they were beaten, whipped with belts, trampled on and humiliated. Liu and his wife were put into solitary confinement, where they were starved and mistreated but kept alive. Mao wanted them to suffer as much as possible and demanded regular updates on their agony. Liu finally died in November 1969, aged 71. His death was not reported to the people, who were still encouraged to condemn him and call for his punishment.

## Setting control

Having almost destroyed the party, Mao now rebuilt it. To replace all those government officials who had been forced out or killed, 2.8 million soldiers were drafted in. Lin made sure these 'new' officials were unquestioningly loyal to Mao and himself. Any 'old' officials who had so far escaped the Red Guard and purges were now investigated to see if they had in any way resisted Mao's instructions in the past or lacked enthusiasm for his policies. A new wave of threats, torture and public humiliations began.

As for the students, in March 1967 they were ordered to return to school and were told that it was no longer right to criticise the authorities. Hundreds of thousands of the Red Guards were commanded to 'go up to the mountains and down to the villages'. They had an almost religious devotion towards Mao but in his paranoia he feared they could be turned against him. They were scattered across the country and forced to live in poverty alongside the peasants.

On 1 April 1969, at the Ninth Party Congress, Mao announced that the Cultural Revolution was over. The Communist Party was restored to its place as the leader of the people. But it was a differ-



## SOURCE G

### A children's skipping song from the Cultural Revolution

	Translation:
<i>Da da da</i>	Beat beat beat
<i>Da dao Liu Shaoqi</i>	Beat down Liu Shaoqi
<i>Bao bao bao</i>	Defend defend defend
<i>Bao wei Mao Zhu Xi</i>	Defend protect Chairman Mao
<i>Liu Shaoqi</i>	Liu Shaoqi
<i>Fan dui Mao Zhu Xi</i>	Opposes Chairman Mao
<i>Wang Guang Mei</i>	Wang Guang Mei [Liu's wife]
<i>Ni ai chou mei</i>	You love fetid beauty

ent party from 3 years previously. It had been drastically reduced in size. Over 80% of its leaders were new and nearly half were army men. China itself was different as well. Anything that looked like culture, freedom or creativity had been removed. All that was left for Chinese people was work, sleep and compulsory political meetings. Mao had created a party and a country that would obey him slavishly.

## Sacrifices made for Mao

During the Cultural Revolution Mao deliberately created chaos. He believed that China and the Communist Party had gone soft and that the revolution had lost its way. But he also felt ignored and unable to get his policies enacted. Because the party would not obey him blindly, he used the Red Guards, first to create an atmosphere of fear in the country and then to batter down the party so that he could rebuild it, emptied of all freedom. In 1957 Mao had told a group of visiting Russians that he was 'prepared to sacrifice 300 million Chinese for the victory of the world revolution'. In large parts the Cultural Revolution was not about sacrificing lives for the victory of communism; it was sacrificing them so Mao could get his way. **HS**

## SOURCE F

Red Guards humiliate Buddhists, 1966

● 4 Look at the children's skipping song (Source G). (a) What do the words of the song tell us about the Cultural Revolution? (b) What does the nature of the song (i.e. the fact that it is a children's playground song) tell us about the Cultural Revolution?

● 5 Using the article and your own knowledge, explain why Mao launched the Cultural Revolution.

● 6 Using the article and your own knowledge, explain the short-term and long-term effects of the Cultural Revolution.

● 7 (a) Use the information in this article to build an argument that the violence of the Cultural Revolution was planned by Mao and his allies. (b) Now build an argument to prove the opposite. (c) Which argument do you find more convincing?

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