**Topic 3: Reasons for the Cultural Revolution - Revision Notes**

**Example Question:**

***How accurate is it to say that Mao’s main motives for launching the Cultural Revolution in 1966 were ideological rather than political? (See p282-3 for model answer). Note: This is an A2 Level Question. AS questions will usually be more straightforward.***

***Tip: Firstly identify the reasons why Mao launched the Cultural Revolution and then decide if they were ideological or political.***

Useful quote From Lynch:

‘At its simplest, the answer is that the CR was to be the means by which Mao, conscious at the age of 73 of his own mortality, would **reassert his authority over China and the CCP**. He had a number of interlocking objectives (aims) including:

Reasons given by Lynch for the Cultural Revolution:

* To preserve himself in power by removing all possible sources of opposition. E.g. Mao resented the ‘shadow emperor’ Liu Shaoqi and wished him removed.
* To obliterate the damaging record of the Gt Leap Forwards
* To ensure that his concept of revolution would continue after his death
* To prevent China making the same mistakes as the revisionist USSR
* To break the power of urban bureaucrats and restore the peasant character of China’s communist revolution.

**Task:**

**Colour code the sentences below into the following possible reasons why Mao launched the CR.**

**Reason 1: The CR was launched by Mao to reassert his authority over the party by removing all possible sources of opposition.**

**Reason 2: Restoring the impetus of the revolution which Mao felt was being undermined by party bureaucrats.**

**Reason 3: To prevent China making the same mistakes as the revisionist USSR.**

**Reason 4: Harnessing the power of youth in a new mass campaign.**

**Reason 5: Other reasons – Please specify**

The Cultural Revolution was an attempt by Mao to shore up his position after the failures of the Great Leap Forward and the criticisms he faced in 1962.

Following the failures of the Great Leap Forwards and the serious famines and social discord that followed (159-62), Mao’s position had been considerably weakened.

By 1969 Mao had strengthened his control over party and country, and faced no further threats to his position; though in the process China experienced almost anarchic change.

Mao believed that the revolution, which he had led to victory in 1949, was being betrayed from within. He was convinced that many in the upper echelons of the CP were infected by neo capitalism.

Mao believed that if the Chinese revolution stood still it would cease to be a genuine movement. To prevent this Mao wished to circumvent the party bureaucracy and appeal directly to the Chinese people. He wished to enlist them in a campaign to save and consolidate the revolution.

Mao was also motivated by developments in the USSR. In the late 50s, he had interpreted the Soviet attack on Stalin’s cult of personality as a criticism of his own leadership of China. The news in 1964 of the fall from power of Khrushchev after he was ousted by internal political opponents gave Mao further concern. He also viewed Khrushchev and his successors as guilty of betraying the revolution by encouraging revisionism. He was determined that such developments would not happen in China after him. Mao wished to pursue an authentic and original ‘Maoist’ version of communism that was distinct from that of the Soviet Union.

Mao judged that CCP officials were already being seduced by the privileges of power. He had convinced himself that the older revolutionaries had lost their revolutionary fervour. Consequently launching the Cultural Revolution would be of saving the revolution by using a new generation of party members to replace the old guard.

Mao also wished to harden the younger members of the party in the crucible of revolutionary struggle. They were too young to have taken part in the civil war and the struggle against Japan.

Mao believed once young people had engaged in acts of violence on behalf of the revolution they would become committed to defending it.

A further aim was Mao’s determination to preserve the Chinese revolution as an essentially peasant movement. Mao also resented the urban intellectuals who had criticised the Great Leap Forward. It is possible to interpret the CR as an act of revenge on a class which he felt, had always despised him.

Mao was concerned that true socialism was being undermined by the pragmatic economic policies followed by Liu and Deng since 61. E.g. the dismantling of the communes and return to private farming after the failure of the famine and GLF. Mao was anxious that China was being put on the capitalist road and he was determined to put a stop to any further drift in this direction.

China had also started importing grain from the USA. As soon as the economic situation improved, Mao wanted to restore the ‘correct’ socialist approach and purging those leaders who had accepted the pragmatic economic approach would be vital in order to achieve this.

He was also anxious to prevent the revolution losing its impetus and therefore wanted to launch a new mass campaign as soon as possible.

He feared that if the revolution stopped moving forwards, then old bourgeois attitudes would start to resurface and the gains made would already be lost. This is what he thought had gone in Russia. Since the split from Russia in the early 60s, Mao wished to follow a different path.

Mao demanded ‘permanent revolution’ – Mao believed that for the revolution to continue those in authority must constantly be replaced to prevent them from ever becoming secure enough to take advantage of their authority.

Mao also wished to ‘blood’ the younger generation in revolutionary activity by encouraging the formation of Red Guard units in 1966. Lin Biao and Chen Boda had been preparing the ground for this by developing the Mao cult among the teenage generation since at least 1963, and by 1966 Mao felt the young were ready to be unleashed.

Mao was determined to destroy his rivals within his own party. To do this he mobilised his most loyal constituency, the young people of China.

Mao’s ideology dictated that a new mass mobilisation campaign was necessary every few years and one which involved the next generation was essential to guarantee the long term future of communism.

The CR can be seen as a new rectification campaign to weed out party officials who had lost their revolutionary edge and were therefore allowing capitalist attitudes to creep back in.

Political motives, while definitely significant to Mao in the short term, were of secondary importance overall compared to his ideological priorities.

He was determined to reassert his political power which had slipped since he stepped down as leader of the PRC in 1959 as well as side-lining potential rivals before they became too popular. The CR began as an attack on individuals in the Communist party before broadening into the attack on the four olds in society at large by the red guards.

By 63, Mao was seeking to reassert the political power he had conceded when he installed Liu in his place as head of state in 59, and he moved further into the background when Liu and Deng, the party secretary, began the painful process of restoring the economy in the early 60s. Not only did Mao have ideological objections to their eocnomi policies, but he was also concerned on apolitical level that both were getting too powerful.

Liu in 1962 had dismissed Mao’s claim that the great famine had been caused by bad weather.

Mao accused Liu of taking the capitalist road at the 1964 party conference. Mao also launched the 1966 poster campaign in the universities over the head of Liu. Liu tried to calm down this unrest.

Mao’s conviction that capitalist roaders were hijacking the party had intensified during the socialist education movement and increased further when moderates like Liu and Zhou tried to calm down student unrest when it stirred in 66.

It was Mao’s political machinations against Liu and to a less extent Deng, that provided the catalyst for the start of the Cultural Revolution, they explain the timing of its outbreak.

The Cultural Revolution stemmed from significant internal disputes within the Chinese communist leadership, as prominent individuals, including Mao, sought to consolidate their power bases and jostle for the key government positions and overall political influence.

Mao and his allies such as Lin Biao claimed that the pro capitalist ‘liberal bourgeois’ elements within society were undermining the principles of the 1949 revolution, and that a new elite had replaced an old elite. Mao’s analysis was that this emerging ‘class; had materialised as a direct result of the country’s bureaucracy, and it was the influence and power of this new class of bureaucrats which now needed to be forcibly challenged, due to it acting as a brake io0n the country’s revolutionary aims.

On an ideological level, Mao argued that the Soviet regime had been diverted from true communist principles by excessive bureaucracy and an overall centralisation of decision making.

Many key members of the CCP lost their positions and status during the years 66-76, the Cultural Revolution would see many of Mao’s perceived rivals significantly purged and punished.

The reasons for the Cultural Revolution are multi-faceted and interlinked but at its simplest the Cultural Revolution is often interpreted as Mao finally reasserting total control over the CCP. There were straightforward elements of factional struggle pitting Jiang Qing and the Shanghai Forum against those in Beijing who wished to preserve their power bases.

Mao was permanently worried by the Chinese revolution losingimpetus because of party conservatism and the lethargy of the huge and cumbrous bureaucracy, which had lost its ability to make speedy or innovative decisions. China had to avoid becoming like the ‘revisionist’ USSR (betraying the communist cause by abandoning revolutionary principles), which had begun with the denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and continued with a move to ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the USA. Mao had to stop the party from taking the ‘capitalist road’ (even as it mouthed the slogans of socialism).

Mao was seventy-two in the year the Cultural Revolution was launched. This made it essential that he preserved his legacy and that it could not be easily undone by a revisionist successor. To ensure his version of the revolution persisted he sought to remould Chinese culture and society once and for all.

Finally, there were also a huge range of social pressures: a) children blocked from advancing because of parents who happened to have been caught up in previous purges b) disgruntled youth sent to the countryside due to Liu and Deng’s policies c) those denied access to elite schools that catered to the children of leading party members d) industrial workers stuck in dead-end, low-paid jobs e) well-educated young party members who were blocked by older uneducated old fighters. Therefore, there were many who would respond positively to any rectification from below.

In Mao’s view the only way to save the revolution was by waging war on the CCP hierarchy itself – a new generation of party members must replace the old guard. The problem was that young members of the party had not been tested in the crucible of revolutionary struggle. The Cultural Revolution would provide that test.

Mao aimed to undermine both party bureaucrats and intellectuals: the peasants were to be the ideal of the revolution (later on the ‘Red Guards’ would have to “Learn from the Peasants”.)

**Other Exam Questions:**

*How accurate is it to say that Mao Zedong carried out both the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Cultural Revolution in order to strengthen his political control?*

**Exam Questions on other aspects of the CR:**

**(Questions with dates in brackets at the end e.g. June 2013 appeared in the old A level).**

How accurate is it to say that the Cultural Revolution was a success for Mao? (*Make sure you consider how the outcomes (political, economic, social, cultural and military? Over the whole period 1966-76, not just those of the radical early phase*)

How accurate is it to say that the most important result of the Cultural Revolution was the defeat of Mao’s rivals? (June 13)

How accurate is it to say that the main effect of the Cultural Revolution was the destruction of traditional Chinese culture? June 12