

What was the nature of terror in Mao's China?

Andrew Flint asks whether Mao Zedong alone was responsible for the violence inflicted on the Chinese people under his rule?

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Exam links

AQA AS The impact of Chairman Mao: China, 1946–76

Edexcel AS Mao's China 1949–76

OCR (A) AS The rise of China, 1911–90

Argument

'Monkey King' or killer thug?

Mao was one of the cruellest dictators of the twentieth century, using terror to maintain Communist rule. Historians disagree on the extent to which terror was a tool employed by Chairman Mao himself, because it was also used by party agents and local officials to settle scores.

Guomindang Chinese Nationalist Party led first by Sun Yat-sen from 1912, then by Chiang Kai-shek from 1927.

Mao Zedong is often placed alongside Hitler and Stalin as one of the most infamous dictators of the twentieth century. Historians Chang and Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story* reinforced this image, creating a picture of life in Mao's China as one of unremitting terror, placing the death toll of the regime at well over 70 million, 'more than any other twentieth-century leader'.

Mao himself seemed to welcome the comparison, declaring Hitler a fellow revolutionary because he said, 'The more you kill, the more revolutionary you are'. However, there remains no consensus regarding the nature of the terror used during his rule. Historian Lee Feigon observes that Mao was 'ruthless...but not bloodthirsty', and others have derided what they term as 'competitive body-counting' between dictators.

No serious historian could argue that terror and repression was not a vital tool of Maoist control. This article evaluates its nature, exploring the validity of the comparisons with Hitler's Nazi state and Stalin's Russia. What emerges is a complex picture of terror in Mao's regime.

The early years

For historians Chang and Halliday, Mao's liking for terror derived from his personality. Ideologically illiterate, Mao, they write, possessed a 'love for blood-thirsty thuggery' that derived not from 'Leninist theory' but 'sprang from his character'.

Although Mao had no qualms about resorting to violence, it is also clear that the use of terror after 1949 derived in part from the tactics he had successfully developed during long years of war. In violent struggles against both the **Guomindang** (Chinese Nationalist Party) and the Japanese during the 1930s, bloody reprisals and torture were commonplace. In this atmosphere, measures created to win popular support could quickly escalate into violence.

Mao Zedong

- 1893** Born to a relatively well-off landed family in Hunan province, south central China.
- 1921** Founding member of the Communist Party of China.
- 1949** Declares the formation of the People's Republic of China, announcing that, after years of humiliation and subservience to foreign powers, 'The Chinese people have stood up'.
- 1956** Launches the Hundred Flowers Campaign, declaring: 'Let 100 flowers bloom...let 100 schools of thought contend'.
- 1958** Launches the Great Leap Forward, an overly ambitious attempt to compete industrially with the capitalist powers. A disastrous failure, it results in the worst manmade famine in history.
- 1966** Famously swims in the dangerous Yangtze river to show off his physical endurance and to announce his return to the political centre stage, launching the Cultural Revolution.
- 1969** Communist Party Congress officially declares the end of the Cultural Revolution, adopting a new constitution that stresses the 'guiding role' of Mao Zedong thought.
- 1976** Mao dies on 9 September.

Peasants denounce landlords

In 1946 Mao pressed for land redistribution in Communist occupied areas, sending in 'work-teams' to encourage poor peasants to organise 'struggle meetings' in which the landlords were denounced. Despite Mao's plea that class struggle had to be 'moderated in the name of national consensus', peasants took the opportunity to vent long-held resentments, behaving, observes historian David Priestland 'in a more radical way than the Communists intended'. Many landlords were murdered and their land seized. Mao consolidated his support effectively not by inflicting terror using party institutions, but by indirectly harnessing violence physically enacted by the population.

Establishing control

Once in power, the reliance upon terror was catalysed by the Korean War. The 'Resist America, Aid Korea' campaign enabled Mao, to use Chang and Halliday's phrase, to 'milk' the war to purge 'class enemies' on the pretence of being spies or traitors.

The 1950 Agrarian Reform Law did not order the execution of the landlords and Mao stressed the necessity of not targeting those with the experience necessary to rebuild production. Yet the law removed legal protection from landlords and, in regions isolated from Beijing's moderation, independently minded local cadres encouraged peasants in punitive

actions. Years of inequitable treatment led to scores being bloodily settled. Up to 1 million landlords were murdered. Just as Hitler's Nazi state encouraged the complicity of the population in the denunciation of its enemies, Mao mobilised his peasant constituency by providing an ideological and practical vehicle by which they could achieve their personal aims through violent methods.

Respect for the elderly

Ever adaptable, Mao co-opted Confucian respect for the elderly to rid the regime of the 'national bourgeoisie' and to bolster his personality cult as a champion of the poor. At one 'speak bitterness' meeting to denounce businessmen, an 80-year-old woman came forward on her walking stick, confronted the accused and said: 'Hah...now Chairman Mao will repay our blood debts!'

The Hundred Flowers Campaign

In 1956 Mao's declaration to 'let 100 flowers bloom' encouraged a political debate that grew to include criticism of the party and even of Mao himself. It ended with the anti-rightist campaign that purged China's intellectuals.

Historian Jian Cheng damns the 'treachery of Mao', while for Chang and Halliday this was a 'devious plan' to 'set a trap' by encouraging non-communists to implicate themselves, providing a pretext for their purging. In contrast, historian Philip Short calls the campaign an 'ambitious attempt...to combine a totalitarian system with democratic checks and balances'.

A combination of factors appears closest to the truth. Mao launched the campaign to encourage



Mao Zedong is considered by many to be one of the most infamous dictators of the twentieth century

Confucianism The writings of Confucius, a philosopher and teacher, which deal primarily with individual morality and ethics, and the proper exercise of political power by the rulers.

'let 100 flowers bloom' In 1956-57, Chinese people were encouraged to give their opinions of the Communist regime. After fierce criticism of the government and social unrest the campaign was forcibly ended and those who had given their opinions were prosecuted.

Great Leap Forward An attempt to solve China's economic problems with a labour-intensive drive to modernise industry and agriculture.

Communist literature being distributed to the People's Liberation Army in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution

criticism of technocrats within the party, arrogantly believing that he would be immune from complaints. When he too was criticised, he reacted repressively. Even then, executions were not widespread. Historian Zhisui Li suggested that Mao believed 'opponents would be reformed within work units', observing, in his metaphorical style, 'an untrained horse can't be ridden'. Mao's Laogai prison camps were brutal, but they were not systematic execution camps on the scale of Nazi Germany.

The Cultural Revolution

The embarrassment of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 — which resulted in widespread famine — forced Mao to the political margins, while pragmatism replaced ideology in guiding party decisions. To restore his place at the political centre he returned to the tactics of the pre-1949 period. As he had in

Questions

- How and why did Mao use terror to consolidate his rule?
- How much popular support was there for Mao's violent campaigns?
- To what extent did Mao personally control and dictate the nature of terror?
- How valid are comparisons between Mao and other twentieth-century dictators?

Yunnan province in the 1930s, Mao launched a rectification campaign, the Cultural Revolution.

Mao mobilises the youth

In a wave of violence, not unlike that of the Red Terror of 1920s Russia, Red Guards clamoured to





Jiang Qing (Madame Mao) addressing the Red Guards in March 1969

Jiang Qing (Madame Mao)

- 1914** Born in Shandong province, on the east coast of China.
- 1934–37** An actress in Shanghai.
- 1937** Joined the Communists in Yunnan and married Mao 2 years later.
- 1966–76** Led the campaign to eradicate traditional beliefs from the arts during the Cultural Revolution, using it to attack those against whom she held personal grudges.
- 1976** Accused of treason and counter-revolutionary activity by opponents within the party and arrested. She famously defended herself in court with the phrase: 'I was Chairman Mao's dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite'.
- 1981** Condemned to death, the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment.
- 1991** Committed suicide, hanging herself while in hospital for cancer treatment. Unrepentant, her suicide note included a denunciation of Deng Xiaoping's 'Western ideas'.

'Smash the Four Olds', torturing and humiliating teachers and officials who they deemed as disloyal, and murdering at least 1 million people. Unlike Bolshevik Terror, it was not dictated by a repressive party apparatus, but was dependent on Mao's educational propaganda in indoctrinating the youth, his revolutionary vanguard, to rid the party of his opponents and 'bombard the headquarters' as he put it.

Mao mobilised students of China's 'elite' middle schools that, observes historian Roderick MacFarquhar, contained significant numbers of children of party leaders of far greater status than

their teachers. They were a cohesive group, drawn from small catchment areas, and had studied together since elementary school, thus ensuring peer pressure unified support for Mao's violent aims.

Rivals and students dictate violence

How far Mao directed the violence is unclear. Rival leaders had much to gain by manipulating violence to their own selfish ends. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, targeted any who could reveal her past as a Shanghai actress of dubious repute. Military leader Lin Biao ensured the death of Marshal He Long in part because the hero of the revolution had expressed doubts about Lin's military acumen.

The students too had their own motives. Having been regaled by their parents with stories of revolutionary heroism, Mao offered them a chance for glory. Pragmatic careerism undoubtedly played a part. Students whose employment opportunities were hindered by lack of party connections took the chance to remove senior communists from the hierarchy. This was important given that there was no established retirement system.

'The Monkey King'

The confused nature of terror in Mao's China is best exemplified by the Cultural Revolution, but it appears that Mao himself did not have a clear plan in mind. Here the link between Mao's character and terror identified by Chang and Halliday is explicit. He admitted to Jiang Qing that he possessed contradictory aspects: a 'kingly air' that compelled him to dominate, with a 'Monkey Spirit,' an *agent provocateur* challenging and embracing rebellion. 'We've been the Monkey King,' Mao said, 'upsetting heaven'.

'Smash the Four Olds'
Old customs that were never clearly defined.

agent provocateur
A person who induces other people to break the law so that they can be convicted.

Chronology



- 1921** Communist Party of China is established.
- 1931** Communist base area is established in Yunnan, a city in Jiangxi province.
- 1942** Mao launches rectification campaign to purge the party of rival elements.
- 1949** Mao announces the formation of the People's Republic of China.
- 1950** Agrarian Reform Law introduced to redistribute land from 'feudal' landlords to the peasantry; Korean War begins.
- 1956–57** The Hundred Flowers Campaign encourages intellectuals to criticise the party. Those who do are branded as 'counter-revolutionaries'; as many as 500,000 are imprisoned.
- 1958** The Great Leap Forward is launched, resulting in the largest manmade famine in history.
- 1966** Mao launches the Cultural Revolution, a rectification campaign to purge the Communist Party of his opponents.
- 1976** Mao dies.

Weblinks



For an uncritical but detailed account of Mao's life see: www.tinyurl.com/43l65

The BBC News website has a short description of the Cultural Revolution and links to other informative sites at: www.tinyurl.com/2krcr

A full account of the Cultural Revolution can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/o6bke2j

Treatment of rival leaders

Some scholars have rejected comparisons with other dictators in respect of Mao's treatment of fellow party members. 'Unlike Stalin and Hitler,' writes Historian Hua Gao, 'it was public knowledge that Mao did not execute his political rivals'. In direct comparison to Hitler's purge of June 1934 or the murder in the Soviet Union of Sergei Kirov, when Marshal Peng Dehuai criticised China's Great Leap Forward, he was not executed. Similarly, Gao claims that while Chinese president Liu Shaoqi was removed from office he died of natural causes, and points out that Zhou Enlai served as premier of the People's Republic of China until he died.

These claims mask the fact that Peng was subjected to struggle meetings, and maimed, while Liu's death was hastened by torture. Before Liu died he personally pleaded with Mao for mercy and to be allowed to withdraw to the countryside to live out his life as a peasant, but Mao refused. Although Zhou was not expelled from his political offices, Mao's denial of treatment for his cancer hastened his death.

Further reading and references



Benton G. and Chun, L. (2010). *Was Mao Really a Monster?* Routledge. A collection of academic responses to Chang and Halliday, criticising their interpretation of Mao as emotive and unbalanced.

Chang, J. and Halliday, J. (2005) *Mao: The Unknown Story*, Jonathan Cape. A controversial and highly negative interpretation of Mao. Chang possesses first-hand insight of life in China under the Maoist regime, having been brought up under communist rule.

Feigon, L. (2003) *Mao: A Reinterpretation*, Ivan R. Dee. This book is an attempt to redress the negative interpretation of Mao by focusing upon his economic and political achievements that, according to Feigon, have enabled China to realise its current success.

Li, Z. (1996) *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, Arrow. As the memoirs of Mao's personal physician this work is one person's view of the subject, but it does provide an interesting insight into Mao's personality.

MacFarquhar, R. and Schoenhals, M. (2006), *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press. A detailed study of the Cultural Revolution using Chinese documentation.

Short, P. (1999) *Mao: A Life*, John Murray. This biography of Mao by a former BBC foreign correspondent attempts to provide a balanced analysis of his rule.

Conclusion

A study of Mao's terror reveals:

- a reactive leader, sometimes cunning, often confused, certainly insecure, but always resourceful
- a person willing to use violence, but perhaps not always in a calculating manner
- a leader committed to establishing a communist society by resorting to the violent methods that had enabled him to seize power

Contrasts outweigh similarities in comparison with other dictators. Mao's more nuanced use of terror, particularly his manipulation of violence carried out by mobilisation and complicity of the wider population, might explain in part why his party's rule has endured while Nazi and Soviet rule has not.

To end, it is worth reflecting upon modern-day attitudes to Mao's terror. When China was traumatised by a spate of deadly food-poisoning cases many people yearned for a return to public denunciations and violent retribution for those found guilty: 'If Chairman Mao was still here,' said one victim, 'These people would have been dragged outside and shot!'

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