Notes on CCP policies in Tibet

The most important Buddhist community in China was in Tibet.

Like the Soviets with Hungary, Mao had its own ‘independence’ problem in Tibet where there were ongoing attempts to break away from Chinese rule.

Control of Tibet (and Xinjiang province with its large Muslim population) was important for the communist regime, particularly because of the importance of religion there. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, religion was fundamentally woven into the fabric of society. Buddhist leaders in Tibet held great political influence.

Religious ideas represented a clear challenge to Mao’s attempt to create a state based only upon communist principles which argued that God did not exist. As rival belief systems, they inevitable were targets for the new government.

The PLA invaded Tibet during the ‘reunification campaign’ in 1950 (establishing communist control). Although the communists had come to power in 1949, there were parts of China, like Tibet, that were beyond their control.

Mao felt that he could not allow such a potentially vulnerable border area to remain outside communist control, fearing that the mixture of religion and nationalism might prove too dangerous if not checked.

Traditional Buddhist religious practice was prohibited, as was the teaching of Tibetan language and history in schools. Mandarin Chinese was enforced as the official language.

Invading PLA forces were accompanied by special propaganda units that spread communist ideas.

Newspapers and magazines were distributed that explained the benefits of communism.

Mao encourage migration of Han Chinese (dominant ethnic group in China) into China to marginalise the indigenous Tibetan population and replace their traditional culture.

Tibet was a specific focus for repressive policies because its Buddhist culture provided an alternative belief system to Communism, and its religious leaders, the lamas, provided rivals to the Communist party.

The Tibetan people resisted with sabotage and guerrilla warfare. The resistance was so committed that Tibet was targeted during the Anti-rightist Campaign of 1958 when an intense anti-Buddhist propaganda campaign was launched.

The Great Leap Forwards heralded a renewed attack on Buddhist monks. Monks were converted into physical labourers and forced into communes. Temple land was added to the communes.

The Famine appears to have been deliberately extended into Tibet, where starvation caused the deaths of a quarter of the entire population – the highest proportion in any region of China. The Chinese government deliberately made the situation worse by forcing the Tibetans to switch from growing barley to other crops not suited to local conditions.

In 1959 following a Tibetan rebellion which was brutally suppressed by the PLA, the Tibetan Buddhism’s religious leader, the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India.

The Dalai Lama’s deputy, the Panchen Lama incurred Mao’s anger for endorsing a petition criticising the treatment of Tibet during the famine. He spent the next 20 years in jail or under house arrest.

Buddhism was denounced as one of the 4 olds during the Cultural Revolution. Monasteries were burned, religious relics destroyed and monks beaten or arrested and sent to ‘Laogai’ for ‘labour reform’

By the end of the CR, few temples or shrines remained. 6000 monasteries were destroyed and 1000s were killed by Red Guards. Religious Lamas had been forced into labour.