

The Chinese Civil War 1945-49

The Communist People's Liberation Army entering Guangzhou in 1949

Jonathan Webb explores why Mao Tse-tung's Communists defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War

Argument

China lost or gained?

On the face of it, Mao Tse-tung's Communist forces did not win the Chinese Civil War, rather Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists lost it. In reality, the truth was more complex.

It was only to be expected that news of the Communist victory in China in 1949 would be met with political recriminations in Washington, DC. How could Nationalist forces have lost to Mao Tse-tung's Communists — a force outsupplied, out-gunned and outnumbered three to one?

Arguments in 1949

Those on the right in the USA smelt political blood. Republicans blamed the Democrats for 'losing China' by failing to give Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek the resources to defeat the Communists. Senator Joe McCarthy went further, launching a scathing attack on the State Department for harbouring Communists who, he claimed, had secretly supported Mao — torpedoing any effective support for Chiang, fighting 'our war'.

In defence, secretary of state Dean Acheson's assessment in August 1949 was stark: the Nationalists had thrown victory away — 'its leaders had proved incapable of meeting the crisis, its troops had lost

AOA/AS The impact of Chairman Mao: China, 1946-1976

BOA/AS Crises, tensions and political divisions in China, 1900-1949

COA/AS The rise of China 1911-90

the will to fight and its government had lost popular support'. The Nationalists, he claimed, had not been defeated, they had simply disintegrated.

For Mao, conversely, proclaiming the republic in September 1949, the answer was simple: the people of China had 'closed their ranks, rallied to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and won basic victory'. The revolution, he claimed, was a popular expression of the people's will against landlordism, exploitation and Western imperialism.

The truth was more complex. The Communist victory was not a simple matter of Nationalist ineptitude nor of Communist popularity. It was a complex interweaving of the two, with Mao successfully mobilising some, but not all, of the Chinese population, skilfully wielding his armies to exploit Nationalist incompetence. Chiang, ultimately, lacked the ruthless streak that Mao possessed in abundance.

A popular revolution?

The popular nature of the revolution has long been debated. While it must be conceded that the Communists did successfully mobilise parts of the peasantry, Mao's claims were exaggerated. It should be noted, for one thing, that the Communist victory was a rural phenomenon. The Kuomintang (KMT) had, since 1927, successfully neutralised Communist influence in the cities. In 1962 Johnson argued that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) succeeded in mobilising peasant support during the Sino-Japanese War because peasants were nationalistic. He claimed that the Communists showed the greatest military and organisational ability to oppose the Japanese. This interpretation, unfortunately, lacked substantial evidence, though Chiang's Nationalists did little to challenge the Japanese forces.

Some historians, alternatively, accepted the Maoist interpretation that the peasants flocked to the CCP's land reform programme to pursue their class interests. But the assumption that peasants immediately saw their interests as an issue of class must be questioned. Village life was a complex mix of loyalties to lineage, landlord and religion, and it is hard to accept that class antagonism was a spontaneous phenomenon. There were no independent peasant uprisings.

CCP reforms

This is not to underplay the CCP's programme of agricultural reform, however. In the early 1940s cooperation with local peasant associations sensibly focused on reducing rents and taxation in order not to alienate landlord elites. Famine relief, production cooperatives and the revival of the silk industry were efforts to demonstrate the party's ability to provide tangible benefits for local communities. In 1947-48 policy was escalated with land seizures and popular 'speak bitterness' trials, in which landlords were publicly humiliated for 'class crimes'. In some

Key points

- Communists argued that their victory in the Chinese Civil War was the inevitable product of peasant reaction to landlordism and capitalist exploitation. Western opinion blamed the corruption and military errors of the ruling KMT and its leader Chiang Kai-shek who, they claimed, threw away the chance of victory.
- Evidence for the popular nature of the revolution is not clear cut. While the Communists gained support for their land reform policies, they alienated many with their terror tactics. Urban and central and southern China was conquered in war, not overcome by peasant uprisings.
- The superpowers helped shape the nature of the war, if not fully determining its final outcome. The USSR supported the Communists in seizing Manchuria while the USA gave over \$3 billion in aid and helped transport and supply the Nationalists. The 'loss of China' led to right-wing scrutiny of Truman's Asia policy and partly explains why the USA took more determined action in the Korean and Vietnamese wars.
- Organisational and military factors played a key role. The Communists were highly motivated and pursued a ruthless strategy of attrition under Mao's leadership, which also involved the mass conscription of peasants to supply the PLA. The Nationalist Army, by contrast, was poorly led and its economic policies were weakened by corruption and inflation.
- What finally determined the outcome was a loss of faith and resolve on the part of the Nationalist leadership and its supporters, while the majority of the population accepted the seemingly inevitable triumph of the Communists. Communist confidence, by contrast, grew as the tides of events turned their way.

instances they were brutally beaten and executed by party cadres.

In Manchuria, where traditional social hierarchies had been destroyed by the Japanese, the Communists offered stability and social order. A Shaanxi village report describing the seizure of landlord food was typical: 'In the past we never lived through a happy new year because he always asked for his rent and interest and cleaned our houses bare. This time we'll eat what we like.' In areas reconquered by the Nationalists landlords were often restored to power, intensifying peasant bitterness. As General Stilwell observed, there was a stark difference between the two sides: 'GMD (KMT) — corruption, neglect, chaos... CCP — reduce taxes, rents, interest. Raise production and standard of living.'

- Mao Tse-tung: born to a peasant family in 1893, Mao became leader of the Communists in 1935 and chairman of the People's Republic in 1949. He died in 1976.
- Chiang Kai-shek: leader of the Nationalists in China from 1927, he fled to Taiwan in 1949 where he became leader until his death in 1972.
- Joe McCarthy: Republican senator for Wisconsin who led the 'red scare' in the USA from February 1950 until his censure by the US Senate in 1954.
- People's Liberation Army: the military wing of the Communist Party of China (CCP).
- Kuomintang (KMT): the Nationalist Party of China, founded in 1912. Since 1949 it has been the dominant political party of the Republic of China (Taiwan).
- Sino-Japanese War: In 1931 Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria in northern China. In 1937 Japan attacked the rest of China, occupying much of coastal China until its defeat in 1945.
- cadres: members of the Communist Party.
- General Stilwell: Chiang's US-appointed chief of staff during the Second World War.

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PETER REYNOLDS'S HISTORICAL PICTURES

Mao proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949

Not class but terror?

There is an alternative view. Peasant testimony suggests many were revolted by the excesses of party activities. Historians Chang and Halliday's biography of Mao goes further in suggesting that what bound the peasants together was not class but terror. They claim that Communist violence traumatised millions into submission, although their evidence lacks balance.

What emerges is a subtle picture — a mixture of Communist zeal, practical hatred of landlordism, but also revulsion at some of the Communists' tactics. While peasant support swelled the ranks of the PLA, however, it still fails to explain how the Communists were victorious against larger, better-equipped Nationalist forces. The answer must be found in the military and logistical aspects of the war.

The military angle

Mao had created a strong and organised party from its base at Yen-an. With total conviction and an utter disregard for US intervention, Mao mounted three successful campaigns after 1945. Securing Manchuria and its vital mineral wealth, the Communists defeated the Nationalist offensive there in 1947–48, isolating urban garrisons by destroying rail and air links and starving the populations into surrender.

Following the seizure of Mukden and Changchun in October 1948, the PLA moved on to the conventional

counteroffensive in 1948–49, seizing the Xuzhou railway junction before taking Beijing in January 1949. Huge quantities of American equipment fell into Communist hands. Nanjing fell without a fight in April, Shanghai in May. Chiang and 300,000 loyal troops withdrew to Taiwan. By October, following mopping-up operations in the south, the civil war was over.

Though smaller, the Communist Army possessed higher morale, fired by the rhetoric of class struggle. Living off the land they occupied, they initially used a 'passive defence' strategy to withdraw in the face of superior numbers, and attack to wear the enemy down. Conscription of 2 million peasant labourers helped supply the armies with food and materials.

The occupying Russian forces were crucial in the early stages of the campaign. Though outwardly favouring a Communist–Nationalist coalition (Stalin personally doubted whether Mao could rule alone and feared US intervention), they secretly supplied money and made available to Lin Bao, commander in Manchuria, abandoned Japanese weapons and 200,000 Korean Communists.

The Americans, by contrast, proved an ambivalent ally to Chiang. Indeed, US contact with Mao in 1943 and special envoy George Marshall's visit to Yen-an in December 1945 concluded positively about Mao's land policy. Assessments of the Nationalists, by contrast, were often unfavourable. Rampant corruption suggested that supporting Chiang was like pouring money down a 'rat hole'. Fear of Soviet influence was perhaps the only reason why the Americans maintained their support for the Nationalists. Marshall urged a Communist–Nationalist power-sharing government, but talks in 1946 failed as Nationalist attacks on Communist positions undermined consensus. The talks, however, inadvertently gave Mao much-needed breathing space.

It is incorrect, though, to accuse the USA of contributing to Chiang's downfall. US policy was muddled and incoherent, but its priority was Europe and it was understandably unwilling to commit more than 55,000 advisers, preferring to concentrate military power on the Pacific-rim islands. The USA did, however, airlift 100,000 of Chiang's troops from Chongqing to the northern cities of Manchuria. It also gave Chiang vast amounts of money — \$570 million

Questions

- What were the similarities and differences between the Communist victories in Russia (1917) and China (1949)?
- To what extent can the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s be traced back to the era of the civil war?
- What were the implications of the Communist victory in China for Cold War politics in Asia after 1949?

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in 1948 alone — even though too much help might prejudice Chiang's position with his own people, who resented domination by an 'imperialist power'.

The 'rat hole'

If the blame doesn't lie with the USA, and Communist popularity and zeal provide only partial explanations, then the argument that the Nationalists threw victory away remains the most compelling. Chiang's catalogue of errors was large. Foremost was his military strategy. Attempting to wrest Manchuria from the Communists extended supply lines, taking the war into areas outside of Nationalist control. Patient consolidation of the southern and central regions would have been better. Though the Nationalists seized Manchurian cities in 1945, their defence was hampered by carelessness and corruption, allowing the Communists to slowly strangle each city.

Accusations against key generals that they were Communist 'sleepers' remain a matter for debate, but rivalries, jealousies and sheer incompetence among the Nationalists were major problems. Chiang was quick to blame his generals' 'muddle-headed' planning, but his tendency to promote on the basis of personal loyalty rather than merit hampered the armies. Military fiasco was compounded by political error. Allowing administrators who had collaborated with the Japanese to remain in office cemented the belief that Chiang favoured the Japanese over the Communists. This allowed Mao to appear as a nationalist champion.

Economic disaster

Most important of all in undermining the Nationalist cause was a disastrous economic policy. Printing money to fund the war machine induced hyperinflation. Waves of strikes, which hit cities like Shanghai in 1947, were partly orchestrated by Communist agents but primarily a response to the steady rise in unemployment. Wage and price fixing failed and attempts to stabilise the currency with gold in 1948 proved short-lived. Over-printing of the new currency soon induced another inflationary spiral. The Nationalists' response to instability was terror. But public executions alienated the urban population from which the Nationalists drew their strength. Communist terror, while more brutal, was more low-key in rural areas.

Conclusion

The Nationalists were never really the party of the people. They drew their core support from urban business elites, and their failure to stem chronic corruption, speculation and plundering of factory stocks alienated a large percentage of the population who might have provided support. Morale in the army was low and desertion rates high. Many soldiers were conscripted and conditions were brutal and rations poor, despite the Nationalists controlling China's

Web link

A detailed history of China from ancient days until the latter part of the twentieth century can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/3abhya

A biographical history of Mao's life can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/2dyeo46

Chronology

- 1911 Fall of the last Imperial dynasty and establishment of the first republic under President Sun Yat-sen.
- 1921 Foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- 1927 Chiang Kai-shek defeats warlords to establish his rule as leader of the Kuomintang (KMT) and begins war against the Communists.
- 1931 Japan invades Manchuria.
- 1934 Mao becomes leader of the CCP after the Long March, making his base at Yanan.
- 1937 Sino-Japanese War begins. CCP and KMT form a 'united front' against the Japanese, though unofficially fighting continues.
- 1945 Civil war between the CCP and KMT begins again.
- 1949 Mao proclaims the victory of the Communists and the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

most productive land. No wonder their armies often disintegrated in the face of the Communist onslaught.

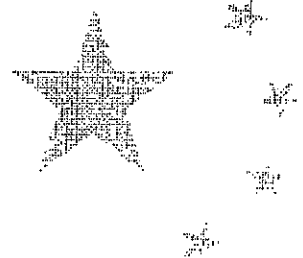
It is therefore in hard to question a US report that claimed the Nationalists were prone to 'apathy and defeatism'. Though most of the population feared the Communists, many were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. There was a fatalistic acceptance of the Communist triumph — none more evident than Chiang's careful preparation of Taiwan in the 1930s as his place of final refuge. Acheson, while not entirely right, was not far from the truth.

See 20thCenturyHistoryReviewOnline for a revision activity to go with this article.

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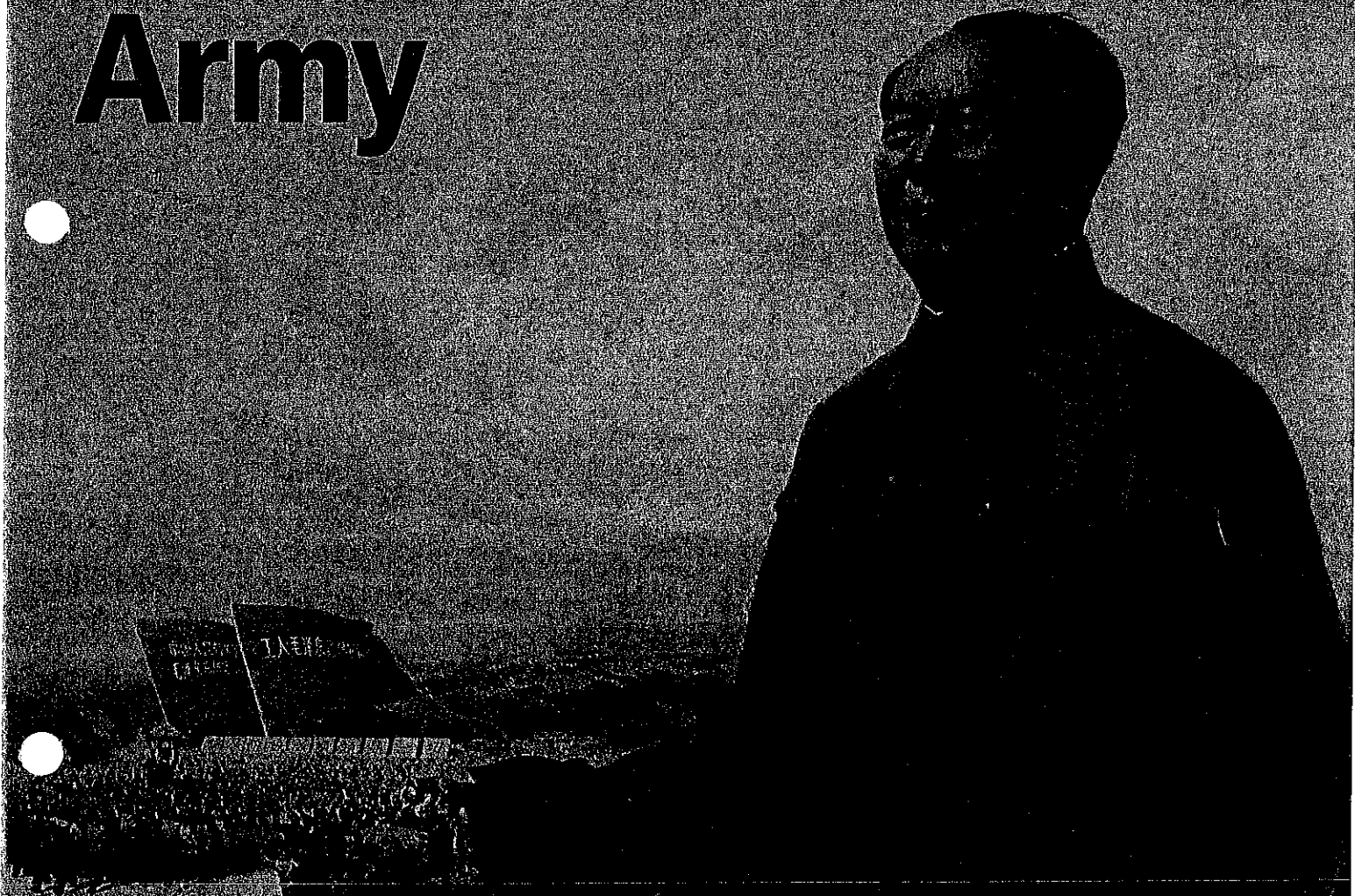
Further reading

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- Fenby, J. (2005) *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the China he Lost*, Free Press.
- Lynch, M. (2010) *The Chinese Civil War*, Osprey.
- Short, P. (2004) *Mao: a Life*, John Murray.
- Spence, J. (1990) *The Search for Modern China*, Hutchinson.



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Mao and the People's Liberation Army



Source A

A Chinese propaganda poster of Mao from the time of the Cultural Revolution

Andrew Flint explores how Mao used the People's Liberation Army to control China

In 1949 the Communist leader Mao Zedong stood on the Tiananmen gate of the Forbidden City, former home of the emperors in Beijing, and announced the formation of the People's Republic of China: 'The Chinese people,' he declared, 'have finally stood up'. Despite his rhetoric, as he spoke Mao knew that the creation of a new state did not mean that the Communists controlled China.

After years of humiliation by Western powers, invasion by the Japanese, and civil war, China was ruined, bankrupt and chaotic. Parts of the country suffered famine while an estimated 1 million bandits roamed the countryside. 'The task facing Mao,' writes historian J. A. G. Roberts, 'was truly herculean.' Mao's solution to his problems could be found in his infamous declaration that 'All political power lies in the barrel of a gun'. Only the gun, representing his military force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), could enable him to consolidate his power:

■ How did Mao use the PLA to control China?

Source B

These are the lyrics to the PLA anthem
Forward! Forward! Forward!
Our army soars towards the Heavens,
Stepping on the earth of Motherland
Carrying the hope of our people.
We are an invincible power!

We are the sons and brothers of the workers,
We are the arms of the People!
Fearless and unyielding, to fight bravely
Until we exterminate all counter-revolutionaries.
The banner of Mao Zedong flutters high!

■ Why was the army so vital to his personal dictatorship, even in peacetime?

The Korean War, 1950–53

The Korean War enabled Mao to use the PLA to legitimate his rule through a combination of military success and propaganda. The war broke out in June 1950 when Communist North Korea attacked South Korea, a capitalist Western ally. China joined to aid its Communist ally, while the West supported the South.

Although no match for the technological and military superiority of the enemy forces, Mao's troops were more motivated. Moreover, hardened

Source C

Extract from *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, a memoir by Zhisui Li, Mao's private doctor for over 20 years. The book is banned in China.

'I followed the war closely, surprised and thrilled that China was not only holding its own but was actually defeating the United States in battle after battle, recalled Mao's doctor, Zhisui Li. It was the first time in more than a century that China was engaged in war with a foreign power without losing face. I was appalled, too, over reports that the United States was using bacteriological warfare in Korea. Even as the Korean War dragged on inconclusively, I was proud to be Chinese.'

from *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Zhisui Li, 1996

Source D

Chairman Mao

The American army is politically a reactionary military organisation of the imperialists and basically a paper tiger. But it is an army with modernised equipment and fighting power. Its training and equipment are very different from the reactionary nationalist Guomindang troops. To destroy thoroughly such enemy troops, it is necessary to build up a strong modernised national defence army.

Quoted in *The Search for Modern China* by Jonathan Spence, 1990

by the bitter fighting of the Second World War and the civil war, the PLA was an effective fighting force. The PLA's struggle gave rise to heroic tales of model-soldier heroes that publicised the values of sacrifice, discipline and commitment to Mao. One lady recalled being so impressed with the stories of Chinese soldiers capturing Americans by 'carrying them away whilst they slept in their sleeping bags' that she donated all her wages to the war effort.

Fighting ended in a stalemate but the value to Mao's new regime was considerable. After years of humiliation at the hands of the West, he had fought them to a standstill and in so doing had proved them to be, in his words, mere 'Paper Tigers'. The Korean War greatly enhanced Mao's prestige abroad and among the Chinese people.

The reunification campaigns

Aside from fighting abroad, Mao also used the PLA to consolidate his control within China. The PLA played a crucial role in establishing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) power, particularly in the remote border regions, far from Beijing.

Mao sent the PLA to seize control of Tibet. The official reason for this was in order to 'liberate it from imperialist oppression', but in reality Mao's aim was to remove the threat of a rival belief system, Buddhism, and curtail loyalties to an alternative leadership, the Dalai Lama. 'Liberation from whom and what?' asked the confused Tibetans and 60,000 resisted the invasion, but to no avail.

Similarly, Xinjiang province in the West had a large Muslim population with ethnic ties to national groups in the Soviet Union. Mao feared the growth of Russian influence so the PLA attacked. It had cleared all resistance by March 1950. In the South Guangdong was purged of nationalist forces, who were forced to flee to Taiwan. Finally, the PLA hunted down the bandits and thousands were executed. The CCP had effectively imposed its one party state.

The economic role of the PLA

Alongside its military role, the PLA played a key part in building popular support for the Communist regime through economic assistance. It rebuilt China's shattered infrastructure: soldiers built bridges, roads, rail links and canals. In 1954 soldiers from the First Field Army were transformed into the Xinjiang Production and Construction Army. They were given the task of helping peasants with land reclamation and developing agriculture and mining resources.

The wives of officers were compelled to work in the cooperative farms, while work teams of PLA soldiers contributed up to a week of free labour a year to support local construction or irrigation projects, help in primary schools, teach night classes and

1 Study the lyrics in Source B. What can you learn about the role of the PLA? The tune can be found on the internet. Listen to it and decide how you think it is meant to make the Chinese people listening to it feel about the new People's Republic of China.

2 How useful is Source C?

3 Study Source D and explain why the PLA was so important to Mao.

4 Mao wanted to use the PLA to spread loyalty and commitment to communism. Do you think Source F achieves this aim?

repair farm tools. Every 50 men were commanded to jointly raise at least one pig to help the food supply. The PLA was also forced to join local peasants to hunt down rats, sparrows, flies and mosquitoes to prevent diseases spreading. PLA men were even forced to collect their own excrement to be supplied to farmers as fertiliser.

The army itself represented an economic opportunity: many poor peasants welcomed the opportunities that a military career offered. One female soldier enlisted, she said, because 'the alternative was feeding pigs in the countryside'. So important was the loyalty of the PLA to Mao that its members even received exemption from some laws: when the divorce rate rose as a result of the 1950 Marriage Law, a special clause was added to prevent the wives of PLA soldiers from divorcing their husbands. Mao had little interest in the standard of living of his people, but he knew that the PLA could be used effectively to build popular support for his regime.

Be like Comrade Lei Feng!

When Mao's misguided economic policies during the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) sparked an appalling famine, Mao was forced to the political margins by his rivals within the CCP — Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Bitter, Mao plotted to return to his former glory. Once again he used the PLA to his advantage.

Army propaganda turned one rank and file soldier, Lei Feng, into an ideological role model, a national hero to be revered. After he died in an accident while on duty his diary was published. Extracts

Source F

An extract from Lei Feng's diary

I felt particularly happy this morning when I got up, because last night I had dreamed of our great leader Chairman Mao. And it so happens that today is the Party's 40th anniversary. Today I have so much to tell the Party, so much gratitude to the Party. I am like a toddler, and the Party is like my mother, who helps me, leads me, and teaches me to walk. My beloved Party, my loving mother, I am always your loyal son.

Quoted in *Mao, A Life* by Philip Short, 1999

recalled his service in washing the feet of his tired comrades and darning their socks while helping the company cooks clean cabbages. Posters showed him digging wells for peasants and helping old ladies to cross the road, all the while exhorting greater commitment to the Communist cause with the slogan: 'It is glorious to be a nameless hero'. Mao declared, 'Be like Comrade Lei Feng', encouraging others to follow Lei Feng's example of revolutionary zeal and loyalty to Mao.

The Little Red Book

In 1961 the PLA newspaper began to publish a quotation from Mao every day. Soldiers were ordered to cut out these quotations and compile their own collections to study. Army leader Lin Biao issued the first book of Mao's quotations, the so-called *Little Red Book*, calling for the PLA to follow its teachings. This indoctrination ensured that Mao could depend on the loyalty of the army.

Source E

Posters of the PLA were used by Chairman Mao to instil 'revolutionary zeal' into the Chinese people





Source G

Chinese Red Guards reading from the *Little Red Book of Thoughts of Chairman Mao* (c. 1970)

The Cultural Revolution

In 1965 Mao launched a campaign to remove his rivals. He exhorted young radicals, the Red Guards, to denounce and purge his enemies as 'capitalist roaders'. He commanded Lin Biao to use the PLA to transport Red Guards to gigantic rallies in Beijing where his mere appearance whipped them into a frenzy of revolutionary violence against his enemies. Liu and Deng were purged.

Then, when the Red Guards took their campaigns too far and attacked Maoist loyalists within the party, Mao used the PLA to crush them. Finally, Mao turned on PLA members themselves as he feared a military coup. 'Why do we have so many soldiers around here?' he complained at one party

meeting. He reversed his earlier slogans. Now he declared: 'Let the PLA learn from the People'.

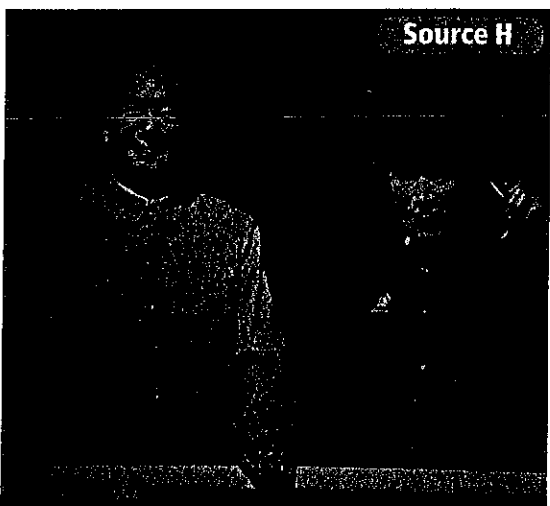
Convinced he was to be purged himself, Lin Biao fled from Mao's security forces in such a panic that his escape plane was not fully fuelled before takeoff and he was killed when it crashed. Large numbers of PLA soldiers were reassigned to do manual labour, and the army was badly weakened. One recent US military strategic report noted that the Cultural Revolution left China 'with a military with no credible fighting power'. Mao stood unrivalled once more.

Conclusion

Mao's portrait still hangs outside the Tiananmen gate. The ruling government of China remains his Communist Party. His enduring legacy is in no small part due to the role of the PLA. Its importance meant the CCP and the army were, in effect, almost impossible to distinguish from each other. Indeed, those who cite Mao's description of the nature of political power often neglect the second half of the statement — not only did political power derive from the power of the gun but, said Mao, it was crucial that 'the Party controls the gun'.

Thus, the PLA was vital in the CCP's consolidation of power. Yet in truth at times it did not serve the party's interests either. It might be more accurate to describe the PLA as the 'power behind the dictatorship'. In the final analysis it was clear that it was not the party, but always, only ever Mao himself, who in reality wielded 'the gun'. HS

- 5 Examine Source G and decide what kinds of attributes and attitudes Mao was trying to instil.
- 6 What can you infer from Source G about how Mao used the army to bolster his cult of personality?



Source H

Mao and Lin Biao, the minister of defence

- 7 Study Source H. Research Lin and answer the question: 'How important was Lin in helping Mao consolidate his dictatorship?'

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Argus/Fotolia

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?

Andrew Flint

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.

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.

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

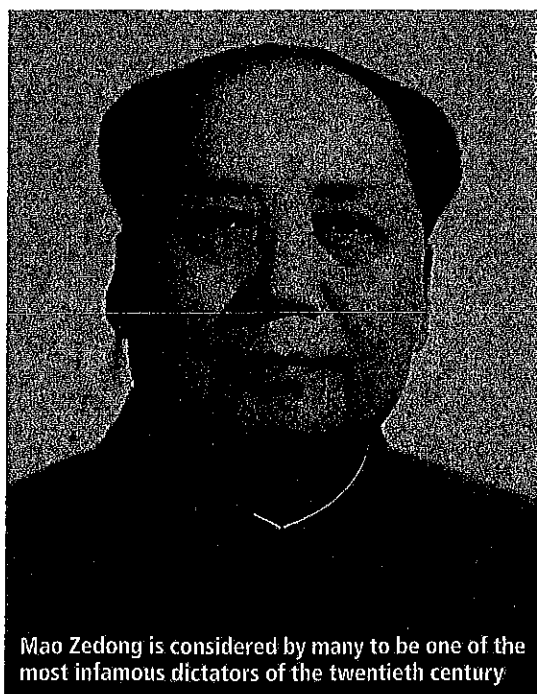
Ever adaptable, Mao co-opted Confucian respect for the elderly to rid the regime of the 'national bourgeoisie' and to bolster his personality cult as a champion of the poor. At one 'speak bitterness' meeting to denounce businessmen, an 80-year-old woman came forward on her walking stick, confronted the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

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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.



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'.

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', 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

'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.

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

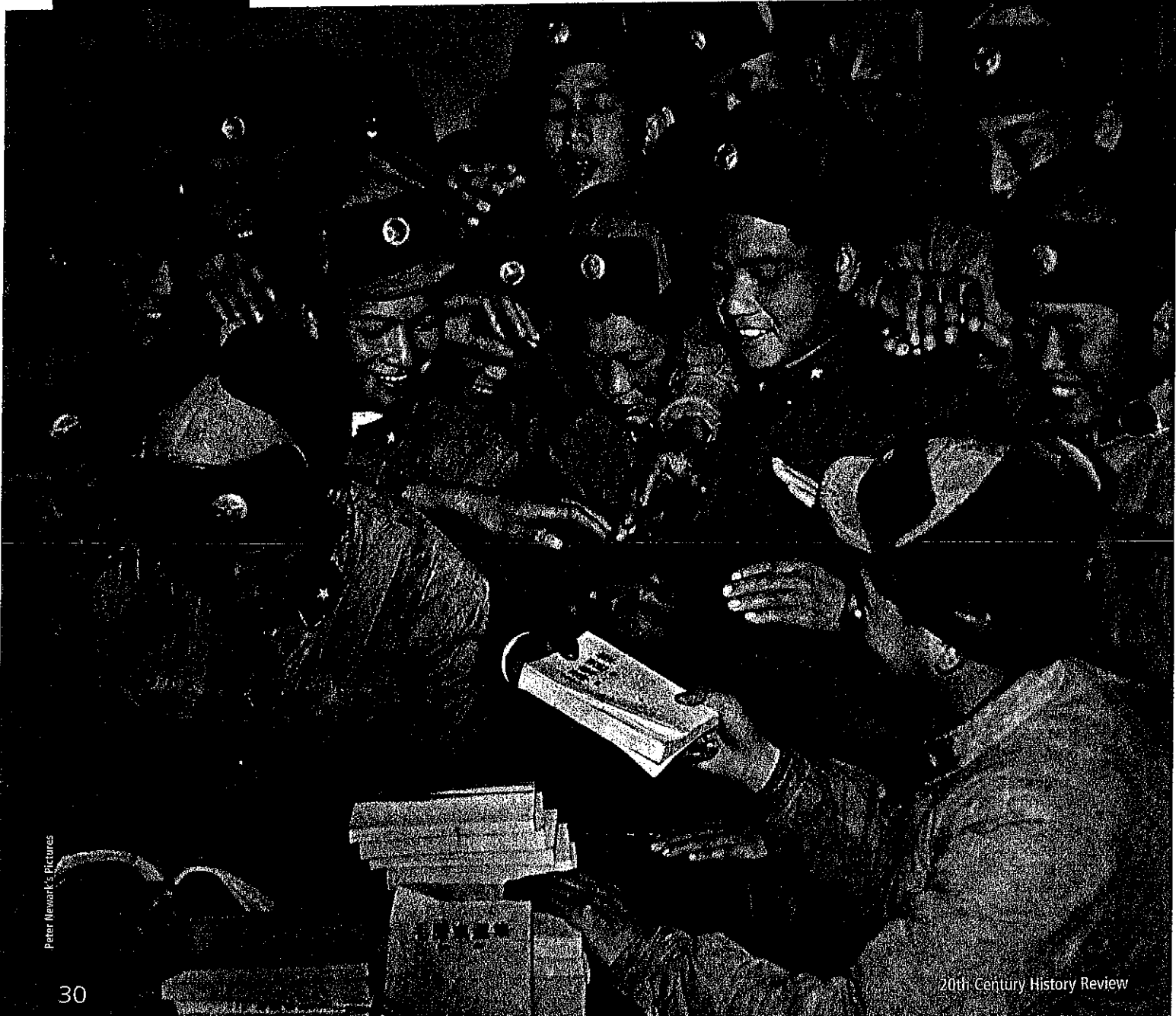
Questions

- 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 : 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



Peter Newark's Pictures

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

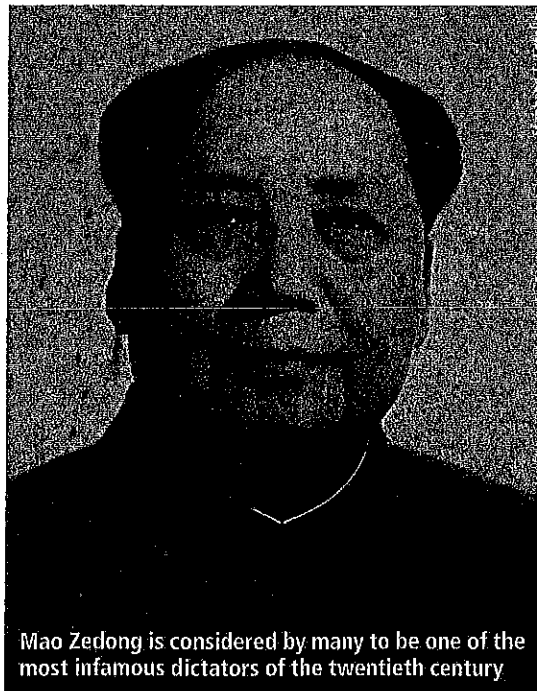
Ever adaptable, Mao co-opted Confucian respect for the elderly to rid the regime of the 'national bourgeoisie' and to bolster his personality cult as a champion of the poor. At one 'speak bitterness' meeting to denounce businessmen, an 80-year-old woman came forward on her walking stick, confronted the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

Can
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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.

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The Hundred Flowers and the Anti-Rightist Campaigns

Introduction:

In 1949, the Chinese Civil War ended with the victory of the Mao Zedong's Communist Party (CCP) over the Nationalists. Soon opponents of the new regime were under attack. Those suspected of working with the Nationalists had their property confiscated. Landowners had their land taken away. Anyone suspected of being a spy was imprisoned, deported or worse. However, in February 1957 Mao Zedong appeared to suggest that his government would no longer be intolerant of opposition. "Let a Hundred Flowers blossom," he declared, "And a hundred schools of thought contend." The different "schools" meant different ideas and beliefs. People were encouraged to offer suggestions on how to improve the situation in China, and they did so, suggesting reforms such as less censorship, more rights for schools to teach ideas other than Communism. Some even suggested that Mao himself give up some his authority. Yet no sooner had they answered Mao's call did he launch a campaign of repression. This 'Anti-Rightist' campaign meant thousands of those who had offered suggestions were imprisoned. The episode has puzzled historians ever since: why did Mao act in such an apparently contradictory manner?

Flagrant Flowers or Poisonous Weeds: Why did Mao launch the Hundred Flowers Campaign?

One possible reason was that Mao was setting a trap for his opponents. Chang and Halliday believe Mao had "set a trap," by encouraging non-Communists to speak out so that he could use this as an excuse to imprison them. In February 1956, the new leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev had made his famous 'Secret Speech.' In it he had criticised the former leader Stalin for being a dictator and using terror tactics to control opponents. Although aimed at Stalin, these criticisms from its closest ally, a country that China referred to as its "big brother" were dangerous: Mao had used many of the same tactics as Stalin. According to Chang and Halliday, this made Mao nervous about "being too blatant about launching a purge" lest in open himself up to more criticism for being too domineering so "he cooked up a devious plan...inviting people to speak out so he could then use what they said as an excuse to victimise them." Two other Chinese writers agree: Han Suyin agrees that the campaign was "a deliberate strategy by Mao" whilst Nien Cheng refers to the "treachery of Mao" for inviting frank and constructive criticism" only then "harshly punishing those who gave it."

For historians who view the Hundred Flowers campaign as a trap, Mao was a deeply paranoid leader who feared opponents plotting against him. They point to the fact that Mao's speech asking for the comments on the performance of the Party was never publically published at the time in China. When it was finally published in June, after the anti-rightist campaign had begun, it was radically different: gone were the promises of a real and open discourse. Instead, the published transcript accused critics of "trying to overthrow the CCP." Had Mao succeeded in encouraging his opponents to implicate themselves as enemies, only now for him to reveal his true intention? This is certainly possible: Mao was certainly a devious leader who often changed his policies to confuse and trap his opponents. Certainly Mao wanted people to believe that he had changed the speech deliberately, that it was, as Breslin puts it, "a subtle plot to flush out class traitors." However, other historians have questioned whether this was in fact a deliberate strategy. They suggest that the speech was changed not because of a clever plan but because Mao had realised he had made a mistake in giving people freedom to criticise the party. Now he wanted people to believe he had been tricking them all along. If people did not believe that the play had been cleverly designed by Mao he would have looked foolish. "Since his original encouragement of debate could not be wiped from the slate," writes Fenby, "the whole thing had to be turned on its head to provide fresh proof of the leader's wisdom." Not all historians agree. As for the idea that it was all a clever plan by the CCP: "they would say that, wouldn't they" writes Breslin.

Was the campaign a genuine call for more democracy?

Although Mao certainly was a devious leader, other historians have suggested alternative motives. Philip Short, who has written a biography of Mao, argues that Mao genuinely wanted to open a discussion about the way forward for China. "Even Mao," he writes, "was unsure what it would produce." For Short, Mao really was attempting to create a mix of democracy and dictatorship, without any clear idea of the end result: "Let's try it and see what its like," said Mao. Another historian, Lee Feigon agrees. Rather than a trap, he believes that Mao was attempting to "change the political climate." Although Mao's policies of land reform had been popular with peasants who had received land previously owned by landlords, this had not increased production significantly: in 1957 food production only increased by one percent. It may have been that the Hundred Flowers campaign was a genuine attempt to encourage educated intellectuals to come forward with advice and answers to this problem. This was particularly important because most of the Communist Party were peasants: they did not possess the expertise needed for modern economic planning and development. In previous years, the intellectuals had been intimidated into not speaking their mind. Now Mao needed them to provide him with advice on how to modernise agriculture, in order, writes Feigon, to "stimulate innovation and initiative."

China has 'Stood Up': Was Mao over confident?

Another possibility is that Mao acted not out of fear of his opponents, but precisely because he was feeling optimistic. The early years of the Peoples Republic had been a success. Communist control over the whole of China had been consolidated through a combination of popular policies and repression. Areas far from Beijing such as Xinjiang and Tibet had been brought under control by the Communist People's Liberation Army. After years of devastating Civil War, the First Five Year Plan had successfully stimulated industrial recovery. In foreign policy China had successfully fought the capitalist west to a standstill in Korea. Policies such as the rounding up of bandit gangs and drug dealers had been popular. After years of humiliation at the hands of the West, China had, in Mao's words, "Finally Stood up." "By asking for a verdict on the party's record so far," writes Breslin, "he expected a ringing endorsement of his own policy" that would increase his personal prestige. Instead, Mao was shocked at the strength of the criticism that the Communists received. The CCP writes Breslin, "was not as popular as he had thought."

Enticing Snakes out of their lairs: The Intellectuals speak out

In magazines, posters and rallies people began to speak out. They complained about the harsh treatment of political opponents, the lack of freedom of speech in books, newspapers and College campuses. Many complained about economic inequalities, criticising their low wages and comparing them to the privileged lifestyle of the Party elites. "Who are the people who enjoy a higher standard of living?" one critic asked. "They are the party members and cadres who wore worn-out shoes in the past" but now "travel in saloon cars." Opponents denounced the CCP and compared its methods to those used by the Nazis at Auschwitz. Mao himself was not immune to the criticism: on poster warned that "dissatisfied peasants could throw Chairman Mao's portrait into the toilet." Mao was shocked. According to his personal doctor, Li Zhisui, he "stayed in bed...depressed." Although "apparently immobilised" Li writes, "He was rethinking his strategy, plotting the revenge." When he re-emerged from his isolation, he launched the anti-rightist campaign. By the end of the year over 300,000 intellectuals had been branded "rightists. Blacklisted, their careers were ruined. If they were lucky they were sent to the countryside to learn the value of hard labour working amongst the peasants. Many were sent to the Laogai, Mao's "Reform through Labour camps." Others committed suicide to avoid such a terrifying fate.

Conclusion

As ever, Mao's true motives are difficult to accurately gauge. In reality, a synthesis of interpretations may be appropriate. It seems that Mao did indeed genuinely want increased debate and discussion. However, this did not signal a real desire to share power. At the time Mao was struggling with other CCP leaders over the pace of economic development: Mao wanted to institute Communist policies rapidly, whilst others were more cautious. He hoped that his call for debate would generate criticism of those leaders who opposed him. Humiliated, they would be forced to stand aside and Mao would be able to institute his own ideas. Instead, Mao was shocked when criticism spread from the Party to himself personally. Given that Mao was already nervous about Khrushchev's criticism he moved quickly to crush his opposition. The anti-rightist campaign was not evidence of a plot, but of a shocked and nervous leader seeking to cover his tracks and protect his authority. But then, perhaps Mao had no plan at all: in later years Mao recalled that he had acted like the Monkey King, a character from Chinese folklore who creates anarchy, insulting the Gods and causing upset for the sake of it. "We've been the Monkey King," he said, "upsetting heaven." Whatever the answers, as was so often was the case in Mao's China, the cost of his indecision and increasing paranoia was paid by the Chinese people themselves.

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