

The CCP: Still hiding the truth about China's 'liberation'

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China today is a far cry from the mass starvation, state terror, and endless purges of the years under Mao Zedong. Thanks to a limited opening of the economy after the Chairman's demise, many ordinary people have been allowed to improve their livelihoods. Today, China is the world's second largest economy and America's largest creditor. Politically, however, China remains a one-party state. Much greater political openness, freedom of speech and access to information are necessary if the country is to sustain its economic growth. Unfortunately, the government appears to be moving in the opposite direction. An unwillingness to come to terms with the Communist Party's sordid past is part of the problem.

In the People's Republic of China, the revolution that brought the communists to power in 1949 is known as "liberation." To this day, the first years of the new regime are often described as a 'Golden Age' – a honeymoon period between the party and the people, in contrast to the cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966. But as I discovered while I was researching the 1950s in the Communist Party archives in China, there is an abundance of evidence – ranging from secret police reports and inquiries into rebellions in the countryside, to statistics on the number of victims executed during land reform and letters of complaint written by ordinary people – that points at a very different story. Calculated terror and systematic violence, rather than popular support and a moral mandate, were at the heart of liberation.

The communist triumph was not a spontaneous peasant uprising, but a Soviet-backed military conquest that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people. In 1948, the communists laid siege to Changchun for five months – starving out a Nationalist garrison stationed inside the Manchurian stronghold. At least 160,000 civilians also died of hunger during that blockade. Other cities were besieged. Unwilling to undergo the same fate, Beijing capitulated.

The land reform that followed liberation carefully targeted a minority of village leaders, who were denounced as "landlords," "tyrants" or "traitors," even though they were barely better off than their neighbors. But unlike Stalin, who had the kulaks liquidated by the security forces, Mao forced people to turn on each other, as they were forced in "struggle meetings" to denounce, humiliate, kill and sometimes bury alive their victims. The new society had to be baptized with a large enough quantity of blood to make any return to the past impossible. Up to two million people were killed, and even the children of some victims were persecuted as "little landlords."

The violence continued with a Great Terror, unleashed in October 1950, the very moment that 200,000 Chinese troops crossed the border into North Korea to fight the Americans. Like steel production or grain output, death came with a quota, as Mao's ordered that one per thousand of the population be killed. As party officials vied to outdo each other, many more people vanished or were executed in stadiums. Some were secretly murdered along rivers, near ravines or deep inside the forests. Bo Yibo, father of Bo Xilai, the party leader on trial in China today, estimated that some two million people lost their lives during the terror. Many more ended up in labor camps strewn across the country.

Stalin was the only man capable of restraining Mao. After the death of his master in Moscow in 1953, Mao cranked up the pace of collectivization. By 1956, farmers had been reduced to the status of bonded servants, as their land now belonged to the state. Their tools were shared and their daily schedules were determined by local cadres who gave them work points for their labor. In the cities, private enterprise was squashed, as shopkeepers and entrepreneurs had to turn over their assets to the state. Briefly, in the second half of 1956, Mao was forced by Khrushchev's secret speech on de-Stalinization to relieve the pressure on the Chinese population. He badly miscalculated the extent of popular discontent, as tens of thousands of workers went on strike, farmers left the collectives in droves, and intellectuals clamored for freedom and democracy. He put Deng Xiaoping in charge of a ferocious campaign that crushed all opposition to the party.

After decades of propaganda about the peaceful liberation of China, few people in China remember the victims of the Communist Party's rise to power. In Mao's hometown of Xiangtan alone, prestige projects worth \$15 billion are shooting up to honor his 120th birthday. An updated version of the book featuring Chairman Mao's quotations, popularly known as the little red book, is eagerly awaited in some quarters.

The People's Republic wants to keep the terrible foundations of its regime hidden from public view. If more widely scrutinized, the country's bloody liberation and disastrous record in government would undermine the legitimacy of the Communist Party's claim to power. It is partly for that reason that the future of political freedom in China remains uncertain.