Review - Mao's Great Famine

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On 18 November 1957 at an international summit in Moscow, Premier Nikita Khrushchev boasted that, within the next fifteen years, the Soviet Union would surpass the output of important products in the USA. Chairman Mao Zedong, founder and leader of the People's Republic of China, who had been locked in a game of one-upmanship with Khrushchev since he succeeded Stalin, immediately announced that China would outstrip British steel production – still then a major industrial power – within fifteen years. And with that statement, the Great Leap Forward was launched.

Over the next four years, as figures such as Francois Mitterrand and Conservative MP John Temple reported that the country was making "great progress", China was gripped by the worst famine in history as millions were starved, beaten, tortured or worked to death. In ***Mao's Great Famine,*** winner of the 2011 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, Professor Frank Dikötter has used newly available archive material to elucidate the magnitude of the disaster and demonstrate why responsibility for the catastrophe must ultimately be laid with Mao.

The biggest revelation in the book is the revised estimate of unnecessary deaths during the program of rapid industrialisation. Previous estimates based on official population statistics, including the census figures of 1953, 1964, and 1982, have ranged from 15 to 13 million excess deaths. Using large volumes of archival material recently opening up under a new archive law – and with specific reference to contemporaneous public security reports and abundant secret reports collated by party committees in the last months of the Great Leap Forward – Dikötter argues that at least 45million people died.

The new archival material available also includes detailed minutes of top party meetings, unexpurgated drafts of key leadership speeches, surveys of working conditions in the countryside, investigations into cases of mass murder, confessions of leaders responsible for millions of deaths, reports compiled by teams sent in to discover the extent of the famine during the last stages of the famine, accounts of peasant resistance during the campaign, and many more.

The full extend of what was said and known behind closed doors in the upper echelons of power will not be known until, and if, the Central Party Archives in Beijing opens its doors to public researchers but by using over a thousand archival documents collected from dozens of party archives and painstakingly collated over several years, Dikötter is able to present the most authoritative and comprehensive account of the famine to date.

In so doing he is able to present a harrowing account not only of the human loss but the damage wrought to the nature and the built environment that exacerbated the misery and hastened the deaths of millions. Dikötter estimates that between 30-40% of all housing was pulled down to make fertilizer, to straighten roads, to relocate villagers or simply to punish owners, in what he describes as the "greatest demolition of real estate in human history."

The first two parts of the book explain how and why the Great Leap came about, understanding the decision within the fraught Sino-Soviet dynamic. Part 3 explores the scale of the destruction across agriculture, industry, housing and trade – Dikötter is able to show with greater accuracy than before the volume of food China was continuing to export to America and others while millions starved at home. Part 4 looks at the extent of popular resistance and the response from party officials while Part 5 explores the lives of children, women and the elderly. The final and most wrenching part looks at the many ways in which people died from torture, murder, suicide, disease, accidents and starvation.

It was a common lament from workers in the cities and villages that if only Mao knew about the extent of the hardships then his well-intentioned plans could be put right. Contemporary experts, like economist Justin Lin Yifu, have excused Mao along similar grounds arguing that he didn't orchestrate the famine knowingly or deliberately.

Dikötter's research rebuts this narrative and shows that Mao was both aware of the disaster and indifferent to the lives lost. In one particularly callous comment, he said: "When there is not enough to eat people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill." Local party officials presented frequently fabricated, exaggerated or depressed data to central command but the scale of the catastrophe could not be completely hidden from Mao. The second in charge of the regime, Liu Shaoqi, was so shocked at the conditions he

found in his home village he directly and publicly confronted Mao. He extracted some concessions but millions continued to die unnecessarily and Mao would have his revenge on Liu during the Cultural Revolution.

Written in a sober style that elevates the horrors of the period, Dikötter has written a meticulously researched, illuminating and harrowing account of this dark chapter in Chinese history.

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