

Mao Zedong

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From World History in Context

Born: December 26, 1893 in Shoa Shan, Hunan, China

Died: September 09, 1976 in Beijing, China

Nationality: Chinese

Occupation: Head of state

Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was a Chinese statesman whose status as a revolutionary in world history is probably next only to that of Lenin.

More than anyone else in recent times, Mao Zedong, with his supple mind and astute judgment, helped to reshape the social and political structures of his ancient and populous country. In doing so, Mao is likely to influence the destiny of the "third world" as well. Highly literate and sensitive, he was dedicated to a relentless struggle against inequality and injustice; thus at times he was capable of utter ruthlessness. He lived through reform and revolution in the early years of China's awakening nationalism, accepting at first the philosophies behind both movements. With the onset of the warlords' reaction after the revolution of 1911, disillusionment drove him to radicalism. This occurred at a time when Wilsonian self-determination was being ignored at the Paris Peace Conference and the messianic messages of the Russian October Revolution had attracted the attention of Chinese intellectuals, as China itself was passing through a period of traumatic cultural changes. Skeptical of Western sincerity and iconoclastic toward Confucianism, Mao sought inspiration from Marx's class struggle and Lenin's anti-imperialism to become a Communist.

Born in Hunan on Dec. 26, 1893, Mao Zedong did not venture outside his home province until he was 25. Up to then, his formal education was limited to 6 years at a junior normal school where he acquired a meager knowledge of science, learned almost no foreign language, but developed a lucid written style and a considerable understanding of social problems, Chinese history, and current affairs. He was, however, still parochial in the sense that he had inherited the pragmatic and utilitarian tradition of Hunan scholarship with the hope that somehow it would help him in his groping for ways and means to strengthen and enrich his country.

Mao's visit to Peking in 1918 broadened his view. Although his life there was miserable, he was working under the chief librarian of Peking University, who was one of the pioneer Marxists of China. On his return to Hunan in the following year, Mao was already committed to communism. While making a living as a primary schoolteacher, he edited radical magazines, organized trade unions, and set up politically oriented schools of his own in the orthodox manner of Communist agitation among city workers and students. With the inauguration of the Chinese Communist party (CCP) in 1921, of which Mao was one of the 50 founder-members, these activities were pursued with added energy and to a greater depth.

Meanwhile, the major political party, the Kuomintang (KMT), was reorganized, and a coalition was formed between the KMT and CCP on antiwarlord and anti-imperialist principles. Mao's principal task was to coordinate the policies of both parties, an ill-suited role on account of his lack of academic and social standing. In 1925, when the coalition ran into heavy weather, Mao was sent back to Hunan to "convalesce."

Champion of the Peasants

An unfortunate result of this rebuff was that he was completely left out of the nationwide strikes against Japan and Britain in the summer of that year, during which many of his comrades made their mark as leaders of the trade union movement or party politics. A by-product of his "convalescence" was that he discovered the revolutionary potential of the peasants, who had in such great numbers been displaced and pauperized by the misrule of the warlords. From then on Mao switched his attention to this vast underprivileged class of people. He studied them, tried to understand their grievances, and agitated among them.

Mao's newly acquired knowledge and experience enabled him to play a leading role in the peasant movement led by both the KMT and CCP. By 1927 he was in a position to advocate a class substitution in the Chinese Revolution. Instead of the traditional proletarian hegemony, Mao proposed that the poor peasants fill the role of revolutionary vanguard. Shortly after the publication of his *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, the KMT-CCP coalition broke up and the Communists were persecuted everywhere in the country.

Establishment of Soviets

Some survivors of the party went underground in the cities, to continue their struggle as a working-class party; the rest took up arms to defy the government and eventually to set up rural soviets in central and northern China. One of these soviets was Mao's Ching-kang Mountain base area between Kiangsi and Hunan, where he had to rely chiefly on the support of the poor peasants.

Under conditions of siege, the autonomy of these soviets threatened to disrupt the unity of the revolutionary movement, breaking it up into small pockets of resistance like premodern peasant wars. Doctrinally, this development was anything but orthodox Marxism. The center of the CCP, located underground in Shanghai, therefore assigned to itself the task of strengthening its leadership and party discipline. A successful revolution, in its view, had to take the course of a series of urban uprisings under proletarian leadership.

In its effort to achieve this, the center had to curb the growing powers of the soviet leaders like Mao, and it had the authority of the Comintern behind it. Its effort gradually produced results: Mao first lost his control over the army he had organized and trained, then his position in the soviet party, and finally even much of his power in the soviet government.

The Long March

The years of this intraparty struggle coincided with Chiang Kai-shek's successes in his anti-Communist campaigns. Eventually Chiang was able to drive the Communists out of their base areas on the Long March. The loss of nearly all the soviets in central China and crippling casualties and desertions suffered by the Communists in the first stages of the march were sufficient evidence of the ineptitude of the central party leadership. At the historic Tsunyi Conference of the party's Politburo in January 1935, Mao turned the tables against the pro-Russian leaders. On that occasion Mao was elected, thanks mainly to his support from the military, to the chairmanship of the Politburo.

During the low ebb of the revolutionary tide and the hardships of the Long March, those who might have

challenged Mao fell by the wayside, largely through their own fault. By the time the Communists arrived at Yenan, the party had attained a measure of unity, to be further consolidated after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. This was the first truly nationalist war China had ever fought, in which the nation as a whole united to face the common foe. However, from 1939 onward, as the war entered a long period of stalemate, clashes began to occur between KMT and Communist troops.

By early 1941 the united front between the KMT and CCP had come to exist in name only. This new situation called for the emergence of a Communist leader who could rival Chiang in his claim to national leadership in the event of a resumption of the civil war. But this could not be done so long as the CCP remained under the Russian wing.

Events in the early 1940s helped the CCP, in its search for independence, to become nationalistic. Russia, pre-occupied with its war against Hitler, was unable to influence the CCP effectively, and soon the Comintern was dissolved. Mao seized this opportunity to sinicize the Chinese Communist movement in the famous rectification campaign of 1942-1944.

Leader of the Chinese Communists

The personality cult of Mao grew until his thought was written into the party's constitution of 1945 as a guiding principle of the party, side by side with Marxism-Leninism. Under Mao's brilliant leadership the party fought from one victory to another, till it took power in 1949.

Mao's thought now guided the Communists in their way of thinking, their organization, and their action. In giving their faith to Mao's thought, they found unity and strength, an understanding of the nature, strategy, and tactics of the revolution, a set of values and attitudes which made them welcome to the peasant masses, and a style of work and life which differentiated them from the bureaucrats and the romantic, culturally alienated intellectuals.

But Mao's thought had very little to say on the modernization and industrialization of China, on its socialist construction. Therefore, after 1949 the CCP was left to follow the example of Russia, with Russian aid in the years of the cold war. The importance, and relevance, of Mao therefore declined steadily while China introduced its first Five-Year Plan and socialist constitution. Once more the pro-Russian wing of the CCP was on the ascendancy, though still unable to challenge Mao's ideological authority. This authority enabled Mao to fight back by launching the Socialist Upsurge in the Countryside of 1955 and the Great Leap Forward in 1958. The essential feature of these movements was to rely upon the voluntary zeal of the people motivated by a new moral discipline, rather than upon monetary incentives, price mechanism, professionalism, and the legalism of gradual progress. The failure of the Great Leap Forward impaired Mao's power and prestige even further. His critics within the CCP attributed the failure to the impracticability of his mass line of socialist construction; in his own view, the failure was due to inadequate ideological preparation and, perhaps, abortive implementation by the pro-Russian wing of the CCP.

Cultural Revolution

At this juncture, the worsening Sino-Soviet dispute made its fatal impact. The condemnation of Russian "revisionism" cut the pro-Russian wing from its ideological source, and the withdrawal of Russian material aid practically sounded the death knell of China's attempt to emulate the Russian model. In the midst of this, Mao began his comeback.

The groundwork had been laid through the socialist education movement early in the 1960s, which started with the remolding of the People's Liberation Army under the command of Lin Biao. When this had been accomplished, Mao, with the help of the army and young students organized into the Red Guards, waged a fierce struggle against what he called the revisionists in power in his own party. This was the famous cultural revolution of 1966-1969. In this struggle it was revealed how elitist, bureaucratic, and brittle the CCP had become since 1949.

With Mao's victory in the cultural revolution, China became the most politicized nation of the world. No Chinese thought beyond the premises of Mao's thought--a state of affairs reminiscent of the Christianization of Europe in the Middle Ages. By this Mao hoped to whip up the unbound enthusiasm and altruistic spirit of the Chinese masses to work harder while enduring a frugal life. This may be the only way for a poor and populous country like China to accumulate enough capital for its rapid industrialization.

By the time Mao was in his late 70s, his lifework was essentially done, although he retained power until the end. Physically debilitated, suffering from a lifetime of effort and Parkinson's Disease, Mao's ability to rule in new and innovative ways to meet the demands of China's modernization grew increasingly enfeebled. To what degree his radical actions in his later years were due to his illness and age is a matter of debate among historians. His final years were marked by bitter maneuvering among his clique to succeed him upon his death. One of his final major acts was to reopen contact with the United States. In September of 1976, Mao died. Mao was undoubtedly the key figure in China in the 20th century and one of the century's most important movers and reformers. He had devoted his life to the advancement of a peasant class terrorized for centuries by those in power. However, in pursuit of his own goals, Mao himself could be violent and dictatorial. To Mao must go the credit for developing a revolutionary strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside, a mass line of political thought and application to bridge the chasm between the leaders and the led, and, finally, a strategy of permanent violent and nonviolent revolution to guard against the recurrence of that kind of bureaucratism which so far in history has always emerged once a revolution is over and revolutionaries have turned into reformers.

Further Readings

- Mao's own writings, *Selected Works* (4 vols., 1961-1965), *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-tung* (1967), and *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (1966; 2d ed. 1967), have all been published in English in Peking. For Mao's own writings also consult Anne Fremantle, *Mao Tse-tung: An Anthology of His Writings* (1954), and Jerome Ch'en, *Mao Papers: Anthology and Bibliography* (1970).
- An understanding of the historical background of Mao's revolutionary activities is provided by Jerome Ch'en, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution* (1965). Another biography is Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-tung* (1966; rev. ed. 1969). Edgar Snow's books *Red Star over China* (rev. ed. 1968), which contains Mao's autobiography, and *The Other Side of the River* (1962) are both excellent works on Mao and the Chinese Communist movement. A brief guide to Mao, his views, and other people's views of him is provided in Jerome Ch'en, *Mao* (1969). See also Harrison Salisbury's *The Long March* (1987); Dic, Wilson's *Mao Tse-tung in the Scales of History*; and Brantly Womack's *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought 1917-1935* (1982). Also useful is Lee Feigon's *Mao: A Reinterpretation* (2002).
- Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951), and Stuart Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (1963; rev. ed. 1969), are also outstanding works as is Siao-Yu, *Mao Tse-tung and I Were Beggars* (1961). Biographies of 500 leaders of the Communist movement in China, including Mao, are in Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark, *Biographic Dictionary of Chinese Communism, 1921-1965* (2 vols., 1971).

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