

## THE GREAT LEAP: "HALF OF CHINA MAY WELL HAVE TO DIE"

(1958-61 \* AGE 64-67)

WITH HIS cult fed and watered among the population, his colleagues cowed into submission, and potential voices of dissent silenced through the "Anti-Rightist" campaign, Mao proceeded to accelerate his Superpower Program, though he still concealed its military nature. The original 1953 schedule of completing "industrialisation" in "ten to fifteen years" was now shortened to eight, seven, or even five—*or possibly three*—years. Mao had been informed that acquisitions from Russia could enable him to break into the superpower league in five years. He fancied he could fulfill his ambition in one "big bang," declaring that "Our nation is like an atom." He called the process the "Great Leap Forward," and launched it in May 1958.

While the nation was told, vaguely, that the goal of the Leap was for China to "overtake all capitalist countries in a fairly short time, and become one of the richest, most advanced and powerful countries in the world," Mao spelled out to small audiences, and strictly confidentially, just what he meant to do once the Leap was completed. On 28 June, he told an elite army group: "Now the Pacific Ocean is not peaceful. It can only be peaceful when we take it over." At this point Lin Biao interjected: "We must build big ships, and be prepared to land [sc. militarily] in Japan, the Philippines and San Francisco." Mao continued: "How many years before we can build such ships? In 1962, when we have xx-xx tons of steel [figures concealed in original] . . ." On 19 August, Mao told select provincial chiefs: "In the future we will set up the Earth Control Committee, and make a uniform plan for the Earth." Mao dominated China. He intended to dominate the world.

For the Chinese population, the Great Leap was indeed an enormous jump—but in the amount of food extracted. This was calculated on the basis, not of what the peasants could afford, but of what was needed for Mao's Program. Mao proceeded by simply asserting that there was going to be an enormous increase in the harvest, and got the provincial chiefs to proclaim that their area would produce an astronomical output. When

harvest time came, the chiefs got selected lackeys down at the grassroots to declare that their areas had indeed produced fantastic crops. Mao's propaganda machine then publicized these claims with great fanfare. The stratospheric harvests and other sky-high claims were called "sputniks," reflecting Mao's obsession with the Russian satellite. On 12 June *People's Daily* reported that in Henan, Mao's No. 1 model province, a "Sputnik Co-operative" had produced 1.8 tons of wheat on one *mu* (1/6th acre)—more than ten times the norm. Claims in this vein were not, as official Chinese history would have us believe, the result of spontaneous boasting by local cadres and peasants. The press was Mao's voice, not the public's.

"Sputnik fields" mushroomed. They were usually created by transplanting ripe crops from a number of fields into a single artificial plot. These were the Maoist equivalent of Potemkin fields—with the key difference that Mao's plots were not intended to fool the ruler, but instead produced by the ruler for the eyes of his distant underlings, grassroots cadres from other collective farms. These cadres were most important to Mao, as they were the people immediately in charge of physically handing over the harvests to the state. Mao wanted them to see these Sputnik fields and then go back and make similar claims, so that the state could say: since you've produced more, we can take more. Cadres who declined to go along were condemned and replaced with others who would. Charades of sky-high yields filled the press, though Peking eventually quietly stopped the transplanting theater, as it caused big losses.

By late July, *People's Daily* was declaring that "we can produce as much food as we want," setting the stage for Mao to assert publicly on 4 August: "We must consider what to do with all this surplus food." This claim about there being surplus food was one that Mao himself could not possibly have believed. Barely six months before, on 28 January, he had acknowledged to the Supreme Council that there was a shortage of food: "What are we going to do as there isn't enough food to eat?" he had asked. His solution was as follows: "No worse than eat less . . . Oriental style . . . It's good for health. Westerners have a lot of fat in their food; the further west one goes the more fat they eat. I say that Western meat-eaters are contemptible." "I think it is good to eat less. What's the point of eating a lot and growing a big stomach, like the foreign capitalists in cartoons?" These airy remarks might well apply to Mao, who had a paunch, but they were irrelevant to famished peasants. In January, Mao had been saying: There isn't enough food, but people can eat less. Six months later, he was saying: There is too much food. Both of these contradictory remarks had the same purpose: to gouge more food out of the peasants.

In September, *People's Daily* reported that "the biggest rice sputnik" yet had produced over 70 tons from less than 1/5th of an acre, which was hundreds of times the norm. This sputnik field was faked by an ambitious

new county boss in Guangxi. At the end of the year, his county reported a grain output that was over three times the true figure. The state then demanded an impossible 4.8 times what it had taken the year before.

Grassroots cadres often resorted to brute force. And if they were judged ineffective, armed police were sent in. On 19 August 1958, Mao instructed his provincial chiefs: "When you order things handed over and they are not handed over, back up your orders with force." Under such pressure, state violence raged across the countryside.

To produce a "justification," Mao repeatedly accused peasants and village cadres of hiding grain. On one occasion, on 27 February 1959, he told his top echelon: "All production teams hide their food to divide among themselves. They even hide it in deep secret cellars, and place guards and sentries . . ." Next day, he asserted again that peasants were "eating carrot leaves during the day, and rice at night . . ." By this he meant that peasants were pretending they had run out of proper food but in fact had good food, which they consumed in secret. Mao revealed his contempt for the peasantry to his inner circle: "Peasants are hiding food . . . and are very bad. There is no Communist spirit in them! Peasants are after all peasants. That's the only way they can behave . . ."

Mao knew perfectly well that the peasants had no food to hide. He had an efficient reporting system, and was on top of what was happening daily around the country. On one batch of reports in April 1959 he noted that there was severe starvation in half the country: "a big problem: 15 provinces—25.17 million people no food to eat"; his response was to ask the provinces to "deal with it," but he did not say how. A report that reached his desk from Yunnan province, dated 18 November 1958, described a wave of deaths from edema—swelling caused by severe malnutrition. Again, Mao's response was to pass the buck: "This mistake is mainly the fault of county-level cadres." Mao knew that in many places people were reduced to eating compounds of earth. In some cases, whole villages died as a result, when people's intestines became blocked.

This nationwide squeeze made it possible for Mao to export 4.74 million tons of grain, worth US\$935 million, in 1959. Exports of other foods also soared, particularly of pork.

The claim about China "having too much food" was trundled out to Khrushchev. When he came to Peking in summer 1958, Mao pressed him for help to make nuclear submarines, which were going to be extremely expensive. Khrushchev asked how China was going to pay. Mao's response was that China had unlimited supplies of food.

Food was also used as a raw material in the nuclear program, which required high-quality fuel. Grain was turned into the purest alcohol. On 8 September, having claimed that there was food to spare, Mao told the Supreme Council that "we have to find outlets for grain in industries, for

example to produce ethyl alcohol for fuel." Grain was therefore used for missile tests, each of which consumed 10 million kg of grain, enough to radically deplete the food intake of 1–2 million people for a whole year.

THE PEASANTS WERE now having to work much harder, and much longer hours, than before. As Mao wanted to raise output without spending any money, he latched on to methods that depended on labor, not investment. It was for this reason that he ordered huge drives to build irrigation systems—dams, reservoirs, canals. Over the four years from 1958, about 100 million peasants were coerced into such projects, moving a quantity of earth and masonry equivalent to excavating 950 Suez Canals, mostly using only hammers, picks and shovels, and sometimes even doors and bed planks from their homes to improvise makeshift carts. Peasants corvéeed for these projects often had to bring not only their own food but their own tools, and in many cases their own materials to put up shelters.

In the absence of safety measures and medical care, accidents were frequent, as were deaths, which Mao well knew. His talks with provincial chiefs about these waterworks are littered with mentions of death tolls. In April 1958 he observed that as Henan (his model) had promised to move 30 billion cubic meters that coming winter, "I think 30,000 people will die." Anhui, another of Mao's favorite provinces, "said 20 billion cubic metres, and I think 20,000 people will die . . ." When senior officials in Gansu province appealed against "destroying human lives" in these projects, Mao had them condemned and punished as a "Rightist anti-Party clique."

Mao wanted instant results, so he promoted a typical slogan: "Survey, Design and Execute Simultaneously," known as the "Three Simultaneouslys." Geological surveying was therefore scanty, or non-existent, so a fourth "simultaneous" usually soon had to be added: Revision.

One well-known project was a canal 1,400 km long across the drought-plagued Yellow Earth Plateau in the northwest. It had to cross 800 mountains and valleys and the 170,000 laborers had to dig caves to sleep in, and forage for herbs to eke out their meager food. Months into the project, tunnels which they had already started digging, by hand, were abandoned in favor of culverts. After more months, this approach in turn was abandoned, and some of the tunnels reinstated. The project went on in this way for three years, during which at least 2,000 laborers died, and was then abandoned. The official account admitted that not one plot of land had benefited.

Most of the projects turned out to be a stupendous waste. Many had to be abandoned halfway: out of the over 500 large reservoirs (100 million cubic meters capacity or more), 200 had already been abandoned by late

1959. Many others collapsed during Mao's lifetime. The worst dam disaster in human history happened in 1975 in Mao's model province of Henan, when scores of reservoirs built during the Leap crumbled in a storm, drowning an estimated 230,000-240,000 people (official death toll: 85,600). Other Mao-era follies went on killing people long after his death, and as of 1999, no fewer than 33,000 were considered a risk to human life. The dams also uprooted untold millions from their homes, and more than two decades later there were still 10.2 million "reservoir displaced persons."

MAO INFLICTED MANY other half-baked schemes on the peasants, like forcing them to dig up soil by hand to a depth of half a meter. "Use the human wave tactic, and turn every field over," he ordered. Grossly excessive close planting was another. Close planting needed fertilizer, but Mao refused the requisite investments, and in late 1958 he actually ordered: "Reduce chemical fertiliser imports." On another occasion he said: "Turn China into a country of pigs . . . so there will be lots of manure . . . and more than enough meat, which can be exported in exchange for iron and steel." But he did not say where the feed was to come from for these pigs. In fact, under Mao's stewardship the number of pigs fell by no less than 48 percent between 1957 and 1961.

Over the centuries, Chinese peasants had applied their ingenuity to find every possible substance that could be used as fertilizer. In urban areas, every spot where human waste was dumped was allocated to a particular village, and peasants coming in before dawn to collect this waste with their special oblong barrels on carts were a feature of life. Human waste was so precious that frequent fights broke out between people from different villages over poaching, using their long-handled ladles. Desperate to find new sources for fertilizer, people started to mix human and animal manure with the thatched roofs and earth walls of old houses, into which smoke and grease had seeped. Millions of peasant houses were torn down to feed into manure pits, known as "shit lakes and piss seas."

One day it hit Mao that a good way to keep food safe would be to get rid of sparrows, as they ate grain. He designated sparrows as one of "Four Pests" to be eliminated, along with rats, mosquitoes and flies, and mobilized the entire population to wave sticks and brooms and make a giant din to scare sparrows off landing so that they would fall from fatigue and be caught and killed by the crowds. There was much to be said for eradicating the other three, which were genuine pests, though one side-effect was that whatever slight privacy people had once had in performing their bodily functions disappeared, as eager fly-collectors loitered in droves at public lavatories. But the case for eliminating sparrows was not so clear-cut, as sparrows got rid of many pests, as well as eating grain—and, need-

less to say, many other birds died in the killing spree. Pests once kept down by sparrows and other birds now flourished, with catastrophic results. Pleas from scientists that the ecological balance would be upset were ignored.

It was not long before a request from the Chinese government marked "Top Secret" reached the Soviet embassy in Peking. In the name of socialist internationalism, it read, please send us 200,000 sparrows from the Soviet Far East as soon as possible. Mao had to accept that his anti-sparrow drive was counter-productive, and it gradually petered out.\*

The "Four Pests" campaign was a sort of Maoist DIY substitute for a health service, as it was labor-intensive and investment-free. Mao had wanted to get rid of dogs, which consumed food, but relented, when he was advised that peasants needed them to guard their houses when they were out at work.

ANOTHER FIASCO that drained the peasants' energy, and brought disaster, was an order from Mao that the entire nation had to "make steel." The Superpower Program needed a lot of steel—and steel was also Mao's yardstick for superpower status. When he boasted to Communist leaders in Moscow in 1957 that China would "overtake Britain in fifteen years" (which he later shortened to three) and when he told the Chinese he was fully confident that China could "overtake America" in ten years, steel output was what he had in mind. Mao set the 1958 target at 10.7 million tons. How this came about illustrates his broad-brush approach to economics. Sitting by his swimming pool in Zhongnanhai on 19 June he said to the metallurgy minister: "Last year, steel output was 5.3 million tons. Can you double it this year?" The yes-man said: "All right." And that was that.

Steel mills and related industries like coal mines were ordered to go flat out to speed up production. Rules, and common sense, were cast aside. Equipment was overworked to the point of breakdown, and over 30,000 workers were killed in serious accidents alone within a few months. Experts who tried to talk sense were persecuted. Mao set the tone for discrediting rationality by saying that "bourgeois professors' knowledge should be treated as dogs' fart, worth nothing, deserving only disdain, scorn, contempt . . ."

Even going flat out, the existing steel mills could not fulfill Mao's target. His response was to order the general population to build "back-yard furnaces." At least 90 million people were "forced," as Mao said matter-of-factly, to construct such furnaces, which Khrushchev not

\* North Korea's Kim Il Sung turned out to be less stupid than Mao on this issue. Mao had pressed him to emulate China's anti-sparrow campaign. To humor Mao, Kim drafted a "3-Year Plan for Punishing Sparrows," but then did nothing while he watched to see how Mao's campaign turned out.

unfairly dubbed "samovar" furnaces, and which produced not steel at all, but pig iron, if that.

To feed these furnaces, the population was coerced into donating virtually every piece of metal they had, regardless of whether this was being used in productive, even essential, objects. Farm tools, even water wagons, were carted off and melted down, as were cooking utensils, iron door handles and women's hair-clips. The regime slogan was: "To hand in one pickaxe is to wipe out one imperialist, and to hide one nail is to hide one counter-revolutionary."

Across China yet more peasant houses were torn down, and their occupants made homeless, so that the timber and thatch could be burned as fuel. Most accessible mountains and hillsides were stripped bare of trees. The resulting deforestation was still causing floods decades later.

The furnaces required constant attention, consuming vast amounts of labor time. Tens of millions of peasants, plus a large proportion of draft animals, were pulled out of agriculture, leaving only women and children to bring in the crops in many places. By the end of the year, some 10 billion work-days had been lost to agriculture, about one-third of the time that would normally have gone to producing grain. Though the total 1958 crop output was slightly up on 1957, there was no increase in the amount harvested.

As the year-end deadline approached for his steel output goal, every time Mao saw his managers he would use his fingers to count the days left, and urge them: "We must make it!" By 31 December, the 10.7 million tons figure was reached, but as Mao acknowledged to his top echelon, "only 40 percent is good steel"; and more than 3 million tons were completely useless. The "good" steel had been produced by proper steel mills; the useless stuff from the backyard furnaces, almost all of which were soon abandoned. The whole venture, a gigantic waste of resources and manpower, triggered further losses: in one place, local bosses hijacked shipments of high-quality Russian alloys and had them melted down so that they could claim a bumper output, called an "Iron and Steel Sputnik." "No good at constructing, but super-good at destruction": never was Mao's own assessment of himself more accurate.

MAO WASTED MUCH of the technology and equipment bought from Russia, along with the skills of the accompanying specialists. Machinery often lay idle, as the gigantic industrial infrastructure they required was lacking. The equipment that was working was overworked, often twenty-four hours a day, while maintenance was neglected or dismissed as irrelevant. Mao encouraged ignoring regulations, and told those Chinese who were working with Russian advisers that they must not be "slaves" to Russian expertise. Russian pleas for common sense got nowhere. Even

the very pro-Chinese chief adviser Arkhipov was rebuffed. In 1958, he told us, "I asked Chou and Chen Yun to try to persuade Mao to keep his ideas to himself, but Mao wouldn't listen . . . They said to me: Very sorry; Mao didn't agree with the Soviet side." In June 1959, Soviet deputy premier Aleksandr Zasyadko, a metallurgy and missile silo expert, visited China and afterwards reported to Khrushchev that "They've let the whole thing go to pot."

By the end of 1958, the number of *large* arms-centered industrial projects that were under construction had reached a staggering 1,639—yet only 28 had been completed and were producing anything at all. Many were never finished, because of a lack of basic materials like steel, cement, coal and electricity. The regime itself called these "greybeard projects." Mao was the only ruler in history to produce a rust-bowl at the start of industrialization rather than at its end.

All this was destructive to Mao's own dreams. The breakneck speed he imposed sabotaged quality and created a long-term problem that was to plague arms production throughout his reign. China ended up with planes that could not fly, tanks that would not go in a straight line (on one occasion a tank swerved round and charged at watching VIPs), and ships that were almost a greater hazard to those who sailed in them than to China's enemies. When Mao decided to give Ho Chi Minh a helicopter, the manufacturers were so scared it might crash that they detained it at the border.

The four-year Leap was a monumental waste of both natural resources and human effort, unique in scale in the history of the world. One big difference between other wasteful and inefficient regimes and Mao's is that most predatory regimes have robbed their populations after relatively low-intensity labor, and less systematically, but Mao first worked everyone to the bone unrelentingly, then took everything—and then squandered it.

Mao demanded a fever pitch of work, using non-stop "emulation" drives to make people vie with each other. Undernourished and exhausted men, women and children were made to move soil at the double, often having to run while carrying extremely heavy loads, and in all weathers, from blazing sun to freezing cold. They had to trot for kilometers along mountain paths carrying water for the fields, from dawn till dusk. They had to stay up all night to keep the useless "backyard furnaces" going. Mao called this way of working "Communist spirit." In one of his many bits of theater, on 6 November 1958 he first asserted that peasants refused to take breaks ("even if you want them to rest, they won't"), and then played magnanimous and codified his optimal day: "Change from 1 January next year: guarantee 8 hours sleep, 4 hours eating and breaks, 2 hours studies [i.e., indoctrination] . . . 8-4-2-10," with the "10" refer-



ring to the hours of work. In the same generous tone, he bestowed a few days off: two a month, and five for women (up from the three he had originally contemplated).

In fact, these tiny concessions resulted in part from reports of epidemics, which Mao took seriously, not least because they affected the workforce. One account that startled Mao involved a typhoid epidemic near Peking. He called for "greatly reducing diseases" so that people "can go labouring every day."

IN SUMMER 1958 Mao pitchforked the entire rural population into new and larger units called "People's Communes." The aim was to make slave-driving more efficient. He himself said that by concentrating the peasants into fewer units—26,000-plus in the whole of China—"it's easier to control." The first commune, "Chayashan Sputnik," was set up in his model province, Henan. Its charter, which Mao edited, and touted as "a great treasure," laid down that every aspect of its members' lives was to be controlled by the commune. All the 9,369 households had to "hand over entirely their private plots . . . their houses, animals and trees." They had to live in dormitories, "in accordance with the principles of benefiting production and control"; and the charter actually stipulated that their homes were to be "dismantled" "if the commune needs the bricks, tiles or timber." Every peasant's life must revolve around "labour." All members were to be treated as though in the army, with a three-tier regimentation system: commune, brigade, production team (usually a village). Peasants were allowed negligible amounts of cash. The communes were de facto camps for slave-laborers.

Mao even toyed with getting rid of people's names and replacing them with numbers. In Henan and other model areas, people worked in the fields with a number sewn on their backs. Mao's aim was to dehumanize China's 550 million peasants and turn them into the human equivalent of draft animals.

As befitted the labor-camp culture, inmates had to eat in canteens. Peasants were not only banned from eating at home, their woks and stoves were smashed. Total control over food gave the state a terrifying weapon, and withholding food became a commonplace form of "light" punishment, which grassroots officials could deploy against anyone they felt like.

As the canteens were sometimes hours' walk away from where people lived or worked, many tended to move to the site of the canteen. There, men, women, children and old people lived like animals, crammed into whatever space was available, with no privacy or family life. This also hugely increased the incidence of disease. Meanwhile, many of their own homes, which were often made of mud and bamboo, collapsed from neglect, in addition to all those torn down to make fertilizer, or to feed

the backyard furnaces as fuel. When Liu Shao-chi inspected one area near his home village in spring 1961, of the previous 1,415 abodes, only 621 decrepit huts remained.

Mao's claim about there being "too much food" contributed in another way to increasing the peasants' misery. When the canteens were first set up, many cadres allowed the hungry peasants to fill their stomachs. This spree only lasted a couple of months, but it hastened the onset of famine—and wholesale deaths—in many areas before the end of 1958. Three years later, Mao reluctantly agreed to abandon canteens. Yet closing down the canteens, though hugely popular in itself, was almost as painful as their opening had been, as the many peasants who had gone to live where the canteens were located now had no home to return to. Even when their dwellings had survived, their stoves and their woks had not.

UNDERNOURISHMENT and overwork quickly reduced tens of millions of peasants to a state where they were simply too enfeebled to work. When he found out that one county was doling out food to those too ill to work, Mao's response was: "This won't do. Give them this amount and they don't work. Best halve the basic ration, so if they're hungry they have to try harder."

The people who drove the peasants on were the commune cadres, who were Party men. These were the resident slave-drivers. Knowing that if they failed to do their job, they and their families would swiftly join the ranks of the starving, many adopted the attitude articulated by one man: people were "slaves who have to be beaten, abused, or have their food suspended to get them to work."

These cadres doubled as jailers, keeping the peasants penned inside their villages. On 19 August 1958, Mao clamped down even further on anyone moving without authorization, what he called "people roaming around uncontrolled." The traditional possibility of escaping a famine by fleeing to a place where there was food, which had long been made illegal, was now blocked off. One peasant described the situation as worse than under the Japanese occupation: "Even when the Japanese came," he said, "we could run away. This year [1960] . . . we are simply shut in to die at home. My family had six members and four have died . . ."

The cadres' other job was to stop peasants "stealing" their own harvest. Horrific punishments were widespread: some people were buried alive, others strangled with ropes, others had their noses cut off. In one village, four terrorized young children were saved from being buried alive for taking some food only when the earth was at their waists, after desperate pleas from their parents. In another village, a child had four fingers chopped off for trying to steal a scrap of unripe food; in another, two children who tried to steal food had wires run through their ears, and

were then hung up by the wire from a wall. Brutality of this kind crops up in virtually every account of this period, nationwide.

AS PART OF his Leap, in 1958 Mao also tried to turn the cities into slave-labor camps by organizing urban communes. His plan was to abolish wages and put the whole society on a non-cash barracks system. This did not work out, as the slave system could not be made to fit onto modern cities, where life had more complex dimensions.

But this failure did not mean that Mao left the cities unravaged. His guideline for them was "Production first, Life takes second place." His ideal city was a purely industrial center. Standing on Tiananmen Gate and looking out over the gorgeous palaces and temples and pagodas which in those days decorated Peking's skyline, he told the mayor: "In the future, I want to look around and see chimneys everywhere!"

Worse, Mao wanted to destroy existing cities on a massive scale and build industrial centers on the ruins. In 1958 the regime did a survey of historic monuments in Peking. It listed 8,000—and decided to keep *seventy-eight*. Everyone who heard of the scheme, from the mayor down, pleaded against this level of destruction. Eventually, the order was not carried out so drastically—for a while. But at Mao's insistence, the centuries-old city walls and gates were mostly razed to the ground, and the earth used to fill in a beautiful lake in the city. "I am delighted that city walls in Nanjing, Jinan, and so on, are [also] torn down," Mao said. He was fond of mocking cultural figures who shed tears of anguish at such senseless destruction, and intellectuals were deliberately made to work on the wrecking crews. Many of the visible signs of Chinese civilization disappeared forever from the face of the earth.

Time and again, Mao expressed his loathing for Chinese architecture, while praising European and Japanese buildings, which he saw as representing the achievements of militaristic states. "I can't stand the houses in Peking and Kaifeng [old capitals]. I much prefer the ones in Qingdao and Changchun," he remarked to his inner circle in January 1958. Qingdao was a former German colony, while Changchun had been built by the Japanese as the capital for the puppet state of Manchukuo. Mao repeatedly called these two cities "the best."

Mao permitted few things with a Chinese character to be built. In the early years of his rule, some buildings in old Chinese style had been put up, but these were soon denounced for their traditional design. When new edifices were put up to mark the tenth anniversary of the regime in 1959, they were built in the Soviet style. They were actually the only Mao-era buildings with even a nod to aesthetics. The rest were factories and utilitarian, gray concrete matchbox blocks.

The best-known of the new buildings was the Great Hall of the People.

in central Peking. This was where Mao intended to hold large prestigious meetings, and he specifically ordered the auditorium to be designed to hold as many as 10,000 people. The Great Hall itself, 171,800 square meters in area, was erected on one side of Tiananmen Square in front of the old imperial palace, the Forbidden City. Determined to outdo other totalitarian rulers in gigantism, Mao gave orders to make the Square into "the biggest square in the world, capable of holding a rally of one million people." What had been a square of 11 hectares, with great character, was quadrupled in size, destroying large swaths of the old city. The result was a vast concrete space devoid of human warmth, the dehumanized heart of Mao's regime.

PEOPLE STARVED in the cities too, although death tolls were much lower than in the countryside. Nonetheless, most urban dwellers could barely survive on the rations they got. "Life seemed to proceed in slow motion," a Polish witness observed in Peking. "Rickshaw drivers barely able to pedal . . . tens of thousands of comatose cyclists . . . dejection stared out of the eyes of passersby." The urban meat ration declined annually from 5.1 kg per person in 1957 to an all-time low of just over 1.5 kg in 1960. People were told to eat "food substitutes." One was a green roe-like substance called chlorella, which grew in urine and contained some protein. After Chou En-lai tasted and approved this disgusting stuff, it soon provided a high proportion of the urban population's protein.

This famine, which was nationwide, started in 1958 and lasted through 1961, peaking in 1960. That year, the regime's own statistics recorded, average daily calorie intake fell to 1,534.8. According to a major apologist for the regime, Han Suyin, urban housewives were getting a maximum 1,200 calories a day in 1960. At Auschwitz, slave-laborers got between 1,300 and 1,700 calories per day. They were worked about eleven hours a day, and most who did not find extra food died within several months.

During the famine, some resorted to cannibalism. One post-Mao study (promptly suppressed), of Fengyang county in Anhui province, recorded sixty-three cases of cannibalism in the spring of 1960 alone, including that of a couple who strangled and ate their eight-year-old son. And Fengyang was probably not the worst. In one county in Gansu where one-third of the population died, cannibalism was rife. One village cadre, whose wife, sister and children all died then, later told journalists: "So many people in the village have eaten human flesh . . . See those people squatting outside the commune office sunning themselves? Some of them ate human flesh . . . People were just driven crazy by hunger."

While all this was happening, there was plenty of food in state granaries, which were guarded by the army. Some food was simply allowed to rot. A Polish student saw fruit "rotting by the ton" in southeast China

in summer–autumn 1959. But the order from above was: “Absolutely no opening the granary door even if people are dying of starvation” (*e-si bu-kai-cang*).

CLOSE TO 38 million people died of starvation and overwork in the Great Leap Forward and the famine, which lasted four years.\* The figure is confirmed by Mao’s No. 2, Liu Shao-chi himself. Even before the famine had ended, he told Soviet ambassador Stepan Chervonenko that 30 million had already died.

This was the greatest famine of the twentieth century—and of all recorded human history. Mao knowingly starved and worked these tens of millions of people to death. During the two critical years 1958–59, grain exports alone, almost exactly 7 million tons, would have provided the equivalent of over 840 calories per day for 38 million people—the difference between life and death. And this was only grain; it does not include the meat, cooking oil, eggs and other foodstuffs that were exported in very large quantities. Had this food not been exported (and instead distributed according to humane criteria), very probably not a single person in China would have had to die of hunger.

Mao had actually allowed for many more deaths. Although slaughter was not his purpose with the Leap, he was more than ready for myriad deaths to result, and had hinted to his top echelon that they should not be too shocked if they happened. At the May 1958 congress that kicked off the Leap, he told his audience they should not only not fear, but should actively welcome, people dying as a result of their Party’s policy. “Wouldn’t it be disastrous if Confucius were still alive today?” he said. The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, he said, “was right to lounge and sing when his wife died. There should be celebration rallies when people die.” Death, said Mao, “is indeed to be rejoiced over . . . We believe in dialectics, and so we can’t not be in favor of death.”

This airy yet ghoulish “philosophy” was relayed down to grassroots officials. In Fengyang county in Anhui, when one cadre was shown the corpses of people who had died from starvation and overwork, he repeated almost word for word what Mao had said: “If people don’t die, the earth

\* This figure is based on the following calculation. Chinese demographers have concluded that death rates in the four years 1958–61 were 1.20 percent, 1.45 percent, 4.34 percent and 2.83 percent, respectively. The average death rate in the three years immediately before and after the famine was 1.03 percent (1957: 1.08 percent; 1962: 1 percent; and 1963: 1 percent). The death rates over and above this average could only have been caused by starvation and overwork during the famine. The “extra” death figure comes to 37.67 million, based on population figures of 646.53, 659.94, 666.71, and 651.71 million for 1957, 1958, 1959 and 1960. The official statistics published in 1983 are recognized as partly defective, because local policemen understated the number of deaths in the years 1959–61 after some were purged for “over-reporting deaths.”

won't be able to hold them! People live and people die. Who doesn't die?" Even wearing mourning was forbidden; even shedding tears—since Mao said that death should be celebrated.

Mao saw practical advantage in massive deaths. "Deaths have benefits," he told the top echelon on 9 December 1958. "They can fertilise the ground." Peasants were therefore ordered to plant crops over burial plots, which caused intense anguish.

We can now say with assurance how many people Mao was ready to dispense with. When he was in Moscow in 1957, he had said: "We are prepared to sacrifice 300 million Chinese for the victory of the world revolution." That was about half the population of China then. Indeed, Mao told the Party congress on 17 May 1958: "Don't make a fuss about a world war. At most, people die . . . Half the population wiped out—this happened quite a few times in Chinese history . . . It's best if half the population is left, next best one-third . . ."

Nor was Mao just thinking about a war situation. On 21 November 1958, talking to his inner circle about the labor-intensive projects like waterworks and making "steel," and tacitly, almost casually, assuming a context where peasants had too little to eat and were being worked to exhaustion, Mao said: "Working like this, with all these projects, half of China may well have to die. If not half, one-third, or one-tenth—50 million—die." Aware that these remarks might sound too shocking, he tried to shirk his own responsibility. "Fifty million deaths," he went on, "I could be fired, and I might even lose my head . . . but if you insist, I'll just have to let you do it, and you can't blame me when people die."