

Mao's Great Famine

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Mao Zedong's "Great Leap Forward," a far-reaching program of forced modernization intended to transform China into a socialist paradise, instead results in the greatest holocaust in human history — **with a death toll of 45 million**. Also listed as La grande famine de Mao. [Mao's Great Famine credits: Dir: Patrick Cabouat, Philippe Grangereau/ 52 min/ Documentary, History/ Democide, Anti-socialism/ France]

Could 45 million people be murdered — the single greatest man-made holocaust in human history — and yet the event pass nearly unrecorded?

Up until this point, yes.

But a handful of historians are at last ripping the lid off of both the crime and the cover-up of the Great Leap Forward, the deadliest stage of Mao's socialist inferno, in five recently-published books (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)...and in the groundbreaking documentary Mao's Great Famine, the subject of this review. This persuasive film provides a rare glimpse through the razor-wired gates of a "workers' paradise" in its purest state.

This documentary begins its story at the end of WWII, when Mao, naively believing Soviet production statistics and unaware that much of its limited success actually reflected Western aid, decided the path to progress was to emulate the Soviet model. He began by collectivizing farms under the management of party cadres (who in fact knew nothing about farming), and meanwhile ordered peasants to produce steel (but without steel-making equipment or specialized knowledge). Dissent was crushed and those who opposed collectivization were sent to re-education camps. The family unit was destroyed, men and women were separated into barracks, and what little food available was distributed based on "merit," that being determined at the whim of party officials. If ever there was a point in history when centralized force as a fountain of human progress was put to the test, this was it.

The result was everything that Orwell and Ayn Rand predicted, only darker and more horrifying and on a scale unimaginable. Informed that millions were dying from starvation as a result of collectivization, Mao replied dryly "It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill." Mao's eye of Sauron was even cast upon wildlife. He accused sparrows of causing the famine, alleging they had eaten the crops and therefore had to be annihilated. Yes, incredibly, in this moment of pitiless crisis, the entire nation was mobilized to wipe out the sparrow population. The result was an unprecedented insect infestation that further devastated crops; the famine worsened. Some Chinese survived by eating grass or tree bark. Others turned to cannibalism. The weak were denied food. Meanwhile, Mao and the party leadership were entirely insulated from the effects of their policies, enjoying a world-class lifestyle, with banquets, parties, and plenty of food and drink. So much for socialist egalitarianism.

Reports of famine trickled out to the West, but were denied both by the Chinese Communist Party and by Western journalists who had seen the wonders of socialism for themselves...in guided tours of Potemkin villages.

Finally, after even party cadres — some of whom had lost close relatives in the famine — began to question what was going on, Mao gave up on the idea of collectivization. You would think he would have lost political control at that point, but ever the skilled community

organizer, Mao managed to beguile the younger generation into thinking that corruption was the problem and unrelenting brutality the answer, by launching the next stage of his socialist inferno: the Cultural Revolution.

To this day, the Chinese government and the Communist Party refuse to admit any culpability.

It is only recently that real work has been done to learn what happened, and that is thanks to a handful of courageous Chinese historians. It takes a gutsy person dedicated to the truth to risk the kind of work they undertook; enemies of the Chinese state, even now, suffer consequences that are the stuff of horror films.

One of those gutsy historians is Dr. Xun Zhou. She spent four years traveling the countryside, coaxing elderly people, who were naturally afraid to talk, into revealing what they saw during those fateful years. Her recorded first-hand interviews make up a large part of this documentary and are chilling in their candor. Intermixed are propaganda films of the day and interviews with other historians also investigating this crime.

Estimates of the final death toll range between 36 million and 45 million, more than that of Hitler's death camps and Pol Pot's killing fields combined. And yet, more people today know about historical trivialities like George Washington's wooden teeth than about this unprecedented monumental atrocity. Historians, filmmakers and media professionals — who together decide the popular conversation on history — have considerable work to do. This authoritative, eye-opening and well-paced film is at least a start. It deserves high praise for paving the way.

External Reviews

“Not many survived the famine, and of those who did, few have spoken out. Mao's Great Famine compiles never before seen footage from the famine with testimonies of [survivors].”

-Patheos

“The three-year famine is one of the major human tragedies during the reign of Mao. Mao's Great Famine not only provides a real historical picture, it also brings a wider lens to the period of time until 1976, the end of the Cultural Revolution. The film is recommended to be used as a supplemental teaching material for college history and political science classes.”

-Educational Media Reviews Online

“Mao's Great Famine, by Philippe Grangereau and Patrick Cabouat, is an important film. It gives voice to the brave Chinese historians and witnesses of the time who speak out and challenge the official version of the plan...An old peasant hesitates to remember: ‘When I think of that time, my legs are shaking.’”

-Bakchich

“Patrick Cabouat's film shows how — blinded by a utopian pipe dream of a ‘new society’ — [Communist] Party leaders forced through their dream of a bright future, resulting in a nightmare for millions of people.”

-NC+

“Between 1958 and 1962, economic policy advocated by Mao resulted in the death of some 50 million people. Archive pictures and testimonials in support, this documentary unveils this dark episode in the history of modern China.”

-France5