China's Great Terror

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Mao's Last Revolution
by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals
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Long before August 1966, when immense chanting crowds of young Chinese Red Guards began to mass before Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square, alerting those in the wider world to the onset of the Cultural Revolution, senior figures in the Chinese leadership began to seek their own solutions. On March 18, 1966, General Luo Ruiqing, a veteran revolutionary and then chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, tried to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a three-story building. The attempt failed, though his legs were shattered and he ended up paralyzed, unable to walk. On May 17 Deng Tuo, the Beijing Party secretary for culture and education and former editor of the main Communist newspaper, People's Daily, took his own life in Beijing. Six days later Tian Jiaying, who for many years had been one of Mao's most effective and influential political secretaries, also committed suicide. On June 25, the director of the Beijing foreign affairs office took the same way out and he was followed on July 10 by the director of Beijing's municipal propaganda department, Li Qi, who took his own life after being denounced as an "ultra-vanguard opponent of Mao Zedong Thought." Two weeks after Li, another senior Communist bureaucrat hanged himself.

What was it that these experienced revolutionary professionals saw as so full of menace that they could not bear to confront it? In varying degrees all of these men had lived through terrible times: the civil wars of the 1930s, the Japanese occupation of their homeland, the renewed civil war of the 1940s against the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, the Korean War, violent land reform, the anti-rightist movement that followed the partial thaw of the Hundred Flowers period, the Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine. They all knew much about Mao's character, his bizarre ideological swerves, his stated indifference to loss of human life, his tortuous language, his unpredictable modus operandi; they had all sat through hundreds of hours of "study groups" and had prepared numerous "self-criticisms"; they were used to purges and the sudden vanishings of relatives, friends, and colleagues.

As Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals show, the most convincing explanation for the terminal despair of so many well-placed and well-informed Party personnel was that each of them had the experience and the knowledge to see how, in late 1965 and early 1966, a complex series of intersecting pieces was being put into place by Mao and his self-selected personal advisers and confidants. This was an eclectic group that included People's Liberation Army Marshal and Minister of Defense Lin Biao, Mao's wife (his third), Jiang Qing, Mao's longtime speechwriter and ideological trouble-shooter Chen Boda, his security expert Kang Sheng, two leading ideologues at the Shanghai Party headquarters, and China's long-term premier, Zhou Enlai. Most important was their realization that Mao had clearly decided to carry out his belief that the Chinese socialist revolution was being sidelined by the "forces of revisionism" (whether these forces were meant to be pro-Soviet, pro-capitalist, or pro-nationalist was not always clear) that had wormed their way into the heart of the political, cultural, educational, military, and economic institutions of China. In his determination to wipe out these trends, Mao was willing to assault any of the senior leaders of the Communist Party and their staffs, no matter how strong were their prior revolutionary credentials, starting with the Beijing Party establishment, and following whatever leads might emanate from these assaults. Chief of Staff Luo had been persecuted in part because Mao wanted to be absolutely sure that the military was personally loyal to Mao himself.
In early 1966 Mao moved to Shanghai, where his wife Jiang Qing had already formed a partnership with local leaders. With their help she had launched an ideological assault against a group of writers prominent in the Beijing Party world who, Mao believed, were guilty of privately trying to undercut his prestige. Jiang Qing and Mao also worked closely with Lin Biao, who had used the army as a testing ground for the mass popularization of Mao's image and thoughts, most famously through the brief collection drawn from a wide range of Mao's earlier writings which became known as the Little Red Book. Lin made no secret of his ardent loyalty to Chairman Mao, and the army's broad range of cultural organizations, such as dance troupes and opera teams, were all pledged to spread Mao's already omnipresent image. By late April 1966 the senior Beijing Party leader Peng Zhen had effectively been isolated and removed from his several powerful posts, joining General Luo and two other once-dominant Party leaders in the political wilderness.

Party members not marked as targets in this initial purge were especially contemptuous of Luo's suicide attempt. The head of state, Liu Shaoqi, remarked that "if you are going to commit suicide, you have to have some technique, that is, heavy head and light feet, but he arrived feet first and did not injure his head." Liu's dismissal of Luo's suicide attempt was supplemented by Deng Xiaoping, who commented that Luo had "jumped like a female athlete diver"; Deng added that the trajectory of the falling general must have resembled a popsicle on a stick. Perhaps the contempt shown to Luo helped make the later group of suicides all the more determined to succeed in their attempts, for Luo's failure was defined as "resistance to the Party," and for months after the disaster Luo still was forced to attend a series of struggle meetings, bundled in the kind of large basket used by farmers to carry their vegetables to market. (He was rehabilitated in 1975 and died in 1978.)

The conclusion of this opening phase of Mao's assault on his own Party hierarchy came with a series of "notifications" presented to the Politburo Standing Committee on May 16, 1966. In these notifications, Mao and his supporters announced the coming of a "cultural revolution"—whether that revolution should be termed "great," "proletarian," or "socialist" had not yet been determined. Mao and his surrogates summed up the scale of the issues confronting the nation. "Far from being a minor issue," the notifications declared, "the struggle against this revisionist line is an issue of prime importance having a vital bearing on the destiny and future of our party and state, on the future complexion of our party and state, and on the world revolution."

As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals write in their sweeping panorama of the Cultural Revolution, many senior Party figures in China found the charges against those four senior leaders "literally incomprehensible." Nevertheless, the two authors point out, as late as December 1965 the most influential noncommitted Party leaders might have had a chance to close ranks and tell Mao that "they could not go along with this travesty." But they let the moment pass and such an opportunity did not offer itself again. By the late spring of 1966 Mao's most radical group of allies, with the chairman's obvious encouragement, had triumphantly institutionalized themselves in the form of "The Central Cultural Revolution Group" (often known simply as "the small group"), and this informal-sounding body was to be the center of the radicals' power for the next decade. As the authors add, "the more profound result of Mao's secretiveness was that during the Cultural Revolution his ardent supporters had to try and intuit what he wanted and to fulfill what they believed to be his aims."

Mysterious though the "May 16 Notifications" seemed to many Party members, Mao was determined to widen the circles of his assault on what he may have truly believed were counterrevolutionary forces that had pushed their way deep into the Party and its leadership, and through those organs to the society as a whole. Mao's decision to focus on schools and universities as a spearhead of his assault on the Party establishment was confirmed by the appearance on May 25 of the first inflammatory "big character poster" attacking the Peking University leadership for being a "bunch of Khrushchev-type revisionist elements." The initial poster—which did indeed use very big Chinese characters — was soon followed by others, and the criticisms spread to Tsinghua University, and from there to other campuses and schools. The scale rapidly became immense: 65,000 posters were displayed at Tsinghua in June. According to records in
Shanghai, in the first three weeks of June 2.7 million people joined the protest movements inside the city; 88,000 posters appeared, attacking 1,390 people (by name) for various "crimes." Mao declared that this spreading movement was "more significant than the Paris Commune," and the pressure built up even more after June 13, when the State Council, acting on Mao's instructions, suspended all classes at all schools nationwide. This freed for political action some 103 million primary school students, 13 million middle or high school students, and just over half a million at colleges and universities. When senior Party leaders outside the Central Culture Revolution Group ordered investigative "work teams" to go to campuses and schools and double-check the nature of the accusations being made, and to restore some semblance of order, Mao charged them with trying to stifle the revolutionary impulses of the people, and condemned them for backsliding and encouraging "revisionist" behavior.

In a fine example of their mastery of specific details on the logistics of the Cultural Revolution, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals point out that even when Mao was away from Beijing, as he so often was, traveling in his special train and staying in spacious residences in Hangzhou, Shanghai, or Wuhan, he was kept in touch with events on a daily basis, by special planes that brought important documents to an airfield near wherever he happened to be staying, whence they were driven to his residence in special cars. Even more importantly, Mao's power was bolstered by a highly secretive office known as the Central Case Examination Group, whose name was never mentioned in the press.

This special body (which the authors suggest had strong parallels with the Gestapo and the Cheka) reported directly to Mao. Its mandate was to check out all senior Party personnel charged with treachery, spying, or "collusion with the enemy." With a staff of several thousand, including 789 People's Liberation Army officers, the group was subdivided into three main sections, each devoted to specific cases, such as digging out evidence against Peng Zhen and Liu Shaoqi, checking at least eighty-eight members, or alternates, of the Party Central Committee, many senior army officers, and the members of a huge and shadowy alleged plot known as the May 16 Conspiracy. The scale of operations was enormous: seven hundred army officers, for example, worked for eighteen months to investigate the entire archive of the Ministry of Public Security. The work of digging into the past became so arduous and time-consuming that some of it was outsourced to groups of trusted Red Guards at leading universities; eventually branch offices of the Central Case Examination Group were opened in eighteen cities besides Beijing. Clearly Mao trusted the members of this secretive and ruthless institution, though the authors do not fully explain why Mao did not also suspect it might have ideological traitors within its ranks.

By such means, Mao was kept fully apprised of unfolding events, including the way that the "criticism meetings" (called in many Party and educational locations from June 1966 onward) began to take on new levels of violence, as people accused of incredible charges were beaten up and humiliated, often in front of huge crowds, or even in sports stadiums. The growing practice of forcing criticized people to march through jeering crowds, their heads crowned with dunce caps, and their "crimes" outlined in heavy signboards hung from their necks, apparently sprang from the practice of rural revolution by the peasant associations that Mao had investigated and described in his widely read "Hunan report" of 1927.

Such practices became more widespread after Mao and his allies began to speak of the need for, and value of, a "Red Terror" that would lead the "black gangs" of the present era to "tremble with fear and shake with fright." Violence increased further at the end of July 1966, after Mao ordered the investigative work teams withdrawn from schools and workplaces. In personal messages sent to various members of informal Red Guard units, formed initially by Beijing college and middle school students, Mao stated that "to rebel is justified" and that students should not hesitate to "bombard the headquarters."

In an angry diatribe against Party leaders who, he believed, had used the work teams to try to cow the young activists by the use of counterterror tactics, Mao called them "monsters and freaks," whose "so-called mass line, this so-called faith in the masses, this so-called Marxist-Leninism, is all fake and has been so for years." Clearly disassociating himself from most of his own senior colleagues at the Party center, Mao added, "What we have here is suppression and terror, and this terror originates with the [Party] center.... Because the center not only has not supported the movement of the young students, but
in fact has suppressed the student movement, I am of the view that something has to be done." On August 8, Mao promulgated even sharper instructions through what were termed the "Sixteen Points," which, in case anyone might miss them, were broadcast by radio that same night, published in People's Daily the next morning, and even distributed to record shops in the form of a 33 rpm vinyl disc. In the sixteen points, all brakes were removed:

In the great proletarian cultural revolution, the only method is for the masses to liberate themselves.... Don't be afraid of disturbances.... Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement and learn to distinguish between right and wrong.

The words had already been overtaken by events, for it was in the afternoon of August 5 that we have the first recorded details of the death of a teacher at the hands of students. The students were girls at a prestigious middle school not far from Party headquarters at Zhongnanhai, who had formed their own Red Guard organization to "answer the call" of Chairman Mao. The teacher they beat to death was named Bian Zhongyun. Bian was a fifty-year-old mother of four (three girls and a boy), who had been at the school ever since the Communists took over the country in 1949, and had risen steadily to her current position as assistant principal. She had joined the Communist Party secretly in Sichuan province back in 1941, and in the job at her school had encountered a wide range of elite pupils including the daughters of Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping.

From June 1966 onward Red Guard units composed of female students began to accuse Bian of a battery of crimes, many of which were written out on big character posters. They charged her with engaging in counterrevolutionary activities while serving on the Beijing municipal Party committee, planning to foment a military coup, working against the class lines laid down by the Party, and lacking due respect for Mao Zedong. (This last charge arose from an incident in March 1966, when Bian briefed her students on earthquake drill, and emphasized the importance of leaving the school buildings as quickly as possible. When one of the students asked if it were not equally important to save the portrait of Mao that hung in the schoolroom, Bian apparently failed to answer with the correct level of enthusiasm.)

On August 5, after she had been so badly beaten in another struggle meeting that she could no longer move, the students dumped Bian's body in a hand cart, covering her with copies of big character posters, weighted down with a road sweeper's broom. After some hours, when her body was already stiff, somebody from the school pushed the cart across the road to a nearby hospital. When her husband and her eldest daughter came to the hospital, no one would tell them what had happened, and the cause of death was listed as "unknown." Bian's husband did go and buy a camera, with which he took a photo of his dead wife, showing the fearsome extent of her injuries. But still nobody in the school chose to take responsibility, though among the Red Guard leaders was Deng Xiaoping's own daughter.[2]

Around two weeks after Bian's death, the first of a series of eight Red Guard mass rallies was held in Tiananmen Square, with Mao on the reviewing stand atop the old gate to the Forbidden City. An estimated one million Red Guards participated, and Mao himself wore a military uniform. When some of the girl students were invited to join Mao at the rostrum, one of them, who was from Bian's school, slipped a Red Guard armband onto his uniform. When Mao asked her for her name, she replied that it was Song Binbin. Mao commented that "Binbin" had the meaning of "refined" and hence was not a suitable name for the current period of violent upheaval in which the young should strive to be militant. Shortly thereafter, Binbin changed her name to "Be Martial" and the school was subsequently also renamed the "Red 'Be Martial' School."

There is obviously a difficult question here: Why were so many of the early radical activists so young, in many cases just middle school or even primary students, and why were girls often prominent in the violence? The answer given by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals is that these younger students were mainly from highly privileged elite Party families; they lived in the same compounds, and were tightly bonded together through
work and leisure activities. In this closed setting, sheltered from the real worlds of farm
and factory, girls were under intense pressure to appear as revolutionary as boys.

Furthermore, through their high-ranking parents, these privileged youngsters were privy
to much confidential information about the shifting ideological lines in the top councils
of the Party. They were fiercely competitive, and wanted to be seen as fiercely
revolutionary. They also had a pungent view of the issues at hand: as one early big
character student poster put it, the central rule of the radical groups should be to "beat to
a pulp any and all persons who go against Mao Zedong Thought." The somewhat elder
college students, on the other hand, came from all over China, and had widely different
backgrounds and interests. Like the workers, peasants, and PLA soldiers later caught up
in the turmoil, they already had established their career plans.

Especially in the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, another factor may also have
been involved, a kind of sexual excitement or challenge that came with the violence.
Evidence for this is elusive, but present in various sources, both official and anecdotal.
The members of one of the work teams sent to Peking University in June 1966, for
example, accused one of the male radical students of repeatedly making unwanted sexual
contact with a female cadre being "struggled against." The British chargé d'affaires
reported similar aggressive and unwanted sexual advances being made to female members
of his staff when the British mission was sacked in August 1967. The authors also cite a
powerful passage from one of the strongest memoirs ever written about the Cultural
Revolution, Spider Eaters by Rae Yang. In the cited passage, as Yang and her fellow
Red Guards are "struggling" with a middle-aged man, the man shocks them all by
suddenly dropping his shorts and exposing himself. In the rage and embarrassment that
follow, he is beaten to death.

By any conceivable measure, the Cultural Revolution was an immense, violent, and
tragic upheaval, which can be variously dated but is most often presented—as in the book
under review—as spanning the period from mid-1965 to Mao's death in 1976. Because of
its scope, its drama, and its moral and personal complexities, it is a great subject for the
historian. Yet just because the scale is so vast, it remains a major challenge to provide a
simple unified linear narrative of the entire movement that does justice to all the issues
involved. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals are both leading authorities on Chinese
Communist Party history, and inevitably their focus is on the Communist Party, on Mao
and his cohorts, and on the Beijing and Shanghai regions. Even though that means some
highly charged problems have to be bypassed, the story they do tell is absorbing enough.

As might have been predicted, Mao soon lost control of the movement he had initiated.
The ferocious assaults by the younger Red Guards spread rapidly from their schools to
the homes and possessions of those they deemed guilty of loyalty to the past, and lack of
devotion to the thoughts of Chairman Mao. Yet as the focus of the violence, they were
rapidly replaced in later 1966 by older students who formed competing Red Guard units
and "rebel forces," often heavily armed, who clashed with one another over the correct
interpretations of the current political line, desperate to prove they were innocent of any
taint of revisionism.

By early 1967 workers' organizations were formed, also along ideological lines,
sometimes allied with student rebels and sometimes acting on their own. The attempt by
the far left wing of Mao's supporters to found a new and radical Shanghai "commune"
was deflated by Mao once he came to realize how seriously this affected economic
production. Similarly, attempts to rein in the People's Liberation Army and prevent it
from curbing major dissension with massive force and firepower led to a serious military
mutiny in Wuhan and the arrest of two members of the Cultural Revolution Central
Group in mid-1967 and to countless other outbreaks all across China. As workers began
to demand more concessions, and staged their own large-scale clashes with the "power
holders" and the "center," the working of full eight-hour shifts in factories was declared
mandatory by Mao's administrators. To help in restoring order to the cities, 12 million or
more "educated urban youth" were sent out to the countryside, to live there indefinitely
and to "learn from the peasants." A new system of "revolutionary committees" was
instituted, consisting of three roughly equal parts, the PLA, the revolutionary masses,
and the revolutionary cadres; all these groups, it was optimistically hoped, would work
together to establish a more truly revolutionary society.
But though a second generation of purges had dismissed both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping from all their offices, and Liu Shaoqi was humiliated and left to die from diabetes and related problems without any medical help, China endured several years of near anarchy between 1968 and 1970, with the campaign to "cleanse class ranks" being the single most violent focus of confrontations between the army and the local power structures. Indeed for several years of hell for the Chinese people, it appeared that Mao had simply replaced the power of his "revisionist capitalist-readers" with the organized muscle of his huge military establishment. (The top army commander Lin Biao was officially named Mao's successor in October 1968.)

The year 1969 was dominated by fears of war with the Soviet Union, but as that panic faded, Mao began to regret having allowed so much power to Lin Biao, and in another tortuous set of purges and realignments he was able to transfer certain key generals, and to gradually isolate Lin Biao. The turn toward the United States in 1971 was a curious part of this story, and may have been part of the trigger for the extraordinary events of the year, when Lin Biao allegedly tried to assassinate Mao, only to die in a plane crash with many of his family members after bungling the attempt. In 1973, Mao summoned Deng Xiaoping back from limbo, and began to rethink the nature of the main tasks now confronting the allegedly purified Party. The task was uncompleted when Mao died in 1976.

How can we estimate the actual scale of these years of chaos and violence? MacFarquhar and Schoenhals take their start from an important estimate of the casualties of the movement by two scholars in 2003. That study was based on evaluations of over 1,500 local county gazetteers compiled in the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s after the Cultural Revolution was over, and concluded that in the Chinese countryside alone—not counting any of the major urban areas—and restricting the inquiry to the period between 1966 and 1971, when figures seem to have been fairly reliable, 36 million Chinese in those five years suffered some form of "persecution," often repeatedly. Of that total, again just in the rural areas, between 750,000 and 1.5 million people were killed, and "roughly equal numbers permanently injured." The study's authors add that in their opinion "the vast majority of casualties were not the result of rampaging Red Guards or even of armed combat between mass organizations competing for power. Instead, they appear to have been the result of organized action by new organs of political and military power."[4] If the urban centers of China could be studied through similar sources, the estimated figures would of course be immensely greater, though by how large a factor is hard to say.

Drawing on a broad range of recently available sources, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals give further estimates that amplify the question of scale. Though episodic and fragmentary, the figures nevertheless paint a terrible picture. In Inner Mongolia, for example, just during a search for counterrevolutionary scapegoats during the year 1968, 790,000 people were "put in prison, criticized, struggled, isolated, and investigated." Of these, 22,900 died, and 120,000 were "maimed." In eastern Hebei province, the region closest to Beijing, over 84,000 people were interrogated in the attempt to find links to an alleged underground KMT nationalist party espionage network: 2,995 died during interrogation, and 763 were permanently disabled. In the southwest border province of Yunnan, during the "campaign to cleanse class ranks" of August 1969, 448,000 people were "targeted" for interrogation, of whom 6,979 died. The cause of death in these Yunnan cases is given cryptically as "enforced suicide."

During the Beijing "cleansing class ranks campaign," spanning the year 1968 and the first part of 1969, the death toll is given as 3,731. Again, most of the deaths were ascribed to "suicide." In the coastal province of Zhejiang, with unusual directness, the 9,198 fatalities are described as having been "hounded to death." For the southern province of Guangxi, perhaps China's poorest region, came reports of over 3,000 people buried in mass graves, and several incidents of ritualized cannibalism.

This entire story seems unreal now, misted over by time's passage, seemingly irrelevant to New China's current concerns. Yet all China's current leaders were in their early twenties or their teens during this time, and they would not be human if the scars did not run deep. It is both correct and touching that MacFarquhar and Schoenhals should dedicate their deeply researched and poignant book to two groups of the Chinese people, first to those who have "enlightened" the two authors with their "works and words on the Cultural Revolution," and second to "the future generations of Chinese historians, who
may be able to research and write on these events with greater freedom." There is, indeed, much still to be explained and explored.

A few months ago I made a visit to the former factory area in northeast Beijing, known as Dashanzi, long abandoned by failing industries, and now converted into sprawling studio and exhibition spaces for China’s new artists. Prompted by some impulse to look upward, I could see that, in bold but now faded characters, there were two matching passages of calligraphy written along the vaulted brick ceiling. "Chairman Mao is the Red, Red Sun in our Hearts," declared one. "Chairman Mao, Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand Years," responded the other. Hard to remember, in such a setting, how deadly those words were, not so long ago.

Notes


\[2\] Bian Zhongyun’s grim story is reconstructed in careful detail by Wang Youqin in her *Wenge shounanzhe* (English title *Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment and Murder*) (Hong Kong: Kaifang Zazhi, 2004), pp. 2–24, with an introduction (in Chinese) by Roderick MacFarquhar. A photo of Bian and her family in happier times is on the prefatory page 23. Wang’s absorbing study marshals an immense amount of data on 675 victims of the Cultural Revolution, of all ages up to seventy-six, many of whom were beaten to death or committed suicide. Wang’s meticulous indices also list the victims by city, province, and school.
