

The Most Cruel

“Stalin is the greatest torturer in History. Genghis Khan and Hitler were altar boys compared with him.”¹⁵ I don’t know about Hitler but Mao certainly. I’m exaggerating as Anna Akhmatova did, but less so than when I’ll compare Kang Sheng (see Appendix) with Yezhov (usually he’s compared with Beria). That’s just a matter of degree, and if disagreements with many of my Sinologist colleagues are anything to go by, I’ll doubtless have trouble convincing my reader. Mao inflicted indescribable suffering on his people, and his reign was a disaster for China (especially the last two decades, which is considerable for a total of twenty-seven years). Nevertheless I think it is necessary to qualify the equation that I have so often read or heard: Mao = Stalin = Hitler = Pol Pot. I’ll stick to the first two in a defense that will stretch my capacity for persuasion to its limits.

Mao was responsible for the death of millions of people during the Great Famine. Two-thirds of them could have been saved if Mao had not relaunched the Great Leap Forward in the summer of 1959 in reaction to Peng Dehuai’s justified criticisms. The Cultural Revolution killed more than a million people and persecuted dozens of millions of others. In addition to the victims of the Red Guards (teachers, the “bourgeois,” Communist officials beaten to death, etc.) were the Red Guards themselves, killed by other Red Guards and later by the army, and lastly the “class enemies” massacred by the militia in 1967–1968. While Mao did not order those executions directly, he was nevertheless ultimately responsible, as he was for the quotas of national minorities (Tibetans and others) to be executed per city and per area following a revolt in western Sichuan during the winter of 1958–1959,¹⁶ and (more conventional and on a far wider scale) the death of landlords and rich peasants during the Land Reform. He accepted responsibility for that and was even proud of it on occasion, as in his famous speech of 8 May 1958, when he nevertheless took care to incorporate the Party in a collective responsibility for the revolutionary movement as a whole: “You call us Qin Shihuang as an insult, but we’ve surpassed Qin Shihuang a hundredfold. ... He only buried 460 scholars but we buried 46,000 scholars.”¹⁷

There is therefore no doubt about Mao’s cruelty, and above all his insensitivity. They appeared right from the earliest stage of the revolutionary saga, during the creation and consolidation of the agrarian bases that gave rise to the Soviet Republic of Jiangxi (1931–1934). The

silences and the fabrications of the Party's official history have long concealed the causes of the Futian mutiny of December 1930 and the extent of the repression that followed. In that small town in Jiangxi province, Communist officers revolted against what they called Mao's dictatorship and executed about a hundred of their Maoist comrades. Strategic disagreements and resentment between indigenous Communists and the Hunanese ones from Mao's entourage (two bordering provinces) explain in part—but only in part—the hostility of the mutineers to Mao's agents and their methods. The repression, which ended only in the spring of 1932, led to the execution of approximately one-tenth of the Red Army soldiers and officers and perhaps one-quarter of the political cadres, most of whom were innocent. All of them either confessed under torture to belonging to the Anti-Communist League or were denounced by others who were also tortured. Mao was not in charge throughout the entire period, but the purge slackened once a succession of emissaries from the Party's Shanghai leadership (which included Zhou Enlai) supplanted him at the head of the Communist base. It seems clear that both before and after the mutiny Mao left it to his officers to apply those "Stalinist" methods in order to implicate his adversaries and rivals.¹⁸

Let us fast-forward from the young Mao to an aging emperor (see Box 8).

Box 8

Exit a President of the Republic

On 5 August 1966, Mao scribbled these words on an old newspaper: "Bombard the headquarters: my *dazibao*." They were immediately copied, reproduced, and disseminated around the country. That *dazibao* (big character poster) called on the Party and the masses to bombard the headquarters and free it from the bourgeois dictatorship that had infiltrated the Party summit. It was his way of letting people know that he had broken off with his Number Two, Liu Shaoqi, guilty of having tried to destroy the marvelous impetus of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution by sending working groups to contain

student agitation on the campuses. Dispatching working groups into the field was the usual procedure every time the government had to deal with popular discontent or promote an official campaign. Liu had taken care to send Mao a telegram asking for orders (Mao had been away from Beijing since November 1965) but had received no reply. In July, Liu went to Hangzhou with Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and a few others, to consult with Mao and beg him to come to Beijing and settle the problem himself. Mao preferred to leave the matter in Liu's hands. He returned to Beijing on 19 July without informing Liu and called a meeting on the 23rd in which he publicly criticized both Liu and Deng, whose working groups had sabotaged the great revolution under way. During the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee that ended on 12 August, Lin Biao replaced Liu as the Party's Number Two. Relegated to eighth place and therefore disowned, Liu offered his resignation but Mao turned it down. The Great Cultural Revolution needed an existing enemy on which to unleash its energies.

From that time on (August 1966), all Liu could do was to proffer his self-criticisms, appear before the "rebels," or endure the criticism of those around him, including his servants and his own daughter, under pressure from Jiang Qing who urged her to revive a denunciation that she considered to be insufficiently ferocious. During his last meeting with Mao on 13 January 1967, Liu asked to be relieved of all his functions and permitted to return to Yan'an or to his native village in Hunan to work with the peasants in a People's Commune. Mao did not reply. In August 1967, Liu was summoned to a large meeting to answer questions from the rebels, where he saw another defendant, his wife Wang Guangmei. That was the last time he saw her, for she was imprisoned the following month and released only in December 1978, two years after Mao's death. In September 1967, Liu lost the custody of his children (two of whom met with tragic ends during the Cultural Revolution). In the summer of 1968, while

under house arrest, Liu contracted pneumonia and then learned a month after the event that the Twelfth Plenary Session (October 1968) had expelled him from the Party and dismissed him from all his posts. He was given medical care until the Ninth Congress (April 1969) because a live target was required, but that ceased immediately afterward, leading to an aggravation of his diabetes and high blood pressure and worsening his ongoing pneumonia. He survived, bedridden and covered in bedsores, until he was transported to Kaifeng where he was imprisoned in October 1969. His new guards didn't even know who he was; his physician was not permitted to give Liu the medication he needed, and Liu died of pneumonia in November the same year.

So who was this supposed incarnation of evil, held in contempt by millions of Chinese? He was a gray apparatchik, not particularly outgoing or affable, who had supported or flattered Mao on numerous occasions. Yet it would be hard to find a more decent man among all those who played an important role in any revolution since 1917. Mao had more charisma and was more interested in general ideas. Liu was more gifted for organization and governing, more methodical and conscientious. He was a hard worker, and was also more frugal than Mao (which wasn't difficult, but also more than any other leader), even ascetic. Liu enjoyed considerable prestige among everyone who had worked with him, and therefore with most high-ranking Communist cadres, which greatly perturbed Mao. What if the Chinese Khrushchev turned out to be a Brezhnev and obtained a majority thanks to his support in the hateful bureaucracy? Instead of which Liu never rebelled against the ukase that denounced him. Mao, after being criticized by Peng Dehuai in 1959, threatened to revolt and take part of the Red Army with him if his colleagues did not follow.

Liu suffered his martyr's fate in silence, but what exactly was he guilty of (by which I mean according to Mao; history would tend to reproach Liu for being too

submissive)? He mostly obeyed, but being in charge of the “first front” (see chapter 3), he was unable to apply the “second front” directives the way Mao wanted and with the results he required—or rather dreamed of. I believe Mao to have been sincere when he thought the policy followed by Li Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping from the end of the GLF to the Cultural Revolution was a rightist deviation of the “line.”*

Who was Liu and what was he trying to do?† “Far more orthodox than the ideological renegade denounced during the Cultural Revolution,” he was also more pragmatic and flexible than the “iron Bolshevik depicted in the pre-Cultural Revolution and post-1980 media” (Dittmer). A partisan of socializing the means of production in 1949, an orthodox Leninist in matters of ideology and organization, Liu nevertheless tried to reconcile order and revolution, efficiency and equality. He was an engineer by training and stuck to technical tasks; he set up the institutions and endeavored to make them work. While in charge of the “first front,” he pursued attainable goals. He first supported the launch of the GLF, before disasters and famine made him more flexible and open to experimentation in economic matters. That was how, at the head of a team that provided good support, he was able to pull the country out of stagnation. Mao left him alone, before denouncing him after the fact for the inevitable social consequences of a more flexible policy. Even after his fall, Liu remained faithful to his principles

* I am endeavoring to use Mao’s own misleading vocabulary when he described a struggle as being between two lines; that of the proletariat, which he led, and the bourgeoisie, incarnated by Liu. In fact no such struggle existed for the simple reason that there was only one political line (his), and it was not obtaining the fanciful results he hoped for. Circumstance and the wisdom of his lieutenants were equally to blame for this “deviation.”

† This paragraph owes a great deal to Dittmer, [1974] 1998, especially pp. 23, 99, 153, and 289.

and continued to comply with the standards—standards that were abolished in the Cultural Revolution. A criticized leader must make his self-criticism and accept the sanctions the Party deems appropriate, without betting an eyelid. Collective interest prevails over that of the individual, and Liu submitted uncomplainingly.

Ultimately, Liu Shaoqi's real fault (apart from being more moderate than his overradical leader) was to be the Number Two; his successor would also suffer from that. The disproportionate importance conferred on the army by the Cultural Revolution, like the precedent in the French Revolution, made a Bonapartist deviation feasible—but with one difference: Lin Biao was incapable of playing that role and probably did not aspire to it. Mao finally began to feel imprisoned by the scaffolding he himself had set up. Lin, who knew him from early days, fled to his death, terrified by the realization that Mao had decided to get rid of the successor he himself had designated.

Sources: Above all Dittmer, [1974] 1998 and 1981, then MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006. On the Lin Biao affair, Teiwes and Sun, 1996; Jin, 1999.

That is the man I'm portraying as a choirboy in comparison with Stalin! In his thirties Mao let his agents take care of torturing his adversaries to make them confess to fictitious crimes and then execute them. In his early seventies, in Beijing and at the peak of his powers, Mao persecuted Liu Shaoqi and killed him slowly but refrained from having him shot. Marshal He Long, an early revolutionary veteran, died in prison the same year as Liu Shaoqi. The following words by Mao probably hastened his demise: "We used to say as far as He Long was concerned that he should (a) be denounced, and (b) be protected. ... Now it seems we can no longer protect him, because of the things he did that we did not know about." What he allegedly did, or to be precise, the fabricated accusation against him that Mao feigned to believe, was to have wrecked a people's army. The Central Case Examination Group (a body established in 1966 and comparable to the Cheka or the Gestapo) immediately prescribed medical treatment for patient He Long, which hastened

his death. The only difference here with the physical “liquidation” of Stalin’s adversaries is that Mao was happy to let others do the job and he abandoned his former companion He Long to his henchmen.¹⁹

I shall begin the impossible demonstration (Mao less monstrous than Stalin) with the most subjective, and therefore the most debatable aspect: a rough comparison of their personalities. Lucian Pye has described Mao as “a narcissist with a borderline personality.”²⁰ He pointed out his extreme sensitivity to rivalry and criticisms, his implacable grudges, his lack of human warmth, and his inability to develop any significant human attachments. Stalin’s character was even less “normal” and many traits identified by Pye could just as easily be applied to him: solitariness, pride, the feeling that his worth was insufficiently appreciated,²¹ resentment, and an implacable holding of grudges and desire for vengeance. Stalin was even more pathologically distrustful than Mao; ultimately he wanted to “liquidate” everyone he was suspicious of. Add rudeness and brutality to that, along with disloyalty—in other words all the warning signs that Lenin saw, and was repelled by, in 1922. Mao was easily coarse, more deliberately so too, in order to demonstrate his disdain for politeness and convention. Last, as far as I know Mao never showed the same sadistic traits as Stalin, who enjoyed reading the NKVD reports about the last days of former allies he had sentenced to death. All in all they were both paranoid, if not depraved, with “the Kremlin Mountaineer” (Mandelstam) slightly more so than his Chinese counterpart.

As a transition between their characters, acts, and massacres, I have to concede that the indoctrination of their subjects was as monstrous (or more so) in China. Jean-Luc Domenach suggests that it was more so (see above), with *laogai* worse than the gulag. Similarly, Pierre Souyri wrote succinctly that “Maoism is the bureaucratic manipulation of crowds and a state instrument for reshaping thought in the most extreme form of totalitarianism.” I’ll admit that the Maoist relentless remolding of consciousness to purge patients of their reactionary thinking and cure them, often degenerated into a shared cynicism by which the patient pretended to see the light, and the doctor of souls pretended to believe his playacting. For the Stalinist NKVD, cynicism was acquired early on. There was no intention to forge a “new man,” but rather to fabricate a “docile cripple,” a “yapping dog, obedient, dull and cowardly” (Malte Griesse), which Griesse immediately qualifies: “Blackmail is never explicit, people are ‘made to understand.’ The Stalinist regime ... does not want free and aware actors