



Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62, by Frank Dikötter (Bloomsbury, £9.99)

From 1958 to 1962, “China descended into hell”. The Great Leap Forward was Mao’s masterplan to create a communist utopia by mobilising the muscle-power of China’s peasant workforce. Farms and villages were forcibly combined into huge “people’s communes”, collective farms of as many as 20,000 people. “Communisation is the communist revolution,” boasted one official. Vast numbers of peasants were forced to work back-breaking 10-hour days on futile irrigation projects. Dissent or slacking was punished by starvation and brutal beatings. After five years, there were nearly 9 million prisoners in labour and re-education camps. Using recently released material in Chinese archives, Dikötter’s powerful study reveals that the Great Leap Forward was an unparalleled disaster. He calculates that at least 45 million people died of starvation. One of Mao’s ministers said it was “a price we have to pay”. Mao blamed the failure of his policy on counter-revolutionaries and by 1962 he was planning a new policy - the Cultural Revolution.

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