

“Why Don’t We Arm the Left?” Mao’s Culpability for the Cultural Revolution’s “Great Chaos” of 1967*

Michael Schoenhals

ABSTRACT This article sets out to describe and explain the events that led, in the summer of 1967, to near civil war in many parts of China. It links the violence on the ground to statements and policies formulated at the highest levels of the CCP, and sets out to show how and why Mao Zedong himself must bear direct personal responsibility for what stands out as one of the darkest chapters in the history of the PRC. Common assumptions about the involvement of senior CCP figures other than Mao, including Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai, are reassessed. Misimpressions that have influenced non-Chinese scholarship on the period are corrected, and evasions and obfuscations on the part of establishment historians in China today are pinpointed.

In the summer of 1967, Lin Biao, Jiang Qing *et al.* secretly plotted and performed the most brazen counter-revolutionary destructive activities ... [As a result], for a while, a host of demons danced in riotous revelry, armed struggles became the norm, production was at a standstill, communications were blocked, and society was in a state of intolerable confusion. At the time of the worst disorder, Chairman Mao was on an inspection tour of north, central-south, and east China in the course of which he released a series of statements ... that to some extent served to limit the “great chaos.”¹

For two decades, the version of history told above has been repeated in countless books, articles and commentaries on the pre-emptive strike against revisionism that Mao Zedong launched under the name the “Great Cultural Revolution.” The explanation by ideological implication it articulates has found its way into normative, influential scholarship well beyond the reach of the Communist Party censor.² And yet, as I shall attempt to show below, while not actually portraying falsely the situation in China in the summer of 1967, this version of history all but totally obscures the CCP chairman’s personal responsibility for what he characterized in front of Edgar Snow in 1970 as an “all-round civil war.”³ Far

* Research for this article was supported by a grant from the Swedish Research Council. A first version was presented at the conference “Mao Re-evaluated” at the John K. Fairbank Center, Harvard University, in December 2003. A special thanks to Yin Hongbiao for his help with interviews and to Andrew G. Walder for his invaluable comments.

1. Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao Zhonggong dangshi jiaoyanshi (ed.), *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue tigang (Outline for the Teaching of CCP History)* (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1984), pp. 236–37.

2. Cf. Harry Harding’s contribution to Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 15 The People’s Republic, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 107–113, 182–85.

3. Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts since the Founding of the Nation)*, 13 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990–98), Vol. 13, p. 163.

© The China Quarterly, 2005

from serving to limit the “great chaos,” Mao’s actions and pronouncements at the time of the worst disorder had in fact made it escalate rapidly to unprecedented levels.

The year 1967 had begun with the “leftist masses,” encouraged by Mao, seizing power from local authorities across China. To ensure that he himself remained in ultimate control, Mao – who in addition to his chairmanship of the Communist Party also held the crucial position of chairman of its Central Military Commission, the apex of power within the military – ordered the PLA to support the power seizures, which it did, albeit reluctantly. In-fighting between contending factions soon erupted and disrupted the creation of new structures of political power, so-called “Revolutionary Committees.” When an increasingly untidy situation prompted certain senior members of the Politburo to call the wisdom of his Great Cultural Revolution project into question, Mao, briefly on the defensive, responded by shutting them out of the decision-making process altogether. In Inner Mongolia and Qinghai, he admitted in May, the situation was volatile; in Sichuan and Guizhou, circumstances were particularly difficult; but mixed reports coming from Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan and Henan, he suspected, were almost certainly exaggerated. People were getting shot at, newspapers forcibly shut down and hunger strikes called to exert pressure on local “bureaucrats.” Campuses in Beijing and elsewhere were no longer peaceful, placid places, but the scenes of ugly battles being fought between increasingly radicalized students. Still, untidy as the situation may have become, Mao was not losing sleep worrying about it.

The extraordinary policy formulated and advocated by Mao that turned the intense but still localized violence of the early summer months into “all-round civil war” in August 1967 was that of “arming the left (*wuzhuang zuopai*) and distributing rifles to the leftist masses (*fa qiang gei zuopai qunzhong*).”⁴ Inside China today, establishment historians serving as the CCP’s custodians of the late great chairman’s political legacy confront a well-nigh impossible task in trying to square the “official Mao” with what they know to be historically true about this remarkable policy. The official 1,800-page *Biography of Mao Zedong 1949–1976* published at the end of 2003 simply makes no mention of it.⁵ Supposedly representative collections of primary texts, like the 13-volume *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts Since the Founding of the Nation* edited by the Historical Documentation Research Office under the CCP Central Committee, also skirt the problem by resorting to omission. In a long note at the end of volume one of *Manuscripts*, the editors claim to have “included those manuscripts that practice has proven were sound, as well as those manuscripts that practice has proven were not sound or not entirely sound” and to have aspired to meet the needs of “practically

4. *Yaowen jianbao* (*Crucial News Reports*), No. 56 (24 August 1967); *Dongtai bao* (*Current Intelligence Reports*), No. 111 (26 August 1967).

5. Cf. Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Mao Zedong zhuan* (1949–1976) (*Biography of Mao Zedong* (1949–1976)), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003), Vol. 2, pp. 1463–1511.

oriented and all-sided” historical research.⁶ In fact, although they claim they do, the editors are for political reasons simply unable to provide a balanced selection of texts from which a “practically oriented and all-sided” understanding of Mao’s actions can be derived. Even the most careful reading between the lines of the texts in *Manuscripts* and the voluminous annotation accompanying them fails to uncover a single reference to the “arming of the left.”⁷ In dealing with Mao at his most radical, the editors of *Manuscripts* still serve the needs of propaganda and mythology.

Fortunately, independent historians and students of what Stuart Schram once called “the multifarious ideological and policy innovations of the Cultural Revolution” now have access to different, even superior, sources.⁸ We are by no means dependent solely on what the Historical Documentation Research Office and its sister agencies choose to declassify, partially or fully. It is on some level in order to illustrate precisely this – the possibility, strength and limitations of independent research – that this article puts a corpus of alternative, contemporary data to use. It is hoped that it will show that Mao today can and indeed must be held personally culpable for what has to count as one of the darkest chapters in the history of the CCP’s hubristic Cultural Revolutionary attempt to destroy every idea, culture, custom and habit supposedly incompatible with communism.⁹

“Why Not Arm the Workers and Students?”

By 1967, the notion of arming civilians judged to be sympathetic to the revolutionary cause was if anything an old one in the Chinese communist movement. In the 1920s, it had been central to a political strategy that viewed CCP-led armed uprisings by China’s urban proletariat as a crucial first step on the way to communism. When that strategy was eventually abandoned as ineffectual, the notion remained and promptly resurfaced in proposals for how an alternative, rural-centred revolution might be led to victory.¹⁰ At the Gutian Congress in December 1929, Mao Zedong argued that “the Red Army ... should shoulder such important tasks as... arming

6. *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, p. 764.

7. Vol. 12 of *Manuscripts* contains Mao’s brief comment (“Already read and agreed. Mao Zedong, 7 August [1967], 6 pm”) on a set of regulations intended to resolve problems in his home province of Hunan. The editors have added to it a long explanatory footnote that purports to summarize the regulations but conveniently fails to mention that they, among other things, called on “organizations of the revolutionary masses to establish ... a revolutionary armed force of mass character (*gunzhongxing de geming wuzhuang*) ...” This omission of a reference to the policy is the closest a reader of *Manuscripts* ever gets to seeing Mao’s endorsement of it hinted at. See *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, pp. 395–96; Yunnan sheng geming weiyuanhui (ed.), *Wuchanjiexi wenhua dageming wenjian huibian* (*Collected Documents of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*), 2 vols. (Kunming, 1969), Vol. 1, p. 429.

8. Stuart R. Schram, “Mao Tse-tung’s thought from 1949 to 1976,” in *The Cambridge History of China*: Vol. 15, Part 2, pp. 81–96.

9. *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 1 June 1966.

10. Tony Saich (ed.), *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 277–290.

the masses.”¹¹ Two decades later – the revolution meanwhile having been victorious – the official voice of the Party centre in the new People’s Republic declared that “armed organizations of the popular masses constitute specific products of the Chinese people’s revolution; they are one of the expressions of Chairman Mao’s strategic thinking.”¹² On 28 November 1952, China’s national government formally ratified the temporary organizational statutes of a national militia.¹³

Talk of “arming” any discrete sector of the rural or urban population distinct from or in addition to this existing militia would in the early 1960s have at best seemed extraordinary and at worst provoked charges of incitement to counter-revolution. There were, it is true, signs in the minutes of central meetings on political work in the militia, convened in the course of the so-called Socialist Education Movement, of dissatisfaction with the “purity” and political reliability of the militia core and cadres.¹⁴ A two-week meeting convened jointly by the PLA General Staff and Political Department even hinted at the possibility of a fairly extensive purge and introduced a distinction between the *de facto* existing militia organization and a substantially rectified force “that is to be established anew in the course of the movement.” In such cases where “the power of leadership is not in our hands,” the minutes stressed – and by “our hands” one has to assume its authors had the super-ordinate PLA command structure in mind – “a power seizure has to be carried out” (*yao duo quan*). But the minutes also cautioned explicitly against “indiscriminately and uniformly bypassing the existing militia organization and confiscating its weapons.”¹⁵

And yet, float the idea of creating and introducing into the strategic arsenal of anti-revisionist measures and counter-measures an armed popular force altogether distinct from the existing militia was precisely what Mao did on 18 July 1967 in Wuhan, where he had come on the first leg of what was meant to be an extended inspection tour of central and eastern China. “Why can’t we arm the workers and students?” he asked a select audience including Premier Zhou Enlai, Minister of Public Security Xie Fuzhi, Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) member Wang Li, and the commander and second political commissar of the Wuhan Military Region (MR). Pre-empting any serious discussion of the pros and cons of such action, Mao immediately went on to add “I say we should arm them!”¹⁶

What motivated Mao may well have been not just his perception of the situation on the ground in Wuhan, but also what he knew about events in the neighbouring province of Jiangxi, where armed battles between

11. Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949 Vol. 3* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 196.

12. *Renmin ribao*, 18 August 1952.

13. *Minbing gongzuo lishi wenjian xuanbian (Selected Historical Documents on Militia Work)* (N.p., 1976), pp. 4–10.

14. *Ibid.* p. 168.

15. *Ibid.* pp. 189–190.

16. *Wang Li fansi lu (Wang Li’s Reflections)*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Star North Books, 2001), Vol. 1, p. 251; Vol. 2, p. 1012.

competing “organizations of the masses” were an almost daily occurrence. Zhou Enlai and the CCRG had been trying unsuccessfully since the end of June to bring the situation there under control. Their negotiations aimed at disarming the belligerents, but made little progress. In the first half of July, Zhou had raised the Jiangxi issue specifically in his communications with Mao, trying by various means to make the CCP chairman formulate and commit to a viable solution.¹⁷

Mao spelled out what he wanted to be seen as his rationale for “arming the left” in a letter to Jiang Qing on 4 August. It was to be introduced as a strategic measure intended to right the crucial balance of political forces which – so the current information and intelligence he was receiving led him to believe – had begun to tilt precariously in favour of reaction and the political right. Pessimistically, Mao estimated that more than 75 per cent of the PLA officer corps “supports the [civilian] right.”¹⁸ By “arming the [civilian] left on a massive scale (*daliang wuzhuang zuopai*)” and by having “the masses exercise dictatorship,” so Mao told Jiang Qing, “the left will gain great fame and high prestige, while the arrogance of the right will be kept in check.”¹⁹

Mao’s words on 18 July were a political time-bomb, especially if taken out of context and leaked to a wider audience as his latest Supreme Instruction. Wang Li may well have sensed this, and years later he made a point of stressing that neither Zhou Enlai nor he himself “transmitted them downward” after the meeting.²⁰ That same night, Zhou flew back to Beijing, while Wang and Xie Fuzhi stayed behind. A possibility so far unexplored by historians of the Cultural Revolution is that members of the Wuhan MR top brass present may have taken Mao’s words to mean – in the absence of any independent criteria according to which the “genuine left” could be distinguished from the “right” – that they had been given the green light to arm the “workers and students” that backed them. If so, it would explain why less than 48 hours later, members of a “Million Heroes” organization of workers and students roamed the streets of Wuhan brandishing arms later traced back to the independent division of the Hubei provincial Military District (MD) (also known as PLA Unit 8201).²¹ Slogans painted by Red Guards on walls across the city proclaimed “The Million Heroes are great! The Million Heroes are really great! The Liberation Army is great! PLA Unit 8201 is terrific!”

In the midst of this “counter-revolutionary riot” as it came to be known, Mao left for Shanghai by air under tumultuous circumstances at

17. Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Zhou Enlai nianpu 1949–1976* (*Chronology of the Life of Zhou Enlai 1949–1976*), 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 3, pp. 168–69.

18. Passages from Mao’s letter memorized by Wang Li and quoted in *Wang Li’s Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1012. The full text of Mao’s letter remains unavailable and is not included in *Manuscripts*, even though it clearly satisfies all of the editors’ criteria for inclusion.

19. Passages from Mao’s letter written down by Zhou Enlai at the time and quoted in Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai (Zhou Enlai’s Later Years)* (Carle Place NY: Mirror Books, 2003), p. 232.

20. *Wang Li’s Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1012.

21. *Dongtai (Current Intelligence)*, No. 118 (9 August 1967).

dawn on 21 July.²² He was to spend the next 56 days in the city.²³ In Beijing, meanwhile, at a marathon meeting in the Great Hall of the People, the CCRG met a delegation from Henan, the second of the two provinces that together made up the Wuhan MR. Kang Sheng did most of the talking, but Jiang Qing's impromptu remarks were those that would be remembered. Agitated and arriving close to midnight, she praised one of the Henan delegates critical of the "Million Heroes" who spoke about the need to "mobilize the masses to curb armed struggles." "I remember," she said, "I think it was in Henan that a revolutionary organization came up with this kind of a slogan, one that goes 'attack with reason, defend with force.' This slogan is correct!"²⁴ Jiang's words were greeted with "enthusiastic applause," the record notes.

The Shanghai Experiment

In Shanghai, in the final week of July, the first attempt was made to implement Mao's ideas about "arming the masses." Zhang Chunqiao – Mao's host and one of only a handful of senior municipal Party and PLA cadres aware of his presence in the city – fused Mao's as yet vague proposal with the Henan slogan discovered and endorsed as "correct" by Jiang Qing. In a letter in which he claimed to be voicing the aspirations of the Shanghai industrial proletariat, Zhang cleverly interpreted what Mao wanted and proposed the creation of so-called Defend With Force organizations (*wuwei zuzhi*) under the Workers' General Headquarters (WGH), the city's large and powerful "rebel" organization commanded by Wang Hongwen.²⁵

Zhang had not been present in Wuhan so it is unlikely that Mao's words on that particular occasion had directly inspired him; instead, he may have heard the CCP chairman elaborate further on the "arming of the left" in Shanghai. Whatever the circumstances, on 31 July he wrote to Mao proposing the creation of a "force made up of [members of] the workers' rebel faction" that could be made to "grow from small to large, from being unarmed to being armed, and in this way gradually establish a people's armed force with a base in the rebel faction." "Perhaps Shanghai could serve as a testing ground?" Zhang asked, ending his letter "Please instruct."²⁶ Mao's response that same day was positive but left the door open for a discussion of the issue among his colleagues in Beijing who, at this point, had not yet been given an opportunity to commit themselves one way or the other. It read in full, "Lin, Zhou and the

22. Wang Shaoguang, *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995).

23. Zhonggong Shanghai shiwei dangshi yanjiushi (ed.), *Mao Zedong zai Shanghai (Mao Zedong in Shanghai)* (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1993), p. 440.

24. *Wenge jianxun (Cultural Revolution News in Brief)*, No. 367 (22 July 1967).

25. On the WGH, see Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), pp. 32–37.

26. Shanghai minbing douzheng shi ziliao (ed.), *Shanghai minbing douzheng shi ziliao (Materials on the History of the Struggles of the Shanghai Militia)*, Vol. 17 (December 1980), p. 3.

comrades on the Cultural Revolution Group: read and advise.”²⁷ We have no record of what, if anything, Mao’s colleagues advised, but the gist of their reactions may be deduced from some of Zhang’s subsequent remarks. On 8 September, he observed in front of members of the WGH leadership: “In July, I proposed to the centre that arming the left begin in Shanghai. The centre agreed, but said to proceed slowly, considering that once Shanghai begins to distribute arms, how do we proceed in other localities?”²⁸

If it was hard evidence of the power and potential capacity of a “people’s armed force with a base in the rebel faction” that Mao needed (and not merely Zhang’s speculations on paper) in order to persuade himself and his colleagues that “arming the left” was a viable policy, then he got it almost immediately in the Shanghai testing ground. On 4 August, prototypical “Defend With Force” contingents descended on the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory where for more than a year – or so it was claimed – class alien elements had been subjecting the broad masses of proletarian brothers and sisters to an unbearable reactionary regimen and anti-Cultural Revolutionary provocation.²⁹ The factory was successfully “liberated” in the name of the WGH in a ten-hour battle that left 983 injured and 18 dead.³⁰ In his temporary residence in Shanghai’s western suburbs, a safe distance away, Mao watched it on film. He appears to have been pleased with what he saw; his only known criticism concerned the appearance, in the raw footage prepared for him, of the slogan “drag out a small handful in the military.” It was wrong, he maintained, and asked for it to be edited out.³¹ Zhang Chunqiao later spoke of how, from the battle at the Shanghai Diesel Factory, “I derived new inspiration, as it made me realize why we cannot make revolution without arms.”³²

Zhang Chunqiao was in the unique position of being able to consult Mao directly as he proceeded to develop his plans. He also began soliciting ideas among his confidantes about how the new organization might best be structured and run. Yao Wenyuan told city leaders:

Chunqiao and I both wish to express the same shared clear-cut attitude and that is that we support the setting up of a unified Attack With Reason and Defend With Force Command (*zhihuibu*). Its concrete organization has to take place in accordance with

27. *Ibid.*, Vol. 17, p. 3. For the date of Mao’s comment, see p. 25. Though it satisfies the editors’ criteria for inclusion, Mao’s response to Zhang’s letter is not included in *Manuscripts*.

28. *Ibid.*, Vol. 17, p. 7. See also the brief exchange between Mao and Zhang reported in Xu Jingxian, *Shinian yimeng: Qian Shanghai shiwei shuji Xu Jingxian wenge huiyilu (Ten Years a Dream: Former Shanghai Party Secretary Xu Jingxian Remembers the Cultural Revolution)* (Hong Kong: Time International Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 276.

29. *Mao zhuxi de geming luxian shengli wansui (Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao’s Revolutionary Line)* (Shanghai, 1967), pp. 25–35.

30. According to Jin Chunming, Huang Yuchong and Chang Huimin, “Wenge” *shiqi guaiishi guaiyu (Strange Things and Strange Words at the Time of the “Cultural Revolution”)* (Beijing: Qiushi chubanshe, 1989), p. 65. Slightly different casualty figures are cited in Perry and Li, *Proletarian Power*, pp. 132–141.

31. *Weida de jiaodao guanghui de zhenli (Great Teachings and Brilliant Truths)* (Nanchang: Jiangxi ribao she Jinggangshan hongqi huoju, 1967), p. 12.

32. Shanghai “Wenge” shiliao zhengli bianzuan xiaozu, Shanghai “Wenhua dageming” shihua (*Telling the History of the “Great Cultural Revolution” in Shanghai*), typeset manuscript in 3 vols. (Shanghai, 1992), Vol. 2, p. 540.

the Chairman's revolutionary line and the long- and short-term policies of the centre ... The revolutionary masses of our entire city: if you have any calculations and considerations or plans about how to proceed, you should send a message [about this] to the centre.³³

Yao's reference to the centre was ambiguous, but even if people were to have bypassed the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee and sent a message directly to Beijing, it would have been automatically routed back to Zhang and Yao anyway. From this perspective, Yao's carefully chosen words were merely a way of suggesting that the new scheme was one that enjoyed firm backing in high places.

Lin Biao's Concerns Ignored

Whether he agreed with them or not, in public and when meeting his generals, minister of defence and CCP vice-chairman Lin Biao aggressively defended whatever Mao said and did. Possibly because it was something his generals called into question, he often made a particular point of emphasizing the extent to which Mao's actions and policies were not just the products of a brilliant "supreme commander" but rooted in a solid understanding of the situation on the ground.³⁴ It would, however, be a mistake to conclude from this that Lin was entirely uncritical of Mao. In closed communications between himself and the man he referred to in public as the "greatest genius in the present era," Lin would not hesitate to voice serious concerns in specific matters. In the wake of the Wuhan incident they had differing views of how best to deal with the situation on the ground. While Mao, as shown above, was prepared to consider increasing the volume of arms in circulation in society, Lin's concerns were with bringing it down.

On 28 July, Zhou Enlai had called a meeting of the CCRG specifically to discuss what could be done to put an end to the increasingly widespread seizure of arms.³⁵ The sources do not reveal whether he was alarmed about this, but his immediate nominal superior in the Party hierarchy was very much alarmed: Lin Biao's secretary recalled years later how Lin on or immediately after 27 July had insisted on highlighting the arms seizures in a letter to Mao.³⁶ Outlining in broad terms what the situation in the country as a whole looked like from Beijing, Lin suggested to Mao that "the issue at the moment is still one of opposing factions and escalating armed struggles. In particular," Lin stressed, "there is the matter of the theft of rifles from the armed forces. Such thefts are already occurring in five provinces in the south. This seems to be a growing trend and we urgently need to find a way of putting an end to it."³⁷ Prior to sending his letter to Mao in Shanghai, Lin had his

33. *Yaowen jianbao*, No. 49 (16 August 1967).

34. Cf. *Dongfanghong tongxun* (*East is Red Newsletter*), No. 8 (14 September 1967).

35. *Chronology of the Life of Zhou Enlai 1949–1976*, Vol. 3, p. 174.

36. Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan jishi: Lin Biao mishu huiyilu* (*Factual Record of Maojiawan: Lin Biao's Secretary Remembers*) (Beijing: Chunqiu chubanshe, 1988), p. 129. Wang Li further recalled Lin Biao drafting a directive banning arms seizures at around this time; see *Wang Li's Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1013.

37. *Factual Record of Maojiawan*, p. 130.

secretary take a draft to the CCRG’s offices where it was shown to Jiang Qing and given minor textual revisions at a hastily convened meeting. The letter was then sent by special courier on a PLA Air Force plane to Shanghai. Two days later, the courier returned to Beijing with Mao’s response. In essence it was one of guarded optimism, telling Lin not to worry and insisting that the moment for dealing with the issue had not yet come.³⁸ Some time later, Mao’s views were leaked and quoted widely in the internal newsletters of various “organizations of the masses”:

We must not view armed struggles with too much concern or take an excessively serious view of the situation. Don’t worry: where such struggles take place, there’s invariably a back-stage boss. Let them go on for a bit longer: the more they do, the more isolated he will become. The masses will see things even more clearly and once they have isolated him, things can be resolved. The chaos is temporary.³⁹

In his letter to Jiang Qing on 4 August, Mao insisted that “arms seizures are not a serious problem.”⁴⁰ When he received an intelligence report from Jiangxi in which the claim was made that rifles were being stolen from the PLA by members of one of the local “organizations of the masses,” Mao challenged the accuracy of the report. “I don’t believe this,” he commented, “the rifles aren’t being stolen; they’re being [clandestinely] distributed by the local People’s Armed Department.”⁴¹

Lin Biao was unable to muster such optimism. At some point soon after 4 August, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Guangdong again had him calling for a sternly worded “general notice” banning arms seizures to be circulated nation-wide in the name of the centre. As was the routine procedure in matters like these, the first draft went to Zhou Enlai who distributed copies to the CCRG for comments. Wang Li reminded Zhou of Mao’s views as spelled out in the letter to Jiang Qing – that “arms seizures are not a serious problem.” Undue complications might arise, Wang argued, if Beijing were to send out signals suggesting otherwise. The best solution would be to limit any central intervention to Guangdong alone, on a quasi-trial basis. In the end, support was won for a compromise along these lines.⁴²

Promoting the New Policy: “This is the Latest Spirit Right Now”

Judging from the way in which members of the central leadership changed what they said in public, it seems clear that the enlarged meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee on 4 August – at which Mao’s letter to Jiang Qing was circulated and everyone present with the exception of Chen Boda copied it down into their notebooks as a way of reducing

38. *Ibid.* pp. 130–31.

39. *Yaowen jianbao*, No. 64 (7 September 1967); *Dongtai bao*, No. 125 (12 September 1967); *Wenge jianxun*, No. 470 (13 September 1967); *Cankao (Reference)*, No. 104 (14 September 1967).

40. *Wang Li’s Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1013.

41. *Mao zhuxi shicha dajiang nanbei (Chairman Mao Inspects North and South of the Yangtze)* (N.p., 1967), p. 27. See also *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 13, p. 488.

42. *Wang Li’s Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1011.

the likelihood of their inadvertently misrepresenting the Chairman's precise formulations (*tifa*) – was the day on which “arming the left and distributing rifles to the leftist masses” became one of the key (short-term) policies of the centre.⁴³ On 2 August, at a meeting in the Great Hall of the People with delegates from Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan, Zhou Enlai had still limited himself to saying that it was impermissible to “distribute rifles to the conservative faction,” and refrained from touching upon whether, on the other hand, it was permissible to “arm the left.”⁴⁴ On 3 August, he had similarly observed in conversation with delegates from Jiangxi that “rifles must not be distributed indiscriminately.”⁴⁵ In the evening of 4 August, Qi Benyu was finally in a position to “go public” with the new policy and elaborate briefly on it in front of the same Hunan delegates that Zhou had addressed two days earlier:

Right now, the phenomenon of rifle thefts is very serious, which is bad. We've already called on the 47th Corps to arm the Joint Committee of Working Class Revolutionary Rebels and the workers of Changsha, and to arm the other rebel factions. We'll start with tests in Changsha and Zhuzhou. These two test sites must bring credit to the rebels and not end up seeing them fight amongst each other.⁴⁶

It is worth noting that Qi on this occasion still stuck to Lin Biao's assessment of the situation with respect to the “theft of rifles,” and chose not to repeat Mao's claim that it was “not that serious.”⁴⁷

What Qi may not even have been aware of, when he spoke, was that a first “test” of the new policy (not counting the battle at the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory earlier that day) had already been given the go-ahead by Mao and was under way in far-away Jilin province. Here, in Yanji county, not far from the Chinese–Korean border, the county Military Control Commission had, at the start of August, clandestinely handed out rifles to a sympathetic faction of the “organizations of the masses” which immediately proceeded to launch a devastating attack on the faction that opposed it. Why Mao would have wanted to intervene personally in such an obscure localized conflict appears strange until one discovers that one of the backers of the faction facing annihilation was his own nephew Mao Yuanxin.⁴⁸ Through what channels information of the situation in Yanbian prefecture reached Mao is not known, but that it did

43. In his memoirs, Wang Li writes: “We were all called upon to copy down what was said in the letter and to implement and carry it out. Chen Boda didn't make a copy, but asked me to provide him with an extra one.” *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 1013.

44. *Dongtai*, No. 113 (3 August 1967).

45. *Qinghua Jinggangshan tongxun* (*Qinghua Jinggangshan Newsletter*), No. 551 (5 August 1967).

46. *Ibid.*, No. 555 (9 August 1967); *Wenge jianxun*, No. 404 (9 August 1967).

47. Passing through Hunan on his way back to Beijing in mid-September 1967, Mao stated cryptically: “Don't worry about the theft of rifles; the militia alone has 5 million of them”; *Chairman Mao Inspects North and South of the Yangtze*, p. 17.

48. *Yanbian Chaoxianzu zizhizhou zhi* (*Gazetteer of the Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Yanbian*), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), Vol. 1, p. 78; *Mao Zedong's Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, pp. 195–96.

is certain. In the words of Wang Li, speaking to Xinhua News Agency journalists later in August:

What happened in Yanbian was that for the first time, Chairman Mao gave permission for the rebels to be armed (*di yi ci pizhun wuzhuang zaofanpai*). This is the latest spirit right now – that the rebels are to be armed ... Under no circumstances must the conservative faction be allowed to devour the rebel faction. The centre is now planning to proceed in the same way and to arm the rebels in Hunan, Jiangxi, Wuhan, Fuling in Sichuan, and other places. In the Yanbian region of Jilin province, the revolutionary rebel faction is now armed.⁴⁹

Mao’s intervention saved the “rebels.” They received arms (Mao had approved giving them 1,000 rifles) and ammunition from a PLA main force unit, No. 3168, stationed in the area since the end of the Korean War. The unit’s deputy political commissar, as it happened, was a close ally of Mao Yuanxin.⁵⁰

The first leader who explicitly linked the new policy to Mao Zedong himself was Zhou Enlai. In the night of 6–7 August, he and Qi Benyu again met delegates from Hunan in the Great Hall of the People, and on this occasion, the Premier announced that “Of course the rebels are to be armed (*zaofanpai dangran yao wuzhuang*) – this is an instruction issued by our supreme commander-in-chief.”⁵¹ Twenty-four hours later, in Shanghai, Mao made the final textual revisions to, and signed off on, a document that was the product of the meetings between delegates from Hunan and central leaders the preceding weeks.⁵² Circulated nation-wide by the CCP centre, it was one of two that went out almost simultaneously (the second one concerned the situation in Jiangxi) and that contained explicit, almost identical expositions of the policy of arming the left. In the second document, the wording was as follows:

Under the leadership of the Revolutionary Committee preparatory small groups, in areas where the conditions are ripe, the revolutionary masses are to be armed. At present, the intention is first of all to prepare and study the execution [of this policy] in the two areas of Nanchang and Ganzhou. The revolutionary armed force of the masses is a powerful force assisting the People’s Liberation Army in protecting state property, maintaining revolutionary order, and curbing the killing of the leftist masses by bad persons.⁵³

49. *Dongtai bao*, No. 111 (26 August 1967).

50. *Wenge tongxun* (*Cultural Revolution Newsletter*), No. 4 (8 September 1967); *Gazetteer of Yanbian*, Vol. 1, pp. 77–78; 595.

51. *Wenge jianxun*, No. 407 (10 August 1967); *Jiedai tongxun* (*Reception Work Newsletter*), No. 53 (29 August 1967).

52. See above, n. 7.

53. *Wenjian huibian*, Vol. 1, pp. 435–36. This and all other known contemporary and recent collections of central documents from the Cultural Revolution gives 10 August as the date on which the Jiangxi document was issued. In actual fact, it was not issued by the CCP Central Committee General Office Secretariat until 13 August, the delay probably caused by last-minute disagreements among the 32 (!) parties expected by the central authorities to sign a province-wide cease-fire agreement that was meant to be appended to it; *Dongtai*, No. 122 (13 August 1967).

Mao's instruction, dated 10 August and reproduced at the beginning of the document, read "I've seen this item. Act accordingly."⁵⁴

On 9 August, Lin Biao made his only known public reference to Mao's policy of "arming the left," at a reception for the recently appointed new leadership of the Wuhan MR, Lieutenant General Zeng Siyu and Major General Liu Feng. If anything, Lin's endorsement was low-key: it was made not in his formal address but in one of his interjections while listening to Zeng's and Liu's report on the progress they were making in Wuhan. It was edited out of the official transcript of his address circulated by the CCP centre in October. After criticizing by name three senior PLA officers who, Lin alleged, had since the beginning of the year given their backing to "reactionary organizations actively attacking the left," he added: "It is very clear how *they* viewed the situation; *we* [on the other hand] must comply with Chairman Mao's instructions, arm the left and distribute rifles to the leftist masses."⁵⁵ Whereas Zhou's way of mentioning Mao's name seemed calculated to add extra force and urgency to the policy and imply that it was to be given the highest possible priority, Lin's did little of the sort.

When the two central documents referring to the policy as applicable in the prevailing situation in Hunan and Jiangxi were issued, the question immediately arose whether or not "arming the left" was intended to become a national policy and, if so, where else the "conditions" might already be deemed ripe for it to be implemented? In the afternoon of 10 August, addressing a rally of public security officers, Xie Fuzhi cautioned against assuming that the policy would be implemented in the national capital: "On the whole, the circumstances [motivating implementation] are not present in Beijing." "In certain factories, schools, and places," he admitted, "they may be present in part, but on the whole they are not. So you must not cite this slogan indiscriminately, since to do so is wrong."⁵⁶

Speaking at dawn on 16 August, to an audience made up of staff members of the capital University Red Guard Congress, Zhou Enlai also emphasized that in Beijing, "conditions" were simply not sufficiently "ripe" to allow for the distribution of arms and the arming of *workers*. What he lamented in particular, he said, was the slow speed with which Great Alliances were being achieved.⁵⁷ But while such may have been the situation in Beijing's factories, it was rather different on some university campuses. While Zhou was speaking, preparations were already under way to arm a few selected member organizations of the capital University Red Guard Congress. And in provinces like Sichuan, Jiangsu, Guangdong

54. Mao's instruction has, not surprisingly, not been deemed suitable for reproduction in *Manuscripts*.

55. Cf. p. 1 of the full transcript of Lin's interjections and address mimeographed and distributed as "Lin fuzhuxi zhishi" ("Vice-Chairman Lin's instructions") by Jiangsu sheng dazhong yuanxiao hongse zaofan lianhehui. The official transcript is in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long Live Mao Zedong Thought*) (Lanzhou: Lanzhou junqu zhengzhibu, 1969), pp. 509–527.

56. *Dongtai*, No. 121 (12 August 1967).

57. Page 3 of a transcript of Zhou's speech mimeographed and distributed on 16 August 1967 by Qinghua Jinggangshan tongxunshe.

and Fujian (to name but a few) the assumption was right away that here was a new policy that most definitely applied wherever local leaders cared to argue that the “genuine left” was running the risk of being “devoured” by the “conservative faction.”

Implementing the Policy in Beijing: “This is No Trifling Matter!”

Compared to most other cities in China, Beijing was in August 1967 almost peaceful. By comparison, that is: in absolute terms, the residents of the capital had to put up with their fair share of “beating, smashing and looting.” Under the banner headline “Armed struggles continue across city,” a daily news bulletin published on the campus of the Beijing Institute of Politics and Law on 15 August reported that violent clashes had recently occurred in, among other places, the Central Nationalities Institute, Beijing Iron and Steel Institute, and Beijing No. 4 Middle School. By far the worst violence had engulfed the large Xidan marketplace in western Beijing on 12 August, involving over 2,000 persons, lasting for some 14 hours and resulting in seven dead and more than 390 wounded. It was 40 days before the market could reopen for commerce.⁵⁸

No sooner had word reached the leaders of Beijing’s major university-based Red Guard organizations of what Mao had said and that his words (“Why can’t we arm the workers and *students*?”) had become Party policy than they began to submit requests to the authorities for their organizations to be given rifles. It is not known how many requests were turned down, but a handful did meet with positive responses. To one request from the Jinggangshan Commune on the campus of Beijing Teacher’s University on 14 August, Xie Fuzhi responded in his concurrent capacity as chairman of the Beijing Revolutionary Committee: “I agree you may arm yourselves for self-defence purposes with 500 of your own university’s firearms. But you must be selective and train the persons that will be carrying firearms. This is no trifling matter.”⁵⁹ On 16 August, Zhou Enlai concurred publicly, mentioning in a speech that “the Teacher’s University is one of those units where [great alliances] are successful. You may arm yourselves ...”⁶⁰

The Commune was not the first group of Red Guards in Beijing to set up what was in effect a militia organization of its own with high-level endorsement. That distinction goes to the Beijing Aeronautical Institute (*Beihang*) Red Flag organization to which the distribution of an initial 1,000 assault rifles was granted by the authorities.⁶¹ More than three-and-a-half decades later, Han Aijing, the leader of the Beihang Red Flag

58. *Yaowen jianxun*, No. 48 (15 August 1967); Zhonggong Beijing shiwei dangshi yanjiushi (ed.), *Zhongguo gongchandang Beijing lishi dashiji 1949–1978 (Record of Major Events in the History of the CCP in Beijing 1949–1978)* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2001), p. 236.

59. *Yaowen jianxun*, No. 54 (22 August 1967); *Jinggangshan tongxun (Jinggangshan Newsletter)*, special issue No. 14 (25 October 1967), p. 13; *Wenge tongxun*, No. 4 (8 September 1967).

60. *Jinggangshan tongxun*, special issue No. 14 (25 October 1967), p. 13.

61. *Beijing xiaoxi (News from Beijing)*, No. 2 (31 August 1967).

organization, still remembered the event, his own involvement, and the fact that with the AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles, his “fighters” had *not* received any ammunition:

It was during the mass rally in Tiananmen Square [on 25 July 1967] to welcome Xie Fuzhi and Wang Li back to Beijing that I said to Premier Zhou that given the present situation in the country, if you look at our Beihang organization and consider that our ranks are in fairly good order and that these are rebels with fine family backgrounds, they really should be armed. The Premier responded by saying that my proposal was worth considering. After the rally, I got in touch with the Beijing Garrison – or perhaps it was they who got in touch with me, I don’t remember. In any case, it was the [Beijing] Garrison that delivered the [altogether] more than 2,000 assault rifles. We didn’t have any ammo: at the time, none of the Garrison soldiers on duty in Beijing did. Our rifles came from on high. They were not the ones that had originally belonged to our university’s militia.⁶²

Attending a formal “Arming the Beihang Red Flag” ceremony on the institute sports grounds on 16 August and making speeches pledging support were Red Guards representing six other “rebel” organizations. News of what had happened spread far and wide.⁶³ And as one would have expected, it prompted Red Guard organizations elsewhere in Beijing and across China to make demands for rifles and arms themselves.⁶⁴ Some anxious local leaders opted for compromises, fearful of what might happen should the situation get out of hand. In Nanjing, a PLA officer probably expressed the sentiment of quite a few when he told a mass rally on 20 August: “That you now have weapons [yourselves] doesn’t mean you can now stop shouting slogans opposing armed struggle. That would be wrong... The rifles now in your hands are not meant to be used, but meant *not* to be used.”⁶⁵ But words like these were to no avail. Banner headlines in locally produced news bulletins proclaimed “Chairman Mao’s Personal Decision: Rebel Factions are to be Armed!” and, citing Chen Boda, “No Arms to Conservative Faction; Revolutionary Factions to be Armed!”⁶⁶ Confusion, disorder and “great chaos” was descending on China.

62. Han Aijing, interviewed over the telephone by Yin Hongbiao, Peking University, on 19 December 2003. Han’s recollection of a total of more than 2,000 rifles being distributed is corroborated by a contemporary Shanghai source in which it is reported that “some 2,500 Beihang Red Guard fighters have received rifles.” See *Jiedai tongxun*, No. 62 (23 September 1967).

63. Cf. *Wenhua geming tongxun* (*Cultural Revolution Newsletter*) published by the WGH in Shanghai’s Xuhui city district.

64. One such organization was the Jinggangshan Regiment on the campus of Qinghua University. Its leader Kuai Dafu later recalled: “Beihang got rifles but no ammunition, one division’s worth of rifles. They’d managed to achieve a ‘great alliance’ [on campus]. The reason Qinghua didn’t get any rifles was because we hadn’t managed to achieve a ‘great alliance’.” Kuai Dafu, interviewed over the telephone by Yin Hongbiao, Peking University, 16 December 2003.

65. *Du Fangping yanlun xuanbian* (*Selected Utterances by Du Fangping*) (Nanjing: Nanjing gongxueyuan Dongfanghong zhandou gongshe Dongfanghong zhanlian, 1967), p. 35.

66. *Dongtai bao*, No. 111 (26 August 1967); *Yaowen jianbao*, No. 56 (24 August 1967).

Sichuan: “Arm Them and Have Them Shoot the Fucking Dogs!”

In those provinces where the situation was akin to the one that had prompted Mao’s formulation of the policy in the first place, “arming the left” was nothing like the orderly and controlled affair that it was in Beijing. To begin with, the volume of arms was often far greater than in the national capital. Most importantly, ammunition was either distributed or otherwise easily available in substantial quantities. In the second week of August, “rebels” in Wuhan came in the possession of (at least) 25,000 rifles.⁶⁷ In the course of a single night in late August, in one Chongqing factory alone, more than 10,000 rounds of anti-aircraft ammunition were fired.⁶⁸ By September, the number of rifles distributed to “organizations of the masses” exceeded 40,000.⁶⁹

In Sichuan, centre of the PRC arms industry, large sectors of the province rapidly descended into total chaos. Here there was little interest in formal ceremonies or such niceties as letters of congratulation when “the left” was to receive arms. When the Political Commissar of the People’s Armed Department of Zigong municipality informed the deputy political commissar of the Chengdu MR Liu Jieting that he planned to distribute rifles and arm a company of rebels to deal with its political challengers, Liu responded positively in the crudest possible language as befitted an old Red Army veteran: “Arm them and have them shoot the fucking dogs (*wuzhuangqilai datagouride*)!”⁷⁰ It was later estimated that there had been “countless dead and wounded” in the battle that ensued.⁷¹

Soon it was no longer necessary for senior officers to issue explicit orders, their subordinates having quickly caught on to how they were meant to interpret the signs coming from above. When the policy of “arming the left” was eventually reversed, this fact conveniently allowed some to maintain a cover of deniability. A PLA Air Force officer described the following incident a few years later:

In September 1967, the leader of an organization of the masses in the East is Red film studio came to me asking for arms and handed me a slip of paper on which Liu Jieting had written: “Comrade Feng Dehua, please help them solve their problems.” Acting in full accordance with the sinister instructions I had received from Liu and Zhang [Xiting], I handed out a dozen rifles and some ammunition ... At the time, in the name of “arming the left” and “attack with reason, defend with force,” we

67. *Wuhan shizhi dashiji (Wuhan City Gazetteer Record of Major Events)* (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1990), p. 255.

68. *Chongqing shizhi (Gazetteer of Chongqing City)* (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1992) Vol. 1, p. 411.

69. *Chairman Mao Inspects North and South of the Yangtze*, pp. 6–7.

70. *Zhongyang ban de Mao Zedong sixiang xuexiban Sichuanban geming dapipan fayan (Revolutionary Great Criticism Statements in the Sichuan Class of the Mao Zedong Thought Study Class Arranged by the Centre)* (N.p., n.d.), Vol. 12, p. 3. Liu was a direct beneficiary of the Cultural Revolution, having been promoted to this position in the course of the purge of Li Jingquan, the Chengdu MR political commissar and powerful first secretary of the Central Committee’s South-west Bureau.

71. *Ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 9.

distributed [in each case] more than 200 rifles and ammunition in all to somewhere between 30 and 40 units.⁷²

Needless to say, quite a few PLA officers were appalled by what was going on, and some expressed at least token resistance. Their reluctance to carry out the order of “arming the left” has in some cases become part of the historical record. In mid-August, Liu Jieting had a member of his office staff inform the officer in charge of the “Support the Left Leading Group” of a PLA main force unit stationed west of Chongqing that “in Yibin and other places, rifles have already been distributed to arm the rebel faction; you may also distribute some rifles to the rebel faction. I’m putting you in charge of this ...” When the officer in question hesitated, Liu’s member of staff later recalled, “I became worried he might not obey, so I added that the go-ahead has been given by Deputy Political Commissar Liu [Jieting].” Eventually, more than 2,000 rifles and 2 million rounds of ammunition were issued to the “rebel faction” in the area where the officer’s unit was stationed, and on 23 August the “rebels” embarked upon a campaign to crush their opponents. Fierce fighting ensued in the counties of Tongliang – where 35 persons lost their lives on the first day – Yongchuan, Bishan, Rongchang and Dazu.⁷³

One simple way of illustrating how lethal the impact of Mao’s “arm the left” policy was in a province like Sichuan is by comparing the casualty figures for the first and second of the infamous three battles known as the “three campaigns in armed support of Luzhou” (*san ci wuzhuang zhi Lu*), a city on the Chang [Yangtze] River, upstream from Chongqing. In the battles, the belligerents were essentially the same, the attackers attempting to “liberate” the city being – in the parlance of the times – the “left,” and the defenders controlling it the “conservatives.” The first battle took place on 20 July 1967, when “arming the left” was not yet officially an option and whatever policies were in effect all forbade the PLA from distributing arms to *any* “organization of the revolutionary masses.” On this occasion, the “left” was routed: an official chronicle of events has it that one ship on the river was sunk, four people died and dozens were wounded.⁷⁴

The second battle took place in the first days of September, while the policy of “arming the left” was still very much in effect in Sichuan. Testimony provided by highly placed provincial cadres tells the inside story. As soon as “arming the left” become permissible Liu Jieting ordered the Political Commissar of the Yibin Military Sub-District, Wang Maoju, to organize what was euphemistically referred to as a civilian “propaganda team” to head for Luzhou to support the local, weaker “leftist” faction.⁷⁵ When asked by Wang how he expected the propaganda

72. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 8. Zhang Xiting was the wife of Liu Jieting who, like her husband, sat on the Sichuan Revolutionary Committee preparatory small group in 1967.

73. *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 11; *Gazetteer of Chongqing City*, Vol. 1, p. 411.

74. *Dangdai Sichuan dashi jiyao (Outline of Major Events in Contemporary Sichuan)* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1991), p. 251.

75. Luzhou was at the time located within the administrative boundary of the Yibin MSD.

team to be able to carry out its task successfully, given that its foes in Luzhou were known to be armed, Liu responded by saying “You too may go ahead and arm some of the masses!”⁷⁶ Having thus been given the green light, Wang proceeded to distribute thousands of rifles and to prepare three armed propaganda team “regiments” for battle. Quite a few of its core members were militia men from Yibin prefecture and municipality, their appointments approved by Wang and a senior member of the prefectural Revolutionary Committee preparatory small group, Guo Linchuan, who also delivered a mobilization speech on the eve of battle.⁷⁷ This time, the casualty figures and destruction were of a different magnitude altogether. An official history of Sichuan states that a total of more than 30,000 persons were involved in the battles of Luzhou and that “the number of confirmed dead members of the masses alone is well above 2,000.”⁷⁸ Even after deducting the 274 “cadres and members of the masses” known to have died in the third and final battle in May 1968 (when the policy of “arming the left” had been abandoned and in which in addition to Luzhou the fighting also affected a number of surrounding counties), it still shows what a difference Mao’s policy made in terms of the number of human lives lost.⁷⁹

Although it may appear from the names of provinces mentioned here that China’s north and north-west were somehow spared the impact of Mao’s policy, this was not the case. So for example, the Muslim autonomous region of Ningxia was the scene of one of the single worst massacres. In the aftermath of an early confrontation on 8 August in which the “organization of the masses” identified in Beijing as constituting the “left” had suffered serious casualties, Kang Sheng in Beijing had spoken briefly to delegates from the region on 13 August in positive terms about the new policy, and what it might achieve; on 16 August, a PLA main force unit mobilized by the Lanzhou MR was given the go-ahead from Beijing to distribute rifles to a local “rebel faction.”⁸⁰ On 28 August, in Qingtongxia county, the resolution of a stalemate involving both the PLA itself and members of two opposing factions of the now armed “masses” ended in a bloodbath. At the time, unconfirmed rumours had it that “more than 400 people” died, but Kang Sheng denied this and added in passing that “the resolution of the Qingtongxia issue” had been

76. According to Guo Yimin’s testimony in *Revolutionary Great Criticism Statements*, Vol. 4, p. 11.

77. *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 11.

78. *Dangdai Sichuan jianshi (Short History of Contemporary Sichuan)* (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1997), p. 195.

79. *Lishi de shenpan (Verdict of History)*, 2 vols. (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1986), Vol. 2, p. 359.

80. *Dongtai*, No. 124 (16 August 1967); *Zhongguo gongchandang Ningxia Huizu zizhiqu zuzhishi ziliao 1926–1987 (Materials on the Organizational History of the CCP in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 1926–1987)* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1992), p. 176; Zhong Kan, *Kang Sheng pingzhuan (Critical Biography of Kang Sheng)* (Beijing: Hongqi chubanshe, 1982), p. 410. See also the VCD disk *Mao Zedong yu Zhongguo (Mao Zedong and China)* (Nanchang: Jiangxi wenhua yinxiang chubanshe, n.d.), Coll. II, Vol. 2, part 2, where newsreel footage of armed workers is accompanied by the voice of a commentator claiming that “Kang Sheng even went so far as to propose distributing rifles to the rebels.”

endorsed by Mao and Lin Biao.⁸¹ An official history of the region produced in the 1990s has it that the PLA shot dead 104 and wounded 133 members of *one* of the two factions.⁸²

Disarming “the Left” ... For Good?

The precise combination of factors that made Mao abandon the policy of “arming the left” is not known. When speaking to senior provincial officials while travelling through Jiangxi in mid-September, he appears to have wanted to impress upon them that everything that had happened since the beginning of the summer had been part of a grand design, events having been allowed to run this particular course for a purpose. He claimed to have written a letter to Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai in late May in which he had expressed surprise at the degree of mutual hostility and tension that characterized the situation among the “masses” in Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei and Henan and now went on to explain: “The tension reached its peak in June, July and August. In the midst of that tension, I could see the issues emerging and to resolve them became easy. Without tension, how do you resolve them?”⁸³ In fact Mao was fudging the timetable and putting a positive spin on something that clearly had *not* gone according to plan. Mao was no fool: the “arming of the left” had swiftly brought disorder so real, even he was eventually forced to admit that in August 1967, the “great chaos” in much of China had been simply “impossible.”⁸⁴ In the middle of a Central Committee plenum in 1969, his memory triggered by the presence of the commander of the Nanjing MR, General Xu Shiyong, Mao spoke of how “really desperate” and how “really tense” the situation had been when the two men had last met in Shanghai on 18 August 1967.⁸⁵

By 25 August at the latest, Mao had begun shifting his position, at first towards a stance that involved defining more clearly the parameters under which the policy of “arming the left” was to be implemented. On that day, he made some textual revisions to and signed off on – his comment was “Excellent; issue accordingly” – a hastily written central document bearing the title “Appeal for the Launch of a Movement to Support the Military and Cherish the People.”⁸⁶ This contained, close to the end, the following crucial passage:

The arming of the revolutionary masses may only be carried out step by step and in a planned way in such places where conditions are ripe and the local People’s

81. *Dongfanghong (East is Red)*, No. 66 (26 September 1967).

82. *Dangdai Ningxia jianshi (Short History of Contemporary Ningxia)* (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2002), pp. 138–39.

83. *Great Teachings and Brilliant Truths*, pp. 17–18. I have been unable to locate the text of Mao’s letter.

84. *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 13, p. 163.

85. *Mao zhuxi zai ‘Jiuda’ de zhongyao zhishi (Chairman Mao’s Important Instructions at the Ninth National Congress)* (N.p., 1969), p. 18; Li Wenqing, *Jinkan Xu Shiyong 1967–1985 (Xu Shiyong Up Close 1967–1985)* (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2002), pp. 79–86.

86. *Great Teachings and Brilliant Truths*, p. 11; *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, p. 406.

Liberation Army has a clear understanding of the situation, and subsequent to consultations and the express granting of permission by the centre. In places where these conditions cannot be met, excepting those where urgent circumstances may prompt the centre to grant special permissions, all of the weapons and military supplies currently in the hands of organizations of the masses must without exception be sealed up for safekeeping or turned in.⁸⁷

On 19 July, the day after Mao had first floated his “arm the left” policy, Wang Li had already spoken at a rapturous meeting of student “rebels” in Wuhan about the overall need to “support the military, cherish the people.” It had been reaffirmed by Mao in a *Red Flag* editorial, but as everyone in Wang’s audience knew, the slogan as such was an old and faded one.⁸⁸ So Wang tried with a bit of humour to drive home the point that it was now to be taken rather more seriously than at normal times: it was no longer, he said, “the ordinary slogan you normally hear every year around the time of the Spring Festival (*laughter*) ... but an important strategic slogan in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*enthusiastic applause*).”⁸⁹ If anything, five weeks later, the slogan and what it stood for would have been judged by Wang to be even more “important.” Four days after the centre had issued its appeal, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and CCRG issued a brief joint notice in the form of a second central document that stressed its “immense strategic significance” and called on every possible means to be employed to propagate its contents far and wide. In isolated and remote areas of the country, the joint notice suggested, copies of the appeal might preferably be dropped in quantity from the air. What was urgently called for was the *immediate* launching of a “large-scale and enthusiastic campaign to support the military and cherish the people!”⁹⁰

Possibly gauging how and in what direction Mao was moving, Zhou Enlai had an extended one-to-one conversation with the acting PLA Chief-of-Staff Yang Chengwu at around 1 o’clock in the morning on 25 August, the day the appeal was issued. Yang had come to Beijing from Shanghai by air that night in his temporary capacity as the high-level courier ferrying messages back and forth between the two leaders. Zhou asked Yang to return to Shanghai at dawn to tell Mao of his own assessment of the chaos that was now also threatening to engulf the capital where “rebels” had recently ransacked the embassies of India, Burma and Indonesia, and set fire to the British mission. In Zhou’s own words: “Where will it all end if things are allowed to continue like this? I fear a chain reaction. One thing is certain now and that is that there must be no wavering, as far as the leadership of the centre is concerned, nor as far as the authority of the Liberation Army is concerned.” Knowing

87. *Wenjian huibian*, Vol. 1, pp. 493–94. The summary of the appeal in the note appended to Mao’s comment by the editors of *Manuscripts* does not summarize or mention this passage.

88. *Hongqi (Red Flag)*, No. 6 (1967). See also comment in *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, p. 321.

89. *Zhenhan quanguo de riri yeye (Days and Nights that Shook the Entire Nation)* (Wuhan: Gang gongzong, 1967), p. 8.

90. *Wenjian huibian*, Vol. 1, pp. 495–96.

that it was imperative that Mao himself did not end up believing he was being tricked or pressured into adopting a particular stance – in which case, past experience showed, he might well react in fury by moving even further in the direction from which he, if left to his own devices, was planning to turn away – Zhou explicitly forbade Yang from sharing with Mao his own highly critical views of the incendiary nature of certain recent slogans and remarks attributable to CCRG members Wang Li, Guan Feng and Qi Benyu. At the same time, Zhou said, Yang was to make sure he drew Mao's attention to those slogans and remarks.⁹¹ It was high politics of the kind that Zhou mastered perhaps better than any other member of the CCP's inner circle, save for Mao himself. Assuming that Mao was looking for a way of executing and explaining a 180° turn, the Premier desperately needed him to conclude himself that Wang, Guan and Qi were the people who could be made into scapegoats for all that had happened since he had left Beijing on his "inspection tour" in mid-July.⁹²

Zhou had guessed correctly where Mao was moving. At dawn on 26 August, after having been briefed by Yang and after a mere two or three hours of sleep, Mao had his nurse call Yang back to his side to inform him that the three junior CCRG members were "wrecking the Great Cultural revolution." "Tell nobody but the Premier about this," Mao said to Yang, ordering him to return to Beijing immediately: "See to it that they are arrested. I am putting the Premier in charge of dealing with this matter."⁹³ Sensing fully how extraordinary the impact of what was about to happen would be on the PLA leadership, Zhou, after having received the news from Yang, told him to travel on to Beidaihe to brief Lin Biao.⁹⁴ Zhou dispelled Yang's anxiety by reminding him that Lin was the vice-chairman of the CCP and "not to tell him about something this important would not be good. If the Chairman asks, just tell him it was my idea!"⁹⁵

The scapegoats were charged, found guilty and arrested on 30 August.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, it was becoming clear to Mao in Shanghai as well as to his colleagues in Beijing that the appeal was insufficiently powerful

91. The claim was eventually made in *Renmin ribao* on 8 September 1967, in an article penned by Yao Wenyuan and revised by Mao himself, that the slogans (including "Drag out a small handful in the military!" about which Mao, as noted above, had voiced misgivings in early August) had "stirred up evil gusts of doubting everyone, bombarding the proletarian headquarters, creating dissension and exploiting confusion." That the appearance of the slogans in the Party media in the summer had been ratified by persons far more senior than Wang, Guan and Qi was not acknowledged; Jin, Huang and Chang, *Strange Things and Strange Words*, pp. 341–43.

92. Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai's Later Years*, pp. 241–42.

93. Zhang Sishen, *Zhanjiang yu tongshuai* (*Victorious General and Commander in Chief*) (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 2000), pp. 373–76.

94. According to *Wang Li's Reflections*, Vol. 2, p. 1014, in mid-August "when Lin Biao noticed that Beijing was becoming increasingly chaotic, he had taken the train and left [Beijing]."

95. Zhang Zishen, *Victorious General and Commander in Chief*, p. 378.

96. Wang Li and Guan Feng, that is. Qi Benyu was spared until January 1968 when he too was arrested.

and was having a limited impact in all but a handful of provinces.⁹⁷ When an “enthusiastic campaign to support the military” failed to materialize, Zhou Enlai on 3 September went on to call and chair a meeting of the CCRG caucus to draw up an “Order Prohibiting the Seizure of Arms, Equipment and other Military Supplies from the People’s Liberation Army.” Later that day and all through the night, he met members of the PLA top brass and senior MR officers in the capital to revise and amend the text of the order. On 4 September, its text was sent to Mao in Shanghai to finalize and issue, which the CCP and CMC Chairman did the following day.⁹⁸ Appearing in the name of the CCP centre with the State Council, CMC and CCRG as co-signatories, much of the order was concerned with commanding the “organizations of the masses” not to seize any further arms and to seal up and commence the return to the PLA of whatever arms they had already seized. To ensure that, this time around, such a call would be heeded, the order spelled out in language that could not be misunderstood that the Liberation Army had the “right to shoot in self-defence” anyone acting in violation and found to be resisting it. But from the point of view of what had happened to the policy of “arming the left,” it was above all point three of the order that mattered. It read in full: “Military organs, forces, academies etc. are strictly forbidden from distributing weapons, ammunition, equipment, vehicles, material or supplies to *any* organization or persons without express permission from the centre.”⁹⁹

The order was instantly communicated through each layer of the military and civilian bureaucracies, all the way down to the grassroots. In the Guangxi MD it was communicated to military sub-districts “by telephone, at approximately 7.30 am” on 5 September; one can safely assume that the process was the same in many parts of the country.¹⁰⁰ Whereas the actual returning of arms is known to have proceeded reasonably smoothly in some places, in others it was resisted, upsetting as it no doubt did complex new local balances of power.¹⁰¹ Soon some local authorities began passing “supplementary legislation” adapted to local conditions. So for example on 8 September, and again on 6 October, the Beijing Garrison issued regulations that, assuming they were implemented as intended, strictly curtailed the rights of non-residents to carry

97. *Dangdai Guizhou dashiji (Record of Major Events in Contemporary Guizhou)* (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1996), p. 304.

98. *Great Teachings and Brilliant Truths*, p. 11; *Chronology of the Life of Zhou Enlai 1949–1976*, Vol. 3, p. 186. *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, p. 410, gives the date of Mao’s comment (“The Premier: I’ve already read this; act accordingly”) on the order as 5 September 1967, sourcing it to what is described as Mao’s original handwriting. It is worth noting that all contemporary copies of the order give the date of Mao’s comment as 4 September. Why it should have been retro-dated is unclear.

99. *Wenjian huibian*, Vol. 1, pp. 500–505.

100. *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao (Chronology of Major Events in the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi)* (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 51.

101. Cf. *Dongtai*, No. 150 (15 September 1967); *Revolutionary Great Criticism Statements*, Vol. 5, pp. 8–9.

firearms in the city and gave the police sweeping powers to confiscate arms and ammunition.¹⁰²

On 24 September, Mao was finally back in Beijing. Upon his return, he received (he made no speech) the many PLA officers from the provinces who were in the national capital at the time to “study” or attend meetings, and/or preparing to attend the forthcoming National Day celebrations. Accompanying Mao and speaking at the reception were Zhou Enlai and the members of the CCRG. None of them referred, even indirectly, to the policy of “arming the left.” Instead, they spoke in vaguely self-critical terms of the need to rectify mistakes all around. In his closing address, following Mao’s brief appearance, Yang Chengwu announced that a massive extended training and indoctrination campaign was about to be embarked upon, not just among officers and men all over the country but among civilian cadres and Red Guards as well. Its aim was one of *peaceful* conflict resolution – in reality, the papering over of differences. By early October, sporadic violence may still have been very much the order of the day, but China as a whole was no longer in a state of “all-round civil war.” In the words of Zhang Chunqiao, speaking on 12 October, “the high point of the nation-wide great chaos has passed.”¹⁰³ When Lin Biao called an enlarged session of the CMC, the policy of “arming the left” was one of three major topics on the agenda.¹⁰⁴ What the PLA top brass attending (including Marshal Ye Jianying and Yang Chengwu) said on the topic is not known; a summary transcript of Zhou Enlai’s remarks had him telling the session that the way to proceed with the policy was by way of “distributing [mock] wooden rifles first and real rifles later.”¹⁰⁵ The day he spoke, Zhou had met Mao Zedong; one cannot but draw the conclusion that this fundamental alteration of the meaning of “arming the left” had been cleared with the CCP Chairman.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Historians, Eric Hobsbawm argued in an article in which he took issue with the relativism of some “post-modern” intellectual fashions, must defend the foundation of their discipline: the supremacy of evidence.¹⁰⁷ The present study of a discrete episode in Mao’s career after 1949 attempts to defend the supremacy of evidence, by exploding a myth about the Great Cultural Revolution that for too long has been dressed up as history. How many lives were lost as the policy of “arming of the left” further aggravated the violence that was already endemic to the great cataclysm, the mother of all mass movements, and human tragedy on the grand scale – to pick three equally appropriate images conjured up by

102. *Wenge jianxun*, No. 477 (16 September 1967); No. 521 (13 October 1967).

103. *Quanwudi* (*Entirely without Enemies*), No. 20 (2 November 1967).

104. *Huanxintian* (*Alter the Sky*), No. 24 (23 October 1967).

105. *Huanxintian*, No. 20 (18 October 1967).

106. *Chronology of the Life of Zhou Enlai 1949–1976*, Vol. 3, p. 194.

107. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 271.

Roderick MacFarquhar in his *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*?¹⁰⁸ The numbers still elude us, but hopefully the evidence presented here will have shown that culpability and personal responsibility for what happened was Mao’s.

At the time, when powerful evidence to the contrary was scarce, many outside observers were prepared to accept Edgar Snow’s characterization of the Cultural Revolution: “Violence, certainly, has occurred, but I don’t think anything comparable to the old civil war of China. And one must remember that the leadership, including Mao – *starting* with Mao – has emphasized that violence should not be used in carrying through this purge, or reform. On the whole, the whole period has been carried through, lived through, with a minimum of violence, it seems to me.”¹⁰⁹ Once the Cultural Revolution was safely in the past, the accounts of events in the summer of 1967 that entered the history books told students of China in Europe and North America that “at the height of the Cultural Revolution, [Mao] did try to moderate its destructive impact on the Party apparatus and on society as a whole. Mao attempted to prevent armed struggle and physical persecution”¹¹⁰ Now it can be said confidently that this was at best only half the story. The “moderation” and “prevention” consisted of a string of statements by Mao widely publicized by the CCP Centre in Central Document *Zhongfa* No. 313 on 7 October 1967.¹¹¹ Purported to have been made during his travels in July, August and September, the statements had in fact prior to their publication been chronologically re-ordered and extensively edited so as to make no mention of the “arming of the left” and/or Mao’s assessments of the domestic situation that had informed this particular policy. As an important and influential text in and after October 1967, *Zhongfa* No. 313 has rightly been included in *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts Since the Founding of the Nation*. But what the Historical Documentation Research Office has failed to do is employ the archival resources and fuller historical record at its disposal to deconstruct the patently false version of history it represents. In *Manuscripts*, despite all its rhetoric about the need to “totally negate the ‘Great Cultural Revolution’,” the CCP is still defending the indefensible.

108. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; 1983; 1997), Vol. 1, p. 3; Vol. 3, pp. 465–66.

109. Edgar Snow, interviewed on Swedish Television, 4 December 1968. My thanks to Bosse Lindquist for providing me with a video-tape of this interview.

110. *The Cambridge History of China*: Vol. 15, Pt. 2, p. 208.

111. *Wenjian huibian*, Vol. 1, pp. 4–18. At the time of its release, this official record of Mao’s statements was prefaced by a brief note that read “Stenographic record, not checked and approved by the speaker”; in the CCP Centre *Notification* that accompanied it, this point was reiterated: “This stenographic record has not been checked and approved by the Chairman and it should not be reprinted in newspapers and magazines.” In fact, as the editors of *Manuscripts* note, the record had been gone over and edited by Mao personally (see note in *Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts*, Vol. 12, p. 389). In other words, Mao was responsible not only for what was left in (and left out of) the official record, but also for the way in which the record had been edited.

That large-scale military and bureaucratic organization played a crucial role in sustaining the massive death toll of the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76) as a whole is certain.¹¹² Equally certain is that without Mao, regardless of whatever factional, social, local conflicts may have been brewing under the surface, the summer of 1967 would not have witnessed an eruption of violence and chaos on the scale that it did. In the end, the story told here may be less about the Cultural Revolution than about the power of Mao's words – not about a prairie fire started by a single spark, but about the escalation of violence fuelled by a single remark, the rhetorical question “Why don't we arm the left?” In *The Violence of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle introduced the idea of being subjected by linguistic violence: what Mao's Supreme Instruction achieved in August 1967 was create a “left” that was armed or otherwise no longer a subject.¹¹³ And once armed, it was compelled to “defend itself by force” or be devoured by that which Mao's dialectics defined as the right, revisionism and the forces of reaction. In their original context, Mao's words were the Cultural Revolution's ultimate weapon of mass destruction: the lethality of a mere rhetorical question of his surpassing even that of a “spiritual atom bomb.”¹¹⁴

112. See Andrew G. Walder and Yang Su, “The Cultural Revolution in the countryside: scope, timing and human impact,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 173 (March 2003), pp. 74–99.

113. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 224–264.

114. Cf. Lin Biao's foreword to the second edition of the “little red book,” in Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2002), p. 172.