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History-Geography essay

“How far were Mao's agricultural policies responsible for the scale of the great famine in China, 1958-62?”

The 2nd Chinese Great Leap Forward aimed to begin the industrialisation that China awaited for centuries. Not only it would increase the life level in China, but it would also let the PRC's economy surpass the Western economy, who overshadowed the Chinese for a long time. For that, Mao Zedong, the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, ordered a reform of agriculture. His aim was to increase the effectiveness of Chinese farms in order to give the Chinese a chance to eat better and make profit from selling the surplus stocks of food abroad. That profit would give China enough resources to make their industrial revolution happen. But what ended up happening was a campaign of famine, ravaging through the entire China, leaving starving peasants, increasing poverty and overall stagnation of Chinese political, economical and social progress.

The Chinese peasants in the 50's were met with severe distrust from every single part of Chinese society, with Mao being it's initiator. He viewed them as “inherently capitalistic”, unable to grasp communist principles. He accused them of hoarding food for themselves, and thinking only about their own profit. This accusation could be seen as ironic, as Mao himself was a peasant, who lead a great peasant revolution. Yet, due to Mao's accusations and their consequences, China was forced to face most appalling consequences, first of them being the forced collectivisation of farms in 1956. Chinese peasants were forced to abandon all private property, and now work for the state, gaining nothing in return. Entire China was divided in 70,000 communes, each commune made up of roughly 750,000 brigades, each counting around 200 households. The collectivisation also revolved around the force of the state: everything was controlled by the PRC, starting from farming methods, going through sale and distribution and ending with prices. All was dictated from above, meaning that now all the country followed Mao's exceptional wisdom and vast knowledge on all subjects. Everyone was obliged to follow Mao's orders. This collectivisation left the peasants with nothing, doing just what they were told to do. Left with no incentive to work, the effectiveness of Chinese agriculture radically dropped. But it was only a relatively minor factor when contrasted with what Mao wanted the peasants to do. Him being so inspired by the USSR, Mao thought that all scientific advances developed by the Russian scientists should be applied in China. Trofim Lysenko's theories were one of the most influencing the Chinese. He claimed to discover how to produce super-crops, 16 times more efficient than current methods. Yet, it was not known at the time that these ideas were just worthless. But all generation of Chinese were told that Soviet researches could do no wrong, and that their ideas were infallible. In addition, Mao, who had no idea how to efficiently organise the Chinese agriculture, ordered everyone in China to follow this new doctrine based on Lysenko's “discoveries”, which lead China even further into a standstill. It was true that some of the methods of Lysenkoism would yield some benefit, but as all of them were enforced everywhere, this prominence of Mao's agricultural genius caused more harm than benefit. The ineffective production of crops that were not adapted to Chinese soil caused to be so destructive, that entire China had fallen into the spiral of starvation and famine, which caused around 50 million Chinese to die throughout China. All because such inadapted policies, like the principle of pest control, taken to a level so high that entire populations of animals were exterminated; prime example being the “sparrowcide”, which resulted in the extermination of almost all sparrows in the countryside, leaving other rodents free to destroy the grain supplies. All of this caused by Mao's hatred towards the peasants and his false ideas on how to organise the Chinese agriculture efficiently.

But Mao's policies weren't the main factor standing behind the famine. These other causes of this famine were more related to Mao as a political personna.