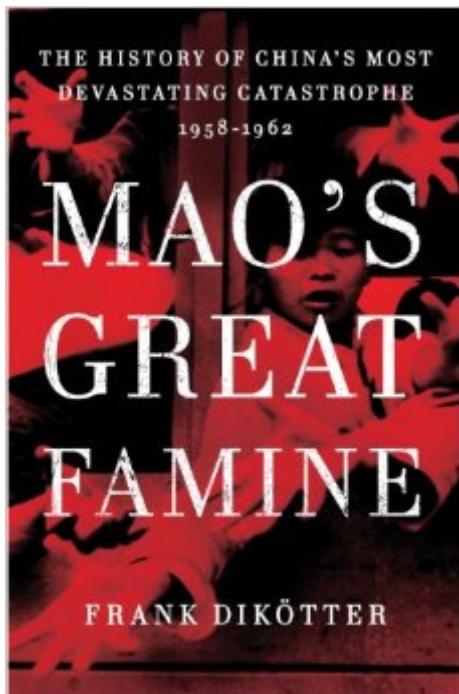


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Mao's Great Famine: The History Of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962



Synopsis

"Between 1958 and 1962, China descended into hell. Mao Zedong threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up to and overtake Britain in less than 15 years. The experiment ended in the greatest catastrophe the country had ever known, destroying tens of millions of lives." So opens Frank Dikötter's riveting, magnificently detailed chronicle of an era in Chinese history much speculated about but never before fully documented because access to Communist Party archives has long been restricted to all but the most trusted historians. A new archive law has opened up thousands of central and provincial documents that "fundamentally change the way one can study the Maoist era." Dikötter makes clear, as nobody has before, that far from being the program that would lift the country among the world's superpowers and prove the power of Communism, as Mao imagined, the Great Leap Forward transformed the country in the other direction. It became the site not only of "one of the most deadly mass killings of human history,"--at least 45 million people were worked, starved, or beaten to death--but also of "the greatest demolition of real estate in human history," as up to one-third of all housing was turned into rubble). The experiment was a catastrophe for the natural world as well, as the land was savaged in the maniacal pursuit of steel and other industrial accomplishments. In a powerful meshing of exhaustive research in Chinese archives and narrative drive, Dikötter for the first time links up what happened in the corridors of power--the vicious backstabbing and bullying tactics that took place among party leaders--with the everyday experiences of ordinary people, giving voice to the dead and disenfranchised. His magisterial account recasts the history of the People's Republic of China.

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Customer Reviews

This important and very revealing book is a serious effort to enhance understanding of the horrendous famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward of the last 1950s and early 1960s. In reading this book, it's important to understand DiKotter's method with its strengths and limitations. A complete and systematic narrative and analysis of the Great Leap Forward is not possible at this time. Much of the key documentation is hidden in closed archives in China and will probably remain inaccessible until the Communist Party loses its political monopoly. DiKotter pursued documents related to the Great Leap Forward in a number of less tightly guarded provincial archives. This effort produced a number of revealing documents generated by provincial party and government (often the same thing) officials, and copies of important documents from the central party-government apparatus. Supplemented by prior secondary sources and some other archival research, DiKotter was able to assemble a great deal of revealing information about the Great Leap Forward. Since DiKotter's approach is driven heavily by his archival research, this book often has an anecdotal quality, though DiKotter supplements his vignettes with some background narrative and analysis. The cumulative effect of DiKotter's reliance on his primary sources is, however, a powerful and devastating exposure of the dimensions of this tragedy and the culpability of the Chinese Communist Party. DiKotter takes pains to rebut the common impression that the famine of the Great Leap Forward was the inadvertant consequence of a terribly mistaken policy exacerbated by bad weather. DiKotter shows very well that the famine and its accompanying events go well beyond simple criminal negligence.

Frank Dikotter has written a masterpiece about history's greatest monster and mass murderer ever to have lived. To be precise, he describes the massed and forcible collectivization of the Chinese peasants who paid a horrible price in the process: over 45 million of them died in addition to the many more tens of millions who perished as well because of one man's mad scheme to bring change to his country, no matter what the price ought to be. This was the so-called Great Leap

Forward and it happened during 4 years,between 1958-1962. To quote Dikotter: "China descended into hell. Mao Zedong threw his country into a frenzy...(which was)an attempt to catch up with and overtake Britain in less than fifteen years. In pursuit of a utopian paradise,everything was collectivized and people in the countryside were robbed of their work,their homes,their land,their belongings and their livelihood."(See Introduction)To write this book,thousands of new documents hitherto classified were used. These came from many sources,mainly from the Office of Foreign Affairs and other provincial archives. These brutal acts caused the greatest demolition of real estate in history and one third of all housing was turned into rubble. "Homes were pulled down to make fertilizers,to build canteens,to relocate villagers,to straighten roads,to make place for a better future beckoning ahead or simply to punish thier owners".But not all the people died of hunger. Many would suffer from common illnesses such as diarrhoea,dysentery and typhus. "Suicide reached epidemic proportions and in Puning,Guangdong,suicides were described as 'ceaseless' ;some people ended their lives out of shame for having stolen from fellow villagers."(p.304) What's more,"human flesh was traded on the black market.

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