

To what extent does Mao Zedong deserve his reputation as one of history's most notorious dictators?

Mao Zedong was Chairman of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to his death in 1976. Mao was a Communist revolutionary, described as having an 'emphatic aura' and as 'exuding overwhelming power'¹. Mao led China with communist regimes, after studying the Marxist and Leninist literature. Mao is commonly known as one of history's most notorious dictators, and many say he was the worst of all due to the immense number of deaths he caused. To what extent does he deserve this reputation? In this essay I will consider the criteria that makes a notorious dictator and whether or not Mao deserves to be compared to the worst dictators in the world according to these factors. Although he deserves his infamous standing as one of the world's most notorious dictators due to the amount of deaths he caused, his good intentions for the benefit of China mean he earns a better reputation than those with immoral aspirations.

To begin, I will examine the death toll attributed to Mao's reign. Mao's 'Great Leap Forward', in 1958, was a plan that resulted in the death of approximately forty million people². This was because he ordered all peasants to produce steel in backyard furnaces, rather than food, in order to increase China's industry so that it could become a world superpower³. This was Mao's fault alone because it was his decision and arrogance which led to a severe food shortage, and then the famine.

A contributing reason for the famine was the exaggeration of statistics. Mao set unachievable targets for food production and beat and tortured those who couldn't reach them. To avoid this, peasants would exaggerate their production levels, sometimes by twenty-five times the realistic amount⁴. Because Mao's reports said there was a huge surplus of food, Mao sold much of it to other countries. This was partly Mao's fault because he set high targets, and terrorised people who didn't reach them. However, he never exaggerated reports of food supplies himself, so it was also the managers of the communes (collective farms) who were to blame for the false statistics.

Mao began the Cultural Revolution in China, 1966, which imprisoned, tortured and killed around one and a half million people who were anti-communist⁵. Mao launched this campaign to gain support for himself, and one of his tactics was to eradicate all who opposed him. This was Mao's responsibility alone because he ordered the killings for his own benefit.

Josef Stalin, who was a notorious dictator of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953, killed around thirteen million people, just over a quarter of the number Mao did⁶. Stalin's situation was similar to Mao's in that he inadvertently caused a famine that killed many people. Stalin, like Mao, was predominantly to blame for these deaths because he refused aid from other countries when Russia was in the middle of a famine and forced the progress of collective farms. But Stalin also sent out

¹ Interview with Sir Gerry Warner, former deputy chief of MI6 and Co-ordinator for Intelligence and Security, By Austin Humphrey, 15th June 2020. (Gerry Warner met Chairman Mao at a formal dinner party in 1957).

² Ian Johnson, "Who killed more: Hitler, Stalin or Mao?", The New York Review of Books, <https://nybooks.com/daily/2018/02/05/who-killed-more-hitler-stalin-or-mao/?printpage=true> (accessed 21st June, 2020)

³ John Cantrell, Neil Smith, Peter Smith and Ray Ennion, 20th Century History (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p.297

⁴ Jung Chang, "Wild Swans" (London, HarperCollins, 1991) pg. 224-225

⁵ "Cultural Revolution", History, <https://www.history.com/topics/china/cultural-revolution> (accessed 21st June, 2020)

⁶ Terry Fiehn, Russia and the USSR 1905-1941 (London, Hodder Murray, 1996) p.102

requisitioning gangs who stole the little grain that the peasants had⁷. These combined factors led to a devastating food shortage.

Adolf Hitler was an infamous dictator who killed many people. During the holocaust, Hitler and the Nazis mass murdered an estimated eleven million people in death camps⁸, based purely on race and religion, in an attempt to create a 'pure Germany': the Aryan race. Without Hitler, there wouldn't have been a second world war, which killed around seventy-five million people. Therefore, it could be argued that Hitler was indirectly responsible for twice as many deaths that Mao was.

Pol Pot was a dictator of Cambodia. He killed an estimated two million people by execution and starvation⁹. He tried to run Cambodia to his own strict version of Communism, where everyone was stripped of their titles and professions and forced to work in fields¹⁰. Pol Pot was responsible for this because as the leader of the Khmer Rouge it was his policies that killed people.

Whilst this number is much smaller than any of the others, in perspective it was a quarter of the entire population of Cambodia¹¹, which is much higher either than Stalin, Hitler or Mao. Mao only killed six percent of the Chinese population, suggesting that the numbers of deaths caused by Mao were only high due to the large population of China: 670 million¹². If purely considering the numbers of people killed, Mao deserves his reputation as one of history's most notorious dictators, because he killed more than anyone else.

Just examining number of deaths may not be as important as analysing the intent behind them. The deaths that Mao caused were double the amount of deaths caused by Stalin and Hitler combined, however, his primary intention for the Great Leap Forward was to increase China's industry to make it a world superpower. Mao also improved healthcare by making it free for everyone and implementing western medicine¹³. In this instance he had no personal gain, only improving the health of his people. This shows that Mao had noble aims while he was in power, so even though some of them drastically failed and resulted in deaths, this wasn't what Mao had planned.

There were some actions Mao took whilst in power that had questionable aims, for example, the Hundred Flowers Campaign. This was a campaign to allow citizens to criticize the government, but after a few months, Mao stopped it and persecuted everyone who protested. Many people believe that Mao just wanted to remove his enemies, including Sir Gerry Warner, who was a British diplomat and interpreter in China from 1956 to 1958, who said, 'The Hundred Flowers campaign was a deliberate attempt to flush out those who opposed Mao and Communism'¹⁴.

⁷ Ibid, pg.102

⁸ Timothy Snyder, *"Hitler vs Stalin: who killed more?"*, The New York Review of Books, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/03/10/hitler-vs-stalin-who-killed-more/> (accessed 20th June)

⁹ *"Khmer Rouge: Cambodia's years of Brutality"*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399> (accessed 30th May, 2020)

¹⁰ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, *"Khmer Rouge leaders found guilty of genocide in Cambodia's 'Nuremberg' moment"*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/16/khmer-rouge-leaders-genocide-charges-verdict-cambodia> (accessed 29th June, 2020)

¹¹ *"Cambodia 1975"*, Population Pyramid, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/cambodia/1975/> (accessed 29th June, 2020)

¹² *"China Population by Year"*, multpl, <https://www.multpl.com/china-population/table/by-year> (accessed 24th June, 2020)

¹³ John Cantrell, Neil Smith, Peter Smith and Ray Ennion, *20th Century History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p.294

¹⁴ Interview with Sir Gerry Warner, former deputy chief of MI6 and Co-ordinator for Intelligence and Security, By Austin Humphrey, 15th June 2020

Mao also started a 're-education' programme in 1966, which were labour camps that those who were deemed to be anti-communist would go to for up to four years to learn the ways of Communism¹⁵. This action demonstrates Mao's malevolent intentions because he knew that this would cause pain and death by hard labour, denial of medical attention denied and seizure of property. Yet, he continued his policy, to avoid being faced with challenges to his leadership.

Mao may have killed more people than Hitler, but most would agree that Hitler's intentions were horrific. He singled out groups in society as second-class humans and purposely killed them. Therefore, as death by ill-judgement is not the same as death by ill-intent, Mao doesn't deserve to be compared to the likes of Hitler who set out with intentions of genocide.

Another dictator with immoral intentions was Idi Amin, who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979. Once in power he created a military dictatorship and tortured anyone who opposed him. He killed approximately 300,000 people of other African ethnic groups who he feared would challenge him¹⁶. He also took the country's money for himself which highlights how he put his own well-being above that of his country's.

Mao's famine was caused by many ill-judged decisions, which led to a food shortage. He was not alone in making poor decisions and should be compared to dictators such as Saparmurat Niyazov, a dictator of Turkmenistan from 1985 to 2006, used half the country's gross domestic product for a presidential fund. This included building an ice palace near the capital city when Turkmenistan's temperatures can reach fifty degrees Celsius¹⁷¹⁸. Niyazov's objectives were to increase his own reputation as a rich and powerful leader, but also attract others to his country, possibly to increase global standing. Whether his intentions were good or bad, his plans were certain to fail from the outset, similar to Mao's misguided strategy to abandon the food production in favour of industry.

Whilst some may argue Mao didn't deserve his reputation as one of history's most notorious dictators because his motivations were to improve China, he did deliberately persecute those who disagreed with him during the Cultural Revolution.

It could be said that the way to judge a dictator is by their lasting impact on a country. Mao implemented many positive changes to Chinese society, which have lasted to today. For example, he improved the lives of women, encouraging them to have jobs, giving them equal education to men and abolishing foot binding: a tradition where the toes would be permanently tucked under their foot, causing agony and often long-term disabilities. By doing this Mao would have saved millions of women from a life of pain. Mao also introduced western medicine as oppose to traditional herbal remedies. This most likely saved the lives of millions, who would have died needlessly had he not done this.

However, Mao forbade criticism of him or his government, which carried on for years afterwards. In the Hundred Flowers Campaign, anyone who complained about Mao was persecuted. This is a denial of free speech, which many argue is a basic human right. This law continued in China even thirteen years after Mao's death, at the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989. According to British ambassador to China at that time: Sir Alan Donald, up to ten thousand civilians died when they were peacefully

¹⁵ John Cantrell, Neil Smith, Peter Smith and Ray Ennion, 20th Century History (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 309

¹⁶ "10 Most Corrupt African Dictators in History", History Collection, <https://historycollection.com/ten-corrupt-african-dictators-modern-history/2/> (accessed 17th June 2020)

¹⁷ Bess Brown, "Saparmurat Niyazov President of Turkmenistan", Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saparmurat-Niyazov> (accessed 21st June, 2020)

¹⁸ "Climate – Turkmenistan", Climates To Travel, <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/turkmenistan> (accessed 19th June 2020)

protesting for democracy and free speech. Even today, there are riots in Hong Kong as the locals there, protest Communism being under Chinese rule¹⁹. Therefore, because of Mao's policies, the quality of life for people in China is still negatively impacted.

Adolf Hitler made a lasting impact as a result of World War II, which caused much of the world to suffer greatly and take time to rebuild. However, now each country has recovered and there's little physical remains of Hitler's dictatorship, only the memory of war. This is similar to Vladimir Lenin, who had to reverse his plan whilst he was still in power, by creating the New Economic Policy which contradicted his lifelong ideologies of Communism²⁰. Some of the changes he made didn't even last to the end of his reign. However, Lenin supposedly motivated Stalin to continue his ideas and Mao himself read Leninist theories as a student which inspired him to make China a Communist country. Therefore, whilst Lenin's own work cannot be identified, his attempts led the way for others.

A reason that Mao could be considered a more notorious dictator than either of Hitler or Lenin is because his ideology that he worked to create, is still intact more than fifty years on. Whilst Hitler only leaves reminiscences of his time in power, and Lenin was the inspiration for someone else to take over, it is possible to see first-hand Mao's legacy today, as part of Xi Jinping's China. Sir Gerry Warner observes, 'The long-term effects of Mao's reign were worse than Stalin'²¹. The country is still a Communist state, which was championed by Mao, thus showing that he had a more lasting impact than other dictators.

In conclusion, there are many ways to judge a dictator, and those ways are subjective and lead to different results. Mao improved China as a country immensely. His actions show his drive for a better China, a characteristic that many dictators as oppose to personal financial gain or power. However, Mao was the cause of death for forty million people, more than anyone in history. Whilst Mao didn't intend this, he is still held responsible and so deserves his infamous status. Out of all dictators, Mao has left a lasting consequence for the people of China. His promotion of Communism in China was more successful than other dictators' goals such as Hitler's effort for European dominance. The political system that Mao started has stifled democracy in China which is still causing protests in Hong Kong today.

I believe that the most important factor for notoriety is intent. Therefore, I believe, that due to Mao Zedong's mass number of killings but honourable intentions on the whole, he deserves his reputation as one of history's most notorious dictators, but falls short of the notoriety of those who intended to harm others.

¹⁹ Helier Cheung and Roland Hughes, "Why are there protests in Hong Kong? All the context you need", BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-48607723> (accessed 29th June, 2020)

²⁰ Terry Fiehn, Russia and the USSR 1905-1941 (London, Hodder Murray, 1996) p.66

²¹ Interview with Sir Gerry Warner: former Deputy chief of MI6 and Co-ordinator of Intelligence and Security, by Austin Humphrey. 15th June 2020.

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