of Stalin. The reform-minded Communist leader Imre Nagy, who had earlier been driven
from the premiership, returned to power. His reform program and release of political pris-
oners ignited pressures not only for democratization and parliamentary government but
also for the severance of ties to Moscow. Alarmed, the Soviets forced the party leadership
to remove Nagy from power and to replace him with the more subservient János Kádár,
who accepted Soviet intervention. Khrushchev dispatched troops, tanks, and artillery to
suppress the “counterrevolution” and forcefully reestablished Communist rule. Severe
reprisals followed. Nagy himself was imprisoned, then tried and hanged, and his body was
thrown into a mass grave. In the wake of the repression, 200,000 Hungarians fled into ex-
ile, mainly to the United States, a larger number than at any time since the crushing of the
European revolutions of 1848–1849. The Soviet tanks in Budapest weakened any remain-
ing illusions about the benevolence and liberalism of Stalin’s successors and shook the
Communist faithful in western Europe and elsewhere.

114. THE COMMUNIST WORLD: MAO ZEDONG
AND THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The Civil War

The proclamation on October 1, 1949, of the People’s Republic of China by Mao Zedong
and the Chinese Communist party, the final episode in the long civil war between the Guo-
mindang, or Nationalists, and the Communists, was among the most momentous of events
shaping the world after 1945.

The civil war had gone on intermittently since 1927. In 1937 Nationalists and Communists entered into an uneasy alliance to fight the Japanese. Mao agreed to place the People’s Liberation Army under the command of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists, but Mao actually waged a separate guerrilla war against the Japanese from the northern bases he controlled and over which he imposed his own Communist regime, winning peasant support through land reforms. The Nationalists, cut off by the Japanese from the urban centers of eastern China, suffered from chaotic economic conditions and severe inflation and became increasingly corrupt, authori-

tarian, and repressive.

The victory over Japan in 1945 set the stage for renewed civil war. Nationalist troops,
with American aid, returned to eastern China. The Communists, moving out from their
guerrilla bases, poured into the northern provinces and made contact with the Russians in
Manchuria. When Mao refused to surrender the northern provinces, disband his army, and
accept Nationalist political control, the civil war resumed. An American-sponsored truce
temporarily halted hostilities, but when the U.S.S.R. withdrew from Manchuria in the
spring of 1946 (after removing Manchurian industrial assets as reparations), Nationalists
and Communists clashed over control of Manchuria.

In the fighting from 1946 to 1949, the Nationalists, despite substantial American sup-
port, lost ground steadily. By the autumn of 1949 the Communists had routed the
demoralized Guomindang armies. Chiang withdrew his shattered forces
to the island of Taiwan (and to the lesser islands of Matsu and Quemoy),
where he established a small but soon prospering Republic of China in Tai-
wan. The mainland regime never gave up its claim to Taiwan, and the fate of Taiwan re-
mained an unresolved international legacy for later generations. In 1971 Taiwan had to sur-
Mao: The New Regime

For the next 27 years, until his death in 1976, Chairman Mao, as uncontested head of the party, molded the destinies of China. Much more is known about him now than at the time. He had earlier imposed his iron rule on the party and on the populations under his control. He had ruthlessly eliminated all party rivals in periodic purges. Now nothing but the total transformation of backward, agrarian China, long the hapless victim of foreign powers, would satisfy him. He had earlier formed his vision of a new proud China in which the social order of domineering landlords and oppressed peasants would be reversed, the country would be industrialized and modernized, and China would be internationally respected. In many ways he personified the Chinese resentment of Western imperialism, which had humiliated China and all but carved the country to pieces in the nineteenth century. He was resolved to set China on the path to modernity, no matter what the cost.

In 1949, for the first time since the revolution of 1911, and indeed for generations before that, a unified central government controlled China, able to direct and mobilize the most populous nation in the world. Even before the Communist triumph Chairman Mao, despite his modest title, already saw himself as something of a successor to the ancient Chinese emperors. He could link Marx’s world view, which since 1920 he had adopted as the instrument for Chinese liberation, to the 4,000-year-old imperial tradition of an all-powerful emperor ruling together with mandarin scholar-officials. The emperor was to rule with the mandate of Heaven in accordance with Confucian moral precepts, as interpreted by his learned officials. They were obligated to criticize the emperor, but if they went too far they could meet a grim end—in ancient times buried alive. The new regime inherited also an ancient tradition of Chinese preeminence in the East Asian world. With traditional ways of life disrupted by decades of revolution, civil struggle, and the war against Japan, Mao’s communism in some ways provided a surrogate for the older Confucian values.

Mao leaned heavily on Soviet experience. The Communist party controlled and policed each level of government and manipulated all organs of information and political indoctrination. The party also added “thought control” and “rectification” labor camps, and it inaugurated a reign of terror. In the first six months of 1950, by Mao’s own estimate, some 700,000 “local bullies and evil gentry” labeled “counterrevolutionaries” lost their lives. In the next two years, from 1950 to 1952, a campaign directed against the “landlords” as a class meant that some half million more men, women, and children lost their lives or were sent to labor camps. The purges then took a different turn. In 1956, in what seemed to be a burst of enthusiasm for greater diversity and toleration in the country, Mao proclaimed: “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.” But as soon as critics were encouraged to come forward, he quickly instituted a new period of repression, an “antirightist” campaign that sent more than a half million “rightists,” and “class enemies” to prisons or forced labor camps, many never to return.

Mao relentlessly mobilized the nation to rebuild the war-devastated economy and then to transform the country into an industrial power. Eliminating the old land regime in the countryside, the party established agricultural cooperatives as a prelude to collectivization. The country’s initial Five-Year Plan, launched in 1953 with Soviet economic and technical assistance during a period of initial friendly relations, concentrated on heavy industry, with significant results even if all targets were not reached. In agriculture the
same floods and droughts that had troubled China for centuries refused to obey government decrees.

Impatient with what he considered the slowness of progress, Mao in 1957 launched the “Great Leap Forward,” designed to transform the country’s industry and agriculture more rapidly. The program adopted by the party proclaimed that China would “catch up with Britain” in a few years’ time. The cooperatives in the countryside were amalgamated into larger “people’s communes.” Tightly organized in military fashion as production brigades, they were responsible for mechanizing production on the farms and developing local rural industry. Communal kitchens, nurseries, and schools left women freer to work on an equal basis in the fields and factories. Borrowing from some of the discredited Soviet experiments of Stalin, the government ordered farmers to abandon their traditional farming and to plant grain and rice everywhere, whether in suitable soil or not, and to crossbreed crops. Farmers were also encouraged to set up metallurgical furnaces in their backyards and learn to make steel.

The Great Leap Forward turned into disaster. Despite the image Mao had cultivated as the champion of the peasantry, he miscalculated on its ability to resist change. The persistent opposition of the peasants, severe crop failures, and the more bizarre experiments brought a disastrous famine. Up to 30 million died of hunger in what may have been the most disastrous agricultural experiment of all time. The outside world knew little of what was going on. Visitors to China were shielded from the disaster, which later scholars call “Mao’s secret famine.” Eventually moderates within the party curbed Mao’s excessive zeal. Although the land remained collectivized, the party suspended the more rigid aspects of the communal experiment. Farmers were even permitted to sell or barter a portion of their crops.

But the industrial sector made progress. In the years before the Communist regime, annual steel production had never reached 1 million tons; by 1960 it exceeded 18 million. By 1960 China’s industrial output ranked among the top ten powers in the world, and its factories had created a base for further expansion. The government also marshaled the country’s scientific and technological talents for the new technological age. It successfully tested an atomic bomb in 1964 and a hydrogen bomb in 1967, and it orbited space satellites in the 1970s.

The regime transformed life in many ways. Road, rail, and air transport physically unified the country. Public sanitation and public health received a high national priority. Labor gangs systematically drained and filled snail-infested canals, curbing the spread of diseases like schistosomiasis. Progress was made in overcoming illiteracy. The government reformed and simplified the written Chinese language and moved toward a single spoken tongue. It also adopted a new transliteration system for spelling Chinese names and words in the Latin alphabet. Women, encouraged to reject traditional Confucian virtues of obedience and deference, received legal equality with men and could count on new opportunities, even if few entered the higher ranks of political power. Old abuses such as child marriage and concubinage were outlawed; foot-binding had been eliminated earlier in the century. More profoundly than the Russian, the Chinese Revolution refashioned the habits and ethos of a gigantic population, reaching remote villages and hamlets untouched for centuries. Within a generation an agrarian, semifeudal country was developing into a modern industrial society. Mao’s transformation was succeeding—at tremendous cost, to be sure.

Suddenly, beginning in 1966, the country was convulsed by the Cultural Revolution unleashed by Mao. Fearful that the revolution would not
The Cultural Revolution in China was led by millions of young “Red Guards” who—with the encouragement of Mao Zedong—sought to rekindle the revolutionary fervor of the Communist revolution and to disrupt or overthrow the bureaucratic order in Chinese society. These young people in Shanghai demonstrated their militant support for Chairman Mao during a typical Red Guard rally at the height of the Cultural Revolution in early 1967.

(Bettmann/Corbis)

survive him and that its purity was endangered, he called for a purge of the highest ranks of government and party and for the removal of those who had succumbed to bureaucratic routine or lacked the zeal to push on with the social revolution. For his cause he mobilized millions of teenage students and other young people as Red Guards, or armed shock troops. Converging on Beijing and other cities, they denounced bourgeois ways, attacked Western imperialist culture, and brutally harassed and humiliated government and party officials as well as cultural and educational leaders. The worst of the brunt fell on intellectuals. Men and women of all backgrounds were arrested, marched through the streets in dunce caps, beaten, and maimed. When fanatical mobs threatened to tear the country apart, army leaders finally intervened and received Mao’s authorization to restore order.

A turbulent sequence followed. Because Mao proclaimed the virtues of the land, white-collar workers, teachers, students, and party officials were forcibly sent off to the countryside to labor in the fields and experience rural life. The economy and the entire educational system broke down. By the time the worst disturbances were over in 1969, hundreds of thousands of lives had been lost. Three million persons had been sent to labor camps or to work in the fields. Thousands of high-ranking officials in the government and party, including two-thirds of the party’s central committee, had been purged. The impact of the Cultural Revolution lingered on in an authoritarian pall that settled
over the country. Mao himself retreated after 1971 into a kind of self-indulgent isolation in Beijing.

The pragmatic and moderate Zhou Enlai, who had little influence in restraining Mao's more radical experiments, faithfully served him for many years as premier and foreign minister. Had he outlived Mao, he might well have been his successor, but Zhou Enlai died in early 1976. Later that same year, Mao died. The Great Helmsman was widely mourned as the towering father of the revolution for over half a century and as one of the giant figures in the history of China. He had forged a revolutionary party and a revolutionary army, fought the Japanese, defeated the Nationalists, and presided over a revolution that had unified, revitalized, and modernized the country. His theoretical teachings on the struggle against imperialism and on the vanguard role of the peasantry, and his practical successes in guerrilla warfare, influenced revolutionaries all over the world. His most famous precept, that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," reinforced revolutionary zeal everywhere. His homilies, published in a little red book called The Living Thoughts of Chairman Mao, were widely quoted and assiduously studied. Mao's revolution had brought self-respect and self-confidence, industrialization, technological progress, unity, and pride to the country.

But his radical experiments and the uncontrolled violence he had repeatedly unleashed also did irreparable harm. His experiments in social engineering in some ways outdid Stalin's and must also be counted among the most costly in all history. By any criteria he ranks among the most brutal of dictators. His successors a few years later tempered their praise for Mao, still lauding his monumental achievements as a revolutionary leader but criticizing him for his "grave blunders."

Foreign Affairs

The emergence of China as a second major Communist power undermined the ideological leadership of the Soviet Union. Stalin, playing his own game, had not always wholeheartedly supported the Chinese Communists in their civil war with the Guomindang. But once the Communist regime was established the U.S.S.R. surrendered to it the concessions acquired in Manchuria under the Yalta agreement. For a time relations remained cool but correct, although Mao always resented being treated as a junior partner. In the 1950s the Chinese received military aid, capital loans, and technical assistance from the Soviets. The Korean War, in which Chinese troops fought the Americans as alien intruders who threatened their very borders, for a time drew them closer to the Soviet Union. Western leaders were even more firmly convinced that a monolithic world Communist movement existed. The Chinese Communists resented American support for the regime in Taiwan and the American effort over two decades to bar the People's Republic of China from the United Nations.

Although professing peace, the People's Republic pursued an aggressive foreign policy. In 1950, pressing old Chinese claims of suzerainty over Tibet and in the guise of liberating the country from clerical, that is, Buddhist, despotism, China occupied Tibet and forcibly maintained its rule there over the years. Monasteries were closed; the Dalai Lama, the country's ruler, was forced into exile; and large numbers of Chinese arrived as settlers. Unresolved tensions continued to affect the people of Tibet and the Tibetan borders. In 1962 China clashed with India in border disputes along India's northeastern frontier, although India from the beginning had been one of the staunchest defenders of the Chinese Revolution.
In the 1960s relations with the Soviet Union became strained. The two states hurled polemics at each other in their rivalry for ideological leadership and for control of the lands of inner Asia into which Russia had expanded in the age of the tsars. Mao, undaunted by nuclear arms, accused Khrushchev of pusillanimous behavior in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. In 1972 the two countries clashed over border territory that divided Manchuria and Russia’s maritime provinces, and they continued to confront one another with large armies in other areas. Although both countries supported North Vietnam in the Vietnam War, China after the war opposed the Soviet-backed intervention by Vietnam in Cambodia. Not until the 1980s was there a rapprochement and the promise of troop reductions along the Chinese-Soviet borders.

With time, relations with the United States improved. In 1971, when the United States withdrew its objections, the People’s Republic of China replaced Taiwan in the United Nations, including its permanent seat on the Security Council. The following year Mao welcomed President Nixon on a dramatic visit to China. Diplomatic channels opened and relations were normalized. The United States conceded that one day in the indefinite future Taiwan would be reunited with the mainland, with its different social and economic system respected.

The Chinese People’s Republic had emerged as one of the great potential centers of global power. And in 1976 it was about to embark on an impressive new era of more peaceful modernization under Mao’s successor. But we must first turn to those other parts of the colonial world that after the Second World War also entered a new stage in their history.