

China's Communist Path



After leading the Communists to victory in China, Mao Zedong placed power in the hands of the Communist Party and began to restructure the economy based on Marxist principles.

China's Communist Path – Placard F

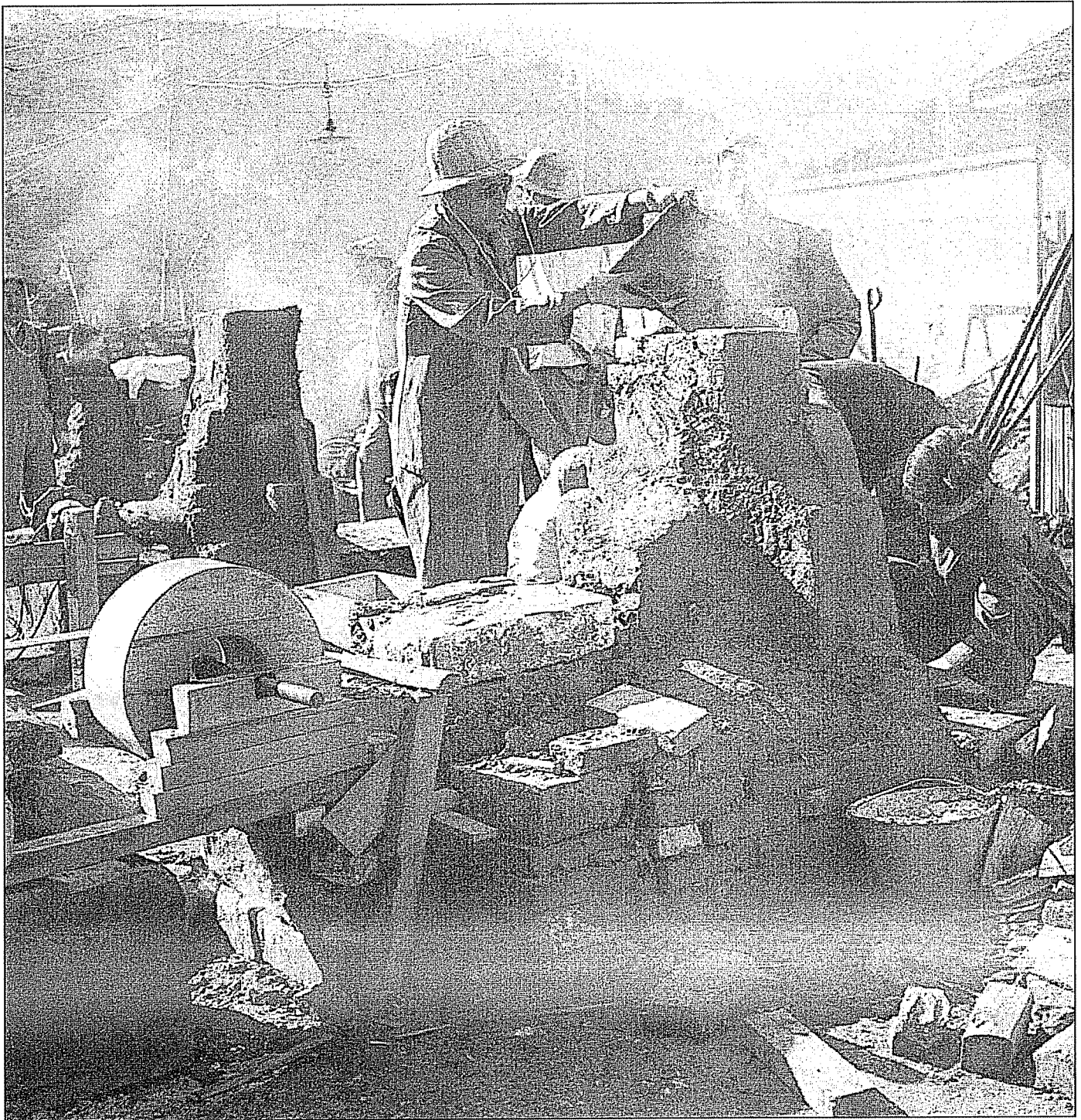
After World War II, China was divided by a civil war. Nationalists fought with communists for control of the country. The Communists, led by Mao Zedong, eventually won. In 1949, they founded the People's Republic of China. The Nationalists fled to the island of Taiwan, where they formed their own government.

China in the Cold War The triumph of communism in China took both the United States and the Soviet Union by surprise. They had assumed that the Nationalists would defeat Mao's forces. At first, American officials held out hope that China would reject Soviet influence and remain neutral in the Cold War. However, Mao soon sided with the Soviet Union. In February 1950, he and Stalin sealed their alliance by signing a mutual defense pact.

Communist states now ruled a vast portion of Eurasia, from Eastern Europe to the East China Sea. This made the United States and its Western allies very nervous. The balance of power in Eurasia was clearly tilting toward the communists.

Over the next few years, Mao consolidated his control over China and expanded China's borders. In 1950, Chinese forces invaded and occupied Tibet, a land with a long history of Chinese influence. China also threatened to invade Taiwan and take control of the island. The United States intervened and provided military aid and assistance to defend Taiwan and its Nationalist government.

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During the Great Leap Forward, many Chinese people were forced to build backyard furnaces to produce steel for their communities.

China's Communist Path – Placard G

Mao's Revolutionary Policies Meanwhile, Mao sought to strengthen communist rule in China. He placed power in the hands of the Communist Party and began to restructure the economy based on Marxist principles. But the character of Chinese communism was different from Soviet communism. Mao and his followers believed that peasants—not urban workers—were the revolutionary class.

The first step was to organize Chinese agriculture along socialist lines. In 1950, the government passed a land reform law, breaking up large estates and distributing land to poor peasants. These small plots were soon combined into larger collective farms, which in theory would be more efficient. A few years later, the government followed the Soviet model of development by setting up even larger collective farms—called communes—where private property was abolished and production goals were set by the state. Chinese women were granted equal rights and given a greater role in production.

The government also socialized industry, putting most factories under state ownership. In 1953, it began a Five-Year Plan designed to modernize the country and to increase industrial production. The plan was a success. Industrial output doubled, with the greatest gains in steel and other heavy industries.

But these results did not satisfy Mao. In 1958, he announced a new plan, called the “Great Leap Forward.” This plan set higher targets for both agriculture and industry. Farmers were forced to work on large rural projects and create their own “backyard industries” to produce steel and other goods. The plan was a disaster. Farming suffered and food production fell sharply. By 1961, some 30 million Chinese had died of starvation—the largest famine in human history.

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Here Red Guards parade their victims, who are wearing hats proclaiming their supposed crimes, on the streets of Beijing.

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Shifting Course The failure of the Great Leap Forward damaged Mao's reputation, both at home and abroad. Relations with the USSR became strained after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. Under Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev, the USSR rejected the murderous violence and repression that had characterized the Stalin era. Meanwhile, the Chinese continued to laud Stalin as a hero. The Soviet Union chose to distance itself further, cutting off aid to China and ending their alliance.

Mao's image also suffered in China. Facing mounting criticism, he stepped down as head of state and allowed other leaders to set policy. The government launched a program of economic reform, making investments in agriculture and industry and shutting down many state enterprises. Within a few years, the economy began to recover.

Mao regarded these new policies as a betrayal of communism, and he accused reformers of promoting capitalist values. He claimed that the Communist Party had lost touch with the people.

Cold War Conflicts



This picture, taken in October 1950, shows U.S. troops transporting North Korean prisoners of war.

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In 1966, Mao called on students to revive China's revolutionary spirit. Radical student groups, known as the Red Guards, took to the streets demanding a return to communist ideals. China was soon engulfed in a wave of revolutionary turmoil known as the Cultural Revolution. With Mao's blessing, the Red Guards persecuted or attacked anyone they considered antirevolutionary. Targets of violence included party members, government officials, artists, intellectuals, and others who were said to embrace "old" ideas. Many people were beaten or jailed, and up to a million were killed. Rival armed groups began to fight pitched battles in the streets. The country was on the verge of civil war.

Cold War Conflicts



In September 1965, U.S. soldiers on the ground were supported by helicopters during the Iron Triangle assault.