



# Mao: The Real Story

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**This major new biography of Mao uses extensive Russian documents previously unavailable to biographers to reveal surprising details about Mao's rise to power and leadership in China.**

**This major new biography of Mao uses extensive Russian documents previously unavailable to biographers to reveal surprising details about Mao's rise to power and his leadership in China.**

Mao Zedong was one of the most important figures of the twentieth century, the most important in the history of modern China. A complex figure, he was champion of the poor and brutal tyrant, poet and despot.

Pantsov and Levine show Mao's relentless drive to succeed, vividly describing his growing role in the nascent Communist Party of China. They disclose startling facts about his personal life, particularly regarding his health and his lifelong serial affairs with young women. They portray him as the loyal Stalinist that he was, who never broke with the Soviet Union until after Stalin's death.

Mao brought his country from poverty and economic backwardness into the modern age and onto the world stage. But he was also responsible for an unprecedented loss of life. The disastrous Great Leap Forward with its accompanying famine and the bloody Cultural Revolution were Mao's creations. Internationally Mao began to distance China from the USSR under Khrushchev and shrewdly renewed relations with the U.S. as a counter to the Soviets. He lived and behaved as China's last emperor.

## Mao: The Real Story Details

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# From Reader Review Mao: The Real Story for online ebook

## Caitlin says

I knew very little about this period in history when I picked up this (very long) book, which is why I was interested in reading it. In writing the book, the authors had access to documents and information previously unavailable to any Mao biographers before them. Because of this they must have felt required to include ALL the details and ALL the names/aliases they had. As a result, they spent forever on Mao's early years and ever. so. slow. rise to power within the CCP. The pace of the book picked up when Mao started gettin' really wacky (understandably).

The authors also came across as very objective. Not sympathetic or apologist, more a "just the facts" approach, which, not having any previous knowledge of my own, made it difficult to grasp the gravity or impact of some of Mao's actions and policies, which was an interesting experience.

Even though it took forever, I'm glad I read this book.

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## Phrodrick says

Russian born and educated Alexander V. Pantsov joined with American born and Harvard educated Stevin I. Levine and together produced the well documented, academic biography, Mao; The Real Story. I cannot say that I believe this is all there is to the Great Helmsman. Gaps are huge and while it is clear that the authors have little sympathy for The Chairman, too much is unanswered. If you are used to the typically Communistic method of reading papers to signal the waxing or waning of various politicians, and the subtle symbolism of who gets to speak in which meeting, this is a relatively easy read. For the rest of us several explanations would help. The authors will leap from finely detailed narrations about these papers and the ever so many committees and titles then leap over small things like World War II. I can barely recommend Mao for the trained student of communist history and cannot enthuse about it for the more general reader.

This is too well documented to challenge the claim that it is a Real Story. I do not accept that it is a complete story. The minutia of the maneuvering by, for and against Mao as he plays his role in the organization of, some of the military actions by and the ultimate foundation of the Communist Party in China can be tedious. That they frequent lack the information necessary to understand the significance of these minutia is an obvious shortcoming.

Too many things are left without context, contrast or full analysis. It is not clear to me that Mao was that necessary or important to the formation of the Chinese Communist Party. The authors have virtually nothing to say about the potential, functional politics or the rational expectations of the Guomindang. Absent Mao, or with a weaker communist party, could China have been unified under General Chiang Kai-shek?

How exactly did the Communist military suddenly jump from a few thousand, rarely paid, and rarely effective force to suddenly number in the millions and defy a better armed non-communist nationalist military. This should be a critical center of The Real Story and it is missing.

Mao becomes the ascendant "Cult of Personality", Stalinist style leader of China, via a process again poorly documented. That he used Stalinist tactics to hold power is again, not clearly laid-out. Much is made of a Chinese cultural preference for forcing a confession rather than simply executing opposition (real or imagined) but the authors seem reluctant to say that Mao directed or countenanced the death of any of the people suppressed. The lack of detail about Mao's "butcher's bill" is a major failure. We are frequently told

that he could be indifferent to the human costs of policy, or war so long as his will was maintained. What was the human cost of this indifference?

The authors of Mao, The Real Story are not fans of their subject. A reasonable attitude. This is a biography that emphasizes the political techniques and details of a person. Whatever the intended audience, we need more info about this time and better information about the conditions that helped to create the communist movement. The Real Story fails to explain why and how it became preferable to other alternatives. Stalin's early dominance of the Chinese Communist Party is clearly shown to have been a fiscal and practical necessity, but it should also have been a drag and an embarrassment.

Given when and who wrote this history; given the availability of previously secret sources, at least previously secret Soviet sources, this could have been a better and more complete story.

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### **Daniel Kukwa says**

I forced myself through to the end of this dense work of scholarship. It contains a massive amount of information, and yet...there's a distinct lack of context provided. One would think the events of the Japanese occupation, Vietnam & the birth of relations with the USA in 1972 would engender some contemplation as to their effect on Mao...and yet it's strangely anemic, as if these events were less important than the endless (and I mean ENDLESS) bureaucratic meetings, committees, plenums, and self-criticism sessions that seemed the basis of everything to do with Mao and the creation of Communist China. Even the Cuban Missile Crisis passes without comment! Reading this book, one might believe that nothing else but bureaucratic ideology is at the heart of Mao and China...and that's simply...not something I can believe in. In the end, this is one of the strangest, most frustrating biographies I have ever read.

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### **Jim says**

I received an Advanced Reader Copy of this book through Goodreads.

I was very impressed by the amount of detailed research in this biography of Mao. Using the archives of the Soviet Communist party, Pantsov provides an amazing look into the life of Mao, the inner workings and creation of the Communist party in China, and an intimate look at Mao's beginnings and his methodical and sometimes terrifying rise to power.

Prior to this reading, I had only a vague idea of Mao's China, filtered through the lens of American media, but now I feel much better informed and will consider further reading about the man and the country he so irreversibly transformed.

A good read and recommended to historians and lay readers alike.

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### **Nicole says**

While the book is fascinating in the amount of detail that it recovered from the Soviet archives, I can't but help thinking that it was weighed too heavily on the Soviet influence in Mao's life and subsequently the

development of modern communist China. Although Mao's youth was described in as much detail as I could have expected to have been recorded for someone with a modest family background, I felt that the book raced through the cultural revolution, the opening of China to the West, and Mao's process in choosing a successor. Perhaps this is because the book is so focused on Mao (and Stalin and Khrushchev), that the Chinese political characters do not fully developed so that they can become plausible characters that affect these key historical events. Ideally, the author's should have focused on Sino-Soviet relations instead of giving the pretense that this was a balanced story of Mao's life. All this being said, the tangled historical web that was woven between Russia and China is compelling enough that I would recommend this book to anyone who might interested in this part of history.

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## **S. says**

784 page biography drawing heavily off newly released Russian sources, contains blow-by-blow accounts of the party's early years. Focus is on minute changes of political climate and intra-party politics rather than the famous Mao's physician's accounts of underage girls or whatnot (this book limited to noting that for years at a time, Mao spent most of his time with 17 and 18 year old girls, which isn't really 'underage').

Book is not an absolute must read but it does flow competently, and the story and academic distance is superior to Edgar Snow's Red Star Over China and other single person, ax-to-grind works

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## **Carl Rollyson says**

This biography was first published in Russia in 2007 without benefit of subtitle hype. But no American publisher would settle for the sober announcement that Alexander V. Pantsov's access to the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History has resulted in a nuanced study of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) that supersedes previous biographies.

The evidence of Mao's faithfulness to Stalin right up to the Soviet dictator's death in 1953 is especially striking. Of course, there were tensions between the two leaders, and even distrust, but in the main Pantsov and Levine provide a detailed exposé of Communist solidarity that strikes yet another blow at certain American Cold War historians, who have generally wanted to present Mao as his own man. In other words, there was considerable truth to the idea that communism was monolithic -- no matter how much it may have seemed to vary from one country to another.

Perhaps because Pantsov and Levine are so focused on getting their man right, they do not step away from their narrative enough to appreciate that in certain respects Mao is now an irrelevance. Without saying so, China's subsequent leaders have repudiated Mao's ideas of radical reform, which led to the disastrous, famine-producing Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) that caused a political chaos that China has yet to fully overcome. Still, their biography of Mao goes a long way toward elucidating contemporary China and Chinese leaders' insistence on one-party rule as the only way to perpetuate long-lasting political, economic and cultural change.

For better or worse, China seemed to have not had a good alternative. The portrait of Chiang Kai-shek in this biography is devastating: Although he inflicted severe losses on the Communists in 1936, ultimately his rule succumbed to them in 1948, when they triumphed using guerrilla war tactics and a call -- not for socialism,

or communism, or Stalinism, but for a "New Democracy" that would destroy the power of corrupt generals and government officials. Communists claimed they would elevate the fighting spirit of the country's soldiers and build a prosperous economy that the nationalist Chinese government could not deliver. In the end, Mao's promises were unfulfilled -- or rather their fulfillment was much delayed, until his death and the country's turn toward a market economy.

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### **Steven Peterson says**

This is a well done biography of Mao Zedong. Just a few weeks earlier, I had completed reading the Chang and Halliday biography. The latter has great detail and chronicles Mao's negative side well. But it is a pretty one-sided view of "the Great Helmsman." This volume, although more "neutral" with its subject, also is clear eyed in its take on Mao. As such, I find it a preferable work to Chang and Halliday, even as I recognize the value of that work.

The book has much detail and provides a fine chronological perspective on its subject. One of the first (and more useful) features is a listing of the characters. There are a lot of important people to consider in Mao's career--and it sometimes gets difficult keeping the characters straight. This feature also highlights how many of the main characters rose and fell; Mao was hard on his subordinates--and individuals who were at one time major players could easily be reduced to minor figures or be hector to their death (e.g., Liu Shaoqi or Lin Biao). Even Zhou Enlai was punished often by Mao--including not allowing him to have surgery for cancer for a couple years after diagnosis. At the same time, there was a certain pragmatism to Mao with his subordinates--such as Deng Xiaoping. Deng was purged a couple times, but never targeted for death. Mao felt him, potentially, to be too valuable.

The book traces Mao's life from his youth to his political awakening to his rising role among Chinese Communists. His rise was often contested, and his path was not easy. There were times that other leaders shunted him to the side, but he persevered. During the Civil War with the "Nationalists," there were challenges facing the Communists. But the Long March was a prelude to an increasingly powerful Communist military force (the authors' view of the Long March is so different from Chang and Halliday's that is hard to reconcile the two). Soviet leader Stalin at some point came to recognize Mao as the person whom he would support as leader. This was a key element in Mao's rise to power.

The book also describes well the horrors of two of Mao's greatest efforts--the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He set in motion actions that had devastating effects on China. His own view is that ideology should trump pragmatism and "what works." The aftermath was brutal.

Finally, the volume tracks his later efforts to retain power, to balance off the Soviet Union with overtures to the United States.

The volume is a very fine resource to get a realistic sense of Mao Zedong--what he contributed and, as important, what damage he did to his country. A must read on Mao.

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### **Eric Stone says**

Fascinating biography with a lot of new information gathered from KGB and other Russian files that have

previously not been available, as well as some significant new research from China. It gave me a very good sense of how he managed to become the ruler of China and stay in that position against tremendous opposition for a long time. It also was fascinating in the portrayal of the development of his ideas - he seemed like a typical, wild-eyed college kid who never grew out of a lot of the wacky ideaa that so many of us flirt with in school and learn to get over after a few years. The evil that he was responsible for - both deliberate and inadvertent - was very well illuminated and explained. The main flaw of the book that there was awful lot of plenum this and politburo that dry recitations of the workings of the politics. But, in the end, they seemed necessary to make a lot of things clear in the book.

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### **Barbara Barth says**

A better title would have been. " Mao: Real Boring." Well documented, yes....but it was like reading one big footnote. I was hoping for something more readable.

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### **Danny Marcalo says**

I don't know much about China's history so I figured this might be a good start. Mao's live story is interesting, although the man seemed to be all about no bullshit. His fondness of young girls, dancing and smoking, this book describes Chairman Mao as a robot, determined to have as much power as possible. Sometimes they overdo it, when giving about 20 different names of people who were present at such and such event, with footnotes about as to whom they married and when their children were born. All in all, a little more focus would have been nice. The name-dropping might be correct in terms of giving the full picture, but I could have done with less.

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### **Hadrian says**

New biography of Mao - reliant upon opened Soviet archives. The title seems to be a direct refutation of the 'cartoonishly evil' portrayal of Jung Chang's Mao: The Unknown Story, and instead they're aiming for a 'complex multifaceted titanic evil'.

Mao's early life is already covered in great detail by other biographies, and the book does a fair treatment of the whole process. Stern father, love of reading, education in the cities. The young Mao was well aware of the corruption and instability of China in his era, and was a ravenous reader of history. He likely imagined himself to be one of the Great Men of History.

He was not committed to Marxism until the early 1920s, when news of the Soviet Union became more widespread, and he became one of the first delegates of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. From then on, his life became a tremendous political juggling act. The fledgling CCP was dependent upon funds from the Comintern, and there was a tremendous degree of political infighting among various factions, who had to try to toe the Bolshevik line as well as guarantee survival against the corrupt military government.

After the Chiang Kai-Shek took over the country, the CCP was surprised to learn that the Soviets were more

interested in supporting his party, the Guomindang, (GMD) against the Japanese. After Chiang launched a purge against labor unions and communist-sympathizers in the cities, Mao was the only one to realize that an independent army was necessary. He worked vigorously in this manner, forming a Soviet in the Jiangxi provinces, and writing fiery screeds for the revolution:

"A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another. A rural revolution is a revolution by which the peasantry overthrows the power of the feudal landlord class. Without using the greatest force, the peasants cannot possibly overthrow the deep-rooted authority of the landlords which has lasted for thousands of years. The rural areas need a mighty revolutionary upsurge, for it alone can rouse the people in their millions to become a powerful force!"

His early Red Armies were something out of *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Vol. 1-4 - bandits, prostitutes, secret societies, the lowest-classes of people, ethnic minorities. They were among those who had the most to gain from Mao's forceful land distribution schemes.

In 1934, the Guomindang decided enough was enough, and launched a final assault of the Chinese Communists. Thus the mythical Long March began. Out of 80,000 which began the march, some 8,000 had survived to rest and recover in the northern hamlet of Yan'an. By some miracle, Mao had managed to win a strategic retreat. He gathered the remnants of the party around himself, and those within the party who had opposed him were either submissive to him or utterly beaten (one such opponent managed to lose 20,000 men in Sichuan province, then tried to expel Mao after his catastrophe).

The next few years were a place to rest and rebuild. Tell Western journalists sympathetic stories and finagle aid from the Soviets. Flirt with women, write poetry, and coordinate guerrilla warfare against the Japanese.

The CCP was particularly successful in the anti-Japanese war. The Guomindang had begun a full retreat to a few key cities (Chengdu and Chongqing) in the interior, and had all but given up the possibility of a counterattack. By contrast, the CCP was able to infiltrate the countryside near Japanese-held cities and hold large swathes of territory.

The narrative of the Chinese Civil War is often said solely to be the result of superior Communist guerrilla training and demoralized and incompetent GMD leadership. They place a curious and interesting emphasis on Soviet support - on how much support he would indeed give to Mao, for fear that he would suddenly become independent of Soviet demands, like another Tito. The Soviets began their work on building up spies and informers. Liu Shaoqi, one of Mao's closest men, was a Soviet informer.

Mao was a subservient and loyal follower to Stalin, even sending troops in the Korean War against the demands of his populace. His first economic plans were centralization and mass industrialization on the Stalinist line. Using the faithful and disciplined cadres built up over the past twenty years, he began a purge of warlord and feudal influence from the countryside, and built something like the first effective unified governance over China in centuries.

Chen Yun, one of Mao's successors, and a key man in the Deng government, summarizes the next years thus:



"If Mao had died in 1956, he would have been immortal. If he had died in 1966, he would have been a great man. But he has died in 1976."

After Stalin died, Mao was less enthused about closer ties with the Soviet Union. He believed that Khrushchev was a 'weak' leader and snubbed him on numerous occasions, and was horrified at his denunciation of Stalin in 1956. After seeing the backlash and Hungarian Uprising in Eastern Europe, he began the Hundred Flowers campaign in earnest, hoping for modest criticism about development. When it backfired, he imprisoned anyone who dared speak out.

In response to Khrushchev's boast to surpass the US, Mao began his Great Leap Forward, to surpass the Soviet Union. He began with a manic energy, convinced that he would bring about a new society. We all know how that went. Then in 1966, when the country had recovered and could feed itself again, he began the Cultural Revolution, a 'permanent revolution'. Cheering crowds, Little Red Books, mass purges. Again this story is familiar.

He passes on in 1976, a drooling husk, almost completely alone. Factions squabble over his empire. The Gang of Four, leaders of the Cultural Revolution, eventually lose out to Deng the reformer, and we see China now.

How could he do all this, without any major strikes against him? How else all totalitarian systems work - fear. Even when he was bedridden, he still crushed coups and opposition movements with a few angry words. 8,000 were left at the end of the Long March, and these were hacked away into a few dozen by 1976. The years of revolution instilled in him paranoia and bloodlust - then not unjustified, but once he was safely in power, revolution becomes tyranny. "China has stood up!" cheered Mao, and then it staggered down again, and then Deng brought it up again - a China so different, so prosperous, and raw *capitalist* that Mao would not recognize it.

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## **Raghu says**

I was wondering whether to read one more book on Chairman Mao and his legacy and life. I had read Stuart Schram's book as well the more recent one by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday titled 'Mao: The Unknown Story'. However, the introduction to this book suggested that this one is written after new material has come to light once the Soviet and Chinese archives were opened for research by scholars. Also, the title 'Mao: the Real Story' seemed to suggest as if the ones before were somewhat 'less authentic'. This book covers the entire life of Mao and so there is a lot of material on his childhood, family and early years as a communist. Since I was interested mainly in Mao, the supreme communist leader of China, I had to wade through half the book without being all that absorbed in it. As I finished reading the book, I felt that the new material from the Soviet and Chinese archives did not contribute much to a changed view of Mao.

Primarily, I felt that the book did not say anything significantly new as far as the major events during the Maoist times between 1957 and 1972 are concerned. The other point about the book is that the authors say that they avoided the 'unreliability and distorted judgements' of Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (in their book 'Mao: the Unknown story') by making careful and discriminating use of a wide array of sources. But the picture of Mao that emerges from this book is one of him as an ideological, deluded and megalomaniacal leader with a prodigious capacity for inflicting death on the Chinese people. This is not too different from

what Jung Chang had portrayed in her book. Even the accounts of the Great Leap Forward and the cruelties of the Cultural Revolution do not disprove things that Jung Chang had written. On the other hand, I feel that Jung Chang has one thing going for her which eludes the authors of this book. One must give greater credence to Jung Chang because her experience of Mao was not purely academic. She grew up in Maoist China and her parents had lived through the turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and the violent cultural revolution. Jung Chang herself was in her mid-teens when the Cultural Revolution started and so she had experienced it in its full venom. Surely, this should count for more than pure academic research.

The coverage of the years from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Korean war show that Mao was a faithful follower of Stalin and toed the line set by the Kremlin so long as Stalin was alive. It emerges that Stalin plotted diabolically to force the Chinese to enter the Korean war and forced Mao to commit a million men of his ill-equipped army in the war against the US, much against the better judgement of Mao and his party colleagues. Mao simply could not say 'No' to the Boss, according to the authors. The authors always refer to Stalin as the 'Boss' whenever they talk about Mao's relationship to Stalin and the USSR, implying the subservient role that Mao played. But even this is not something entirely new. Die-hard communists in Asian countries have always insisted and believed that Mao was always loyal to Stalin and that he believed in solidarity with the USSR as part of the vision to advance socialism across the world. It was always said that he deviated from the line set by the Kremlin only after Khrushchev's historic de-Stalinization speech in 1956.

Much has been written about the number of people who died as a result of the famine during the Great Leap years of 1957-62. Jung Chang specifies a figure of 38 million dead, based on Chinese records of annual death rates. This book says that Chinese local archives arrive at a figure of 45 million while the authors themselves speculate it to be between 30 and 40 million. Even an apparatchik like Hu Yaobang, the general secy of the Central committee of the CCP, accepted a figure of 20 million, while Chinese dissidents say it was some 35 million. So, the criticism against Jung Chang in the past about inflating the numbers does not seem valid anymore.

Another point of contention has always been about Liu Shaoqi's role as a reformer. During Deng's reign in the 1980s, Liu Shaoqi's legacy and image was sought to be rehabilitated. He was projected as a reformer even during the Great Leap years by Dengists. This book, however, says that Liu Shaoqi was fanatically supportive of Mao till as late as even 1961 while it was actually the Defense Minister, Peng Dehuai, who openly criticized Mao as early as 1959 but ended up paying the price for it by being denounced and punished.

The book brings out the enormity of the Korean war tragedy in depth. The authors show that Stalin desperately wanted to draw the US into that war in order to show the limits of US power in a conventional war without atomic weapons. Towards this end, he skillfully manipulated Kim-il-Sung and Mao to commit millions of ground troops and escalate the conflict by invading the South. The official data records that the Chinese lost 148000 soldiers and 300000 wounded. The North Koreans 520000 dead, South Koreans 415000 and the US 36500 killed in action. However, the greatest number of victims is the often unmentioned innocent and peaceful Korean citizens - a whopping three to four million dead! Mao, as always, saw the losses only as another step towards advancing communism.

The book is rather dry for one who is not interested in the various persona of the CCP and the other Soviet players in the Cold War. However, for those interested in Chinese communism and Chairman Mao-Ze-Dong in particular, this is still an important book to read.

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## David Groves says

Mao is one of the top five major figures of the 20th century, and in reading about other historical topics--the Russian Revolution, the Korean War, Stalin, Western imperialism--I discovered that I couldn't understand it without immersing myself in Mao.

This book isn't a standard biography, because those have all been written. Instead, it approaches the subject by offering new insights from recently released Soviet documents. They cast new light on everything. Stalin was pulling the strings on the Chinese Communist Party from the very beginning, sending massive amounts of money for 25 years before Mao took over in 1949.

It's amazing to think what a betrayal that is. Think about a foreign country sending millions of dollars per year to a political party in your own country. Think about that party waging a guerrilla war against the government using those funds. Think about that party finally taking over the country. Then think about that foreign country calling the shots on your country's foreign policy, directing your country even to wage wars in order to protect that foreign country. That's what Stalin did with the CCP.

One of the revelations for me was the Korean War, which my father fought in. It was all Stalin's idea, according to Pantsov. Strangely enough, David Halberstam disagrees. I don't know who to believe.

At any rate, Pantsov shows how Mao did not hesitate to throw over a million soldiers at the Korean War, resulting in a couple hundred thousand deaths. I would have liked to see a more detailed discussion of the number of deaths in that war, since it's still a point of contention, the Chinese government being quite opaque on those points.

At times, Pantsov waxes personal on Mao, talking about his health, energy, his ailments, his sleeping habits (he went to bed at 5 am and awoke at 2 pm), and the like. He also talks about Mao's three wives, and how he treated and mistreated them. He offers horrifying stories of babies that they delivered, and then gave away on the same day to random villagers, never to see them again. He talks about the sad fates of each of those wives, their abandonment, their humiliation, their mental decline. These anecdotes are especially enlightening, and something that biographers don't always cover. These help me know the man.

This book answered many questions for me. It filled in the chaotic period in Mao's life from 1920 to 1949. At first, he was just one of many communist aspirants fighting a war for Chinese dignity, unity, and autonomy. But by the late 1930s, Stalin saw the need for a Chinese cult of personality, and Mao was lucky enough to be there. Pantsov didn't sufficiently explain to me how the Guomintang government fell in the late 1940s, but I gleaned it from other sources. (Apparently, the Guomintang was deeply corrupt, and generals and high officials stole vast amounts of gold and money for their own use. The people notice that kind of thing.)

Look into Mao's eyes and you will see an extraordinary mind and ability. He was a master manipulator. It is interesting to see that the leadership of both Russia and China fell to master manipulators, Stalin and Mao. Perhaps communism invites manipulators, since it posits such a far-fetched sequence of political events leading to pure equality.

This book opened my eyes to China's role internationally. Its relationship with Taiwan was explained. Its sibling relationship with the Soviet Union was a major theme. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's trepidations regarding China were also explained. America's clueless relationship with China was also dealt

with. A lot of space was even spent on the role of American communists in the revolution, including Agnes Smedley and Edgar Snow. (One gap was that I wish he had gone into was China's role in the Vietnam War.)

One thing I can't quite figure out is what was in Mao's heart. At times, it seems that he deeply cared about the fate of the poor in his country (and they were deeply poor, living off of scraps for years and even generations). Other times, it seems that he was simply a narcissist, caring about no one but himself, discarding wives and even children at a whim, killing millions of people (as a result of his bad agricultural and industrial policies), and purging his country for the flimsiest of reasons.

However, he did do his country vast good, as well. After 1949, Chinese was a united country. Foreign powers couldn't exploit it the way they had been doing for 150 years. He improved living standards. He improved educational opportunities.

Even more than most people, Mao was a man of vast complexities. Although this book was a long slog in the beginning, it became riveting reading by the time I got to the 1930s, and by the end, I wished there were more. I'm not a guy who is above discarding a book in the middle. But that was never an option with this one. It helped me connect the dots in a way that helped me understand the world better.

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## **Maxwell Murphy says**

This book is a balanced account of Mao's life that is very dense and thorough, with all the good and bad that entails.

Mao's upbringing and the origins of the CCP are covered in great detail. The absolute bombardment of names, dates and facts probably won't stick with you, but it does a respectable job of explaining the dizzying changes in Chinese society during the interwar period. The author really strikes at the root of young Mao's character, showing us Mao at his best (courageous and fiercely intelligent) and his worst (petty, prideful and cruel).

The reader is also treated to a blow by blow account the CCP's development amid war with the Nationalists and fierce sectarian bickering over the "correct Marxist line". The complex relationship between the Soviets and CCP is also covered at length.

I had two major complaints about this book.

First, it starts to taper off after the truce between the CCP and KMT. Perhaps this is where the well of declassified Soviet information begins to dry up. The book becomes more episodic after this; jumping from Sino-Soviet relations to the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, etc. The glimpses into Mao's personal life become rarer and less detailed, which is a bit disappointing.

Second, the academic language of this book was a roadblock that obscured, rather than clarified what the author was saying. I was sent scrambling to the dictionary many times only to find that the words being used were archaic and largely pointless. Jargon for the sake of jargon. More rigorous editing would've helped.

Overall, I highly recommend this book, especially to those who are researching Mao on an academic level.

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