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Analytical Paper: The Great Leap Forward as a Catalyst for the Sino-Soviet Split

The relationship between the Soviet Union and China from 1956-1960 can be characterized as tumultuous, marked by periods of passive cooperation and intense conflict. Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, faced disagreements in approach and worldview, which led to a strained partnership that eventually led to a complete rupture. Further worsening the Sino-Soviet alliance was the Great Leap Forward, launched by Mao to rapidly transform China from an agrarian society into a modern industrial nation through collectivization and industrialization.¹ Mao's campaign became a huge indicator of ideological differences as it reinforced Mao's critique of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union's disapproval of China's new policies. Announced as the Second Five-Year Plan,² Mao encouraged citizens to work long hours and make great sacrifices for the nation's good. This mindset eventually proved to be a domestic and international catastrophic failure, leading to the Great Famine and social unrest. Fast forwarding to 1960, both leaders were in a bid to undermine the other, and the growing rift led to the Sino-Soviet Split, a breakdown in the nations' relations, and a shift in the balance of power within the communist world. It is significant to understand the underlying tensions and dynamics of the two biggest leaders of Communism at the time, significantly how they shaped the future of

¹ Association for Asian Studies. "China's Great Leap Forward - Association for Asian Studies," n.d. Winter 2012.

² Pike, John. "Military." China - 2nd Five-Year Plan 1958-1962. Accessed April 9, 2023.

the Cold War. Shedding light on the complexity of the alliance, particularly during times of rapid change and crisis, helps determine the beginning of the destruction of a once-aligned relationship. Additionally, the response to the crisis resulting from the Great Leap Forward from China and the Soviet Union provides insight into how nations navigate difficult situations and how their decisions can have far-reaching implications for their relationships with other countries. If Mao had not implemented the Great Leap Forward and shown the first sign of resistance against the Soviet Union, there might have been a long-lived entente between both countries. Perhaps it was the radical nature of the Great Leap Forward, coupled with Mao Zedong's growing belief in the need for China to pursue an independent path of socialist development, that set the stage for the Sino-Soviet Split.³ The introduction of the Great Leap Forward in China opened the door for a Sino-Soviet standstill and eventual separation due to the campaign's unsettling Stalinist model, which the Soviets had shifted from, its threat to become the hegemony of the socialist bloc, and its challenge to spread communism in developing countries.

Led by Khrushchev, the Soviet Union was dissatisfied with the Great Leap Forward's departure from traditional Marxist principles and its similarities with Stalin's economic development model. Khrushchev, who came to power in the Soviet Union in 1953, was a vocal critic of the Stalinist economic model and sought to reform the Soviet Union's economy and political system. He made a famous Secret Speech in 1956,⁴ where he discredited his

³ <http://facebook.com/alphahistory>. "The Sino-Soviet Split." The Cold War. March 20, 2018.

⁴ "Khrushchev's Secret Speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences,' Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union", February 25, 1956, Wilson Center Digital Archive, From the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, 2nd Session (May 22, 1956-June 11, 1956), C11, Part 7 (June 4, 1956), pp. 9389-9403.

predecessor, Stalin, and the cult of personality built around him. Keeping this sentiment in mind, Khrushchev disagreed with Stalin's focus on heavy industry and repressive policies, which the Great Leap Forward ironically pushed in the Chinese countryside. He was particularly critical of Stalin's emphasis on heavy industry at the expense of agriculture, which had resulted in widespread famine in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. During a visit to China in August 1958, Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders saw similarities between Mao's economic development model and Stalin's approach.⁵ Both emphasized industrialization and collectivization at the expense of agriculture and consumer goods production. Instead of relying on the working class to drive industrialization, Mao mobilized the rural population to produce steel in backyard furnaces and embark on large infrastructure projects. According to the Soviet perspective, Mao's objective of achieving communism by utilizing a concentrated period of high-speed production was in direct conflict with the core laws of Marxism. Khrushchev's 1957 Moscow Declaration reiterated that socialist construction must be 'gradual' and that 'national development should be planned.'⁶ The Great Leap Forward promoted fast advancement and opposed those basic laws, and Khrushchev saw that the event was not rooted in the orthodox Marxist tradition. They believed Mao's policies were unsustainable and would ultimately harm China's economy and the international socialist movement. On Mao's side, he expressed discontent with the Soviet Union's views, contributing to the underlying tensions during the late 1950s. Mao disagreed with Khrushchev's views after Stalin's death because he believed that the Soviet Union had strayed from the true path of Marxism-Leninism. He was critical of Khrushchev's process of de-Stalinization, which he saw as an attempt to sabotage the achievements of the Soviet Union

⁵ Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich. *Khrushchev remembers: the last testament*. Edited and translated by Strobe Talbott. London: Andre Deutsch, 1974.

⁶ Zagoria, Donald S. "The 1957 Moscow Conference and the Sino-Soviet Dispute." *The China Quarterly*, no. 7 (1961): 17-34.

under Stalin's leadership. The collectivization of domestic items and consumption during the Great Leap Forward was Mao's attempt to reinvigorate Stalinism.⁷ At the same time, Khrushchev was in the process of eliminating Stalin's legacy. Mao speaks about his discontent with Khrushchev and the Soviet Party's agenda in the draft of a speech in December 1959 titled *An Outline for a Speech on the International Situation*.⁸ This speech criticized Khrushchev for his revisionism and for fearing Chinese Communism after the launch of the Great Leap Forward and when he was facing indirect backlash from the Soviet Union about his choices. Mao lists the occasions when the Soviet Union failed to support China after Stalin's death. "Khrushchev and his group are very naïve. He does not understand Marxism- Leninism and is easily fooled by imperialism." Mao said. He is making a jab at Khrushchev's political, social, ideological, and other choices. "The Soviet people are good, as is the [Soviet] party. There is something not good about the style of the party and people, a somewhat metaphysical style, a kind of capitalist-liberalism inherited from history." Mao said. Mao expressed admiration for the Soviet people and the Communist Party but criticized a perceived flaw in their approach to authority and regulation after Khrushchev came to power. He feels that the Soviet Union was starting to exhibit signs of capitalist ideology. This document was produced after Khrushchev implicitly disapproved of the Great Leap Forward in the last months of 1958. It shows Mao's backhanded response and the culminating negative feelings the two nations had against each other. It also states at the end, "The notion of "comparing the time of each other's watch" is an anti-Marxist

⁷Dominique Jones. "Understanding the Sino-Soviet Split: The Great Leap Forward." *Chariot Journal*, June 18, 2022.

⁸"Mao Zedong, Outline for a Speech on the International Situation", December 1959, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the People's Republic of China), vol. 8 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1993), 599-603.

and anti-Leninist one. The introduction of the notion demonstrates how scared they [the Soviet leaders] are.” Mao’s tone is demeaning towards Khrushchev as he implies that the Soviet leadership was intimidated or threatened by China's progress towards building communism and sought to diminish China's achievements by comparing them unfavorably to their own. Such comments and the Great Leap Forward also exemplified Mao’s dissatisfaction with Khrushchev’s “bourgeois back-sliding” that led to the Soviet Union being complacent and lacking ambition, as well as challenging the USSR’s claim the leading communist state. Therefore, Mao’s scheme to hasten the path to becoming a revolutionary communist nation through mass industrialization with ignorance of the Khrushchev immutable agenda contributed to the growing split.

Furthermore, the Great Leap Forward challenged the Soviet Union's dominant leadership and hegemon in the socialist bloc as Mao’s project aimed to surpass the traditional Soviet model, marking a significant turning point in Sino-Soviet relations. As the first socialist state, the Soviet Union enjoyed sole leadership of the socialist authority and sphere. However, the Great Leap Forward’s objective of achieving communism through an accelerated model. In the past, Mao imitated the Soviet Union regarding politics, ideology, and cultural movements. Mao admired Stalinism and viewed it as a blueprint for how to build a prosperous socialist state and adopted his perspectives within China. Some examples include the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao’s cult of personality, and more. Stalin's theory of the “class struggle” influenced Mao's emphasis on revolutionary struggle.⁹ Mao believed that a continuous revolutionary struggle was necessary to achieve the goals of socialism and to defend against internal and external enemies. This influenced the Great Leap Forward, an extreme extension of the revolutionary struggle, and showed that Mao was straying from the path Khrushchev was

⁹ J. V. Stalin, *The Class Struggle*, Vol. 1, November 1901 - April 1907

working toward. At the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of China, Mao made a speech attacking the Soviet Union's leadership and their handling of the process of achieving communism.¹⁰ He said that the USSR's efforts to enter communism and claims of success were only "noise on the staircase" as "you don't see anyone coming down." This statement was Mao's way of saying that the Soviet Union's claims of success were empty, as there was no evidence of other countries achieving communism. Therefore, Mao is taking things into his own hands, being the first one to come down the staircase, and building his passage to a Marxist society—one that pushes the Soviet Party off the pedestal. A major aspect of the Great Leap Forward was the creation of communes in rural areas, which followed Stalin's collectivism framework and attempted to demonstrate that China was ready for more advanced production relations. It brought together thousands of families to work together on common land, share resources, and engage in communal living, which Khrushchev disapproved of. The aim was to achieve greater productivity through increased cooperation and the pooling of resources. Khrushchev began to see these early signs of a tainted communist pathway during his visit to China and other discussions with the nation during the summer of 1958. A Current Intelligence Staff Study titled, *Indications of Soviet Awareness of Chinese Plans and The Soviet Attitude Toward Communes* indicates that there was not much awareness or information about the Chinese communes during the time of the Soviet's end despite the two countries' close working relationship.¹¹ Mao's plans for the communes and his broader strategic objectives were shrouded in secrecy with little public discussion or debate and became a signal of unloyalty in the eyes of the Soviet Union. It states,

¹⁰ Mao Ze Dong, *Speeches At The Second Session Of The Eighth Party Congress, The First Speech*. 17 May 1958.

¹¹ Current Intelligence Staff Study. *Indications of Soviet Awareness of Chinese Plans for the Communes, Spring-Summer 1958*. Sino-Soviet Bloc Area: Office of Current Intelligence, 16 October 1959.

“The differences in the Soviet and Chinese approaches to the commune, however, seem to reflect a difference on the much larger issue of how fast the pace can be toward the final goal.” This is an observation from the CIA about the differing perspectives to the commune— with the Great Leap Forward promoting rapid and mass collectivization, while the Soviets had previously moved away from such methods— reflecting a larger divergence on the question of the speed of progress towards communism. The report also describes how China’s commune system seemed victorious at the moment while comparing it to Stalin’s attempt at collective farming and the formation of a joint unit. It highlighted that the Soviet experience with collective farming was often marked by inefficiencies, low yields, and resistance from peasants forced to give up their private land and join the system. Set alongside Mao’s attempts and implementation of an independent socialist policy, it suggests that Mao is trying to challenge what the Soviet Union couldn’t do before and make up for the shortcomings of the USSR’s collectivist endeavors. By promoting a distinct model of socialism and emphasizing China's economic successes, Mao sought to establish China as a significant industrial and military power and strengthen China's position in the international arena. Such intentions and allegations against Mao further manifested the deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relationship.

The Great Leap Forward, with its radical implementation of collective farming through the communes, not only challenged the Soviet Union's economic and ideological hegemony but also posed a significant threat to its authority in the developing world. The Great Leap Forward's emphasis on its unique applicability to the needs and capacities of developing nations was part of Mao's larger strategy to question the Soviet Union's leadership in the socialist bloc. By positioning the Soviet model as disconnected and unsuitable for developing nations, Mao sought to highlight the limitations of the Soviet approach and present the Great Leap model as a more

effective and efficient path to communism. This provided a template for colonial nations to follow and posed a significant test to the Soviet Union's authority in the developing world. The Great Leap Forward's ambition to provide a "universal pattern for resolution"¹² to agrarian nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America made it a potent tool for Mao to promote his vision for communist countries and position China as a leader in the global movement. A strong result of Mao's ways was when Bulgaria and Albania showed a heavy interest in the Great Leap Forward. Both countries grappled with agricultural struggles and saw Mao's system as a potential solution to their problems. Toward the end of 1958, Bulgaria, a loyal ally to the Soviet Union and member of the Warsaw Pact, had its own Economic Leap Year, where the first but short-lived Bulgarian commune was created in Botevgrad.¹³ This became a sign that the Bulgarian Communists were abandoning the Soviet Union road to follow China's previous commune outline. A Chinese poem by Huan Yan-Pai published in the Bulgarian Literary Magazine, *Septemvri*, called *Unforgettable Nights*, inspires and encourages the country to follow China into a bright Communist future.¹⁴ It says, "Hear my advice, dear brothers, and listen how new China sings of its communes from end to end." Acting as a form of Chinese propaganda for the Bulgarian public, this document was used to promote China's brand of collectivization and industrialization and shape attitudes either against the Soviet Union or toward China. This document, published to the entire nation, suggests that Bulgaria was already slightly deviating from the Soviet Union's perspective and allowing Chinese thought leadership to influence their internal decisions. Whether because developing countries were desperate to solve their production issues or something else, China's Great Leap Forward slowly became the figurehead

¹² "Stalin's Place in History" *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*. 5 April 1956. People's Daily editorial.

¹³ Brisby, Liliana. "Bulgaria's Economic Leap Year." *The World Today* 16, No. 1 1960: 35–46.

¹⁴ Huan Yan-Pai "Unforgettable Night." *Septemvri*, No. 9, 1959

for gullible and struggling regions. Additionally, the Great Leap Forward was a domestic policy and a tool for spreading communism in the developing world. By offering a new and alternative model for development beyond the Soviet sphere, Mao took advantage of countries that were looking for a form of organization and regulation. Rather than emphasizing rapid industrialization, the Soviet Union supported national liberation movements and promoted a more gradual approach to socialist development. China competed with the Soviet Union and its long-standing ideology of having a “peaceful coexistence” with capitalist countries, which was perceived to be weak against Mao’s affirmative beliefs.¹⁵ The increasing tensions between China and the Soviet Union over their different approaches to spreading communism, as well as China’s intention to uproot the Soviet Union’s authority in the developing world, intensified the Sino-Soviet alliance.

The Communist Party of China officially declared the Sino-Soviet split in a statement titled “The Chinese Communist Party’s Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement,” issued on June 14, 1963.¹⁶ The implementation of a Stalinist model in China, which the Soviets had previously moved away from, the attempt to oust the Soviet Union from its seat as the leader of the socialist bloc, and Mao’s expansion into developing countries were all caused by Mao’s Great Leap Forward, further exacerbating the tension between the two countries. It is significant to acknowledge that the disapproval of the Great Leap Forward was not immediate, as Khrushchev initially showed apparent support. These implications highlight the complexity of the Sino-Soviet relationship and the extreme impact and redirection that the Great Leap Forward had on their dynamic. Nonetheless, the campaign

¹⁵ Michelle Van Sleet. Khrushchev’s Peaceful Coexistence: The Soviet Perspective | Guided History. “Khrushchev’s Peaceful Coexistence: The Soviet Perspective | Guided History,” n.d.

¹⁶ Coppola, Brian P. “The Fur’s Flying” | Brian P Coppola.” “The Fur’s Flying” | Brian P Coppola, August 28, 2019.

catalyzed China's future acts of defiance and public opinion against the Soviet Union and vice versa, playing an enduring role in the eventual Sino-Soviet split.