Quiet Holocaust

While the Left in western nations expresses horror at the authentically horrifying death rate by civil war and state-sponsored murder in countries under right-wing governments, it often remains curiously silent on the "peacetime" slaughter in communist nations.

The following statistics, drawn from the works of reliable historians and journalists, show that in the first 25 years of communist rule after winning the revolution of 1949, China staged -- in several phases of increasing mania -- what may have been the largest holocaust in human history. The figures are conservative estimates, favoring the down-side:

* Mopping-up efforts against "class" enemies and by conditions in mass slave labor camps, 1949-52: ten million dead.
* Punishment after the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956-57 (during which persons were encouraged to offer their criticisms of society but were then suppressed for having done so): several thousand dead in labor camps.
* Killings in demonstrations and open battle in Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution of 1966-76: ten million dead.

(Additionally, several hundred thousand to a million are thought to have died in the mass starvation of 1959-61 which resulted from mismanagement of resources plus famine following the chaos of the Great Leap Forward campaign.)

One American journalist reports that, in an effort to turn the old "aristocratic" and cultural capital of Peking into an ideal proletariat city, starting in August 1966, the Red Guard beat to death as many as 500,000 of the older residents: "...the screams of the beaten and the dying made sleep impossible. Almost anything, even owning the photograph of a grandfather, could be grounds for being beaten to death.... The dead lay in piles so high that they could not be burned fast enough in the huge new crematorium, to the west of the city, that then was and today is the last destination of those who live and die here."

This Issue

Editorial Note: What follows in this special issue of Emancipation is a group of articles devoted to Vietnam, Cambodia, and mainland China. The "occasion" for this issue is the tenth anniversary of the United States' withdrawal from the war in Cambodia and Vietnam and the recent news concerning "liberalization" in China.

The information presented here is unusual for a Left or even an anarchist publication. Many of the views expressed may seem outrageous, many of the proposals may seem unusual indeed. The Emancipation collective, though several of its members disagree with some of the perceptions and generalizations offered, believes it legitimate to present these facts and views to help encourage debate and planning within the progressive Left and anarchist movements on the ever-present questions of peace and war, organization and action, justice and human survival.

While much of the material may sound negative or appear as an attack on communism and socialism, these pieces are being offered instead as direct looks at the often-ignored process of authoritarianism in social and political revolutions, an authoritarianism that often hides behind the mask of a seemingly beneficial ideology. Anarchists are anti-authoritarians first, last, and always.

The collective also wishes to make it plain that we recognize the importance of much of the provincial Red Guard activity during China's Great Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. From this period much essential anarchist realization and action was generated which will help the Chinese people in their horrendous task. Persons who wish to examine this movement-within-a-movement should see John F. Welsh's article "Shen-wu-lien: China's Anarchist Opposition" in the journal Social Anarchism, Vol. 2, #1, 1981.

Emancipation welcomes your critical response to this issue and to the question of Left participation in the problem of conflicts between nation-states.

Heresy and Hope
In China

The new reports out of China suggest a loosening of ideological strictures, a "liberalization" of sorts, an effort to allow the Chinese people some economic incentive through free small-scale markets.

We hear from official Chinese sources, generated by the government of Deng Xiaoping, that an authentic "opening to the West" is beginning to take place, that intellectual tolerance and free artistic expression may soon become a possibility.

Other news out of China, however, indicates the bright face of propaganda may be covering a less attractive reality. It appears that the Deng regime does not have complete control over government departments and his apparent sincerity about reforms may be window-dressing. Conservative, xenophobic, authoritarian forces in the Ministry of State Security apparently are able to operate independently, and these police remain loyal to the late Mao and oppose western influence and domestic reform.

The security ministry is also responsible for the mass executions that have taken place the past two years. These are reported by non-Chinese journalists and diplomats to number between 5,000 and 10,000 since a new campaign against "criminal elements" began in August 1983. Diplomats with reliable Chinese contacts say many of the killings take place after merely perfunctory trials. In 1983, Chinese security forces expanded to 29 the number of crimes punishable by death. The new list allows a death sentence for "spies" and organizers of secret societies.

Long Live the Spirit of Tienanmun Revolt!