**Mao’s Great Famine – Frank Dikotter (Bloomsbury; 2007)**

* **1958-62 -** China’s attempt to catch up w/the UK within 15 yrs ***‘descended into Hell’***
* attempt based on mobilising Chinese population – ***‘China to walk on two legs’***
* opposition to precedent established by USSR + its emphasis on heavy industry
* China aimed to collectivise first + foremost instead of industrialisation
* resulted in huge People’s Communes enforced by armed militia w/food used as a weapon
* Dikotter’s work the first to take advantage of 1000+ of archived documents untouched by historians until recent changes in archival law within China
* security reports; party meetings; uncensored speeches; surveys; letters of complaint
* Pre-access estimates put the death toll at 15-32 million…
* Dikotter puts this toll at over 45 million minimum
* moreover, the orthodox view of the GLF as a mismanaged famine is also challenged
* coercion, terror, violence resulted in 2.5 million deaths (6-8% of total)
* lack of care, neglect, removal of support from most vulnerable affected far more…
* As well as mass deaths, Mao’s promise of abundance with the advent of true communism within years instead led to:
* wide scale destruction of tools + equipment
* slaughter and mass death of livestock
* transport system collapse nationwide
* wasted resources left to rot and perish
* useless goods produced
* property demolition on scale greater than WW2 – 40% of all houses torn down for fertiliser, canteens, relocation, road straightening, punishment….
* deforestation on a massive scale, which in turn led to:
* waterway collapse, silting-up of canals + ports
* By 1962, Mao’s vaunted economic + political system had virtually collapsed and his unquestioned leadership under increasing pressure
* Cultural Revolution emerged as a direct result of this pressure
* GLF therefore at the heart of Mao’s leadership, policies and legacy
* Dikotter’s premise is to illustrate how centrally planned state controlled projects such as these are flawed and dangerous…
* Local sources add depth + detail to the everyday impact of such policies and our understanding of Mao as an authoritarian leader
* Much removed from carefully cultivated public image
* rambling speeches
* self-obsessed + narcissistic
* dwelling on past insults
* master of emotional blackmail
* hugely insensitive to human loss and tragedy amongst Chinese people
* Mao was the chief architect of the GLF, but his vision would not have been realised without the absolute support of the yes men around him
* **Liu Shaoqi**
* **Zhou Enlai**
* responsible for widespread purges
* ensuring Party staffed by brutal, indifferent officials
* Dikotter attempts to link these political machinations with resulting everyday effects at the local level for the first time (no social history of Maoist China, let alone GLF)
* These accounts reveal the population not just as faceless victims, but as staunch opponents, participants, agents…..
* society, rather than rigidly disciplined, was in fact disintegrating into chaos
* it was in fact this opposition + disintegration that allowed the regime to survive
* without effective opposition, there would have been no PRC
* hiding grain, cooking books, doctoring flour, slaughtering livestock, black mkt trade
* not weapons of the weak, more the everyday norms of Maoist society
* BUT with very real consequences…you cut corners = others suffered
* Primo Levi’s account of Auschwitz detailed his survival and how such survival very rarely bred heroes….