

Abstract

Rebellion and Repression in China, 1966–1971

In the first five years after the onset of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, one of the largest political upheavals of the 20th century paralyzed a powerfully centralized party state, leading to a harsh regime of military control. Despite a wave of post-Mao revelations in the 1980s, knowledge about the nationwide impact of this insurgency and its suppression remains selective and impressionistic, based primarily on scattered local accounts. Employing a dataset created out of historical accounts published in 2,213 county and city annals (99 percent of all local jurisdictions), I describe the temporal and geographic spread of a mass insurgency, its evolution through time, and the repression through which militarized state structures were rebuilt. Sample selection models yield estimates of 1.1 million deaths and 24 million victims of various forms of political persecution. The vast majority of casualties were due to organized repression by authorities, not the actions of insurgents in the course of rebellion. Despite the large death toll, on a per capita basis these years in China were considerably less deadly than the Salvadoran civil war or Guatemalan counterinsurgency campaign of the 1980s, the Indonesian massacres of 1965-66, and the Soviet purges at the height of the Stalinist terror in the late 1930s.