

## **THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD.** *Annotate the reading and then complete the accompanying questions.*

Great Leap Forward, in Chinese history, the campaign undertaken by the Chinese communists between 1958 and early 1960 to organize its vast population, especially in large-scale rural communes, to meet China's industrial and agricultural problems. The Chinese hoped to develop labour-intensive methods of industrialization, which would emphasize manpower rather than machines and capital expenditure. Thereby, it was hoped, the country could bypass the slow, more typical process of industrialization through gradual accumulation of capital and purchase of heavy machinery. The Great Leap Forward approach was epitomized by the development of small backyard steel furnaces in every village and urban neighbourhood, which were intended to accelerate the industrialization process.

The promulgation of the Great Leap Forward was the result of the failure of the Soviet model of industrialization in China. The Soviet model, which emphasized the conversion of capital gained from the sale of agricultural products into heavy machinery, was inapplicable in China because, unlike the Soviet Union, it had a very dense population and no large agricultural surplus with which to accumulate capital. After intense debate, it was decided that agriculture and industry could be developed at the same time by changing people's working habits and relying on labour rather than machine-centred industrial processes. An experimental commune was established in the north-central province of Henan early in 1958, and the system soon spread throughout the country.

Under the commune system, agricultural and political decisions were decentralized, and ideological purity rather than expertise was emphasized. The peasants were organized into brigade teams, and communal kitchens were established so that women could be freed for work. The program was implemented with such haste by overzealous cadres that implements were often melted to make steel in the backyard furnaces, and many farm animals were slaughtered by discontented peasants. These errors in implementation were made worse by a series of natural disasters and the withdrawal of Soviet support. The inefficiency of the communes and the large-scale diversion of farm labour into small-scale industry disrupted China's agriculture seriously, and three consecutive years of natural calamities added to what quickly turned into a national disaster; in all, about 20 million people were estimated to have died of starvation between 1959 and 1962.

This breakdown of the Chinese economy caused the government to begin to repeal the Great Leap Forward program by early 1960. Private plots and agricultural implements were returned to the peasants, expertise began to be emphasized again, and the communal system was broken up. The failure of the Great Leap produced a division among the party leaders. One group blamed the failure of the Great Leap on bureaucratic elements who they felt had been overzealous in implementing its policies. Another faction in the party took the failure of the Great Leap as proof that China must rely more on expertise and material incentives in developing the economy. Some concluded that it was against the latter faction that Mao Zedong launched his Cultural Revolution in early 1966.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What was the Great Leap Forward?
2. What was the purpose of the Great Leap Forward?
3. Why was the Great Leap Forward a failure?