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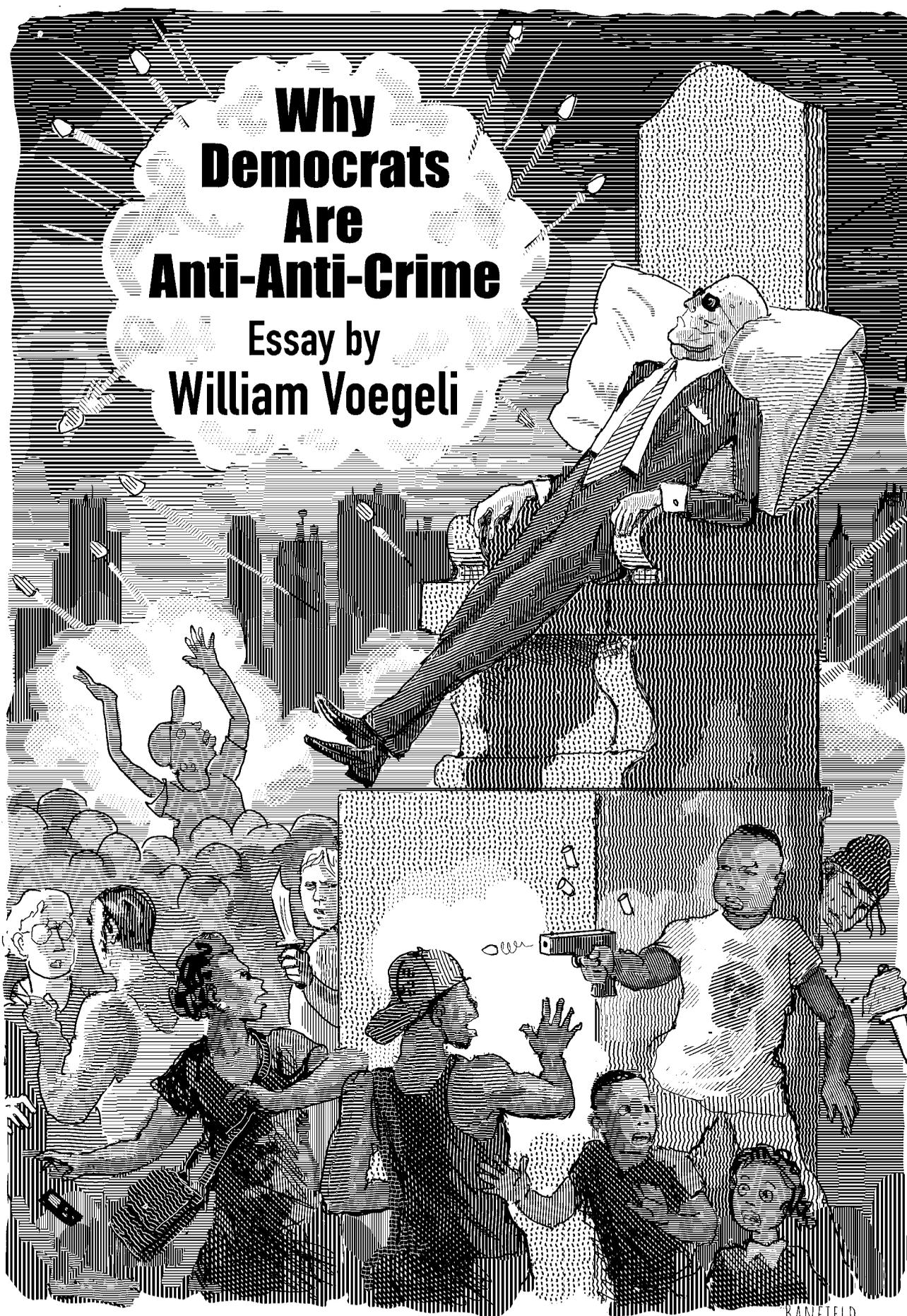
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STRUGGLE SESSION

The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution,

by Yang Jisheng, translated and edited by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 768 pages, \$40 (cloth), \$22 (paper)

JOURNALIST YANG JISHENG HAS BRAVELY covered abuses in China for almost 60 years. He graduated from college in 1966 just as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was beginning to convulse his country. In America, the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath are remembered for the antic words and phrases which have become part of our language—Capitalist Roaders, Little Red Book, Red Guards, Gang of Four. But it is also notorious for its images of students and supporters running amok, trashing college campuses and government offices, humiliating, maiming, and murdering teachers and officials, and driving others to suicide. These atrocities were inspired by a vaguely defined ideology called the Thought of Mao Zedong, encouraged and enabled by the man himself.

At the time these crimes were properly likened to the Hitler Youth rampages. Today, however, references to mid-'60s China have become a shorthand and unconsidered way of talking about the breakdown of civility, tolerance, and order on American campuses, and the outbreaks of violence in many American cities. China's Cultural Revolution doubtless provides a cautionary tale, but such comparisons are both too pat and cloud our appreciation of the true horror.

In *Tombstone* (2012) Yang wrote the definitive account of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" famine of the 1950s (see my review of it: "Blood-soaked History," *CRB*, Spring 2013). By Yang's estimate roughly 36 million died of starvation—arguably the greatest single crime in the history of the world. Yang's latest book, *The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, provides the definitive history of Mao's 1960s enthusiasm—when "only" a million or so died. First published in Chinese in Hong Kong in 2016, it is now available in English thanks to the efforts of journalist Stacy Mosher and the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater professor Guo Jian. Their version is much reduced from Yang's original; even so, it is over 700 pages. But then Yang has a complicated story to tell.

The Communists' People's Republic of China (PRC), set up in 1949, was in a hurry to consolidate its power. Within a decade Mao launched the Great Leap Forward, collectivizing farms and rationing produce. But in the

late 1950s—after calling for a "hundred flowers to bloom" in the nation's discourse—he was taken aback by the unpopularity of his reforms. The 1960s Cultural Revolution was arguably his way of destroying the opposition that had been revealed in the '50s—not only among the people, but within the Communist Party itself.

YANG LAYS OUT WHAT CAN HAPPEN when a fearful regime exists in a perpetual state of war with the people it wants to control. Mao's decision to summon "the masses" to join his political campaign proved dangerous; one can summon and incite a mob but, once raging, it can be like a California brushfire, apt to go off in unpredictable directions. In due course, Mao had to call in the firefighters—the regime's bureaucratic apparatus and armed forces. By that time, the Party itself was smoldering.

In fact, from its founding in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party has been a hothouse of rivalry, intrigue, factionalism, and murderous violence. It was that way when Mao secured his ascendancy in the 1930s and remained that way when he appeared at the height of his power in the '50s and '60s. For aspirants to high office, the further one rose, the greater one's jeopardy. The most dangerous assignment was to serve as Mao's principal deputy: one died in prison, another in hospital after Mao prevented his receiving medical care, a third in an airplane crash under mysterious circumstances. Yang describes what life was like at Mao's paranoia-ruled court. The reader cannot help wonder what manner of man elects to enter a world like this and—at least for a while—thrives in it.

Decades later, the intra-PRC state of war persists. The PRC has changed enormously since its founding, boasting a far larger population, a much higher rate of urbanization, and a once-unimaginable increase in both national and individual wealth. (In 2020 there were an astonishing 389 PRC nationals on *Forbes's* billionaires list.) Accordingly, the means of intimidating the populace and conducting intra-party rivalry have changed. But the intentions remain the same—keep the populace in a state of fear and unease and, inside the party, ensure that even the highest-ranking will be anxious and off-balance.

ENEMIES ARE ALWAYS LURKING. PRESIDENT Xi Jinping's principal rival for power in 2012, a man named Bo Xilai, is serving life in prison. Bo's allies, real and imagined, are still hunted. Xi himself continues to struggle (one of his favorite words) to maintain his primacy. As the *Economist* reported in its March 1, 2021 issue: "On February 27th the Communist Party declared the start of a long-expected purge of their ranks. It will involve, say officials, 'turning the knife-blade inward' to gouge out those deemed corrupt or insufficiently loyal to the party and its leader, Xi Jinping." Xi has already turned against the very *génocidaires* he sent to repress Muslim Uighurs in the northwest Xinjiang province; the hapless Huang Yabo, once Xinjiang's chief of police, will face trial for stealing some \$300 million.

Whether China is poor or rich, or whether individuals are well-connected or alone, does not matter. What matters is that, after over seven decades in power, the regime knows it must maintain an enormous apparatus of repression to survive. When China was poor, poor peasants were the ones brought to heel and held in thrall. Today, there are some extremely wealthy people in China. They too must be taught their place.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution's worst atrocities, there was a worldwide pro-Mao craze, as historian Julia Lovell brilliantly describes in *Maoism: A Global History* (2019). Even today, many urge "fairmindedness"; they want us to weigh the PRC's bloody history against its "rise," as if the one were somehow necessary to the other. Not even the indefatigably industrious Yang Jisheng has been able to shame enough people into abandoning this conceit—least of all those in control of Beijing. Instead, many years ago, the regime installed an enormous portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square and put smaller portraits of him on the country's banknotes—there to smile upon those around the world who so avidly chase them.

Charles Horner is a senior fellow of the Hudson Institute and the author, most recently, of A China Scholar's Long March: Writings and Reflections 1978–2015: Reflections on a Changing China (Merwin Asia).

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