

BOOK REVIEW

## Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China

Covell F. Meyskens. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 281 pp. £34.99 (hbk). ISBN 9781108489553

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*Mao's Third Front* is a ground-breaking monograph that focusses on an oft-referred-to, but little-studied subject in PRC history: the “Third Front.” Launched in 1964, a period normally considered to be one of retrenchment and economic recovery through relatively greater reliance on markets, private garden plots and specialized technical knowledge, the Third Front stands in counterpoint to what we consider to be the norm for the period immediately preceding the Cultural Revolution. This monograph not only puts the Maoist, mobilizational alternative on the map, it problematizes the standard periodization of PRC history in the way it demonstrates key continuities from the Great Leap Forward through to the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution.

Until it was quietly shelved in the late 1970s, the Third Front was a collection of projects implemented in tried-and-true Maoist campaign style to achieve quick breakthroughs in building a heavy industrial base in the underdeveloped interior of China. The sprawling scale of the Third Front as a “militarized industrial campaign” (p. 66) in different industries across remote regions of the south-west with little to no pre-existing infrastructure, its obvious ties to national defence, its mobilization of millions and the sensitivity of the topic could have easily resulted in a monograph that either focused too narrowly on one project, or was so overwhelmed by the multitude of details that it only resulted in generalities. Meyskens adroitly avoids all these pitfalls, blending political, social, economic and Cold War history. The introduction consists of an overview of the topic and a discussion of sources. The first chapter lays out the origin of the Third Front in Mao's preoccupation with continuing the revolution amid China's increasingly precarious international standing in the early- to mid-1960s. Meyskens explains the ways in which the Third Front emerged from the principles that animated the Great Leap Forward: self-reliance, autarky and the mobilization of the naturally revolutionary nature of the masses through extraordinary campaigns to achieve the goals of the revolution in heavy industry, particularly steel. In many cases, Third Front projects were revivals of drives first attempted during the Leap: Panzhihua Steel (Sichuan), Shuicheng Steel at Liupanshui (Guizhou), and Second Heavy Industry Works (Sichuan). The Third Front also encompassed massive railroad building campaigns: the Chengdu–Kunming line as well as the Guiyang–Chongqing and Guiyang–Kunming links. These ideational and institutional links to the Leap notwithstanding, the Third Front was launched in a very different international environment: China's profound and deepening international isolation rendered the Third Front nothing less than a massive pre-emptive defence strategy, with its emphasis on dispersed projects often hidden from view. The Third Front also departed from the Leap's denigration of specialized knowledge. Construction of Third Front factories and railroad lines amid very challenging conditions required rather than suppressed technical expertise: engineers and technicians were sent down to remote areas to build from nearly nothing and were not expected to learn from peasants. Rather they were enjoined to use their skills to build heroic projects from the ground up with nearly nothing.

Chapter one reviews the high-level policy debates and decisions around the Third Front; chapter two covers the ways in which people – mostly men – were recruited from their regular work units to embark on an unknown adventure remote areas where conditions were extremely primitive; chapter three discusses the heavily militarized campaign atmosphere of the Third Front’s actual work, particularly in the building of the Kunming–Chengdu railroad. Chapter four turns to social history in the new steel town of Panzhihua, detailing the physical, social and psychological hardships that workers building the Third Front had to endure. Real *jianku* (hardship) in physical comfort, impossibly long working hours, separation from family and an extraordinarily skewed gender ratio were baked-in costs to the tens of thousands of people sent to build the Third Front, but at the same time, the workers of Panzhihua were privileged with higher salaries and levels of subsidy than the norm, were lauded for building socialism and often felt that despite the hardship they were making positive contributions to building socialism. Chapter five evaluates the Third Front as a whole, finding that while regional output of coal, oil and electricity all grew, astonishing inefficiencies remained (establishing factories and power plants in caves was bound to be logistically difficult and expensive), and that while the Third Front was successful in building an industrial base in the interior, when economic policy shifted in the Deng era “roughly half of Third Front projects were found to be economically unviable and were consigned to the dustbin of history” (p. 235).

In short, *Mao’s Third Front* is a *tour de force*, agenda-setting monograph that successfully draws out its documentary and oral sources in ways that prompt us to rethink Mao-era regional and industrial history in a wider context of Cold War history. One can only hope that in the future, scholars will be permitted access to sources that can build on this fine piece of scholarship.