

The Tangshan earthquake

On its 40th anniversary, **Tony Moore** describes the worst natural disaster of the 20th century, which was also instrumental in bringing to an end one of the worst human-made disasters in the Peoples' Republic of China

Tangshan was just one of a number of coal mining towns in China at the beginning of 1976. It had a population of about a million people. But, in a few seconds at around 03:42 on July 28, an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale left at least a quarter of a million people dead or dying and destroyed between 85 and 90 per cent of the town's buildings.

Fires broke out, igniting explosives and releasing poisonous gasses. Water, electricity and communications were cut. Bridges were destroyed and road and rail access to the city were impassable. Less than 12 hours later, the town was struck by an aftershock measuring 7.1, causing more death and destruction.

To this day, controversy surrounds the number of people killed and injured. Official figures issued by the Chinese Seismological Service 12 years after the earthquake claim the death toll was 242,419, with a further 160,000 injured. However, given most of the town was destroyed, other sources suggest that it may have been as many as 650,000, with a further 779,000 injured. All family members of some 7,218 households were killed. Around 4,000 children were orphaned.

The high death toll was indicative of the quality of building construction in China at the time. The city lay on unstable alluvial soil and very few buildings had been built to withstand any earthquake, let alone such a large one.

Corpses stacked in streets

The central government knew little about the disaster for at least six hours and it was days before it organised relief. Despite its lack of preparedness, the Chinese Government refused offers of international aid and insisted on self-reliance. In the immediate aftermath, the surviving people of Tangshan dug through the rubble with their bare hands, stacking corpses in the street. Fearing an epidemic, government planes flew overhead spraying disinfectant over the ruins. It was days before troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) arrived or relief supplies were dropped from the air.

Eventually the number of PLA troops in Tangshan was estimated to be 100,000, but because of a lack of transport and the inaccessibility, many had to march from distances of up to 180 miles away to reach the destroyed town. When they arrived, they lacked trucks, cranes and even basic tools and they too were forced to dig in the rubble with their bare hands. Although medical teams eventually descended on the area, in the crucial first week after the crisis, many died through lack of medical care.

At the time the earthquake struck, Mao Zedong, better known as Mao Tse-tung, who had started the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, lay dying in a Beijing hospital. In the intervening years, senior officials and millions of ordinary Chinese citizens had been persecuted as Mao Zedong, supported by the so-called Gang of Four led by Mao's last wife, Jiang Qing, had attempted to purge



Chinese troops join the rescue effort following an earthquake that destroyed the industrial city of Tangshan in August 1976 – many soldiers marched 180 miles to reach the city

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the remnants of capitalism and traditional elements of Chinese society in an attempt to impose 'true' communist ideology on the country. Worse still, between three-quarters of a million and a million people had died, many at the hands of the notorious Red Guards.

In the months preceding the earthquake, there had been noticeable signs of increasing anger against the central government by the people. Hua Guofeng, who had only been appointed Premier and First Vice-Chairman of the Communist Party of China in January, made what many people regarded as a career-saving decision to visit the affected area and talk to survivors on August 4. Rebuilding the infrastructure started almost immediately, and the town was completely reconstructed. Today, Tangshan has a population of nearly three million people and is known as the 'Brave City of China'.

Mao Zedong died on September 9, 1976. Within a month, Hua Guofeng made his move against the Gang of Four. Convicted of crimes against the state, the four were sentenced to death, but this was later commuted to terms of imprisonment.

The Great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976 was the worst natural disaster of the 20th century, in terms of loss of life. But it was also instrumental in ending the Cultural Revolution, one of the worst human-made disasters of all time.

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