

## Current Support Brief

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### THE RISING DEATH RATE IN COMMUNIST CHINA



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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THE RISING DEATH RATE IN COMMUNIST CHINA

A sharp increase in the death rate in Communist China since 1958 is suggested by cumulative reports of nutritional disorders, weakening resistance to disease, and a loss of energy resulting from 3 years of acute shortages of food. Although output of food grains from 1959 to 1961 was at or slightly below the 1957 level of 185 million metric tons (including tubers on a grain-equivalent basis), the population increased by at least 50 million between 1957 and 1961. The result was a marked decline in availability of food grains per capita, an increase in nutritional deficiencies, and a reduction in the rate of growth of the population.

Estimates of the population made early in 1961 <sup>1</sup>/ assumed constant fertility and decreasing mortality rates during the first 10 years of the Communist regime, rising mortality rates during 1959-61, and constant mortality rates thereafter. On these assumptions it was estimated that the natural rate of increase in the population rose during the period 1950-58, reaching a peak rate of increase of 25 per thousand of population in 1958. Because of the food shortage during 1959-61, it was estimated that the rate of increase in the population was reduced to 20 per thousand by midyear 1961.

By September 1962, however, accumulating reports from Communist China suggested that malnutrition and diseases caused by nutritional deficiencies may have caused the rate of increase in the population to drop below the 20 per thousand estimated for 1961. Both the mainland press and refugee interviews contain indications of night blindness, beriberi, edema, amenorrhea (stoppage of menstruation), and the highly indicative psychological symptoms of lethargy and resignation. Although it is not possible to assert that these conditions are universal, the regime's system of control and distribution of food tends to prevent wide discrepancies in the nutritional level of the population, thus suggesting that a substantial proportion of the entire population of China may be close to the marginal level of nutrition.

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Studies in other countries show that where undernutrition is acute or prolonged, resistance to disease declines, so that underfed populations become more subject to infection by communicable ailments than they would be under normal conditions. Having fallen ill, people recover slowly; physical injuries do not heal easily; exhaustion from overwork during periods of intense physical activity occurs sooner; and recuperation is prolonged. The margin for survival is lowered, so that debilitating diseases become fatal and take a higher toll in mortality. The evidence of serious malnutrition in Communist China prolonged over a period of 3 years suggests a substantially higher level of mortality than was previously estimated.

Although the effects of malnutrition are reflected with little delay in higher mortality rates, it does not follow that birth rates are affected either as promptly or to the same degree. Refugee reports of amenorrhea, lack of sexual desire, and declining number of births in local areas of Communist China indicate that malnutrition is in fact affecting the fertility of the population, but the data are insufficient to permit precise judgments on changes in the birth rates. On the basis of experience in other populations, the effects of malnutrition on fertility are not uniform and tend to vary with the extent and type of nutritional deficiencies. Moreover, the changes in fertility rates are believed to be relatively insignificant when compared with the changes in mortality rates.

Given these assumptions about the trend in fertility and mortality, there remains the question of what quantitative values to assign to them. Although this question cannot be resolved by a mathematically objective method, several approximate figures for the rate of natural increase can be suggested.

Starting in 1958, various rates of population increase may be assumed (see the accompanying chart). In 1958 a rate of increase of 2.5 percent was assumed on the basis of an estimated birth rate of about 45 per thousand of population and a death rate of 20 per thousand of population. With constant fertility a rise in the death rate to 25 per thousand of population would result in a decline in the rate of natural increase to 2.0 percent by 1962. This projection, represented by

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Series A in the chart, implies a return to the conditions of mortality supposedly attained about 1953.

A rate of increase of about 1.5 percent, indicated by Series B, implies a mortality rate of about 30 per thousand of population, the level probably existing during the mid-1930's. This level of mortality suggests that all of the gains made in reducing mortality during the first 10 years of the Communist regime in China have been lost during the past 4 years.

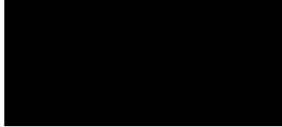
The assumption of a rate of increase of 1.0 percent by 1962, as reflected in Series C, implies a death rate of 35 per thousand of population. If conditions of widespread severe distress were to become evident within the next few years, the assumption of a zero rate of increase would be warranted. If a major catastrophe occurred, with a breakdown in civil administration over significant parts of the more populous regions of Communist China and general acute starvation, the result could be a net decrease in the population.

In summary, evidence of sustained malnutrition in Communist China suggests that the regime is unable to maintain the previous moderately low level of mortality. It is estimated, therefore, that the rate of population increase declined from 2.5 percent in 1958 to about 1.5 percent in 1962. This rate of growth, as represented by Series B, would yield a total population for China at midyear 1962 of 706 million and would mean an annual increment of about 11 million in the population instead of the nearly 18 million that might have been expected in the absence of a food crisis.

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Source:

1. EIC. EIC SR5-S2, Population of the Countries of the Sino-Soviet Bloc, Selected Years, 1938-80, April 1962. C.

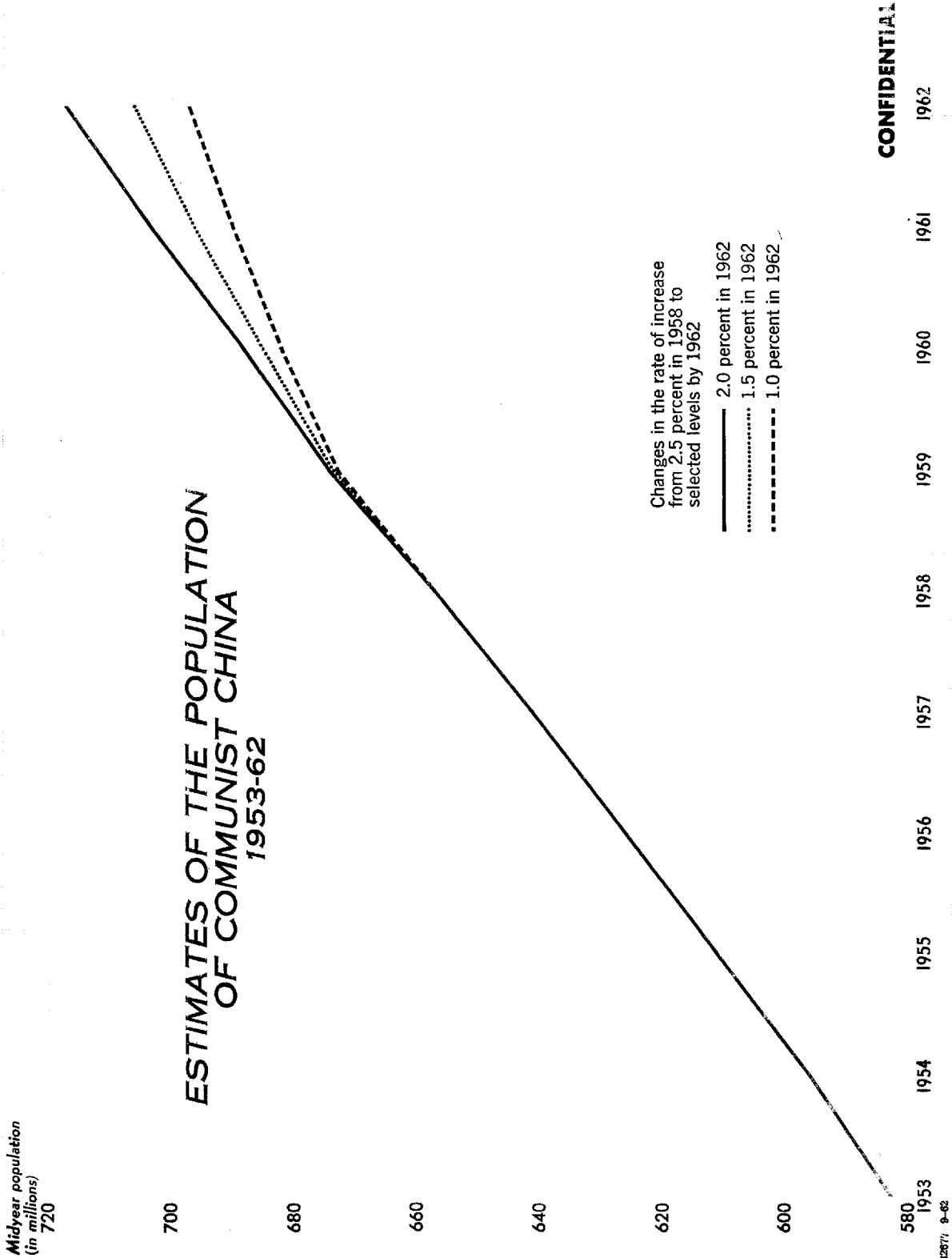
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