

# GENOCIDE

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Edited by  
A. Dirk Moses

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN  
HISTORICAL STUDIES

# GENOCIDE

Critical Concepts in Historical Studies

*Edited by*  
*A. Dirk Moses*

**Volume V**  
**Post-Colonial and Imperial-Genocide**



 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Typeset in 10/12pt Times NR MT by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJI Digital, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Genocide / edited by A. Dirk Moses.

p. cm. – (Critical concepts in historical studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-415-49375-8 (set) –

ISBN 978-0-415-49376-5 (1) – ISBN 978-0-415-49377-2 (2) –

ISBN 978-0-415-49378-9 (3) – ISBN 978-0-415-49379-6 (4) –

ISBN 978-0-415-49380-2 (5) – ISBN 978-0-415-49381-9 (6)

I. Genocide—History. I. Moses, A. Dirk.

HV6322.7.G4464 2010

364.15'109—dc22

2009042247

ISBN 10: 0-415-49375-7 (Set)  
ISBN 10: 0-415-49380-3 (Volume V)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-49375-8 (Set)  
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-49380-2 (Volume V)

**Publisher's Note**

References within each chapter are as they appear in the original  
complete work

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

Stanford University Press for permission to reprint Yang Su, 'Mass killings in the Cultural Revolution: a study of three provinces', in Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz and Andrew George Walder (eds), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 96–123. Copyright © 2006 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University.

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Springer Science & Business Media for permission to reprint Stanley Diamond, 'Who killed Biafra?', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 31:1, 2007, 339–362.

The International Commission of Jurists for permission to reprint International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971: A Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists*, (Geneva, ICJ, 1972), pp. 7–98.

Minority Rights Group International for permission to reprint René Lemarchand and David Martin, *Selective Genocide in Burundi*, Minority Rights Group, no. 20, 1974, pp. 1–36.

John D. Ciorciari for permission to reprint John D. Ciorciari, "'Auto-genocide" and the Cambodian reign of terror', in Dominik Schaller, Rupen Boyadjian, Vivianne Berg and Hanno Scholtz (eds), *Enteignet, Vertrieben, Ermordet: Beiträge zur Genozidforschung*, (Zürich: Chronos, 2004), pp. 413–437.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Transaction Publishers for permission to reprint Ben Kiernan, 'Genocide, extermination, and resistance in East Timor, 1975–1999: comparative reflections on Cambodia', in *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia: Documentation, Denial and Justice in Cambodia and East Timor*, (New York: Transaction Books, 2007), pp. 105–136.

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs for permission to reprint Mark Munzel, *The Aché: genocide continues in Paraguay*, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Document No. 17, Copenhagen, 1974, pp. 3–32.

The University of California Press for permission to reprint Beatriz Manz, 'Terror, grief, and recovery: genocidal trauma in a Mayan village in Guatemala', in Alexander Laban Hinton (ed.), *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 292–309. © 2002 by the Regents of the University of California Press.

Taylor & Francis Ltd for permission to reprint Mark Levene, 'The Chittagong Hill Tracts: a case study in the political economy of "creeping" genocide', *Third World Quarterly*, 20:2, 1999, 339–369. [www.informaworld.com](http://www.informaworld.com)

Taylor & Francis Group LLC for permission to reprint Michiel Leezenberg, 'The Anfal operations in Iraqi Kurdistan', in Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons (eds), *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 2nd edn, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp. 375–394. Copyright © 2004 by Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.

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Alex de Waal for permission to reprint Alex de Waal, 'Sudan: the turbulent state', in Alex de Waal (ed.), *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, (Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University, and Justice in Africa, 2007), pp. 1–38.

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# MASS KILLINGS IN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

A study of three provinces

*Yang Su*

Source: Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, and Andrew George Walder (eds), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 96–123.

Students of the Cultural Revolution are familiar with its violence, including the ubiquitous beating and torture of teachers, intellectuals, and government officials,<sup>1</sup> and the casualties during street battles among warring mass factions.<sup>2</sup> Less familiar are scattered reports of mass killings, a qualitatively different phenomenon in which a large number of unarmed civilians were massacred in a systematic fashion. These reports include a memoir by a former cadre on perhaps the earliest event of this sort, in Daxing, a suburban county of Beijing. In the five days between August 27 and September 1, 1966, 325 members of “class enemy” households, whose ages ranged from thirty-eight days to eighty years, were executed.<sup>3</sup> The best-known case, and perhaps the most tragic, was in Daoxian County, Hunan Province. An article published in a Hong Kong magazine reports that a series of pogroms spread across the county in late 1967; within two months, 4,950 were killed.<sup>4</sup> Zheng Yi’s controversial book on massacres in Guangxi Province may be the best known to the western world thanks to its English translation and its tales about cannibalism.<sup>5</sup> A recent volume edited by Song Yongyi adds cases from Yunnan, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and Beijing to this list of atrocities.<sup>6</sup>

Such reports are troubling, but how widespread were such incidents? I had this question in mind when I embarked on my research project on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, using published county gazetteers (*xian zhi*). I found that while the cases cited above may be particularly severe, similar mass killings were relatively common in some rural regions from late 1967 to 1969. As I will show, the evidence is overwhelming. Bear in mind that these gazetteers are publications compiled by local governments. There is



little reason to believe such county gazetteers would exaggerate political violence. If anything, we should suspect underreporting.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will document mass killings based on the county gazetteers of three provinces, two of which (Guangxi and Guangdong) report widespread mass killings, and one of which (Hubei) reports relatively few.

In order to understand the extensive violence reported here, I will also discuss the political context of the time. Most mass killings took place when the party-state began to form new local governments and to demobilize mass organizations. By the time Mao and the party center called for a “revolutionary great alliance” in late 1967, the mass movements of the Cultural Revolution had been underway for more than one year. Local governments had been dismantled; the masses had been let loose to form organizations and alliances to contest for power. Mass organizations fought armed street battles. It was an all-but-impossible task to form revolutionary committees (the new organs of power), to have them command obedience, and most of all, to disband and disarm mass organizations. Social and administrative problems were attacked through a time-honored method, “class struggle”—a shorthand term for destroying overt defiance and searching for hidden “enemies.” An important difference was that this time local representatives of the state turned “class struggle” into a reign of terror. Mass killings ensued.

### **Documenting mass killings with county gazetteers**

In 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee called for rehabilitation of victims in “false,” “innocent,” and “wrongful” cases in the Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup> The policy generated valuable information regarding the scope and severity of tragic events during the Cultural Revolution at the local level, most of which were later documented and published in county gazetteers (*xian zhi*). The new *xian zhi*, with few exceptions, have a “Major Events” section that records, among other historic events in the county, key events during the Cultural Revolution. These records also include death and injury statistics for the Cultural Revolution as well as population, party membership, and county leaders’ background.

There were about 2,250 such jurisdictions in 1966.<sup>9</sup> For this study, I chose the three provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hubei, which contain some 235 counties, for in-depth examination.<sup>10</sup> Table 58.1 shows the percentage of counties for which I was able to collect county gazetteer information about the Cultural Revolution.

The extent of published detail in accounts of the Cultural Revolution varies greatly due to possible self-censorship or inadequate information gathering. I will report numbers of deaths *as reported* in the county gazetteers. The statistics based on this approach hence should be considered as minimum figures.<sup>11</sup> This conservative coding is a deliberate strategy I have adopted to unambiguously establish the fact of mass killings.

Table 58.1 The Sample Counties, by Province.

	<i>Guangxi</i>	<i>Guangdong</i>	<i>Hubei</i>
Counties in sample	65	57	65
Total counties in province, 1966	83	80	72
Percent of counties in sample	78.3	71.3	90.2

Following Benjamin Valentino, I define mass killing as “the intentional killing of a significant number of the members of any group (as a group and its membership is defined by the perpetrator) of non-combatants.”<sup>12</sup> A few elements of this definition are worth further discussion. First, identification of the victim is based on “membership” in some group, as opposed to one that is based on immediate threat to the perpetrator. In the case of the Cultural Revolution, the membership was based on alleged political crimes or unfavorable family background. Second, the intent to kill can be imputed in the perpetrator’s action. This separates mass killing from other causes of death in the Cultural Revolution, such as beating during a public struggle session (when the initial intent is more symbolic humiliation than physical killing), or torture during the course of interrogation (when obtaining a confession is the main purpose). Third, the event must not occur during armed combat between mass factions. However, if the victims were disarmed captives taken prisoner after armed combat, I consider them as noncombatants since they no longer posed a threat to the perpetrators. Hence mass killing differs from casualties in armed battles, a widespread phenomenon in the earlier stages of the Cultural Revolution. Finally, the criterion of “a significant number” indicates some concentration in terms of time and space. To decide whether an event constituted a *mass* killing, I use ten deaths as a cut-off point.

A record from Quanzhou County, Guangxi, is typical among the gazetteers that use unequivocal language to describe mass killings:

October 3, [1967]. In Sanjiang Brigade, Dongshan Commune, the militia commander Huang Tianhui led [the brigade militia] to engage in a massacre. They pushed off a cliff and killed seventy-six individuals of the brigade—former landlords, rich peasants, and their children—in snake-shaped Huanggua’an canyon.... From July to October, [another] 850 individuals [in the county]—the four-type elements (landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, and bad elements) and their children—were executed with firearms.<sup>13</sup>

This presents one of most devastating cases of mass killings. Quanzhou was otherwise a typical county in terms of demography, governing structure, and recent history. In 1966, about 93 percent of its population of 485,000

was rural, organized into three levels of government: county, commune (township), and brigade (village). In the land reform of the early 1950s, 10,110 families were classified as landlords, and 3,279 as rich peasants.<sup>14</sup> In subsequent political campaigns the ranks of these “class enemies” were enlarged by others who were labeled “counterrevolutionaries” or “bad elements.” Together, this segment of the population, including their family members, was known as “four-types” (*silei fenzi*). Whenever “class struggle” rhetoric was whipped up, they were an instant target for harassment and persecution. Their tragedy reached a climax in the Cultural Revolution. By 1971, when the most violent period of the Cultural Revolution had ended, 2,156 men, women, and children of Quanzhou County had died “unnatural deaths,” like those in the example quoted above.<sup>15</sup>

An account like this provides information on the timing, location, identities of the victims and the perpetrators, and the way in which the deaths occurred. These accounts represent one of the major types of mass killings, which I call *pogrom against the “four-types.”* Other county gazetteers provide less explicit information about the manner of killing. But based on the time period specified in the record and the large number of deaths, mass killings clearly occurred. In the following example from another county, Lingui, Guangxi, the “four-types” comprised the majority of victims, indicating a possible pogrom like that in Quanzhou County, but the victims also include those who were newly labeled as members of an alleged conspiracy. This suggests a second type, which I call *killings in a political witch-hunt.*

In the name of “cleansing the class ranks” and “mass dictatorship,” indiscriminate killings took place across the county. Between mid-June and August [of 1968], 1,991 people were killed as members of “Assassination Squads,” “Anti-communist Army of Patriots,” and other “black groups.” Among them were 326 cadres, 79 workers, 53 students, 68 ordinary urban residents, 547 peasants, and 918 four-type elements and their children. Among the 161 brigades [of the county], only Wenquan in Huixian and Dongjiang in Wantian did not indiscriminately detain and kill.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike in a pogrom against the “four-types,” the identity of victims in a political witch-hunt was constructed more recently, based on the accused’s association with alleged conspiratorial groups such as the “Assassination Squad” and the “Anti-communist Army of Patriots.” While 918 victims were family members of the “four-types,” a significant number of individuals were apparently not in this category—those described as cadres, workers, ordinary peasants, and urban residents.

A third type of mass killing is the *summary execution of captives.* These victims were disarmed after a factional battle and were no longer armed combatants. Killings of this type occurred after one alliance (or faction)

already had defeated another. The following example vividly illustrates the nature of this type of event. After a joint meeting attended by public security officers of a few counties on August 18, 1968,

the People's Armed Forces Department (Renmin wuzhuangbu) in each county went ahead and carried out the "order." About 4,400 (a number that exceeded what had been stipulated in the meeting) armed individuals of the "United Headquarters" (Lianzhi)<sup>17</sup> besieged the members of "7.29" [a dissenting mass organization] who had fled to Nanshan and Beishan in Fengshan County. More than 10,000 were detained (the county population was then 103,138). During the siege and the subsequent detentions, 1,016 were shot to death, making up more than 70 percent of the total Cultural Revolution deaths of the county....After the violence swept across the county, the establishment of the Revolutionary Committee of Fengshan County was finally [announced] on the twenty-fifth [of August, 1968].<sup>18</sup>

I should also say a few words about those counties for which I am not able to establish that mass killings occurred. If the reported number of deaths is fewer than ten, I do not count the event as a mass killing. Even for those counties whose gazetteers mention a substantial number of deaths, I do not regard the county as experiencing mass killings, if

- (1) substantial numbers of deaths are implied rather than explicitly recorded;
- (2) recorded deaths were due to armed battles, not imposed upon unarmed civilians; or,
- (3) the recorded number of deaths is an aggregated number for the entire period of the Cultural Revolution and the manner in which the deaths occurred cannot be determined.

Quotations from three counties illustrate, respectively, these three scenarios:

On the evening of March 20 [1968], the militia of Huangqiao Brigade, Xinlian Commune, indiscriminately killed people on the pretext of quelling the "Pingmin Party." Afterwards indiscriminate killings *frequently* occurred across the county and were particularly severe in Youping and other places.<sup>19</sup>

March 3, [1968]. The two [mass] factions engaged in armed battles in Liantang, resulting in 144 deaths.<sup>20</sup>

During the ten-year Cultural Revolution, 2,053 cadres and members of the masses were struggled against; 206 were beaten to death or otherwise caused to die; 541 were injured or permanently disabled during beatings.<sup>21</sup>

The first quotation, from the Mengshan County gazetteer, reports “indiscriminate killings” on March 20, 1968, and afterwards. From the text, we can discern that the number of deaths must be very substantial. But because no specific number is provided, I do not count those events as mass killings. In the second quotation, from Hengxian, 144 deaths are recorded on March 3, 1968, alone; but since these deaths were a result of armed conflict, I do not count this as a mass killing. The third quotation, from Tianlin County, reports 206 deaths, but because the manner of killing is not clear, I do not count this as a mass killing.

### Mass killings in three provinces

#### *Scale*

The most severe mass killings were in Guangxi Province. Of sixty-five counties for which I have gazetteers, forty-three, 66 percent, experienced mass killings (see Table 58.2). Among the most severe cases were fifteen counties that reported more than 1,000 deaths.<sup>22</sup> Wuming County had the highest death toll of all, 2,463. In one campaign alone, 1,546 were killed between mid-June and early July of 1968.<sup>23</sup> Guangxi Province exhibited all three types of mass killing I described above: pogroms against the “four-types,” killings in political witch-hunts, and summary executions of captives.

Guangdong Province exhibited a similar pattern. Twenty-eight out of fifty-seven counties, 49 percent, experienced mass killings. In six counties the number of deaths exceeded 1,000.<sup>24</sup> The most severe case was Yangchun County, with 2,600 deaths between August and October 1968. The mass killings in Guangdong belong to two categories: pogroms against the “four-types” and political witch-hunts. No summary executions of captives, the third type, were reported.

In contrast, mass killings were rarely reported in Hubei Province—only four out of sixty-one counties. These four cases, however, all involved large numbers of deaths due to beatings in waves of political witch-hunts. No pogroms or summary executions were reported.

It is clear from Table 58.2 that mass killings were a widespread phenomenon in Guangxi and Guangdong. At the same time, Hubei seems to stand as a negative case, if the statistics from the county gazetteers of this province reflect the true historical picture.<sup>25</sup>

At about the same time that mass killings occurred widely in Guangxi and Guangdong, counties in Hubei were by no means quiet. On the contrary, this was also a high time of persecution of previously and newly designated “class enemies.” Thirty-eight counties, or 60 percent of my Hubei sample, report that more than 1,000 people were beaten in the persecutions, many suffering permanent injuries. Unlike Guangxi and Guangdong, however, large-scale beatings in most cases stopped short of mass killings. Here is an example:

# MASS KILLINGS IN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Table 58.2 Frequencies of Reported Mass Killings, by Province.

	<i>Guangxi</i>	<i>Guangdong</i>	<i>Hubei</i>
Total counties in sample	65	57	65
Counties with mass killings	43	28	4
Percent with mass killings	66.2	49.1	6.2
Counties with at least 500 deaths	27	10	0
Percent with at least 500 deaths	41.5	17.5	0
Average number of deaths	526	278	46.5
Highest overall county death toll	2,463	2,600	115

September 6, [1967]. The county seat witnessed the September 6 “Violent Event.” A group of “Rebels” paraded twenty-two “capitalist readers” and “stubborn conservatives” during the daytime, and injured thirty-two individuals (eight permanently) during the night. These activities quickly spread to communes and villages, where 1,015 were severely beaten. Among them forty-four suffered permanent disabilities, one was killed, and nine others died of causes related to the beatings.<sup>26</sup>

Most counties that experienced similar large-scale beatings report fewer than ten total deaths. In the particular case quoted here, although the death toll in a concentrated period reached my cut-off point of ten, I do not count it as a case of mass killing, because nine of these deaths were not explicitly intentional (the intention to harm and injure notwithstanding). Among the sixty-five counties of Hubei, I decided that four had experienced mass killings due to the number of deaths from the epidemic of beatings at the time. They are Yichang (10 killed, 105 driven to suicide, 60 permanently injured), Enshi (2,350 beaten, 51 killed, 314 permanently injured), Zigui (2,500 beaten, 40 killed, 440 severely injured, 35 permanently) and Yunxi (32 killed in Hejiaqu Commune, with 512 beaten and 276 “killed or disabled” in the county as a whole).

## *Timing*

Although the earliest known episode of mass killings occurred in August 1966 in the Beijing suburban county of Daxing,<sup>27</sup> in the three provinces in this study, mass killings did not occur until late 1967 or 1968, shortly before or after the establishment of the revolutionary committees there. Figure 58.1 compares the dates of the founding of the county-level committee with the dates of mass killings in Guangxi, Guangdong, and Hubei respectively. The data clearly show that the peaks of mass killings closely followed the founding of the revolutionary committee.

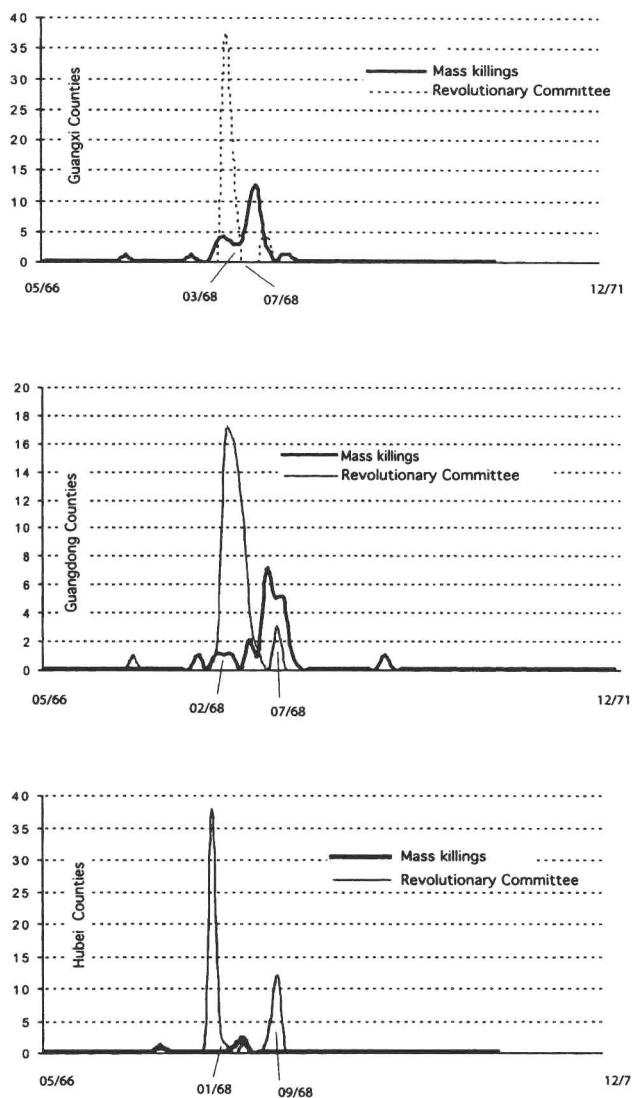


Figure 58.1 The Timing of Mass Killings in Relation to the Founding of Revolutionary Committees.

As shown in Figure 58.1, both in Guangxi and Guangdong, mass killings peaked in July 1968, just after most counties established their revolutionary committees. This was the month when the center issued two well publicized directives to ban armed battles and to disband mass organizations.<sup>28</sup> In Guangxi, the provincial revolutionary committee was not yet established, and the opposition mass alliance, known as April Twenty-second, led insurgencies in all the major cities. The provincial authorities therefore implemented the two directives to crack down on the opposing faction, forcing some of its members to flee to rural counties. At the same time, the newly established governments at the lower levels were called on to “preemptively attack class enemies.”<sup>29</sup> Some local governments, particularly communes, seemed to respond to this call with great zeal, whether or not there was significant organized resistance in the jurisdiction. In Guangdong, although the provincial government had been established since February, organized defiance represented by the Red Flag faction persisted, just as did the resistance of the April Twenty-second faction in Guangxi. The Guangdong provincial government also used the two directives from the center as a weapon in its face-off with Red Flag. As in Guangxi, policy pronouncements from Beijing and the provincial capital that targeted organized resistance translated into a climate of terror in lower-level jurisdictions (counties, communes, and brigades), whether or not organized resistance was widespread. Mass killings took place in such a climate.

In contrast to Guangdong and Guangxi, the few cases of mass killings in Hubei occurred not in July but about two months earlier (Figure 58.1). Beijing’s two directives against mass organizations seemed to have affected Hubei very differently from the way they affected the other two provinces. This may indicate that mass factional alignments in this period help to explain provincial differences in mass killings. In Hubei, unlike Guangxi and Guangdong, the rebel faction had been included in the new government (to be discussed further below).

Figure 58.1 shows that the mass killings in all three provinces were concentrated in a few months. This is important because it ties the mass killings to the establishment of revolutionary committees and the demobilization of mass organizations. It is known that most killings occurred in the wake of the formation of revolutionary committees, but we do not know the specific mechanism that produced them. Some scholars attribute them to a series of later campaigns, especially the Cleansing of the Class Ranks (*qingli jieji duiwu*) and One-Strike, Three-Anti (*yida sanfan*).<sup>30</sup>

Our data show that in fact these national campaigns did not always lead to severe persecutions at the local level. Gazetteers suggest that counties selectively chose the rhetoric of some, but not all national campaigns. Just as important, the timing of adoption varied greatly across provinces and counties. Each of our three provinces, in fact, generated its own campaign waves, which respectively affected persecutions in its counties.



*Location*

Mass killings tended to occur in jurisdictions below the county level, usually in the commune (township) or in the brigade (village). If we recall the quotations above, specific names of communes or villages are mentioned in relation to mass killings. For example, Sanjiang *Brigade* is specified in the well-known Quanzhou (Guangxi) pogrom in which seventy-six family members of the “four-types” were pushed into a canyon. In the Lingui County case (Guangxi), the report specified that only two out of 161 brigades did not have mass killings. Among the twenty-eight Guangdong counties where mass killings were reported, six gazetteers contain detailed information regarding names of the related jurisdictions. For example, *Qujiang xian zhi* states: “In January [1968] serious incidents of illegal killings occurred in Zhangzhi *Commune*. Thirteen *brigades* of the commune indiscriminately arrested and killed; 149 were killed.”<sup>31</sup> Other examples include the following: “Large number of beatings and killings occurred in the three *communes* of Chitong, Zhenglong, and Beijie, resulting in twenty-nine people being killed”; “Mass dictatorship was carried out by the security office of *various communes*”; “Litong *Brigade*, Xin’an *Commune* buried alive fifty-six “four-types” and their family members.”<sup>32</sup> The contrast between the lack of mass killings in the urban settings and their abundance in rural villages may reflect a *disconnect* between lower-level jurisdictions and the upper-level authorities, indicating the weakness of state control at the lower level.

The observation that mass killings were more likely to occur where state control was weakest is supported by another consideration with regard to geography: the variation in incidence across counties. In Table 58.3, I compare counties with mass killings and those without.<sup>33</sup> The table shows that more mass killings occurred in lower-level rural jurisdictions. The average distance of counties with mass killings from the provincial capital is 212 kilometers, while that of counties without mass killings is 179 kilometers. Counties with mass killings also were more sparsely populated and had lower per capita government revenue (see Table 58.3).

Table 58.3 County Characteristics and Mass Killings in Guangxi and Guangdong.

	<i>Counties with mass killings</i>	<i>Counties without mass killings</i>
Average distance from provincial capital (kilometers)	212	179
Population per square kilometer	139.7	219.1
Government per capita revenue (yuan)	15.1	20.8