

**The Great Leap Forward
(1958-1961)**

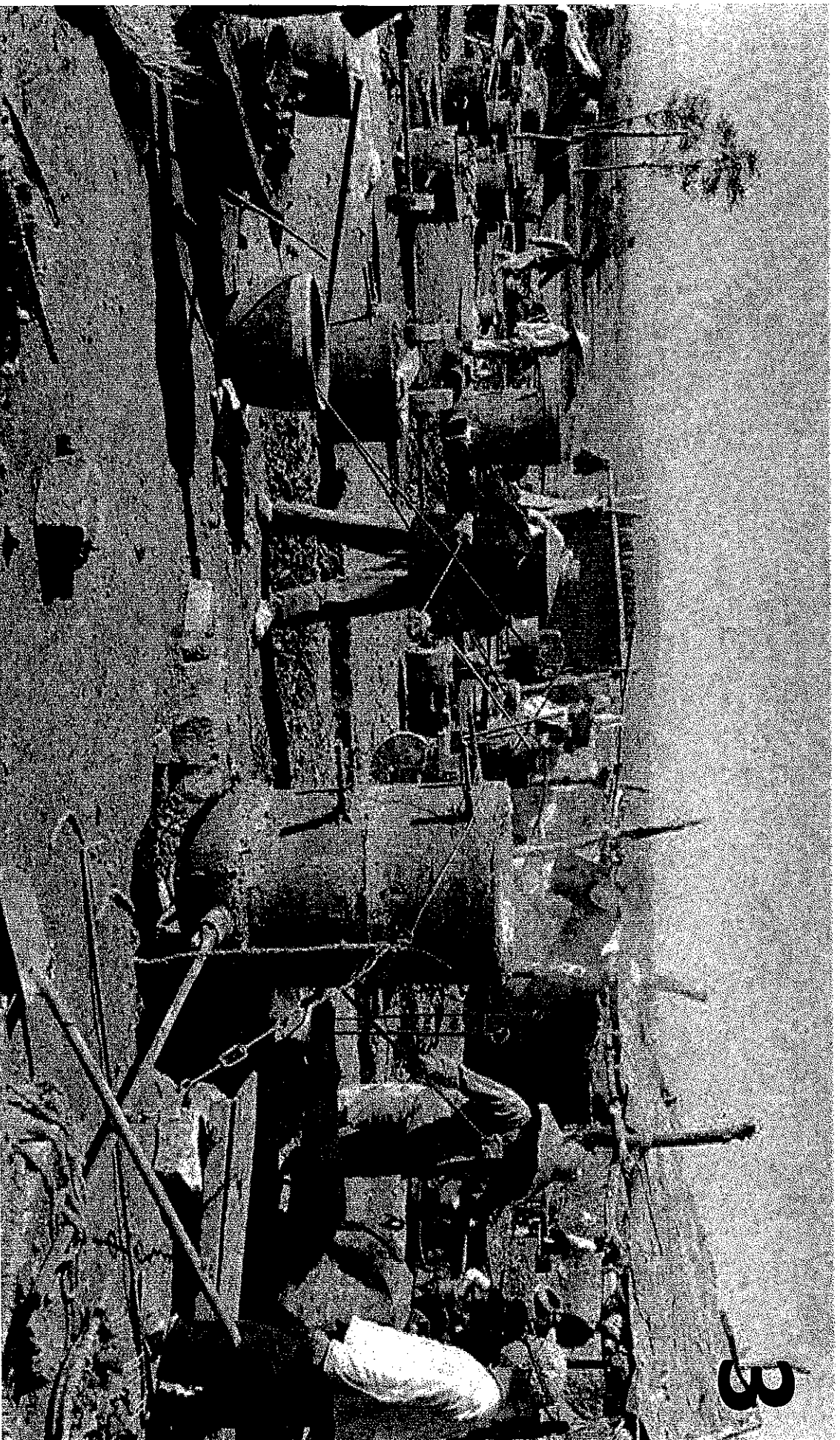


1

The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) was an economic and social campaign of the People's Republic of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The goal of the Great Leap Forward was to transform China's economy from an agrarian economy into a modern communist society through a process of rapid industrialization and collectivization.



By 1958, private ownership was abolished and peasant households all over China were forced into state-operated collective farms, or *communes*. The average commune in China supported over 25,000 people. Peasants living in the communes shared possessions and responsibilities to work the land. Residents ate in communal dining rooms, slept in communal dormitories, and raised children in communal nurseries.

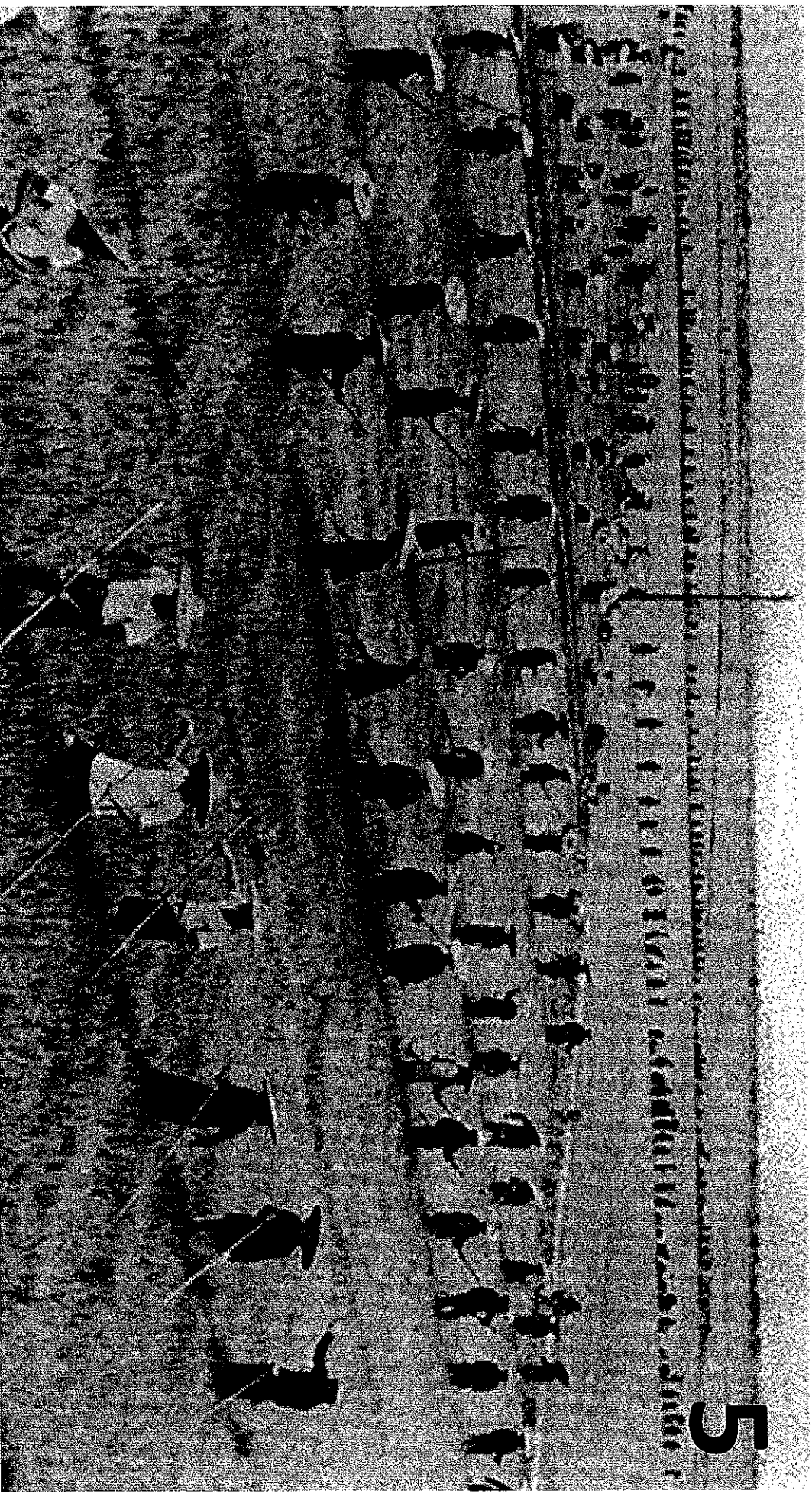


3

Part of the Great Leap Forward involved an industrial revolution in the countryside, where farmers constructed millions of backyard furnaces and then divided their time between tending crops and smelting steel. Gathering fuel to stoke all these furnaces resulted in the loss of at least 10 percent of China's forests. When wood became increasingly scarce, peasants burned their doors, furniture, and even raided cemeteries for coffins.



Rather than mining the metal ore, everyone contributed iron resources, including tools, utensils, and other everyday items. Since the steel was made by hand rather than by machine, it was not durable and had little economic worth.



5

The Chinese government set unrealistic quotas of agricultural production for the communes. Eager to please the government, many farmers lied about how much of a crop was actually produced. The government took the reported crop figure and subtracted the amount workers in the fields would need to survive. Since the majority of the communes reported false numbers, they were left with very little to eat. The crops the government took was either stored in warehouses where it rotted or sold abroad to pay for industrial development.



Mao Zedong expected the communes to harvest enough crops to supply communal mess halls. Exaggerated crop figures and government mismanagement caused food shortages throughout the country. Scholars predict that between 16.5 million and 40 million people died during the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward. As a result of widespread famine, the program was ended in 1961.