

TIMES PAST
1989

The Tiananmen Square Protest

Twenty-five years ago this June, China's rulers sent the army to break up student protests calling for democracy. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were killed in the crackdown.

BY VERONICA MAJEROL AND MERRILL PERLMAN

The 'Tank Man,'
an unarmed civilian who stood up to Chinese army tanks, became a symbol of resistance.

By the time Shao Jiang fled Beijing on June 4, 1989, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Chinese had already been massacred by China's army—mowed down by tanks or shot dead.

Many of them were university students, like Shao, who'd grown frustrated with the Communist state's repressive grip on Chinese life. In mid-May, they began peacefully protesting in Tiananmen Square in China's capital of Beijing. Within six weeks, millions of people across China also had taken to the streets in what became the largest pro-democracy movement in China's history.

But any hopes that the country's leaders might allow political reform or greater personal freedoms ended when the government began a military crackdown that killed scores of people, including three of Shao's friends. Shao, one of the protest

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Student protesters fill Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1989 (above); a soldier confronts a protester in June (below); and the Goddess of Democracy and Freedom



organizers, spent two months in hiding before he was arrested by military police.

"They questioned me around 800 times," says Shao, who served 18 months in prison. He faced years of harassment until Sweden granted him political asylum in 1997.

With the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests approaching this spring, Shao and people around the world are remembering the massacre and trying to make sense of its legacy. The Chinese government, though, is planning no commemorations: It has never formally recognized what happened at Tiananmen and censors Web searches relating to it so thoroughly that younger Chinese today know little about the crackdown.

"I have a bunch of Chinese students in my undergraduate Chinese politics course," says Joseph Fewsmith, a China expert at Boston University, "and most of

them have never heard of" the major figures of the Tiananmen movement.

The spark for the Tiananmen Square protests was the death of reformist leader Hu Yaobang, who was popular among young people. Hu had been forced to "resign" from the Communist Party in 1987, and when he died of a heart attack in April 1989, young Chinese demanded to know why he'd been purged.

The Cold War

Changes in global politics also spurred on China's democracy movement. The 40-year Cold War between the U.S. and its Communist adversaries—led by the Soviet Union and China—was winding down, with tensions easing as a result of arms control and trade agreements, increasing diplomatic contacts, and big changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In fact, the Tiananmen protests might

have petered out had it not been for the news that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev would be visiting Beijing on May 15 for a long-planned meeting to reconcile the two squabbling Communist giants. In his four years in power, Gorbachev had initiated major changes at home known as *perestroika* (free-market reforms) and *glasnost* (more political freedoms)—a last-ditch effort to salvage the Soviet Union, which eventually collapsed in 1991.

Gorbachev's visit spurred on ordinary Chinese: Teachers, doctors, and factory workers in more than 150 cities soon joined the students in their protests against political repression and government corruption.

The government quickly outlawed the demonstrations. But many of the students in Tiananmen went on a hunger strike to call even greater attention to their cause.

Because the usual restrictions on

PETER TURNLEY/CORBIS (PROTESTERS); JACQUES LANSEVIN/ISTOXA/CORBIS (SOLDIER); ERIC BOUVE/ISTOXA/PHO VIA GETTY IMAGES (STATUE)

Timeline CHINA SINCE WWII



1945 Civil War

After WWII, China plunges into civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, backed by the U.S., and Mao Zedong's Communists.

1949 The PRC

Mao establishes the People's Republic of China. Chiang's government, backed by the U.S., flees to Taiwan.

1950s 'Who Lost China?'

Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin blames disloyal U.S. diplomats and State Dept. officials for China's fall to Communism. This kicks off a decade of paranoia in the U.S. known as McCarthyism.

1966-70s Cultural Revolution

Mao calls on young people to revolt against politicians and intellectuals who embrace non-Communist ideas. Thousands die and millions more are persecuted.

1972 Nixon in China

A year after the U.N. kicks out Taiwan in favor of China, Richard Nixon becomes the first U.S. President to visit Communist China.

foreign journalists had been relaxed to spotlight China's reconciliation with the Soviet Union, the world got to see thousands of protesters praising China's rival.

"In the Soviet Union, they have Gorbachev," read one banner. "In China, we have whom?"

Behind the scenes, China's leaders were intensely divided over how to respond. Though some called for dialogue, hardliners backed by China's senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, prevailed, and martial law was declared in parts of Beijing. But the protests continued. The government was further infuriated when the "Goddess of Democracy and Freedom," a 27-foot-tall foam-and-papier-mâché statue resembling the Statue of Liberty and made by student artists, arrived in the square on May 29.

With tensions mounting and local police unable to stop the protests, the government called in the army, the first time since the Communists took power in 1949 (see *Timeline*) that the army had been mobilized for domestic purposes. On June 2, soldiers marched into Tiananmen Square, at first unarmed.

Protesters piled vehicles in the streets

to block them and begged the soldiers not to attack. One woman went from truck to truck to plead with the soldiers: "We believe you have a conscience. You must not crush the movement." Many soldiers joined the protests, and, in a tremendous embarrassment to the government, the army was driven back from the square.

But on the night of June 3, the soldiers returned, this time with clubs. They bludgeoned dozens of protesters, yet the determined crowd drove them back once again.

The next day, the army came back with live ammunition and tanks. Shocked and angry protesters tried blocking them from entering Tiananmen Square. But with orders to "clear the square," soldiers rolled their tanks over the protesters' barricades and opened fire.

'Please Tell the World'

Live coverage of the attack shocked the world: people on bicycles falling over after being shot; old women holding their bloodied heads; people crying out

as soldiers struck them with batons; and everywhere people running.

The army reclaimed the square within 24 hours, destroying protesters' encampments and pulling down the Goddess of Democracy. Witnesses said people trying to flee were shot in the back.

'We need help from abroad, especially from America.'

"Please tell the world," people begged Western reporters. "We need help from abroad, especially America," one student told *The New York Times*.

The U.S. joined the worldwide condemnation of the crackdown. But trying to manage the delicate U.S.-China relationship, President George H.W. Bush used non-inflammatory language. "I deeply deplore the decision to use force against peaceful demonstrators and the consequent loss of life," he said.

On June 5, a man carrying plastic shopping bags became a symbol of resistance. As a line of tanks approached Tiananmen Square, he stepped in front of one of them, and all the tanks stopped. He then waved a bag as if to say "Go away." The lead tank moved left, and he moved left. It moved



A clothing factory in Huaibei in eastern China

1976

Mao to Deng

After Mao dies, moderates, led by Deng Xiaoping, take control. Two years later, Deng begins to modernize the economy.

1989

Tiananmen Square Protest

TODAY

Booming Economy

Four decades after instituting major economic reforms, China becomes the second-largest economy in the world after the U.S. But little progress has been made on political freedom and human rights.

right, and he moved right. The ballet continued for several minutes until some men—whether soldiers or civilians isn't clear—pulled him away.

To this day, no one really knows who he was or what became of him. Some think he was a student; others that he was an ordinary Chinese man who was just fed up. But around the world, Tank Man became an icon of resistance.

Public Executions

The number of people killed in the massacre will probably never be known. China has said it was fewer than 300, a figure universally viewed as too low; other estimates have been as high as 3,000.

As the violence subsided, China's leaders, who hadn't been seen in public for two weeks, emerged from hiding. Hundreds of student dissidents were rounded up. Many were publicly executed, and hundreds of others were thrown in prison. Some escaped to the West.

In the 25 years since Tiananmen, a lot has changed in China, but much has stayed the same. Deng Xiaoping, the Communist leader behind the crackdown, expanded

on his earlier economic reforms—if only as a way to forestall pressure for political freedom. Under his rule in 1992, China announced it would create a “socialist market economy”: private enterprise with continued one-party Communist rule. China's economy took off and in 2010 passed Japan as the world's second-largest economy after the U.S.

But political freedom is still limited. All broadcasting in China is state-controlled, and people who criticize the government face persecution, beatings, and jail time. Though China has more Internet users than any other country, tens of thousands of government censors—the “great firewall”—monitor chat rooms and block websites critical of the government.

Shao, who was imprisoned for Tiananmen, is hopeful that change is on the horizon. Now a human rights researcher in London, he says he's observed encouraging changes in China.

“If you compare the 1980s to today, there are now more rights-conscious people, from scholars to students,” Shao says. “Things will [eventually] change,” he adds, “and after it changes, I can return.” ●

A New Direction?

China has eased its one-child policy. Critics say more reform is needed.

In 1979, China began limiting most couples to one child—a measure to curb the country's exploding population, now at 1.4 billion. The policy has long been seen as a symbol of government repression, with violators undergoing forced abortions and sterilizations, or paying exorbitant fines.

But at a big meeting in November, China's Communist leaders said they would relax the policy. Now if either a husband or wife was an only child, the couple may have more than one child.

Why the change? Aside from being controversial inside and outside China, the one-child policy has caused big problems. Because of a preference for boys in Chinese culture, many couples gave up their girls, creating a gender imbalance that will leave millions of Chinese men without wives. A rapidly aging society, China also won't have enough working-age people to supply its workforce or support the elderly.

With its economy booming, China's leaders also pledged to allow more private investment, moving China even further toward a capitalist system.

But notably absent at the meeting was talk of political reform—a subject that was on the minds of many Chinese leaders before the 1989 Tiananmen protests.

“Today that agenda is largely off the table,” says Joseph Fewsmith, a China expert at Boston University. “And that is the most serious long-term legacy of Tiananmen.” —Veronica Majerol



Chinese families can get a little bigger.