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1989 TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE**TWENTY YEARS AGO THIS SPRING, CHINA'S ARMY FORCED A BLOODY CONFRONTATION AGAINST PEACEFUL STUDENT DEMONSTRATORS**

On May 29, 1989, a 27-foot-tall foam-and-papier-mâché statue appeared in Tiananmen Square, the 100-acre heart of Beijing, China's capital. For more than a month, thousands of college students had occupied the square in defiance of China's Communist government. The towering figure, named the Goddess of Democracy, symbolized the students' goal of forcing the government to loosen its grip on the lives of China's 1.1 billion people.

But to China's repressive rulers, the statue was an insult, perhaps more so because its features were not Chinese. Within days, they sent in army tanks to break up the protest. The result was one of the most violent crackdowns in China's history. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of protesters were killed, and the statue was smashed--along with the hopes of many people across China.

The protest had begun in April. Several thousand students, mourning the death of a progressive leader who had favored democratic reforms, marched through Beijing chanting pro-democracy slogans. Within a week, more than 100,000 people had converged on Tiananmen Square to demand more openness and political freedom. Protests began springing up in other Chinese cities.

The government quickly outlawed the demonstrations, but to little effect. Many of the students in Tiananmen Square went on a hunger strike to call greater attention to their cause. "I don't know exactly what democracy is," a 22-year-old physics student told The New York Times, "but we need more of it."

The protests began at a time when the 40-year Cold War was winding down. Tensions around the world were easing as a result of arms-control and trade agreements between nations. Powerful forces of change were affecting the world's two great Communist powers, the Soviet Union and China.

Gorbachev's Role

The Tiananmen Square protests might have fizzled out had it not been for the visit of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. On May 15, Gorbachev had gone to Beijing. The rulers of the two Communist giants, which had been in a power struggle for years, hoped that talks between the countries could help reconcile their differences.

But Gorbachev's presence also had a larger symbolism. In his four years of power, he had relaxed limits on free speech and opened up the Soviet political system to democratic reforms. His actions had spurred hopes of freedom through much of Eastern Europe, then controlled by the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev's visit seemed to have this effect on ordinary Chinese as well. Teachers, doctors, and factory workers joined the students, complaining about repression and government corruption. The ranks of marchers swelled to more than a million.

Ordinarily, the Chinese imposed harsh restrictions on foreign news coverage. But because controls had been relaxed for Gorbachev's visit, the world got to witness an amazing sight: throngs of Chinese protesters praising their country's rival. "In the Soviet Union, they have Gorbachev," one banner read. "In China, we have whom?"

Behind the scenes, there was an intense struggle among the handful of men who controlled China. How should they respond to the protests? Some called for dialogue. But hardliners backed by China's senior leader, Deng Xiaoping (dung shee-yow-ping), prevailed. Martial law was declared in parts of Beijing. Still, the protests continued--highlighted by the dramatic appearance of the Goddess of Democracy, a gift of student artists, on May 29.

When local police could not stop the protests, the government called in the army. On June 2, troops marched into Tiananmen Square. At first, they were unarmed.

Protesters piled vehicles in the streets to block their advance and begged the soldiers to not attack. "Don't use the People's Army against the people!" was a typical cry.

One woman went from truck to truck to plead with the soldiers. "You are our army. You are our brothers and sisters," she said. "We believe you have a conscience. You must not crush the movement." Indeed, many soldiers joined the protests. In a tremendous embarrassment to the government, the protesters drove the army back from the square.

But the government was not to be deterred. On June 3, the army returned, this time with clubs. Dozens of protesters were beaten before they again drove the soldiers back. The next day, the soldiers were armed with ammunition and tear gas. They were joined by lines of tanks for an attack that rolled over the protesters' barricades.

Images of the attack--broadcast around the world despite government attempts to stop it--were shocking: people on bicycles falling over after being shot by the soldiers; elderly women holding their bloodied heads; people crying out as soldiers struck them with batons. Everywhere, people were running, in many cases only to be cut down by soldiers waiting outside Tiananmen Square.

"Please Tell the World"

The army reclaimed the square within 24 hours, destroying the protesters' encampments and pulling down the Goddess of Democracy. Some people who tried to escape were shot in the back, witnesses said.

Soldiers started bonfires to burn the encampments. For three more days, chaos reigned, with tanks crushing anything and anyone in their path.

"Please tell the world," Chinese citizens begged Western reporters. "Our government is mad," one student told The New York Times. "We need help from abroad, especially America."

America did indeed join the worldwide condemnation of the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. But President George H. W. Bush kept his criticism low-key. Bush had served as the unofficial U.S. Ambassador to China from 1974 to 1975, following President Nixon's visit (see the chronology above). Having had personal experience managing the delicate U.S.-China relationship, Bush thought that the Chinese government could not be pushed too far too fast.

"The Unknown Rebel"

On June 4, in the midst of the attack, a man carrying plastic shopping bags became a symbol of Chinese resistance. As a line of tanks was moving toward Tiananmen Square, he had stepped in front of the lead tank, and all the tanks had stopped. He then waved a shopping bag as if to say, "Go away." The lead tank moved to the left, and he moved in front of it, waving his bag and shouting. The tank moved right, and he moved again. This exchange continued for several minutes, all captured on film. Finally, some men ran in from the curb and hustled him away.

Journalists have tried for years to identify the man, but no one knows who he was. Some think that he was a student, others that he was an ordinary citizen who was just fed up. But around the world, "Tank Man," or "the Unknown Rebel," became a symbol of freedom.

The number of people who died in the four-day attack will probably never be known. The Chinese government said that it was fewer than 300, a number that has been widely discredited. Other estimates go as high as 3,000.

As the violence began to subside, China's leaders, who had not been seen in public for two weeks, emerged from hiding. Then a new crackdown began. Hundreds of students were rounded up and marched before the Public, their heads hanging low. Many were publicly executed, and hundreds of others were thrown in prison. Some escaped to the West and sought political asylum.

Economic Reform

Twenty years later, what has changed in China? After the Tiananmen Square massacre, Deng Xiaoping began to loosen government control of the economy. But today, there is still little political freedom. Andrew J. Nathan, a China expert at Columbia University in New York City, says that most Chinese are no longer clamoring for the freedoms the 1989 protesters sought. Those values, he says, "have been basically rejected."

Why? In large part, because of increased economic opportunities. "The Communist Party found that its only hope to stay in power was to generate jobs and income growth," says Nicholas D. Kristof, who covered Tiananmen Square for The New York Times. "The bottom line for the Party is: We'll stay in power, and anything else is negotiable."

Think About It

1. What does Kristof mean by "anything else is negotiable"?

2. Should President George H. W. Bush have been more critical of China's actions? Why or why not?

Words to Know

- asylum (In): protection from arrest given to political refugees.
- Cold War (1945-1991) (n): a period of intense rivalry between the U.S. and the Communist Soviet Union, and its allies.
- Communist (adj): a type of government in which a single authoritarian party controls all aspects of the economy and greatly limits personal freedoms.
- converge (v): come together.
- martial law (n): control administered by military forces. put into effect by a government in a perceived emergency.

CHRONOLOGY: CHINA SINCE WORLD WAR II

1945 CIVIL WAR

After its defeat in World War II (1939-1945), Japan withdraws from China, which it had invaded in 1937. A civil war erupts in China between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists.

1949 THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

Mao proclaims the People's Republic of China. Chiang's Nationalist government, backed by the U.S., flees to the island of Taiwan. The U.S. and United Nations (UN) recognize Taiwan as China.

1966 CULTURAL REVOLUTION

His power weakening, Mao orders the masses to revolt against "enemies" of Communism, including teachers and intellectuals. Untold thousands die, and millions more are persecuted over the next decade.

1972 NIXON IN CHINA

A year after the UN ejects Taiwan in favor of Communist China, Richard M. Nixon becomes the first U.S. President to visit Beijing, re-establishing contact after a 23-year gap.

1976 FROM MAO TO DENG

Mao dies. Moderates led by Deng Xiaoping take control of China and begin to modernize the economy.

1989 TIANANMEN SQUARE PROTESTS

1990s BOOMING ECONOMY

The government continues to loosen its control of the economy, and China becomes a global economic powerhouse. But there is little progress on political freedom and human rights.

MARCH 2008 TIBET CRACKDOWN

Police clash with Tibetan monks during protests against China's half-century rule over Tibet. Eighteen people die and hundreds of others are injured.

AUGUST 2008 BEIJING OLYMPICS

China hosts its first Olympic Games. The event showcases China's emergence as a world power, but the torch relay is marked by worldwide protests over China's human-rights record.

BOOM TO BUST?

With the world's economy in recession, China's economy is stalling as a result of slowing demand for its products. China's leaders worry about unrest as thousands, maybe millions, of people lose their jobs.

This article was adapted from an article by Merrill Pearlman that appeared in the January 12, 2009, issue of The New York Times Upfront.

PHOTO (COLOR): For left: the Goddess of Democracy, sculpted by student artists for the Tiananmen demonstrations. Left: Chinese soldiers confront student protesters. Below: the still-unidentified "Tank Man," who became a worldwide symbol of Chinese resistance after the army's crackdown.

MAP: CHINA

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): 1945

PHOTO (COLOR): 1949

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): 1966

PHOTO (COLOR): 1972

PHOTO (COLOR): 1989

PHOTO (COLOR): 1990s

PHOTO (COLOR): MARCH 2008

PHOTO (COLOR): AUGUST 2008

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