

# Tiananmen Square Protests in 1989:

## A massacre of communist authoritarian China



The Tiananmen Square protests were student-led demonstrations calling for democracy, free speech and a free press in China. They were halted in a bloody crackdown, known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, by the Chinese government on June 4 and 5, 1989.

Pro-democracy protesters, mostly students, initially marched through Beijing to Tiananmen Square following the death of Hu Yaobang. Hu, a former Communist Party leader, had worked to introduce democratic reform in China. In mourning Hu, the students called for a more open, democratic government. Eventually thousands of people joined the students in Tiananmen Square, with the protest's numbers increasing to the tens of thousands by mid-May.

At issue was a frustration with the limits on political freedom in the country—given its one-party form of government, with the Communist Party holding sway—and ongoing economic troubles. Although China's government had instituted a number of reforms in the 1980s that established a limited form of capitalism in the country, the poor and working-class Chinese still faced significant challenges, including lack of jobs and increased poverty.

The students also argued that China's educational system did not adequately prepare them for an economic system with elements of free-market capitalism.

Some leaders within China's government were sympathetic to the protesters' cause, while others saw them as a political threat.

## **Martial Law Declared**

On May 13, a number of the student protesters initiated a hunger strike, which inspired other similar strikes and protests across China. As the movement grew, the Chinese government became increasingly uncomfortable with the protests, particularly as they disrupted a visit by Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union on May 15.

A welcome ceremony for Gorbachev originally scheduled for Tiananmen Square was instead held at the airport, although otherwise his visit passed without incident. Even so, feeling the demonstrations needed to be curtailed, the Chinese government declared martial law on May 20 and 250,000 troops entered Beijing.

By the end of May more than one million protesters had gathered in Tiananmen Square. They held daily marches and vigils, and images of the events were transmitted by media organizations to audiences in the United States and Europe.

## **Tiananmen Square Massacre**



While the initial presence of the military failed to quell the protests, the Chinese authorities decided to increase their aggression. At 1 a.m. on June 4, Chinese soldiers and police stormed Tiananmen Square, firing live rounds into the crowd.

Although thousands of protesters simply tried to escape, others fought back, stoning the attacking troops and setting fire to military vehicles. Reporters and Western diplomats there that day estimated that hundreds to thousands of protesters were killed in the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and as many as 10,000 were arrested.

Leaders worldwide, including Gorbachev, condemned the military action and, less than a month later, the United States Congress voted to impose economic sanctions against China, citing human rights violations.

### **Tiananmen Square Tank Man**



The image of an unidentified man standing alone in defiance and blocking a column of Chinese tanks on June 5 remains a lasting one for much of the world of the events. He is now renowned as the “Tiananmen Square Tank Man.”

### **Tiananmen Square History**

While the events of 1989 now dominate global coverage of Tiananmen Square, the site has long been an important crossroads within the city of Beijing. It was named for the nearby Tiananmen, or “Gate of Heavenly Peace,” and marks the entrance to the so-called Forbidden City. The location took on added significance as China shifted from an emperor-led political culture to one that was governed by the Communist Party.

The Qing dynasty was the last dynastic power to rule China. It governed the country from the middle of the 1600s until 1912.

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911-1912 resulted in the overthrow of the Qings and led to the establishment of the Republic of China. The early years of the Republic were marked by political turmoil, however, and the country fell under Japanese rule during the lead-up to World War II.

During the Japanese occupation, some 20 million Chinese were killed.

## **National Day**

As Japan faded in the aftermath of Second World War, China entered a period of civil war. At the end of the civil war, in 1949, the Communist Party had gained control of most of mainland China. They established the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong.

A celebration to honor the occasion was held in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949. More than one million Chinese people attended. This celebration came to be known as National Day, and it is still observed annually on that date, with the largest events set in the square.

Mao Zedong, considered the founding father of the People's Republic of China, is interred at Tiananmen Square, in a mausoleum on the plaza.

## **Tiananmen Square Censorship**

Today the June 4 and 5 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre continue to resonate worldwide. In 1999, the U.S. National Security Archive released Tiananmen Square, 1989: The Declassified History. The document includes U.S. State Department files related to the protests and subsequent military crackdown.

It wasn't until 2006 that Yu Dongyue, a journalist arrested for throwing paint at a portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square during the protests, was released from prison.

On the 20th anniversary of the massacre, the Chinese government prohibited journalists from entering Tiananmen Square and blocked access to foreign news sites and social media. Still, thousands attended a memorial vigil in honor of the anniversary in Hong Kong. Ahead of the 30 anniversary of the event, in 2019, New York-based Human Rights Watch published a report detailing reported arrests in China of those associated with the protests.

The 1989 events at Tiananmen Square have also been highly censored on China's tightly-controlled internet. According to a survey released in 2019 by the University of Toronto and the University of Hong Kong, more than 3,200 words referencing the massacre had been censored.

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## Citation Information

Article Title: Tiananmen Square Protests

Author: History.com Editors

Website Name: HISTORY

URL <https://www.history.com/topics/china/tiananmen-square>

Access Date: June 4, 2020

Publisher: A&E Television Networks

Last Updated: May 11, 2020

Original Published Date: May 31, 2019