



## **Remembering Tiananmen 37 Years Later: A Case Study in Chinese Communist Party Narrative Control**

**Dr. Steven Smith**

June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2026, marks the 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the brutal People's Liberation Army (PLA) crushing of unarmed pro-democracy protestors in what is remembered internationally as the Tiananmen Massacre. Commemoration of the events surrounding Tiananmen is important not only to remember the courage of those everyday Chinese people who sought a greater say in their own country's future but also as an exercise to maintain the factual historical record given Chinese Communist Party (CCP) efforts to reclaim the narrative surrounding the events that took place between April and June, 1989. Indeed, the anniversary of Tiananmen provides an excellent opportunity to examine the CCP's attempts to flip the Tiananmen narrative in its own favor.

### **A Brief History of the Tiananmen Protest Movement and the Culminating Massacre**

In mid-April, 1989, small numbers of PRC university students began spontaneously convening in Tiananmen Square to commemorate the passing of former CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang. Hu had widely been seen as an economic and political reformer until the abrupt dismissal from his leadership position in 1997 by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping with the backing of hardline CCP elders. Upon news of Hu's death, small groups of Chinese university students began converging at the Monument to the People's Heroes to lay flowers in memory of a leader who had come to represent the hopes of reform-minded Chinese across the country. In the days and weeks that followed, tens of thousands of students, workers, and everyday people joined the groundswell of commemoration that gradually turned into heady displays of free speech and complaint regarding a myriad of grievances against the CCP that included Party corruption, rampant inflation, and—increasingly—the lack of opportunity to participate in the country's governance.

For several weeks, the CCP appeared undecided about how best to deal with the mounting protests. This indecision was made more complicated by the presence of the world press corps that had converged on Beijing to report on the May 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> visit of Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's visit was the first leadership meeting between the Soviet Union and the PRC in the three decades since the Sino-Soviet split that occurred in the 1950s. Tiananmen protestors viewed the presence of the international press corps and the arrival of Gorbachev as a prime opportunity to air their grievances to a larger audience. Their continued

presence on Tiananmen Square disrupted CCP plans for Gorbachev visit-related events to be held at the Great Hall of the People and was viewed by CCP elders as a huge embarrassment. Once the Gorbachev visit was concluded, internal wrangling commenced in earnest within the CCP regarding how to put an end to the demonstrations. As for the international press corps, they didn't depart when Gorbachev left. Instead, they largely remained on scene to cover the events unfolding in Tiananmen Square that now included hunger strikes, bullhorn speeches calling for democratic reforms, and ever-larger numbers of protestors.

Hu Yaobang's successor as CCP General Secretary was Zhao Ziyang, appointed by Deng Xiaoping to reign in some of Hu's reform efforts and restore CCP control of the galloping economy while curbing demands for further political reforms. In apparent acknowledgement of growing anger within the CCP towards the protestors and the pending dangers they faced from the CCP, on May 19<sup>th</sup>, Zhao tearfully urged the protestors to engage in negotiations with the Party and to end their presence on the square. Protest leaders ignored Zhao's pleas. Consequently, PRC Premier Li Peng declared martial law on May 20<sup>th</sup> and the CCP began moving security and PLA forces into place to forcefully end the protests and clear the square. The imposition of martial law further galvanized protestors who turned out in even greater numbers over the next two weeks. Images of the protests during this period show huge crowds, and the addition of a protestor-constructed large "Goddess of Democracy" statue reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty. Party hardliners—some of whom had been violently purged by Red Guard students during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)—viewed uncontrollable students as an unacceptable threat to the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Once Deng and the Party made the final decision to crush the protests, Zhao Ziyang was never seen in public again. He was eventually purged from his Party leadership position and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. Li Peng served as Premier until 1998, but his role in the coming days secured his lasting reputation in China and around the world as the "Butcher of Beijing."

The Tiananmen protest movement came to a bloody conclusion on the evening of June 3<sup>rd</sup> and the early morning of June 4<sup>th</sup> when armored personnel carriers belonging to the People's Liberation Army began rumbling toward the square. The PLA reportedly warned students they would have one hour to clear the square or they would face the consequences. Witnesses report the PLA's armored vehicles waited only five minutes before they entered Tiananmen Square, crushing unarmed protestors under their treads and shooting automatic weapons into the crowds of civilians. Official PRC statements about the death toll say 200 civilians were killed and approximately 7,000 wounded. Declassified cables from U.K. and other foreign diplomatic sources place the death toll estimates closer to 10,000 people killed with many thousands more wounded.

### **The CCP Flips the Script on Tiananmen Events**

Wide discrepancy between official PRC casualty counts and those of the international press and the international diplomatic corps were only the beginning of the CCP's decades' long effort to regain control of the Tiananmen narrative. In the weeks and months following the massacre, the international community reacted to Tiananmen with horror at the images and accounts broadcast around the world. With little ability to control the international reaction, the CCP turned its attention to controlling the domestic information environment. The CCP justified unleashing the PLA on the protestors as necessary to restoring order, protecting the people,

ending turmoil, and stopping counter-revolutionary elements. It further claimed the protests had been manipulated by “foreign hostile forces,” invoking the possibility of malign foreign government involvement in the movement. The CCP justified its actions as defensive and provoked by the protestors who were seeking to overthrow the government, something that would unleash further chaos on the country.

However, given the wide-spread domestic awareness of the recent events, this CCP spin on events could only ever be partially successful. Consequently, the CCP commenced a longer-term suppression and censorship effort to gradually erase the events from popular memory with the help of time. While the living generation of Chinese would hold fading first-person memories of Tiananmen, future generations would have much less opportunity to learn about the massacre enacted by the CCP and its armed wing, the PLA. Media was forbidden from mentioning the massacre, it was outlawed in school curricula, prevented from inclusion in textbooks, and purged from any public commemoration. International commemorations of the massacre were thoroughly censored inside China. As internet access spread throughout the PRC, censorship extended to the various creative ways Chinese netizens searched for related information online and beyond the “great firewall.” The CCP paired Tiananmen censorship with a concerted effort to focus popular attention on the PRC’s economic development needs and positive economic growth narratives that reinforced the CCP’s image as the responsible, legitimate, protector of China. These pervasive and persistent erasure and suppression efforts were largely successful over the ensuing three decades. Anecdotal experiences of foreigners living in China often include stories about otherwise well-educated and informed Chinese people never having seen iconic Tiananmen-related images like “tank man” or the “Goddess of Democracy” and having very little knowledge about the 1989 protest movement other than “something bad happened.” In Xi Jinping’s PRC, it is a matter of “historical nihilism” to dwell on any aspect of Chinese history that does not conform to the official Party line.

The CCP’s efforts to rewrite Tiananmen history have apparently recently entered a new phase. Instead of suppressing memory through censorship, it has now undertaken an effort to reimagine the events altogether. In 2022, CCP propaganda images began portraying the PLA soldiers as the real heroes of Tiananmen. The protestors are not only labeled “counter-revolutionaries,” but now they are also “terrorists.” It was the PLA soldiers who “sacrificed” to save the country from these enemies of the nation. This narrative is directed at the domestic population and apparently marks a new confidence that decades of censorship have resulted in a blank slate upon which the CCP can start constructing a new collective national memory and narrative uncontested by widespread recollection of the “1989 incident.” Instead of intentionally erasing these events, the CCP now says “never forget” their version of events.

The new Communist Party Narrative  
On the Tiananmen Massacre



Left image above: “We salute the sacrifices of the People’s Liberation Soldiers during the counter-revolutionary rebellion of 1989.” Note the white doves with olive sprigs flying overhead denoting the soldier’s efforts to restore “peace.” Right image above: “Never forget the sacrifices of the PLA heroes who defended the country against terrorism during the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident.” The obelisk is the Monument to the Heroes of the Revolution. It is ironically the site where student protesters originally gathered to lay flowers in memory of former CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang in April 1989.

Despite such efforts, the challenge for the CCP will continue to be the shared collective memory of the international community where detailed accounts of the massacre remain well-documented and accessible. Despite the nearly four decades of intervening censorship and recent attempts to rewrite the narrative, the brutal response of the Chinese Communist Party against its own population's efforts to have a greater say in their own governance will continue to inform international perspectives of the Party, the nature of the regime, and its willingness to commit atrocities to remain in power. While the CCP encourages its people to "never forget" its chosen narrative surrounding the Tiananmen massacre, CASI too encourages never forgetting the well-documented actual history and lasting lessons of Tiananmen.

For more on this subject, watch CASI's video on Tiananmen Square from Mr. Ken Allen who was there, on the ground, in Beijing, as the U.S. Assistant Air Attaché at: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3051566/competition-with-china-the-tiananmen-square-crisis/>

You can also listen to the History of China Podcast for a recounting of the documents available on the matter at: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-history-of-china/id741606139?i=1000657714548>

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