

INJURIOUS EXPLOITATION: THE EFFECTS OF THE SINO-SOVIET SUMMIT ON THE 1989  
TIANANMEN SQUARE PROTESTS

Andrew Lewis

History 586

Professor Kristin Mulready-Stone

December 13, 2011

© 2009, Andrew Lewis

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This essay contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited.

## Abstract

The disruption of the Sino-Soviet Summit was a significant, contributing factor in the violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. The summit was a landmark political event for the People's Republic of China (PRC), attracting worldwide media attention to Beijing. This presented a unique opportunity to show that China's brand of socialism was healthy and that the country was ready to solidify its improving relationship with the Soviet Union. Despite the advice of Chinese intellectuals and governmental threats, the students made a conscious decision to exploit, and thereby disrupt, the summit. The demonstration completely overshadowed the summit and created an international perception of the Chinese government that called into doubt its very sovereignty. Government leaders were humiliated on the world stage. This humiliation contributed to the decision to institute martial law, which created an increasingly volatile atmosphere in Beijing. Paranoid of potential protester violence created by martial law, the government ordered troops to clear the Square. In doing so, thousands of Chinese civilians were killed, many of them students, resulting in one of the greatest tragedies in the history of modern China.

## INJURIOUS EXPLOITATION: THE EFFECTS OF THE SINO-SOVIET SUMMIT ON THE 1989 TIANANMEN SQUARE PROTESTS

Beginning in 1960 and lasting nearly three decades, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union was filled with tension. Although differences between the Soviet Union and the PRC were mainly abstract in nature, having to do with varying interpretations of Marxist ideologies, their effects were concrete. The absence of diplomatic relations between the two premier Marxist states was a three-decade embarrassment to Marxism itself. Because of this, Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in the spring of 1989, the first visit to China by a Soviet head of state since 1959, presented the PRC and the Soviet Union with profound opportunities. The two states could work towards resuming diplomatic relations on a practical level. On a more symbolic level, the meeting would help to dispel the notion that Marxism was ill. Reporters from across the globe arrived in China, expecting to cover a shining achievement for the Soviet Union, the PRC and Marxist ideology. Upon arriving in China, however, media outlets stumbled upon civil unrest, which would eventually lead to one of the greatest tragedies in the history of modern China.<sup>1</sup>

For weeks prior to the event, hundreds of thousands of protesters, comprised primarily of students, had flooded Tiananmen Square, the symbolic center of China. Students protested for democratic reforms, not unlike those being instituted by Gorbachev. The anticipation of Gorbachev's arrival, and the inherent media attention which would

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "China as a Factor in the Collapse of the Soviet Empire," *Political Science Quarterly*, (Winter 1995): 501.

accompany it, boosted the students' resolve. The increase in determination manifested itself in a highly publicized hunger strike, beginning less than three days prior to the summit.<sup>2</sup> The general consensus among the student leaders was that Western media coverage of such domestic Chinese unrest would pressure the PRC to agree to reforms. The student leaders, though, were incorrect. While coverage of the protests added pressure to the PRC, the effects of the pressure were not what the protesters expected. Indeed, the exploitation of the Sino-Soviet Summit was detrimental to the protesters' objectives, because it humiliated the PRC on the world stage, thereby contributing to the violence with which the government eventually ended the protest.

The Sino-Soviet Split originated in 1959, when Mao denounced the post-Stalinist policies enacted by Nikita Khrushchev, the premier of the USSR. After Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev had enacted policies in order to distinguish himself from Stalin, whose legacy had become tarnished at the end of his rule. Specifically, Khrushchev abandoned Stalin's highly confrontational foreign policy, in favor of a "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist West. The new policies, however, elicited dissatisfaction in both Beijing and Moscow. The ideological rift between the two states evolved into direct political conflicts when Mao criticized Khrushchev's Western foreign policy, which Mao thought should be characterized by "more violence," and "more pressure," like that of Stalin's.<sup>3</sup>

When Leonid Brezhnev became the Soviet Premier in 1964, Mao, unimpressed with the new Soviet foreign policy, deemed it "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev."<sup>4</sup> In the

---

<sup>2</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, "Political Developments in the Sino-Soviet Bloc," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 336 (1961): 46.

decades that followed, the Sino-Soviet relationship would be characterized by suspicion, distrust and indirect conflicts with one another all over the Communist world. The world's most prominent Marxist states were without meaningful relations.

Nearly 30 years after the Sino-Soviet schism, China faced domestic unrest. Citizens, especially intellectuals, were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the state's social conditions: unemployment was high, state assistance was unreliable and corruption within the government seemed pervasive. Protesting students' main concern was not only fixing these problems, but saving China in general.<sup>5</sup> When Hu Yaobang, a reformist government official ousted in 1986, died in the spring of 1989, students flooded into Tiananmen Square to mourn his death. The purpose of the mass public gathering quickly evolved into something greater than a mere opportunity to mourn the death of a political leader. In the proceeding weeks, hundreds of thousands of intellectuals and workers gathered in the Square to demand reform and social justice from their government.<sup>6</sup>

Hu's death and the subsequent protests could not have come at a worse time for the PRC. Gorbachev arrived exactly one month after the announcement of Hu's death. During that month, protesters had become increasingly organized while their sheer numbers swelled. Leadership was selected and demonstrations were planned. On May 15, 1989, a Soviet premier arrived in China for the first time in decades. Waiting for him in Tiananmen Square were 150,000 protesters.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lowenthal, "Russia and China: Controlled Conflict," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1971): 512.

<sup>5</sup> "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," VHS. Directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton. San Francisco: NAATA Distribution, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Zhou He, *Mass Media and Tiananmen Square* (Commack: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 1996), 53.

It is difficult to give a traditional review of the literature because relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the summit. Other aspects of the protest, like the students' logistical struggles or the role the media played, have been analyzed in depth, but the summit remains relatively unanalyzed. There are two types of literature in relation to the subject. The first type consists of books on the Tiananmen Square protests at large, which give a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, necessitating that some attention be paid to the summit. The second consists of articles that are focused on a certain aspect of the protest. These articles may or may not comment on the summit, as their scope is relatively narrower. Both types are present in the following examples.

The first of these sources is Timothy Brook's *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*. Brook devotes considerable attention to the subject of the summit. He asserts that the students knew that the government "could not indulge in a bloody repression with Gorbachev on his way."<sup>8</sup> The potential public relations backlash left the PRC unable to suppress the demonstration. In light of the protesters' temporary invulnerability, the students began the hunger strike, a move which Brook refers to as "brilliant."<sup>9</sup> While his assessment of the intelligence behind the hunger strike is debatable, Brook offers a poignant thought regarding the effect of the hunger strike, claiming that the strike destroyed any possibility of compromise. The government, Brook argues, had few choices other than submission – "A position no ruling clique likes to be in."<sup>10</sup> Beyond this, Brook makes no comment on the merits of the students' efforts related to the summit.

---

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Craig Calhoun offers a similar perspective in *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*, in which he describes the timing of Gorbachev's visit as "felicitous" for the students.<sup>11</sup> Like Brook, Calhoun emphasizes the increased media attention and thus, the students' ephemeral invincibility that accompanied Gorbachev's arrival. In addition, Calhoun offers the perspective of student Shen Tong, who tried to rally the protesters to leave the Square, so as not to disrupt the important political event. He cites Shen's failure to persuade the students as evidence of the "little discipline" that characterized the movement as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Calhoun closes his analysis of Gorbachev and the summit by stating that, "for better or worse" the summit had been disrupted, and offers no other judgment.<sup>13</sup>

In his essay, *The Democratic Movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and Failure*, Tianjian Shi attempts to find the reasons for the protest's eventual failure. Shi lists a number of reasons, none of which had to do, specifically, with the students' decision to exploit the opportunities presented by the summit. Eventually, Shi attributes the protest's failure to the inability of the students and intellectuals to effectively incorporate the rural population in the movement. The only attention Shi pays to the summit has to do with its effect on General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's decision to delay ending the protest. Again, Shi argues that the significance of the relationship between the hunger strike and the summit was a clever tool utilized by the students and nothing more.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Calhoun, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 69.



In his essay, *Aspects of Beijing's Crisis Management: The Tiananmen Square Demonstration*, Alan P. Liu devotes the majority of his effort to critically analyzing the PRC's attempt to end the demonstrations. In doing so, he devotes considerable attention to the summit. He maintains that in the weeks prior to Gorbachev's visit, Zhao and Premier Li Peng spent time with government workers, trying to "dissuade them from joining the students and appeal to their patriotism in not demonstrating during the Soviet leader's visit."<sup>15</sup> In addition, Liu comments on the general ineffectiveness of Zhao and Li's efforts. Liu asserts that the PRC's attempt to quell the protests in light of the summit were "doomed from the start."<sup>16</sup> Liu, then, contributes substantially to the historiographical discussion by pointing out that the PRC tried to suppress the protests due to the proximity of the summit and ultimately failed.

Because of the focus on the protests themselves and the subsequent violent government crackdown, the Sino-Soviet Summit has received less attention than it otherwise would have. Scholars treat the summit not as an end in and of itself, but as a means to an end, a tool used by the protesters so that they might achieve their goal. This treatment, thus, results in little collective analysis focused on the summit's effect on the general protest. This lack of scholarship is a unique phenomenon. The Sino-Soviet Summit was among the most important political developments in China in decades, but because it happened in the shadow of the Tiananmen Square Protests, it has been relatively neglected.

---

<sup>14</sup> Tianjin Shi, "The Democratic Movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and Failure," *Asian Survey* 30 (1990): 1199.

<sup>15</sup> Alan P. L. Liu, "Aspects of Beijing's Crisis Management: The Tiananmen Square Demonstration," *Asian Survey* 30 (1990): 515-516.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The significance of the summit cannot be overstated. The lack of diplomatic communication between the PRC and the Soviet Union contributed to the importance of the summit, but the summit also had more concrete purposes. Zhao Ziyang and Gorbachev spent much of their time focusing on the question of socialist reform. Zhao emphasized that socialism had entered a “crucial period” across the Marxist world.<sup>17</sup> Zhao’s analysis is not surprising when one considers that hundreds of thousands of protesters littered Tiananmen Square calling for an end to socialism, and that the Soviet Union was undergoing a period of transformation in the form of glasnost and perestroika.

Both states conceded that reform was necessary. The Soviet Union had initiated its dual principles of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reform), and the PRC had “conducted economic reform for ten years.”<sup>18</sup> General Secretary Zhao, though, maintained that the concerns people had about socialism were unfair for two reasons. The first was their lack of understanding of “the basic historical fact that countries which have established a socialist system through revolution were not the most developed countries in the first place.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Zhao asserts that expectations for these struggling socialist regimes were too high, due to the inherent handicap of their origins of underdevelopment. The second reason, Zhao explained, was that China was “not experienced in how to build socialism.”<sup>20</sup> He concedes that the PRC had made the “mistake of staying in a rut” for too long.<sup>21</sup> Zhao

---

<sup>17</sup> FBIS, “Zhao Ziyang Meets Mikhail Gorbachev,” 17 May 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

concludes that the “young people’s” concerns were due to manmade error, and the principles of socialism were not at fault. In this sense, the summit could be interpreted as an effort by two governments facing domestic unrest to defend themselves against the specter of democracy.

Before one can prove that the disruption of the summit was detrimental to the protest’s cause, it is first necessary to prove several of the argument’s premises. Specifically, it is essential to establish that the protesters made a conscious effort to disrupt the summit, and that the PRC took the disruption of the summit into consideration when cracking down on the protest. In order to determine the motives of the student protesters, one can use a number of tools, the first of which is the examination of the proceedings of the protest itself.

There were a number of demonstrations the protesters had planned throughout the month prior to Gorbachev’s arrival. These events were designed with the intention of fueling the protest and maintaining momentum. The bicycle demonstrations are an example of these events. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, a group of ten thousand people, consisting mostly of students,<sup>22</sup> took to the streets on bicycles in order to advocate freedom of the press and condemn the state-controlled newspaper, *The People’s Daily*, which was a government mouthpiece.<sup>23</sup> Because the bicycle demonstration began in such close proximity to Gorbachev’s arrival, it is clear that the protesters had no intention of curtailing the protest’s momentum, for the sake of the summit. If protesters were concerned with jeopardizing the success of the summit, they would have delayed or canceled the demonstrations. Instead,

---

<sup>22</sup> Tony Saich, editor, *The Chinese People’s Movement: Perspectives on Spring 1989* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 91.

<sup>23</sup> Zhou He, 2.

their actions prove they were unwilling to sacrifice their own interests for the success of the summit.

On May 13, 1989, just two days prior to the Soviet Premier's arrival, protesters began a hunger strike. An article printed at Tiananmen Square in the *Xinwen Daobao* (News express), identifies two main goals of the hunger strike. The first is for the government to hold "concrete and substantial dialogues" with protesters.<sup>24</sup> The second called for the government to give the movement proper attention, including a "correct name, a fair and unbiased assessment, and should affirm that [it] is a patriotic and democratic students' movement."<sup>25</sup> The reason for the students' emphasis on the movement getting a proper name may seem semantics-driven, but students were insistent that their demonstration be perceived as a peaceful protest, rather than marginalized as an extreme, "chaotic disturbance."<sup>26</sup> The students understood that foreign and domestic audiences would have little sympathy for a movement labeled as an unruly mob. Thus, the protesters were aware of the possibility that their demonstration may be labeled as chaotic, especially in light of the summit.<sup>27</sup>

Students recognized the opportunity presented to them by the approaching summit, and intended to take full advantage of Gorbachev's presence. In order to accomplish this, protest leaders planned on exploiting the swelled media presence in Beijing for the summit. Further, protesters aimed to gain the attention of Gorbachev himself. Indeed, just hours

---

<sup>24</sup> "Hunger Strike Announcement," *Xinwen Daobao*, May 12, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Marc Lambert, Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan, *Beijing Spring: Confrontation and Conflict, The Basic Documents* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 258.

after the hunger strike began, before the participants had missed a single meal, students collected signatures in order to petition for a dialogue with the Soviet Premier.<sup>28</sup> The students, then, were using the hunger strike in order to attract Gorbachev's attention and thus were making a direct attempt to interrupt Gorbachev's visit. The Chinese government saw through the students' bold strategy

On the evening of May 13, Yan Mingfu, chief of the government's United Front Work Department,<sup>29</sup> met with a number of student representatives in order to hear their demands and to offer the students some advice of his own. According to Yan, the government was forming "workable strategies and measures for resolving the issues," but reminded the students not to "expect results overnight."<sup>30</sup> He was generally receptive to the student sentiments, calling them "perfectly understandable" and "normal."<sup>31</sup> Yan assured the students that he would submit their requests through the proper channels.

A shift in tone, however, occurred when Yan, speaking on behalf of the PRC, commented on the students' overarching strategy. He was especially critical of the hunger strike, which had begun earlier that evening, arguing that it "accomplishes nothing."<sup>32</sup>

Whether or not this was actually a reason for the government's position is unknown, but

---

<sup>28</sup> State Security Ministry, "On May 13 Peking University students swear an oath to go on hunger strike," in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 157.

<sup>29</sup> The United Front Work Department was a preexisting government agency that managed relations with elite non-Communist Party individuals and organizations. Its headquarters is located at Tiananmen Square.

<sup>30</sup> Party Central United Front Work Department, "Director Yan Mingfu meets with a group of college teachers and student representatives from AFS and other groups," in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 159.

<sup>31</sup> State Security Ministry, "On May 13 Peking University students swear an oath to go on hunger strike," 158.

<sup>32</sup> Party Central United Front Work Department, "Director Yan Mingfu meets with a group of college teachers and student representatives from AFS and other groups," 159.

Yan's chief concern with the hunger strike was not that it was merely a misguided effort, that it "accomplished nothing." If it were, Yan would not have ended the meeting in the manner he did.

Indeed, the government's actual apprehension became apparent when Yan concluded the meeting by speaking about the hunger strike's timing. Yan ordered the students to remember that "at a time when the leaders of China and the Soviet Union are about to hold a summit meeting," they should be "particularly concerned about upholding the dignity of the nation."<sup>33</sup> If the students failed to act in accordance with this advice, Yan maintained, they would "lose the sympathy and support of the people," thereby damaging the demonstration's own ends.<sup>34</sup> Yan's final suggestion, that those present at the meeting should "talk some sense into the students who are hunger striking in the Square," serves both as a succinct summation of his argument and as a tacit threat to the students.<sup>35</sup>

The dialogue on the evening of May 13 is one of the most significant events of the entire demonstration. Yan's counsel revealed the two chief sources of the PRC's anxiety. First, by mentioning the summit, Yan displayed the PRC's concern about a student-caused disruption of Gorbachev's visit and the potential detrimental consequences such a disruption would have on the high-stakes summit. After all, a Soviet premier had not set foot on Chinese soil in decades. A protest aimed at showcasing nationwide discontent certainly had the possibility of disrupting the long-anticipated visit and the Sino-Soviet diplomatic upswing enjoyed throughout the 1980s.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

The PRC's second source of anxiety was the protest's potential damage to the "dignity of the nation," and the international perception of China.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the summit was an opportunity for China to display to the world its renewed diplomatic friendship with the Soviet Union, its desertion of antiquated Maoist policies and its leap into modernity. Media members from across the world had descended upon Beijing, expecting to report on a positive step in the diplomatic reunification of the Soviet Union and China. The presence of hundreds of thousands of protesting students, a considerable number of whom were purposely starving themselves, was the antithesis of the image the PRC had envisioned. What was supposed to be a proud day for the PRC was turning into a public relations nightmare. Yan, the chief of the Party's United Front Work Department, warned the students, but his warning fell on deaf ears. As the summit neared, the hunger strike continued.

Two days later, on May 14, a group of 12 intellectuals attempted to act as mediators between the demonstrators and the government. The intellectuals, led by Dai Qing, were natural intermediaries because both the government and the protesters respected them. In addition, both sides believed the intellectuals to be unbiased because while the intellectuals genuinely advocated the protests' goals, they disapproved of the means by which the students set out to achieve them. Dai first met with the students, heard their requests and reported them to Yan Mingfu. The demands called for the PRC to recognize the protest as "patriotic, democratic" and "legal."<sup>37</sup> In return, the students agreed to evacuate the Square.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Letters and Visits Bureau of Party Central and the State Council, "Excerpt from twelve scholars' and writers' discussion meeting with student representatives" in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 166.

When Dai expressed the students' demands to him, Yan dismissed the goals, calling them "absolutely unworkable."<sup>38</sup>

Without positive news from the government, Dai returned to the Square to address the students. She first praised them for their "historic achievement," but offered advice that echoed that of Yan's, given the previous day.<sup>39</sup> Citing "the long-term interest of China's reforms," and the prevention of "incidents that will only hurt [the students] and comfort [their] enemies" as reasons, Dai urged the students to reconsider their approach.<sup>40</sup> Further though, Dai urged the protesters "to honor the highest ideals of [the] movement by making a temporary withdrawal from the Square," so that "the Sino-Soviet Summit will proceed smoothly."<sup>41</sup> Wen Yuankai, another one of the mediating intellectuals, reiterated Dai's plea and urged that "assuming that the government meets our conditions, [the protesters should] withdraw from the Square and allow the Sino-Soviet summit to proceed smoothly."<sup>42</sup>

Dai made a particularly telling revelation when she dictated the government's terms for compromise. She announced that if Zhao and Li visited the protesters, the students should "evacuate the Square, even if it's just a temporary move...in order to make room for tomorrow's state visit."<sup>43</sup> The temporal nature of Dai's request exposes the government's primary concern with the protest. By qualifying her plea by asking that the students only temporarily move, it exposes the government's lack of concern with the protest as a whole.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 168.



In the days leading up to the summit, it was of little importance to the government why the protests were happening. Zhao and Li were not concerned with the principles of the students' cause, but only with its destructive diplomatic consequences. With the students evacuating the Square during the summit, those effects would be neutralized, thereby rendering the general protest relatively inconsequential.

Again, the protesters disregarded the intellectuals' appeal, just as they had done with Yan Mingfu's demands, two days earlier. Throughout Dai's speech, voices in the crowd could be heard verbally attacking the intellectuals. As though they had been betrayed, protesters shouted that the scholars were no more than "the government's lobbyists."<sup>44</sup> At the conclusion of Dai's speech, the students confrontationally responded by reading the hunger strike declaration three times. It was then, at 11:30 P.M. on May 14, the night prior to Gorbachev's arrival, that the scholars admitted failure in their attempt to influence students. For the second time in three days, the government's attempt to clear Tiananmen Square for the success of the Sino-Soviet Summit had failed.

Gorbachev arrived the next day, and the effects of the protesters were felt immediately. The demonstration forced the Soviet Premier's official welcoming ceremony to be held at the Beijing airport, instead of the more formal Great Hall of the People, which was located on the west side of Tiananmen Square.<sup>45</sup> Chinese officials did not want Gorbachev to "see the protests or be filmed with them as the backdrop."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan Link, "A second dialogue with Li Tieying and Yan Mingfu" in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 171.

<sup>46</sup> Calhoun, 68.

government went to great lengths to downplay the protest that had cast a shadow on the summit. According to the *New York Times*, Gorbachev's arrival was akin to "an exotic dance in which the Chinese side tried to shield Mr. Gorbachev from the protesters."<sup>47</sup> Shortly thereafter, Yang Shangkun, the president of the PRC, accompanied Gorbachev to the Great Hall, at which point the summit commenced. During this preliminary phase of the summit, the students resolved to exploit the foreign media presence that had arrived with Gorbachev.

On May 15, the methods by which the students attempted to increase awareness reached previously unseen levels of extremism. While Gorbachev and the Chinese government leaders had their historic meeting, an audience of media members, both from China and abroad, witnessed a press conference outside the Great Hall of the People, called by the protest headquarters.<sup>48</sup> At the press conference, students threatened that continued government inaction would result in student self-immolation. Envious of the Soviet Union's democratic reforms, protesters asked, "Where is China's Gorbachev?"<sup>49</sup> This extremist strategy was an overt violation of the government's warning.

While some students advocated this strategy, other prominent student protesters, like Wuerkaixi favored a more understated approach for the May 15 meeting. Although he desired a suspension of the protest, Wuerkaixi knew there was no possibility of the students exiting the Square. In order to cope with the students' stubborn determination, he argued that the students should assemble into an organized camp on the east side of the Square,

---

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, "Gorbachev Meets Deng In Beijing; Protest Goes On," *New York Times*, May 15, 1989, accessed December 6, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/16/world/gorbachev-meets-deng-in-beijing-protest-goes-on.html?scp=5&sq=Sino-Soviet%20summit%201989%20may%2015&st=cse>.

<sup>48</sup> Nathan Link, "Beijing intellectuals demonstrate" in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 171.

<sup>49</sup> Nathan Link, "Students around the country support the hunger strikes" in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 172.

opposite of where Gorbachev was scheduled to make his appearance. He reasoned that a single, orderly group was less likely to be accused of creating chaos.<sup>50</sup>

His motivation was driven by the potential international perception of the protest. Just as May 15 was a public relations opportunity for the government, the media spotlight also created an opportunity for the protesters to define their own identity. Wuerkaixi knew that it was important to show the world that in this story, the students were the cool-headed protagonists and the government was the unprovoked antagonist. In order to ensure this favorable narrative, Wuerkaixi argued that “it would be better to have carefully organized student protests as the background...than to have milling masses who might either look incoherent or seem to justify policy repression.”<sup>51</sup> While Wuerkaixi was mainly concerned with the potential image of the protest, others favored a more civil approach for different reasons.

Protestor Shen Tong, for example, believed that a disruption of the summit could be detrimental to the students’ cause for political reasons. Through a microphone, Shen urged the students to “evacuate the Square temporarily.”<sup>52</sup> Shen speculated that allowing a peaceful dialogue between China’s leaders and Gorbachev, who had recently instituted reforms of his own, could be a “beneficial and useful” mechanism for change.<sup>53</sup> With tragic foresight, Shen continued, “By staying here, we are giving the conservatives an excuse to

---

<sup>50</sup>Calhoun, 69.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

crack down on the reforms.”<sup>54</sup> Characteristic of the volatile nature of the day, protesters were quick to condemn Shen’s dissension. One student rebuked Shen, asking, if he felt “worthy of being a student leader...To say you want us to leave makes you a traitor to the movement.”<sup>55</sup>

Much to the chagrin of the government, the contrast between the summit’s pageantry and the chaotic scene happening outside in the Square created a unique spectacle for the media. The Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* warned protesters that their actions could undermine their cause, maintaining that “if [the students] thought they could push the government to further concessions either by making it lose face during the Gorbachev visit or by enticing Gorbachev himself to bring pressure on the Chinese authorities,” they were making a “big mistake.”<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, the international press was generally pessimistic about what the situation meant for Chinese socialism. For instance, the French newspaper, *Libération*, argued that it had become apparent that “the winds of democratization blowing from Moscow would be irresistible in China.”<sup>57</sup> The United States media was similarly captivated by the demonstrations. For instance, during the month of May, *The Washington Post* published 45 stories about the protest. Conversely, the *Post* published only 17 articles about the Sino-Soviet Summit. The discrepancy in the *New York Times* was even larger, with 105 stories about the protests and 23 about the summit. Although the summit lasted

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Nathan Link, “Gorbachev’s visit overshadowed” in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 173.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

a much shorter time, the wide discrepancy exhibits the foreign media's fascination with the protest. The Chinese government had envisioned headlines that praised the landmark diplomatic event, but instead, writers like Nicholas D. Kristof of the *New York Times*, wrote articles titled "Gorbachev Meets Deng in Beijing; Protest Goes On."<sup>58</sup> Even on the day of the summit, in an article written about the summit, writers could not help but point out that "the domestic atmosphere in Beijing was decidedly abnormal because of continuing protests."<sup>59</sup> The summit had taken a back seat to the protesters. Predictably, on May 19, the day after the conclusion of the summit, the protesters ended their hunger strike.<sup>60</sup>

At this point, the protest had tangibly injured the goals of the summit. May 15 was supposed to be a landmark date in the progress of international socialism, but instead, the perception of China's domestic politics became an embarrassment. The international media presence that accompanied Gorbachev would not depart with him, but instead continue to praise the merits of the demonstration's cause. Indeed, after all of the warnings, after all of the threats, the Chinese government's chief fear had come to fruition: its public relations opportunity had ended in humiliation.

The effects of this humiliation can be seen in the subsequent institution of martial law, formally issued on May 20. In a briefing to Communist Party officials, Li Peng outlined the reasons for martial law being declared. Li argued, "traffic jams happened everywhere, the party and Government offices were affected and public security was deteriorating. All this has seriously disturbed the normal order of production, work, study and everyday life

---

<sup>58</sup> Kristof.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Stefan R. Landsberger, "Chronology of the 1989 Student Demonstration" in *The Chinese People's Movement: Perspectives on Spring 1989*, Tony Saich, editor (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.), 171.

of the local people.”<sup>61</sup> While that all was true, Li gave the most attention to the exploitation of the summit, reiterating that “some activities on the agenda of the Sino-Soviet Summit that attracted worldwide attention had to be canceled, greatly damaging China’s international image and prestige.”<sup>62</sup> While traffic jams and the infringement upon citizens’ study time may have been an inconvenience, the prime minister’s extra emphasis on the disruption of the Sino-Soviet Summit proves that it contributed significantly to the government’s decision to institute martial law.

The implementation of martial law added more tension into an already perilous environment. According to a report drafted by the Beijing Party Committee and People’s Government on June 1, the existence of martial law increased the resolve of the protesters.<sup>63</sup> The document is riddled with paranoia, criticizing the protesters on the grounds that “especially since the declaration of martial law,” the students “boasted of plans to kidnap or detain Party and state leaders and to seize power as if they were storming the Bastille.”<sup>64</sup> The reasoning in this explanation is irresponsible. The document completely ignores the government’s role in the creation of the tense atmosphere. Prior to the institution of martial law, no officials criticized the movement of being physically violent. Only when martial law was instituted did the government characterize the

---

<sup>61</sup> “Transcript of Remarks by Chinese Prime Minister Announcing Crackdown,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1989, accessed December 6, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/20/world/transcript-of-remarks-by-chinese-prime-minister-announcing-crackdown.html?scp=3&sq=Sino-Soviet%20summit%201989&st=cs>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Nathan Link, “An emergency report of the Beijing Party Committee” in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 330.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 330-337.

atmosphere within the Square as being threatening. Government leaders feared that the movement had devolved into a dangerous mob.

This fear manifested on the morning of June 4, when the powder keg created by martial law was sparked. Government officials ordered thousands of troops from the People's Liberation Army to clear Tiananmen Square. The blood of thousands was throughout the capital city, in what is referred to as the June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre.<sup>65</sup> The demonstration, which involved well over a million people, "came to a tragic and painful end, in blood and in victory for dictatorship."<sup>66</sup>

The totality of the government's victory is debatable. Clearly, China's contemporary situation is a far cry from that of 1989 and many of the reforms for which the protest advocated have, at least in some fashion, been adopted. In addition, those who worked for the overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe drew important lessons from the events leading up to June 4.<sup>67</sup> In hindsight, it is convenient, but naïve, to characterize those who lost their lives as being tragic, inevitable martyrs in the battle against Communism. The achievements of the Tiananmen Square protests did not necessarily depend on bloodshed. Indeed, the unnecessary loss of life only detracted from protest's success. It is unfair to claim that those protesters involved in the decision to exploit the summit are responsible for the loss of life on June 4, 1989. Further, it is unreasonable to hypothesize that had the

---

<sup>65</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, "Crackdown In Beijing; Troops Attack And Crush Beijing Protest; Thousands Fight Back, Scores are Killed," *New York Times*, June 4, 1989, accessed December 7, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/04/world/crackdown-beijing-troops-attack-crush-beijing-protest-thousands-fight-Tiananmen%20Square%mass%20acre&st=cse>.

<sup>66</sup> Zhang Liang, "Reflections on June Fourth" in *The Tiananmen Papers*, Zhang Liang, compiler Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), xi.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

summit not been disrupted, the protest would have ended without bloodshed. It is accurate, however, to claim that the decision to exploit the summit contributed to the violence of June 4, thereby detracting from the protest's success.

Despite the advice of Chinese intellectuals and governmental threats, the students made a conscious choice to exploit, and thereby disrupt, the summit. The subsequent government humiliation contributed to the decision to institute martial law, which created an increasingly volatile atmosphere in Beijing. Paranoid of potential protester violence created by martial law, the government ordered troops to clear the Square. In doing so, thousands of Chinese civilians were killed, many of them students, resulting in one of the greatest tragedies in the history of modern China.



## Bibliography

- Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy, "China as a Factor in the Collapse of the Soviet Empire," *Political Science Quarterly*, Winter 1995, 501.
- Brook, Timothy. *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew K., "Political Developments in the Sino-Soviet Bloc," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 336 (1961): 46.
- Calhoun, Craig. *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Crane, George T., "Collective Identity, Symbolic Mobilization, and Student Protest in Nanjing, China, 1988-1989," *Comparative Politics* no. 26 (1994): 395-413
- Killiher, Daniel, "Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement," *Comparative Politics* no. 25 (1993): 379-396
- Kristof, Nicholas D., "Crackdown In Beijing; Troops Attack And Crush Beijing Protest; Thousands Fight Back, Scores are Killed," *New York Times*, June 4, 1989, accessed December 7, 2011.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/04/world/crackdown-beijing-troops-attack-crush-beijing-protest-thousands-fight-Tiananmen%20square%massacre&st=cse>
- Kristof, Nicholas D. "Gorbachev Meets Deng In Beijing; Protest Goes On." *New York Times*, May 15, 1989. Accessed December 6, 2011.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/16/world/gorbachev-meets-deng-in-beijing-protest-goes-on.html?scp=5&sq=Sino-Soviet%20summit%201989%20may%2015&st=cse>
- Liu, Alan P. L., "Aspects of Beijing's Crisis Management: The Tiananmen Square Demonstration," *Asian Survey* no. 30 (1990): 515-516
- Liu, Alan P. L., "Symbols and Repression at Tiananmen Square, April-June 1989," *Political Psychology* no. 13 (1992): 45-60
- Lowenthal, Richard, "Russia and China: Controlled Conflict," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1971): 512.
- Oksenberg, Michel, Sullivan, Lawrence R., and Lambert, Marc, editors, *Beijing Spring 1989: Confrontation and Conflict, The Basic Documents*: Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990.

- Saich, Tony editor, *The Chinese People's Movement: Perspectives on Spring 1989*: Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 1990.
- Shi, Tianjin, "The Democratic Movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and Failure," *Asian Survey* 30 (1990): 1199
- Wright, Teresa, "State Repression and Student Protest in Contemporary China," *The China Quarterly* 157 (1999): 142-172
- Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, editors *The Tiananmen Papers*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.
- Zhou He, *Mass Media and Tiananmen Square*. Commack: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 1996.
- "Hunger Strike Announcement," *Xinwen Daobao*, May 12, 1989
- FBIS, "Zhao Ziyang Meets Mikhail Gorbachev," 17 May 1989
- "Transcript of Remarks by Chinese Prime Minister Announcing Crackdown." *New York Times*, May 20, 1989. Accessed December 6, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/20/world/transcript-of-remarks-by-chinese-prime-minister-announcing-crackdown.html?scp=3&sq=SinoSoviet%20summit%201989&st=cs>
- "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," VHS. Directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton. San Francisco: NAATA Distribution, 1995.