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Remembering Tiananmen Square

The Tiananmen Square massacre remains shrouded in myth. This eyewitness report by a Human Rights Watch observer makes the horror plain.

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*AP Images*A Chinese protestor blocks a line of tanks heading east on Beijing's Cangan Blvd. June 5, 1989 in front of the Beijing Hotel.

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Among the revolts that ignited the Communist world in 1989, China's was the great failure. On the night of June 3-4 the Chinese Communist Party showed the world that it would stop at nothing to maintain its monopoly of power.

But what exactly did happen that night? Few modern events have been covered as intensively by the Western news media as the Tiananmen Square democracy movement. Yet in crucial respects the denouement remains shrouded in myth. In the immediate aftermath, some basic notions took hold: Journalists spoke routinely of the slaughter of

students, of "the massacre in Tiananmen Square." A year later, that phrase has become the official shorthand for what happened in Beijing.

A "revisionist" trend currently emerging in some Western circles maintains that there was no massacre. That is preposterous. A massacre did take place—but not in Tiananmen Square, and not predominantly of students. The great majority of those who died (perhaps as many as a thousand in all) were workers, or laobaixing ("common folk," or "old hundred names"), and they died mainly on the approach roads in western Beijing. Several dozen people died in the immediate environs of the square and a few in the square itself. But to speak of that as the real massacre distorts the citywide nature of the carnage and diminishes the real political drama that unfolded in Tiananmen Square.

Hundreds of reporters were in Beijing that night, but very few were present for the climactic clearing of the square by the army. Many were on the real killing grounds of western Beijing, along Changan Boulevard and Fuxingmen Boulevard, and reported vividly and accurately on what they saw. Some had been arrested, and others were pinned down behind roadblocks. Others still were back in their hotels for early-morning filing deadlines. Most who were in the vicinity of the square when the army arrived, however, left quickly and out of legitimate fear for their safety.

But there were also more profound questions about how the Western media saw their role in the events in Beijing. The whole world was watching, and reporters often saw themselves as guarantors of the students' safety. There was something in the pacifist idealism of the students that triggered memories of the 1960s and the civil rights movement, riveting Western attention on the students and causing the crucial role of the *laobaixing* to be largely overlooked.

And there was more: some predisposition, perhaps, on the media’s part to believe in a massacre in the square as the necessary consummation of an allegory of innocence, sacrifice and redemption. The students’ own language may have contributed to this. On May 13 the hunger strikers in the square declared, “Our bodies are still tender and not full grown, and the prospect of dying frightens us all; but history calls us and we must go.” Writer Ross Terrill, interviewed on a June 29 ABC special by Ted Koppel, recalled one student telling him, “We are now ready to face death, and we don’t want you to have to be part of that. Please go home.” And the reporters, for the most part, did so. Into the resulting vacuum rushed the most lurid tales of what then supposedly took place.

This account seeks to explain why the real massacre took the shape it did. It points to the regime’s relative tolerance of the students and to its horror of the working-class unrest that threatened to turn the protests into full-fledged insurrection. It also looks at the critical implications of the fact that sections of the Chinese Army were clearly not prepared to carry out orders on the night of June 3-4.

Some people do accept that the bulk of the killing took place outside Tiananmen Square. Koppel, for example, in his June 29 special, noted the distinction but downplayed it as a “loophole” to be exploited by the Chinese government. But insisting on factual precision is not just a matter of splitting hairs. For the geography of the killing reveals much about the government’s cold political logic and its choice of targets— as well as the likely scenario of the next round of pro-democracy struggles in China. The regime squandered its remaining popular legitimacy in a single night of bloodshed, and unless it can somehow learn the art of compromise, the fact that a sizable section of “the masses” was ready to fight back, together with the potential unreliability of the army, provides the ingredients for a possible replay of a Romanian-style revolt.

Journalism may be only the rough draft of history, but if left uncorrected it can forever distort the future course of events. Nothing serves the cause of China's students and *laobaixing* better than the unvarnished truth, for it speaks eloquently of their heroism and of the regime's cowardice and brutality. But Western criticisms based on a false version of the clearing of Tiananmen Square have handed the butchers of Beijing needless propaganda victories in the U.N. and elsewhere. They have also distracted attention from the main target of the continuing repression: the mass movement that eventually superseded the students' protest actions. The credit for inspiring the movement and upholding the banner of nonviolence will always belong to the students. But only by refocusing attention on the *laobaixing* will we understand why China, a year later, continues to be ruled by the jackboot, the rifle and the thought police.

I.

On April 26, 1989, the *People's Daily* published its now infamous editorial condemning the student protest movement in Beijing as being, in essence, "a planned conspiracy, a riot, whose real nature was to fundamentally negate the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and to negate the socialist system." The editorial was the first definitive statement by the Chinese leadership on the student movement since its inception on April 15, the day reform-minded party leader Hu Yaobang had died.

But if a conspiracy to overthrow the socialist system had been launched in the Chinese capital, whom did the party point to as the main culprits? Surprisingly, not to the students. According to the editorial, "The Party and government [take] a tolerant, restrained attitude to certain inappropriate words and actions of emotionally excited young students." On the other hand, "these facts demonstrate that an extremely small number of people were not involved in mourning Comrade Hu Yaobang . . . Their goal was to poison people's minds, to create turmoil throughout the country, to destroy political stability and unity." As the official conspiracy theory developed, the authorities charged that the students were being manipulated by "outside elements" with "ulterior motives." This meant, first of all, dissident Chinese workers and (to a lesser extent) intellectuals, and second, foreign "reactionaries." This line of analysis was upheld during the military crackdown of June 3-4, and it underpins the repression that continues to this day.

Chinese political tradition has long conferred a limited degree of tolerance and immunity on students, a certain latitude of action not shared by other groups—and especially not

by the workers. This relative privilege was enhanced during the decade of reform in the 1980s, as Deng Xiaoping moved rapidly toward a historic compromise with the intelligentsia (whom Mao Zedong had ruthlessly persecuted) in order to advance China's modernization program and facilitate the economic opening to the West. This official stance was fraught with problems, of course, since greater freedom for the students and intellectuals inevitably brought with it the danger of corrosive "bourgeois liberal" ideas from the West.

But that was nothing compared with the other danger that had preoccupied the party since the start of the reform process. This was the prospect of organized unrest and dissent among the urban working class, along the lines of Poland's Solidarity. Above all, it was the rapid trend toward just such a movement—what China's leaders call the "Polish disease" —in Beijing and other major cities last spring that determined the uncompromising character of the crackdown when it finally came. The students had initiated the movement and brilliantly outmaneuvered the government but with the intervention of broader social forces on Tiananmen Square, the students soon lost control of the situation and their leadership became chronically divided.

The other major factor behind the crackdown was the increasing ideological defection of the party apparatus itself to the students' cause. By mid-May, even sections of the public security service, law courts and military—the very backbone of the dictatorship of the proletariat—were beginning to appear in the square in open support of the pro-democracy movement. On June 14, in an illustration of the party's paranoid vision of events, the Beijing Propaganda Department concluded that "a certain small group of people" had "plotted to arrest party and state leaders and seize power in a 'Bastille'-style attack."

In retrospect, the logic of the massacre of June 3-4 is clear. The students responded to the draconian *People's Daily* editorial not, as expected, by retreating to their campuses but by stepping up their protests. The demonstrations drew massive public support, and the authorities were thrown into a state of confusion and paralysis from which they did not emerge until after June 4. On May 13, after a brief hiatus of failed "dialogue" with the government, the students launched a mass hunger strike at Tiananmen Square. By May 17, the sight of as many as 2,000 idealistic young students collapsing from heat and starvation brought more than a million ordinary Beijing citizens into the square in a moving display of human solidarity. "The students speak on behalf of all of us," they would tell any foreigner who cared to listen. Having been passive spectators, the

laobaixing now began to act as a bastion of active support for the students, bringing food and other supplies to the square on a round-the-clock basis.

This specter of emerging cross-class solidarity led directly to the authorities' decision to impose martial law in Beijing on May 20. But again, the strength of the popular response caught China's leaders unawares: The tanks and troop columns were halted at all major points of entry to the city by a human wall of peaceful protesters, and after a few days the soldiers were forced to withdraw to their barracks in the suburbs. Action groups formed spontaneously throughout Beijing. These included "dare-to-die squads" of workers and other *laobaixing*, who vowed to die rather than let the army into the city; the workers' pickets, who, together with formidably organized contingents of student pickets, patrolled the neighborhoods and maintained order (the public security forces and traffic police were nowhere to be seen after May 20); and "the little flying tigers," large groups of youths on motorcycles who sped around the city on liaison missions for the movement. The laobaixing were now in a posture of peaceful, nonviolent but direct confrontation with the government and army, and similar "turmoil"—to use the party's term—rapidly emerged in dozens of other cities.

Moreover, the *laobaixing* were beginning to articulate their own grievances. These were mostly a product of the decade-long economic reforms, which, though broadly popular, had also generated a range of serious social tensions: sharp income polarization, spiraling commodity prices, an acute shortage of acceptable housing and—last but by no means least—rampant corruption, speculation and profiteering by government and party officials. The authorities probably overestimated the political challenge that these new workers' and citizens' groups posed. The groups were spontaneous, and while their visible impact and propaganda effect were considerable, they lacked any distinct ideological framework or program. But the party's alarm was real.

However, the birth of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation a few days after the abortive imposition of martial law posed a much greater threat. That is because this group, headquartered in a couple of scruffy tents in the northwest corner of Tiananmen Square, raised an issue that had been taboo in China since 1949: the right of workers to engage in independent labor organization and self-representation. Such a demand struck at the very core of the Chinese Communist state, for the party's main claim to legitimacy is that it rules in the name and interests of the "laboring masses." Although its active membership remained relatively small, its formal membership soared during the first few days of June, reaching a peak of more than 10,000 enrollments after three of its leaders

were secretly arrested on May 29. Autonomous workers' groups quickly sprang up in most of China's major cities.

This was the "cancer cell" that the authorities had feared from the outset would appear if legal recognition were ever to be conferred on the student organizations. In the government's eyes, if the statue of the Goddess of Democracy, erected in the square at the end of May, represented the arrogant defiance of the students and the symbolic intrusion of "bourgeois liberalism" and "Western subversion" into the sacred heart of Communist rule, the crude red-and-black banner of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation, not a hundred yards away from the goddess, represented the terrifying power of the workers awakened. Both had to be crushed, and the rapidly defecting party apparatus had to be frightened and shocked back into line.

In the spirit of the April 26 editorial, the students and intellectuals would, by and large, be spared. The *laobaixing*, on the other hand, would be mercilessly punished in order to eradicate organized popular unrest for a generation. The arenas of conflict on the night of June 3-4 overlapped, but they were essentially separate. The real killing grounds, the theater of the popular uprising and massacre, lay mainly on the periphery, above all along western Changan Boulevard and out to the western suburbs. Here, the *laobaixing* fought and died to defend the center: Tiananmen Square. The pro-democracy movement stayed firm in its commitment to the principles of dialogue and nonviolence, and it resorted to force on that final night only out of desperation and rage. Once the army had embarked on the rape of Beijing it was clear that all was lost. In the eye of the storm, around the Monument to the People's Heroes, stood the students—brave, resolute but ultimately protected within a charmed circle. At the last minute, in the square itself, with its most lethal resources arrayed against the moral authority of youth, the government stepped back from the brink of a slaughter of incalculable proportions.

The Bloody Road to Tiananmen

There were more than 1,000 foreign journalists in Beijing on the night of the army's final drive to clear Tiananmen Square, and many of them followed the advance of the main People's Liberation Army (P.L.A.) assault force through the western suburbs as it plowed murderously through the crowds of *laobaixing* that formed at all points to block its path. Most of the foreign film footage of the massacre was shot in this sector of the city, in neighborhoods like Muxidi, Fuxingmen and Liubukou, where hundreds of unarmed protesters and innocent bystanders were mowed down by random gunfire from

semiautomatic weapons. The troops apparently made no distinction between these people and the small number who hurled stones, rocks and Molotov cocktails or set fire to vehicles that had been used as roadblocks. Since this main theater of the massacre was by and large well covered by the foreign news media, we will focus here on some lesser-known aspects of the action along western Changan and Fuxingmen—subsequently dubbed "Blood Boulevard" by the people of Beijing.

As far as is known, the first violence came at around 10:30 P.M. on June 3 at Gongzhufen, some two miles west of Muxidi, where vanguard contingents of the assault force used about twenty armored personnel carriers (A.P.C.s) to crash through bus barricades that were blocking the circular intersection. A West German student living in Beijing at the time witnessed the incident and reports that many people were crushed to death as the A.P.C.s went through and soldiers fired indiscriminately at the crowd. A Finnish journalist who was also standing nearby reports seeing two soldiers with AK-47 assault rifles suddenly descend from the tenth truck of a convoy of fifty or so that drove through the gaps in the barricades. "They were torn to pieces" by the crowd, she says. "It was a horrible sight." The pattern of the night's conflict, then, was set from the start: Random and brutal killings by the army came first, followed swiftly by a small number of revenge killings of troops by distraught, and increasingly insurgent, citizens.

Why did the troops behave with such savagery? At Gongzhufen they had been alerted to the lethal realities of mass resistance, provoked by their violent invasion of the city and by their evident determination this time (in contrast to the halfhearted effort of May 20) to retake Tiananmen Square. Once they saw that terror tactics had conspicuously failed to subdue the crowds, the troops were fearful for their lives, and as they advanced slowly toward Muxidi, they responded by escalating the level of terror. From there on, the P.L.A. acted almost as if it were confronting Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's battle-hardened armies in the hills along the Sino-Vietnamese border rather than unarmed civilians. Local residents and Western journalists who visited the hospitals in western Beijing that night describe them as resembling abattoirs.

Accidental factors, too, may partially explain the army's paroxysm of killing. The troops had intended to meet up at Muxidi with a unit of 600 local officers of the People's Armed Police (PAP). (They may well have expected major resistance, for three people had been crushed to death by a PAP jeep at Muxidi the previous night, provoking angry protests.) But the PAP detachment, which was familiar with the layout of Beijing and was supposed to spearhead the army assault and lead the troops into the square, never made the rendezvous: It had been surrounded, blocked and in the end dispersed by the

laobaixing as it made its way through the alleyways around Yuetan Park, about a mile and a half northeast of Muxidi. This unexpectedly deprived the troops of their paramilitary escort.

For political reasons, also, the army had its reasons for not being found wanting. As early as May 24 or 25, Gen. Xu Qinxian, commanding officer of China's elite 38th Army, had been arrested for failing to carry out martial-law orders (he was later court-martialed). This no doubt left other units eager to prove their zeal against the "counterrevolutionary rebellion." It is still widely believed in the West that most of the carnage was inflicted by the 27th Army. But according to military sources, the deputy commander of the 27th was booed when he appeared at a high-level Beijing conference on "propaganda theory" last September. He is said to have thrown down his cap in anger and frustration and exclaimed, "We in the 27th are being saddled with the blame for what our army brothers in other units did. Yes, we opened fire, but I guarantee that we didn't kill any of the *laobaixing*!"

China may have come closer to a Romanian-style military revolt than is generally recognized. According to a report in the *South China Morning Post* on December 28, P.L.A. Chief Political Commissar Yang Baibing revealed in a confidential speech earlier that month that "21 officers and cadres with ranks of divisional commander or above, 36 officers with ranks of regimental or battalion commander, and 54 officers with the rank of company chief 'breached discipline in a serious manner during the struggle to crush the counterrevolutionary rebellion' in June. In addition, 1,400 soldiers 'shed their weapons and ran away.'"

In the days that followed the massacre, the Chinese authorities repeatedly televised an astonishing piece of footage that showed dozens of A.P.C.s being torched by the crowd in the vicinity of the Military Museum, just west of Muxidi. The commentary said that many of the occupants had preferred to be burned alive rather than open fire on their compatriots; it also clearly implied that this had occurred in the early evening of June 3, before nightfall. This footage was a cornerstone of the government's "Big Lie," evidence of the "counterrevolutionary rebellion" that had obliged the government to respond with force.

The reality was very different. At about 9 A.M. on Sunday, June 4, several foreign witnesses, inspecting the devastation of the previous night, were stunned to see a column of some three dozen A.P.C.s suddenly appear from the west and come to a halt at

the Muxidi intersection. The first vehicle had struck the remnants of a barricade; a second had run into its rear, bringing the convoy to a halt. A large crowd materialized from the neighboring alleyways and surrounded the now silent armored column. The first troops to emerge were beaten, and at least one is thought to have been killed. Only the intervention of student pickets, who negotiated safe passage for the troops, headed off a pitched battle and, perhaps, a fresh round of killing. Several hundred soldiers simply walked away, leaving behind their lethal hardware for the crowd to muse over. Within half an hour, all the A.P.C.s had been set on fire, and a towering column of black smoke could be seen for miles.

It may be no coincidence that this incident took place right outside the main offices of Central Chinese Television, from whose rooftop the scene was exhaustively videotaped. But a more significant explanation is that the troops actually deserted. A prominent West German Sinologist who was present described seeing soldiers escorted away from their vehicles. One A.P.C., he says, "opened the top lids, and a hand appeared waving a white piece of cloth. Soldiers emerged and gave their automatic rifles to the young men receiving them. They hugged."

I witnessed a somewhat similar scene on the night of June 3 to the east of Tiananmen Square, at the Jianguomen overpass, where a column of several dozen troop trucks was halted by large crowds as it tried to cross Changan Boulevard. Several foreign witnesses saw soldiers openly fraternizing with civilians and even posing for photographs. Just after midnight I saw one group of soldiers climb down from their truck and wander off slowly with tears in their eyes. Minutes later an A.P.C. came charging at full speed across the overpass from the east and smashed through the line of P.L.A. trucks, lifting one of them several feet into the air and splashing a young man's brains on the ground. Evidently the troops on the overpass had been identified as traitorous by the high command.

II.

Tiananmen Square is the largest public space in the world. It extends over 100 acres, and no single eyewitness could hope to encompass the complex and confusing sequence of events that unfolded there on the night of June 3-4. My own account, therefore, is supplemented by the testimony of others who saw what happened at crucial moments.

I arrived at the square at about 1:15 A.M. Large crowds were fleeing eastward along Changan Boulevard. Continuous gunfire sounded from the northwest sector of the square, and a crippled A.P.C. lay blazing in the northeast corner, set afire by Molotov cocktails. Its tracks had been jammed with steel bars and traffic dividers. A CNN film unit and a number of British journalists were on the scene. According to John Simpson of the BBC, three A.P.C. crew members had been beaten to death and a fourth escorted to safety by student pickets. Jonathan Musky of the London *Observer*, who was beaten by armed policemen with truncheons just before I arrived, says he saw several people shot dead near the huge portrait of Mao on Tiananmen Gate.

Looking over to the northwest corner of the square, I saw with horror that the tents of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation were in flames, and I ran over to see if any of my friends from the federation were dead or wounded. Twenty yards away, a menacing group of about 200 heavily armed troops stood facing the tents. This was the advance party of the main invasion force of the P.L.A., which would arrive at the square at around 2 A.M. after smashing its way along western Changan. By now the crowds had fled from this area. Only the figure of a young man was visible, wandering slowly around the burning tents and gathering up piles of documents, which he implored me to take to the students on the Monument to the People's Heroes. This I did.

Nearly all the students had withdrawn by now to the three tiers of the monument: 3,000 to 5,000 of them perhaps, huddled tightly together. Their makeshift tent encampment, which sprawled over an area of several hundred square yards to the north of the monument, was virtually deserted. The students seemed calm, almost resigned. There was no panic, though the stutter of gunfire could be heard on the fringes of the square and beyond. Abruptly the government loudspeakers boomed into life with an endlessly repeated message: Everyone was to leave the square immediately; a "serious counterrevolutionary rebellion" had broken out and the martial-law troops were empowered to clear Tiananmen Square by any means necessary.

At about this time, an American freelance journalist named Richard Nations was ducking gunfire in the far southwest corner of the square, where a major confrontation between troops and citizens had been under way since around 12:30 A.M. His notes were scribbled at the time: "Approximately 1:00 A.M.: Southwest corner, on Qianmen West street in front of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Barricade of several burning buses blocks the intersection. Riot police are forced into the street under a shower of rocks and glass. Student pickets or organizers seem to intervene to evacuate about 20-odd unarmed police/soldiers with shields and staves caught near burning buses. A tank races through,

breaking up a roadblock, and a busload of troops disembark. Tracer bullets and sustained volleys." Several people were killed by troops in this confrontation.

Another witness to the clashes in the south was the renowned writer Lao Gui. At about 1:30 he wrote, "There was a continuous sound of gunfire coming from Zhushikou [about half a mile south of the square]. Red flares were going up all around. I met a Western reporter at the cypress trees by the Mao Memorial Hall who told me, 'I saw three people killed with my own eyes, their stomachs were blown open, down at Zhushikou.'" Other accounts suggest that at least several dozen people were killed by troops as the army forced its way up through the southern neighborhoods. Close to 2:00 a force of about a hundred troops tried to enter the square from the southwest corner. "Suddenly there was intense firing and bullets flying all over the place," says NBC cameraman Tony Wasserman, who was there. "And somewhere along the way someone gets it in the stomach and someone in the ankle. Before this, the crowd grabs some soldiers from the southwest corner again and they beat the shit out of them." A little later, according to CBS cameraman Derek William, "in came the paratroopers. . . . They were real shitkickers."

Meanwhile, in the northern part of the square, the main invasion force had begun to arrive from the west. I watched them arrive from a position to the west of the Goddess of Democracy. The first column of troop-transport trucks entered the square hesitantly, at a walking pace. Groups of infantry escorted them, at first just a thin line, but quickly increasing to a dense column, thousands of them, all wearing steel helmets and carrying assault rifles. They took about an hour to deploy fully along the northern edge of the square. Many more troops and vehicles were backed up, invisible to me, all the way down Changan to the west.

After the arrival of this main force, only a sprinkling of people— apparently not students but ordinary residents and workers—remained in the northern part of the square, between Changan and the monument. The statue of democracy looked more dramatic than ever, facing Mao's portrait and the troops beneath it through the flames and smoke that still billowed from the crippled A.P.C. At around 2:15, there was a terrific burst of AK-47 fire, lasting several minutes, from the vicinity of Tiananmen Gate. I hit the deck. Most of the crowd fled southward, toward the monument, but I saw no one injured.

At more or less the same moment, just a few hundred yards away, several hundred troops moved across from Tiananmen Gate to seal off the northeast entrance to the square,

blocking off eastern Changan Boulevard to the north of the History Museum. A student named Ke Feng, one of the main organizers of the statue of democracy project, was hiding in a small park nearby. In the first five minutes or so, he saw about twenty people in the vicinity of the pedestrian underpass hit by "stray bullets." including "five people who fell and couldn't get up again." Some 500 troops emerged from behind the History Museum, although these did not appear to be carrying rifles. As another 200 to 300 advanced from the direction of Tiananmen Gate, the crowd began shouting, "Fascists!" and "General Strike!"; others sang the "Internationale." Ke Feng, still hiding nearby, tells of the soldiers "jumping for joy, as if playing a game. . . . An officer kept shouting through a megaphone for about fifteen minutes, "Leave immediately, we'll shoot to kill!'"

In an extraordinary, suicidal act of defiance, someone drove an articulated twin-carriage bus at full speed straight at the soldiers. In the words of Kenneth Qiang, a council member of the Hong Kong Student Federation, "The driver was dragged out by soldiers and clubbed to the ground with their rifle butts. The crowd was incensed, and they ran forward to within fifty meters of the troops, throwing glass bottles at them. I heard two separate gunshots. The driver fell to the ground dead."

It was now around 2:30. The entire square had fallen silent, though gunfire was still audible in the distance. Taking advantage of the lull, I walked back to the workers' tents, which by now were a smoldering ruin. A young man pressed a small bundle of student leaflets into my hand. The emergency medical tent of the Beijing United Medical College, to the southeast of the statue of democracy, was a grim but heroic sight. The tent, staffed by some twenty volunteer doctors and medical students, stood virtually alone in this vast, deserted sector of the square. A small crowd of student pickets sat in a thin, wide circle around it, forming a "protective" perimeter. I spent perhaps a quarter of an hour inside, enough time to see four or five badly wounded people brought in on makeshift stretchers. One boy, probably a student, had taken a bullet in the side of his head, and was clearly dying. One doctor said five people had died in his hands in the previous hour or so.

By 3:00 I could see no other foreigners anywhere in the square. The foreign television crews had apparently evacuated the place. "I now feel guilty about the decision," the BBC's Simpson wrote later in *Granta*. "It was wrong: we ought to have stayed in the square, even though the other camera crews had already left and it might have cost us our lives." Simpson's decision, as we shall see, had a crucial impact on his reporting during the rest of the night.

I decided to find a vantage point on the raised area in front of the History Museum, thinking this would give me a clear view of the action while removing me from the scene of combat. But as I rounded the trees at the side of the museum and turned to climb the broad staircase in front of it, I froze. Several thousand steel-helmeted troops, each carrying an AK-47 and a long wooden cudgel, were sitting quietly on the steps. Across the square, in front of the Great Hall of the People, the same thing. If anything, there were even more soldiers on that side. I found myself thinking, "They've sealed off the square on all sides; they must be planning to kill us all," and hastily returned to the shelter of the trees.

The square was lit by eerie white light. The silence was broken only by distant gunfire and the surreal echo of the government loudspeakers. At approximately this moment, Richard Nations, the U.S. freelancer, was several hundred yards away at the monument. He described the scene in his notebook: "Monument seems surrounded by infantry with display of overwhelming armed force to north. Students seem to be stoically waiting for final hour—assault which now seems inevitable." The entry continues, "Meet Robin sitting in front of bushes on fence."

I later discovered that there were in fact about ten foreign journalists left in the square at 3:00, but I could have found no more resourceful a companion than Richard. Together we set out to explore the southern part of the square, which was littered with burning buses and cars but entirely empty of troops. (Access to the square was possible here until just after 6 A.M.) Unknown to us at the time, we passed within a stone's throw of the hiding place of a Hong Kong ATV television crew, who remained perched atop the public latrines in the southwest corner of the square until 4:30, when they judged the situation to be too dangerous and left.

The Darkness Before Dawn

Abruptly, on the stroke of 4 o'clock, all the lights in Tiananmen Square went out. Back at the southeast corner of the monument, we waited anxiously, but the assault did not come. The students remained seated on the monument, just as before. No one made any move to leave. Noiselessly, as if in a dream, two busloads of student reinforcements appeared in the square from the southeast, coming to a halt yards from where we stood. The student loudspeakers crackled back to life and a voice announced—deadpan, as if reading a railroad schedule—"We will now play the 'lnternationale,' to raise our fighting

spirit." I wondered what the soldiers were feeling, out there in the dark. Were the students counting on the embarrassment factor to save them if all else failed?

But still the attack did not materialize. When some people set fire to the abandoned tents and piles of garbage to the west of the monument— perhaps so the assault would not take place in darkness—the student leadership rebuked them: "Keep order, stay calm. We must create no pretext whatsoever for them."

At about 4:15 an array of lights, like fairy lights on a Christmas tree, suddenly came on all across the front of the Great Hall of the People, filling the west side of the square with a soft, luminous glow. At the same time, floodlights went on along the facade of the Forbidden City. Next, the southernmost doors of the Great Hall swung open, disgorging a human river of gun-toting troops, many with fixed bayonets. According to CBS's Derek Williams, who was close by, "They came around and joined a large blocking force which stretched in an L-shape down the west side of the street and then cut across the square in front of the Mao Mausoleum." Troops now began firing at the monument from the History Museum steps, and we could see the sparks flying from the obelisk, high above head level.

It was now just after 4:30. The square was empty of people, and scattered with the forlorn debris of the abandoned encampment. The 3,000 or so students remained huddled on the steps and the three levels of the monument. Again, the student loudspeakers crackled to life, and someone who announced himself as a leader of the Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation took the microphone: "Students! We must on no account quit the square. We will now pay the highest price possible for the sake of securing democracy in China. Our blood shall be the consecration." My heart sank. After a few minutes, someone else spoke, this time a leader of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation: "We must all leave here immediately, for a terrible bloodbath is about to take place. There are troops surrounding us on all sides and the situation is now extraordinarily dangerous. To wish to die here is no more than an immature fantasy." A lengthy silence ensued. Then Hou Dejian spoke. (Hou, a Taiwan-born popular singer, was one of four people who had begun a hunger strike on the monument on June 2.) "We have won a great victory," he said. "But now we must leave this place. We have shed too much of our blood. We cannot afford to lose any more. . . . We four hunger strikers will remain on the monument until everyone else has left safely, and then we too will leave."

As Hou spoke, Richard and I decided to make one final trip to the monument. We picked our way slowly up the steps toward the hunger strikers' tent on the top level, through the tight ranks of seated students, who seemed largely oblivious of our presence (many were writing out their wills and farewell letters to their families). There was no hysteria, only courageous resolve. As we descended again by the steps on the east side, the loudspeakers had fallen silent. But a distant rumbling came from the northern sector of the square: The tanks had started up their engines.

Minutes passed, with nothing to break the spell. In the end, it took an obvious, even mundane move to break the tension: Someone took the microphone and proposed a voice vote. Opinions vary as to whether the shouts of "Stand firm!" were louder than the shouts of "Evacuate!" In any event, it was announced that the democratic decision had been in favor of leaving the square.

The question of what happened next has probably been the single biggest point of controversy in the reporting of the events of June 3-4 in Beijing. Correspondent Richard Roth of CBS had time to file one last report before soldiers arrested him and took him into the Great Hall of the People. "Soldiers have spotted CBS News cameraman Derek Williams and myself and are angrily dragging us away. And a moment later it begins: powerful bursts of automatic weapons, raging gunfire for a minute and a half that lasts as long as a nightmare. And we see no more." The film was confiscated. Roth's dramatic commentary, aired on the June 4 *CBS Evening News* and accompanied by footage shot two hours earlier, left the clear impression that troops had opened fire on the students as they evacuated the monument.

But there was no slaughter. Fermin Rodriguez and Jose Luis Marquez, a film crew from Television Espanola, shot the only known footage of the entire evacuation. Like Roth, they heard the sound of semiautomatic rifle fire as soldiers stormed the monument, but they say it was aimed at knocking out the student loudspeakers. Interviewed by Richard Nations, both men say they left the monument with the last of the students and saw no deaths. "There was absolutely nobody killed at the monument," said Rodriguez. "Everyone left and no one was killed."

What Nations and I saw, from our position twenty-five yards southeast of the monument, was unforgettable. For an agonizing minute, it seemed as if the students might not comply with the decision to leave. Then, slowly, they began to stand up and descend from the monument. As the first group filed past us, heading toward the open

southeast corner of the square, we burst into spontaneous applause. Many in the ten-deep column, each contingent following the banners of its college, had tears rolling down their cheeks. All looked shaken; many were trembling or unsteady on their feet. But all looked proud and unbeaten. One group shouted, "Down with the Communist Party!"—the first time I had ever heard this openly said in China. Richard, ever the professional, continued to take notes. In his notebook, he remarks, "The students' leaders had pulled off the most difficult maneuver in politics of any human enterprise, an orderly retreat."

The Journalists

But according to a widely reprinted "eyewitness" account, which first ran in a Hong Kong paper and was purportedly written by a student from Beijing's Qinghua University, nearly all of us had already been killed, mowed down at point-blank range by a bank of a dozen machine guns just after 4:00. The survivors were then either chased across the square by tanks and crushed or else beaten to death with clubs. This story was picked up by, among others, *The New York Times* (although reporter Nicholas Kristof quickly challenged it), *The Washington Post* and the *San Francisco Examiner*. In terms of lurid invention, it was in a class of its own. Astonishingly, however, it is only one of several such accounts, most of which say the mass slayings took place just before 5:00. Wuer Kaixi, one of the principal student leaders, said he had seen "about 200 students" cut down by gunfire in the predawn assault. But he was not there: He had been driven to safety in a van several hours earlier. How could these fabrications have gained so much acceptance?

There were, by my count, ten Western journalists in the vicinity of the monument at the time in question, as well as a handful of diplomats and Hong Kong Chinese. At least two of the reporters—Claudia Rosett of *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and John Pomfret of the Associated Press —filed accurate accounts of the evacuation, but these were isolated paragraphs buried in long reports from other parts of the city. With Roth and Williams of CBS under arrest in the Great Hall of the People, not to emerge until 5:30, the only foreign film footage of the evacuation is that taken by the Spanish TV crew, who insist they saw no killing. In an interesting footnote, their reporter, Juan Restrepo, who was separated from his crew all night, says that their film of the night's events was garbled by his editors at Television Espanola in Madrid, creating the false impression that killings had taken place during the evacuation of the square.

Of all the comments by TV reporters who left the square, perhaps the most telling are those of John Simpson, whose BBC news team won a raft of awards for its coverage of events in Beijing. Simpson, as we saw, felt remorseful about leaving. But his account for *Granta* reveals how the sense of impending disaster that led the news media to abandon the square also predisposed them to believe that the worst then actually happened: "Someone should have been there when the massacre took place, filming what happened, showing the courage of the students as they were surrounded by tanks and the army advancing, firing as it went." As dawn drew near on June 4, from a safe but very incomplete vantage point half a mile away on an upper floor of the Beijing Hotel (from which the Monument to the People's Heroes is completely hidden from view), Simpson wrote, "We filmed the tanks as they drove over the tents. . . . Dozens of people seem to have died in that way, and those who saw it said they could hear the screams of the people inside the tents over the noise of the tanks. We filmed as the lights in the square were switched off at four a.m. They were switched on again forty minutes later, when the troops and the tanks moved toward the Monument itself, shooting first in the air and then, again, directly at the students themselves, so that the steps of the Monument and the heroic reliefs which decorated it were smashed by bullets."

As Simpson's crew was filming, Japanese photojournalist Imaeda Koichi was in the northern part of the square. Koichi reports seeing no killing there, although he also says, "I did see some students in the tents, not many, only in three of the tents." Restrepo of Television Espanola had earlier checked all the tents in the vicinity of the Goddess of Democracy and says, "I can assure you that there were not more than five people inside the tents at around 3 A.M."

Richard Nations and I also witnessed the army's advance from the north. At 5:00, from a position next to the monument, where the evacuation was continuing, we saw that the goddess had vanished. We headed back north to investigate, walking for several hundred yards through the deserted tent encampment. A long line of tanks and A.P.C.s was rumbling toward the monument, crushing everything in its path—tents, railings, boxes of provisions, bicycles. The possibility remains that a handful of students were still in the tents. The Chinese government claims soldiers checked the tents for sick or exhausted students, but we clearly saw that the advancing infantrymen walked *behind* the tanks.

Back at the monument again, five minutes later, we saw that the top level was now swarming with soldiers, their guns pointed skyward. In our absence, the writer Lao Gui had witnessed what happened: "A small detachment of soldiers dressed in camouflage uniform rushed up to the monument, occupied the top of it and fired incessantly into the

air. . . . Soon, there was no more sound from the broadcast station. The soldiers had shot the loudspeakers apart." The Spanish crew was also there when the commandos stormed the top level; they saw no killings. Claudia Rosett and Imaeda Koichi concur, although Kenneth Qiang told me later that one student on the second level had been shot in the leg. (A widely circulated Hong Kong magazine, *Chai Ling Zibai Shu*, quoted Qiang as saying he had seen "twenty to thirty students in a row at the front mowed down by gunfire"; this, he says, was a pure invention by the magazine.) By 5:30, the students had left the square. Moving back at precisely the same speed as the advancing A.P.C.s, they extracted every last ounce of moral victory from their retreat.

Lingering doubts about a small group of students who may have remained on the top level of the monument are dispelled by a recent remarkable eyewitness account by Yu Shuo, a former professor at People's University who now lives in exile in Paris. "As I was talking to [an army] officer," she says, "I suddenly realized that I was the last person left at the monument. As I walked down the terrace, I saw a line of characters on the relief: 'On June 4, 1989, the Chinese people shed their blood and died for democracy.' As I turned around, I saw that a soldier was about to pierce a bed with his bayonet. I saw two feet sticking out from it. . . . I rushed forward and dragged the feet. A boy fell down from the bed; he was not completely awake yet. He was the last student to leave the square."

It will probably never be firmly established what happened to the only two other significant groups of people left in the square at that late hour. One was the medical team from Beijing United Medical College; they were the last people seen by a South American diplomat as he left the square at 5:20. The second was a small crowd of *laobaixing* outside the Great Hall of the People. Richard Roth and Derek William were amazed to see these people still there when the journalists were brought out at 5:30.

The two Americans were driven by jeep directly across the square to the Children's Cultural Palace just to the northeast, where they were detained for about eighteen hours. "We saw no bodies in the square," Williams recollects. His account of this short ride is crucial: It seems inconceivable that the troops would have taken foreign journalists through the square if, as was widely rumored, they were busy covertly disposing of dead bodies at the time.

By now it was broad daylight; the evacuation was complete. At the southern end of the square, Nations and I witnessed one final skirmish between stone throwers and soldiers who opened fire before running off with the crowd on their heels. We finally decided it

was time to get the hell out. As far as we can ascertain, we were the last foreigners to leave Tiananmen Square. It was 6:15.

Epilogue

After fifty days of occupation by the pro-democracy movement, the square had finally been "returned to the people." But still the killing did not stop. As the student column wound its way slowly to the northwest, about half a mile from the square at the Liubukou intersection, four tanks came hurtling down Changan Boulevard and crushed eleven of them to death. Shortly afterward, troops repeatedly fired on unarmed protesters just west of the Beijing Hotel, killing dozens. An unknown number of *laobaixing* were summarily executed in the days that followed, as troops combed the alleyways of Beijing looking for "hidden counterrevolutionaries."

To conclude, we should turn to two Chinese activists from last year's democracy movement, both of whom witnessed the final clearing of the square, for an answer to the question posed at the outset: Why does it matter where the massacre took place? Kong Jiesheng, a famous novelist and essayist, says: "Now, when the power-holding clique in Beijing is still unrepentant about the June 4 massacre but also sorely vexed by the criticisms and sanctions imposed by numerous countries, rebukes from outside China based on ill-founded concepts have given those vicious thugs precisely the 'spiritual shield' they so desperately need. It makes plausible their lengthy refutations of outside criticisms as being mere 'stuff and nonsense' and 'much ado about nothing'"—the very phrase used by General Secretary Jiang Zemin when asked by Barbara Walters, on ABC's *20/20* on May 18, about "the massacre in Tiananmen Square."

But Lao Gui should have the last word: "Because of hatred of the murderer, one sometimes cannot resist exaggerating the severity of the crime. This is understandable. . . . But those butchers then take advantage of this opportunity 'to clarify the truth,' using one truth to cover up ten falsehoods. They exploit the fact that no one died during the clearing of Tiananmen Square to conceal the truth that some deaths and injuries did occur there earlier. And they use the fact that there was no bloodbath in Tiananmen Square to cover up the truth about the bloodbaths in Muxidi, Nanchizi and Liubukou. Why do we give them such an opportunity?"

Robin Munro

As a researcher in 1989 for Human Rights Watch in Beijing, Robin Munro witnessed first hand the weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations in the city and the People's Liberation Army's final assault on June 3-4, 1989.