

Timeline

The Memory of Tiananmen 1989

The spring of 1989 saw the largest pro-democracy demonstration in the history of China's communist regime. The following timeline tracks how the protests began in April among university students in Beijing, spread across the nation, and ended on June 4 with a final deadly assault by an estimated force of 300,000 soldiers from People's Liberation Army (PLA). Throughout these weeks, China's top leaders were deeply divided over how to handle the unrest, with one faction advocating peaceful negotiation and another demanding a crackdown. Excerpts from their statements, drawn from [The Tiananmen Papers](#), reveal these internal divisions.

April 17



Mourners flock to Tiananmen Gate.

Tens of thousands of university students begin gathering spontaneously in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, the nation's symbolic central space. They come to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, former General

Secretary of the Communist Party. Hu had been a symbol to them of anti-corruption and political reform. In his name, the students call for press freedom and other reforms.

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April 18 - 21 Unrest Spreads

Demonstrations escalate in Beijing and spread to other cities and universities. Workers and officials join in with complaints about inflation, salaries and housing. Party leaders fear the demonstrations might lead to chaos and rebellion. One group, lead by Premier Li Peng, second-ranking in the Party hierarchy, suspects "black hands" of "bourgeois liberal elements" are working behind the scenes to undermine the government. A minority faction, led by Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, believes that "the student mainstream is good" and that their patriotism should be affirmed, "although any inappropriate methods of action should be pointed out to them."

Li argues that the protests should be "nipped in the bud;" however, Zhao convinces them to wait, stating, "Our main task right now is to be sure the memorial service for Comrade Yaobang goes off smoothly."

April 22

More than 100,000 university students assemble outside the Great Hall of the People, where Hu's memorial service is being held. Three students carry a petition of demands up the steps of the Great Hall and insist on meeting Li Peng; he does not respond. Over the next days, the students boycott classes and organize into unofficial student unions -- an illegal act in China.

April 25



Chinese Premier Li Peng

With Zhao Ziyang on a state visit to North Korea, Li Peng calls a meeting of the Politburo, a meeting dominated by Party members antagonistic to the students. They convince Party elder Deng Xiaoping, the de facto head of state, that the students aim to overthrow him and the Communist Party. Deng decides the Party has thus far been "tolerant and restrained," but the time has come for action. "We must explain to the whole Party and nation that we are facing a most serious political struggle. ... We've got to be explicit and clear in opposing this turmoil."

April 26

Editorial Denounces the Students

"The Necessity for a Clear Stand Against Turmoil," ([read the full translation](#)) appears in the state-run newspaper, the *People's Daily*. This editorial closely follows the opinions expressed by Deng at the meeting the day before. "This is a well-planned plot ... to confuse the people and throw the country into turmoil," it reads. "... Its real aim is to reject the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system at the most fundamental level."

April 27



Members of the Chinese navy demonstrate in Beijing.

The editorial sets off more demonstrations in other cities. In Tiananmen Square the ranks of protestors now include a cross-section of society. "In Beijing one in 10 of the population was joining in ... all of the old people, all the little children, so it was massive," explains [Jan Wong](#), a foreign journalist in Beijing at the time. "You had doctors and nurses and scientists and army people demonstrating. The Chinese navy was demonstrating, and I thought, 'This is extraordinary because who's left? It's just the top leaders who aren't out there.'"

April 28 - May 3 The World Is Watching

Party leaders are aware of the growing foreign press coverage of the demonstrations, but remain split over how to stop the protests and get the students to return to classes. Zhao Ziyang's camp advocates negotiation and stresses the government should address legitimate complaints, such as the need for political reform. Li Peng and his allies argue that social stability must be restored before any reforms can be considered.

May 4



Student demonstrators mark the anniversary of "May Fourth."

Tens of thousands of students march into Tiananmen Square to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 1919 "May Fourth Movement," which also took place in the square. They pledge to return to classes the next day but intend to keep pressing for reforms.

Zhao Ziyang, in a speech to foreign bankers, expresses support for the students' "patriotism" and essentially contradicts the government's April 26 editorial. This angers senior Party members.

May 5-12

Many students return to classes, and the movement is in flux and lacks clear leadership. Certain factions plan more demonstrations and a hunger strike. Meanwhile, tensions escalate within the Party as they prepare for Soviet Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's historic visit to Beijing.

Deng Xiaoping wants to settle things peacefully, but insists the students must be out of the square before Gorbachev arrives. Zhao, unable to convince the students to call off the demonstrations, begins to lose favor with the senior Party members.

May 13

Hunger Strike

Anticipating Soviet Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's visit, about 160 students begin a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, citing the government's failure to respond to their requests for dialogue. One of the printed manifestos reads: "The nation is in crisis -- beset by rampant inflation, illegal dealing by profiteering officials, abuses of power, corrupt bureaucrats, the flight of good people to other countries and deterioration of law and order. Compatriots, fellow countrymen who cherish morality, please hear our voices!"

Their hunger strike draws broad public support; many important intellectuals pledge their help. "There's such a feeling in China about food because of the thousands of years of famines that they've had," explains Jan Wong. "... So when the students went on their hunger strike, it really moved people to tears."

May 15

"Loss of Face"

Mikhail Gorbachev arrives in Beijing for the first Sino-Soviet summit since 1959, but the hunger strike forces the government to cancel plans to welcome him in Tiananmen Square. His escort is blocked by protestors on nearly every street in Beijing. "[F]or the Chinese government, [this was] a big loss of face, very scary," says [Jan Wong](#). "... They were aware of what was happening in the Soviet Union -- and so were the Chinese people -- that the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was more or less imploding. [The Party leaders] were very frightened in China."

May 16

Divided Politburo

More than 3,000 people are now participating in the hunger strike. The embarrassing protests during Gorbachev's visit further polarizes the Politburo. During an emergency meeting, Zhao maintains that the way to end the strike is for the government to retract its April 26 editorial, accept the students' demand for dialogue and begin reforms.

"[T]he vast majority of student demonstrators are patriotic and sincerely concerned for our country. We may not approve of all of their methods, but their demand to promote democracy, to deepen the reforms and to root out corruption are quite reasonable," says Zhao.

Li Peng insists the government cannot capitulate: "It's more and more clear that a tiny minority is trying to use the turmoil to reach its political goal, which is repudiation of Communist Party leadership and the socialist system." Li says. "Their goals are to topple the Chinese Communist Party ... to completely repudiate the people's democratic dictatorship."

May 17

Plans for Martial Law

When the case is put to Deng Xiaoping, he decides against Zhao's recommendations and proposes instituting martial law to end the hunger strike. "The aim ... will be to suppress the turmoil once and for all and to return things quickly to normal," he is reported to have said. "This is the unshirkable duty of the Party and the government." Zhao expresses his problems with this position but concedes: "I will submit to Party discipline; the minority does yield to the majority."

May 18

Li Peng Meets With Students

Zhao Ziyang visits hospitalized hunger strikers and tries to convince them to call off their fast. Afterward, he is reported to have drafted a letter of resignation to the Politburo, but it is never sent. Li Peng holds a televised meeting with student leaders in the Great Hall of the People ([see a map of Tiananmen Square](#)). It ends without any progress. (Read the translated [transcript](#) of the meeting.)

That evening a meeting of Party elders and Politburo members, including Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng, approves the declaration of martial law. Zhao Ziyang does not attend.

May 19

Martial Law Declared



Zhao Ziyang makes a final plea to the students.

Student leaders learn of the plan to declare martial law and call off their hunger strike. Instead, they stage a mass sit-in in Tiananmen Square that draws about 1.2 million supporters, including members of the police and military and industrial workers. Zhao Ziyang appears in Tiananmen Square in a final, unsuccessful effort to appeal for compromise. It is his last public appearance. He is soon removed from office and replaced by Jiang Zemin.

That evening, Li Peng appears on state television to declare martial law. "We must adopt firm and resolute measures to end

the turmoil swiftly, to maintain the leadership of the party as well as the socialist system." (Read a [translation of his speech.](#))

May 20

The Army Is Sent Into Beijing



Beijing citizens appeal to the PLA.

For the first time in 40 years of Communist rule, the PLA troops attempt to occupy Beijing. A huge number of civilian protestors block their convoys on the streets. Beijingers begin a dialogue with the soldiers, trying to explain to them why they shouldn't be there. "You had these ... touching moments of the people appealing to the army to join them, and feeding them, and giving them water, and saying, you know, 'Could be your son. Could be your daughter,'" says [Orville Schell](#), who was in Beijing at the time. "And [you have] these sort of doe-eyed, puzzled soldiers, who were mostly country people, weren't experienced with big city life, just wondering what was going on here. And not wanting to hurt anybody."

The soldiers have been ordered not to fire on civilians, even if provoked. They are stuck -- unable to reach the protestors in Tiananmen Square and unable to withdraw from the city -- for almost three days.

May 24

The PLA Withdraws

The troops finally are able to leave, but the government views the whole episode as another humiliation and challenge to its power. "The party leaders feared that the whole edifice of communism was going to collapse," says journalist [John Pomfret](#). "They needed to make a stand, and a bloody stand, to show their population, and in effect, to cow their population, back into submission."

May 25 - June 1 A New Offensive

Over the next week, the demonstrations continue, and Beijing operates with no real police presence and with a virtually free press. In Tiananmen Square, the atmosphere is jubilant, but at government headquarters, Deng Xiaoping is devising a new offensive to end the protest. Armed troops will be sent in from every military district in the country.

"I think the leaders felt that they had been thwarted in the most obvious and humiliating manner," says [Orville Schell](#). "[A]nd the second time around they brought in troops from far away who didn't have connections to Beijing, whose kids weren't in the square. And they decided they would brook no obstacle."

June 2

The Party elders approve the decision to put down the "counterrevolutionary riot" and clear the square with military force. Most hope it can be done without casualties. Unaware of what was about to happen, Hou Dejian, a Chinese rock star, and three prominent intellectuals start a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square. Demonstrators continue their sit-in and their calls for democratic reforms.

June 3

The Assault Begins



The PLA clashes with Beijingers.

As word spreads that hundreds of thousands of troops are approaching from all four corners of the city, Beijingers flood the streets to block them, as they had done two weeks earlier. People set up barricades at every major intersection. At about 10:30 p.m., near the Muxidi apartment buildings -- home to high-level Party officials and their families -- the citizens become aggressive as the army tries to break through their barricades. They yell at the soldiers and some throw rocks; someone sets a bus on fire. The soldiers start firing on the unarmed civilians with AK-47s loaded with battlefield ammunition.

"The first rounds of fire catch everybody by surprise," recalls human rights observer [Timothy Brook](#). "The people in the streets don't expect this to happen." The wounded are taken to nearby hospitals on bicycles and pull-carts, but the hospital staff are unequipped to deal with the severe wounds. Muxidi sees the highest casualties of the night; an untold number of people are killed.

June 4

The Massacre Continues



The last protestors leave the square.

At about 1:00 a.m., the People's Liberation Army finally reaches Tiananmen Square and waits for orders from the government. The soldiers have been told not to open fire, but they have also been told that they must clear the square by 6:00 a.m. -- with no exceptions or delays. They make a final offer of amnesty if the few thousand remaining students will leave. About 4:00 a.m., student leaders put the matter to a vote: Leave the square, or stay and face the consequences. "It was clear to me that they stay votes were much, much, much stronger," recalls eyewitness [John Pomfret](#), who was near the students. "But Feng Congde, who was a student leader at the time, said, 'The go's have it.'" The students vacate the square under the gaze of thousands of soldiers.

Later that morning, some people -- believed to be the parents of the student protestors -- try to re-enter Tiananmen Square via Chang'an Boulevard. The soldiers order them to leave, and when they don't, open fire, taking down dozens of people at a time. According to eyewitness accounts, the citizens seem not to believe the army is firing on them with real ammunition.

"[A]fter a little while, like 40 minutes, people would gather up their nerve again and would crawl back to the corner and start screaming at the soldiers, and then the commander would eventually give another signal ... and they'd shoot more in the backs," remembers journalist [Jan Wong](#), who watched it all from her hotel room above the boulevard. "And this went on more than half a dozen times in the day." When rescue workers try to approach the street to remove the wounded, they, too, are shot.

No one knows for certain how many people died over the two days. The Chinese Red Cross initially reported 2,600, then quickly retracted that figure under intense pressure from the government. The official Chinese government figure is 241 dead, including soldiers, and 7,000 wounded.

June 5

A Moment That Fascinated the World



An unidentified man stops the tanks.

By the morning of June 5, the army is in complete control of Beijing. But when all protest in the city seems silenced, the world witnessed one final act of defiance.

About midday, as a column of tanks slowly moves along Chang'an Boulevard toward Tiananmen Square, an unarmed young man carrying shopping bags suddenly steps out in front of the tanks. Instead of running over him, the first tank tries to go around, but the young man steps in front of it again. They repeat this maneuver several more times before the tank stops and turns off its motor. The young man climbs on top of the tank and speaks to the driver before jumping back down again. Soon, the young man is whisked to the side of the road by an unidentified group of people and disappears into the crowd.

To this day, who he was and what became of him remains a mystery.

Epilogue

- In the weeks following the Tiananmen massacre, Chinese officials stick with the party line that hordes of "counterrevolutionaries" rampaged in Beijing and throughout China and the government had been justified in forcefully ending the rebellion. Tens of thousands are arrested, many are imprisoned, and an unknown number are executed. The government states "not one person" was killed in Tiananmen Square and only 241 people died when PLA troops and "rioters" fought in the streets.
- In September 1989, Beijing officials set up an exhibit at the city's military museum to explain why they had to forcefully end the "anti-government riot." It features more than 4,000 exhibits: burned out tanks and armored personnel carriers, photographs of soldiers who had been burned to death or hanged from overpasses, and photos of burning buses and clashes between students and police in riot gear. There is also a film depicting the army's efforts to restore order. The exhibit features some essays on democracy written by dissident Fang Lizhi, exhibited as an example of the misguided beliefs about Chinese communism that led to the demonstrations. It was one of the most popular sections of the exhibit because Fang's writings were banned.
- On June 4, 1994, the fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, Li Peng, stills serving as Premier, announces new security regulations defining political discussions outside the Party line as sabotage.
- In June 2004, the government produces a five-hour documentary on the Tiananmen 1989 protests, portraying them as "counterrevolutionary rebellion," and requiring officials around the country to view it.

Sources:

Research for this timeline was drawn from FRONTLINE's reporting for the "The Tank Man," its previous 1996 program "[The Gate of Heavenly Peace](#)," and *The Tiananmen Papers*, published in 2001 and edited by Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link.