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"The personality cult must be ended now!"

Paint-bombs at Tiananmen Square

The outcome of the Tiananmen Square demonstration in June 1989 is well known. Less so is the fate of the three young men who threw paint bombs at the portrait of Mao Tse-tung hanging over the gate to the Forbidden City. Wolfgang Kraushaar chronicles events.

23 May 1989: In China, a student-led democracy movement is gathering momentum. It had begun one month before in the capital and from there had spread throughout the entire country. Its activities are centred on the Tiananmen, the Square of Heavenly Peace in Peking.

Not only is this where Mao Tse-tung proclaimed the People's Republic on 1 October 1949, it is also the site of the mausoleum in which, as if to warn against forgetting the achievements of the Long March, the embalmed corpse of the former communist party leader and head of state is contained. It's no coincidence that the activists have chosen this place to publicize their demands. Tiananmen is simultaneously a forum, a tribune, and a tribunal. Since 13 May, several thousand people have been holding a hunger strike in an attempt to force the government to enter into dialogue with the protesters. Without success.

On 20 May, the State Council places parts of the capital under a state of emergency. The command signed by the premier Li Peng, which invokes article 89, paragraph 16 of the Chinese constitution, states that:

For the duration of the state of emergency, demonstrations, student strikes, industrial walkouts and all activities that disturb public order are forbidden. It is forbidden to start or to spread rumours, to conspire, to make speeches in public, to distribute leaflets or to stir up social unrest. Expressly forbidden are attacks against the leadership of the party, government and army as well as against radio and television stations or communications facilities, and sabotage of important public supply operations. Brawling, vandalism, theft, arson, or other forms of destruction will not be tolerated. Disturbances to foreign embassies or to agencies of the United Nations are forbidden. For the duration of the state of emergency, security officers and soldiers of the People's Liberation Army are authorized to employ any means necessary, including the use of force, to prevent forbidden activities.

From now on, it's clear to the protesters that a massive deployment of state force is hanging over them like a Damocles Sword. Fear begins to spread through their ranks. This is borne out only the next day, when military units appear on the outskirts of the city. In response, students erect barricades at various traffic junctions in order to hinder the advance of troops into the city centre. They are aware from the outset, however, that they will not be able to hold up a single soldier. The blockades are meant symbolically and thus no more than an appeal that their demands for more democracy are heard and that violence is renounced. Disagreement grows among the Autonomous Association of Students over how to react to the new situation and the unmistakable threats. Yet, while the centre of the democracy movement finds itself in an open crisis, rallies and demonstrations have spread to 131 cities.



The three dissidents (source: en.epochtimes.com)

Throughout the 23 May, ten thousand young people, primarily students, meet at Peking main station. They have travelled from the provinces in order to be at the side of their comrades. Among them are the twenty-one year old journalist Yu Dongyue, the mechanic Lu Decheng, and the schoolteacher Yu Zhijian. The three come from the province of Hunan in central China, the birthplace of the Great Chairman, and considered to be the cradle of the revolution. They have brought two banners, which they unfurl at the gates of the Forbidden City, the former palace of the Chinese Emperor. These read: "5000 years of autocracy must cease now!", and: "The personality cult must be ended now!" However that is not enough. In order to emphasize the seriousness of their slogans, they throw several paint bombs at the giant Mao portrait that adorns the gate as a legacy of the Chinese revolution. The bombs, filled with red, blue and yellow paint, hit their target. They burst onto the canvas, leaving ugly marks on the countenance of the Great Chairman, who in China is revered as a God. It is more than a provocation, it is sacrilege — at any rate in the eyes of the Chinese leadership and the population. The outrage is immediately obvious to most of the student activists. Concerned to prevent the symbolic attack being seen as a welcome opportunity for military intervention, they therefore decide to arrest the three paint-bomb throwers themselves and turn them over to the police. The three students from the provinces are immediately taken away and disappear into prison cells somewhere. The stained portrait of the revolutionary and state founder is replaced with a new one in a matter of hours.

The next day, the Headquarters for the Defence of the Tiananmen Square, a group founded by the activists, conducts a kind of ceremony at which the hundred thousand pro-democracy demonstrators still gathered there make a pledge. In festive spirit they repeat the words of their spokesperson Chai Ling: "In order to encourage the democratization of the motherland, to preserve the dignity of the constitution, to protect the great motherland from the scheming of a handful of conspirators, to prevent the bloodshed of 1.1 billion compatriots under a military reign of terror, and to guarantee that millions of children are able to thrive in an atmosphere of freedom and democracy, I swear until death to devote my life and my loyalty to defending Tiananmen Square, the capital Peking, and the Republic. Fight to the end against all adversity!" Even more spectacular is the unveiling the next day of a huge plaster statue called the "Goddess of Democracy"; with torch in hand, it is unmistakably modelled on the American Statue of Liberty. Both pledge and statue represent involuntary testaments of failure.

Some months later — by this time the democracy movement has long since been violently crushed at the cost of hundreds if not thousands of lives — the three paint-bombers are tried for "counter-revolutionary agitation". On 11 August, the middle people's court in Peking sentences them to long prison sentences. According to the court, "In an act of counter-revolutionary sabotage carried out in broad daylight, they defiled the great portrait of Chairman Mao that hangs from the Tiananmen tower, as well as the brickwork." The three convicts are taken to Lingling prison in Hunan. It is part of a huge labour camp. After that, nothing is heard from them.

Three years later a renowned daily newspaper alerts the international public to the case. On 1 June 1992, the *New York Times* reports that the three prisoners have been tortured and that two of them have had to spend the last thirty months in strict solitary confinement. Yu Zhijian, it is reported, has lost so much weight over this period that he resembles a skeleton. The article cites a report from Asia Watch, a subsidiary of Human Rights Watch.

One of the organizations that campaigns most strongly for a release of Yu Dongyue is the Dresden branch of the German section of Amnesty International. On 4 June 1994, the fifth anniversary of the so-called Tiananmen massacre, it stages a demonstration. As the ear-splitting noise of machine-gun fire sounds from the loudspeakers of a bus parked nearby, the Dresden human rights activists fall theatrically to the ground. Their bodies are then lined up alongside one another and covered with a sheet bearing the words: "4.6.1989 massacre in Peking". The demonstration is supposed to allude to the approval expressed by the East German communist party (SED) towards its Chinese sister party after the latter's clampdown on the Chinese democracy movement. A series of solidarity demonstrations are carried out in Dresden over the following years, including an information event at the Semperoper and an air balloon demonstration on Pragerstraße.

Lu Decheng is the first to be released in 1999, after ten years imprisonment. The following year Yu Zhijian is also freed after eleven years. Seven years later, Lu is able to travel to Calgary in Canada via Thailand. In an interview with the *Epoch Times*, he describes for the first time what the intentions of the three young men were. In spring 1989 they had lost all hope and confidence in the Chinese Communist Party. In order to articulate their frustration publicly, they carried out the paint-bomb attack: "We wanted to demonstrate our complete refusal of the authority of the CP at its very roots — Chairman Mao." The protest was not directed against Mao personally, however. For them it was merely a question of targeting the Communist Party system. Even now, Lu does not regret his participation in this protest and would continue the course he embarked upon in 1989.

On February 2006, the last of the three prisoners, Yu Dongyue, is finally released. He has served seventeen of his twenty year sentence, most recently in Chisan prison, likewise part of a labour camp. Western newspapers speculate that his release is connected to Chinese President Hu Jintao's forthcoming trip to the US. The EU welcomes the release while at the same time demanding that, as a Chinese citizen, his rights be returned to him in full. It also calls for an investigation into the claims that he has been tortured in prison. Should they turn be confirmed, it must be seen to immediately that such practices are abolished.

When the German journalist Harald Maass, correspondent for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, attempts to make contact with Yu's family, who live in the district

of Shegang, he is told that the 38-year old cannot receive visitors. It is explained to him is that Yu "is mentally disturbed and no longer recognizes his family". Apparently, at the party held to celebrate his release from prison, when presented by his mother with his favourite dish, Xihongshi Jidan, an omelette with tomatoes, not so much as a smile crossed Yu's face. In short, he cannot not remember anything or anyone. Commenting on the tragic case of the Chinese dissident, Maas observes that in the eyes of the Chinese justice authorities, Yu committed a far more heinous crime than defiling the memory of Chairman Mao. He had, over all the years, refused to admit his guilt. "Up to this day, the Chinese system demands that prisoners must under all circumstances show remorse. Whoever refuses is systematically destroyed. According to the reports of fellow prisoners, Yu was regularly beaten. His head was 'a mass of scars', according to the human rights organization Amnesty International. On one occasion he was tied to a post and left in the sun for several days, before being shut away for two more years of solitary confinement. At some point, Yu, who later found himself in province prison number one, went mad." From a confident editor he has become a mentally and physically broken man. Mostly he sits rigid in front of the television, now and then uttering confused words. He is strictly forbidden from having contact with foreign journalists. In the case of Yu Dongyue, however, this ban is long redundant. He has paid for his political tenacity with the destruction of his person.

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