

Back to Beijing

Timothy Brook takes a second look at the 1989 massacre

"The incident is now known to all," Timothy Brook opens *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*. "On the night of June 3, 1989, tens of thousands of soldiers armed with assault rifles forced their way into the city of Beijing and drove unarmed student protesters from the central square at Tiananmen. When hundreds of thousands of citizens and students blocked their paths, the soldiers opened fire. On the morning of June 4, thousands lay dead and dying in the streets, the hospitals, and the homes of Beijing."

Brook, a Toronto historian, spent two years researching the first comprehensive and impartial history of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He interviewed hundreds of participants, officials and eyewitnesses, and took a more critical look at some of the figures and events reported in the Western and Chinese media.

Brook visited *Excilbur* this month and spoke to Harry Rudolfs about his book.

Harry Rudolfs: How successful has the Chinese government been at covering up the number of people who died?

Timothy Brook: Oh, every newspaper, every journalist in Beijing uses the phrase "hundreds if not thousands died in Beijing." That phrase is repeated all the time. It means that people at the time thought it was thousands, the government says hundreds, you don't have any proof, therefore you have to allow the Chinese government's figure to stand.

The Chinese government has, I think, convinced a lot of Chinese that it was in the hundreds. Underground — or not so much underground — the rumour mill has the massacre in the thousands. But the government has it in the hundreds, and the international press has pretty well fallen into line with that. One of the things I wanted to do in the book was to establish a reasonable estimate for the number of people killed.

But it can't be in the hundreds, it just can't be. I think that's important.

Somebody made this point in an article shortly after the massacre: "The numbers don't matter. The event itself was an atrocity, the numbers don't matter."

But on the other hand, yes they *do* matter. You need to take account of what people have done, governments have done.

Did you have difficulty getting the statistics on deaths?

A lot of people, if you will, died out of sight. If you were shot or killed and friends or relatives were with you, they pulled your corpse away and they hid you; they got you out of the city, they buried you or whatever you did, so that your family or friends wouldn't be implicated in having been involved in the massacre.

The other problem we face here, with numbers, is that most of the people I talked to were intellectuals.

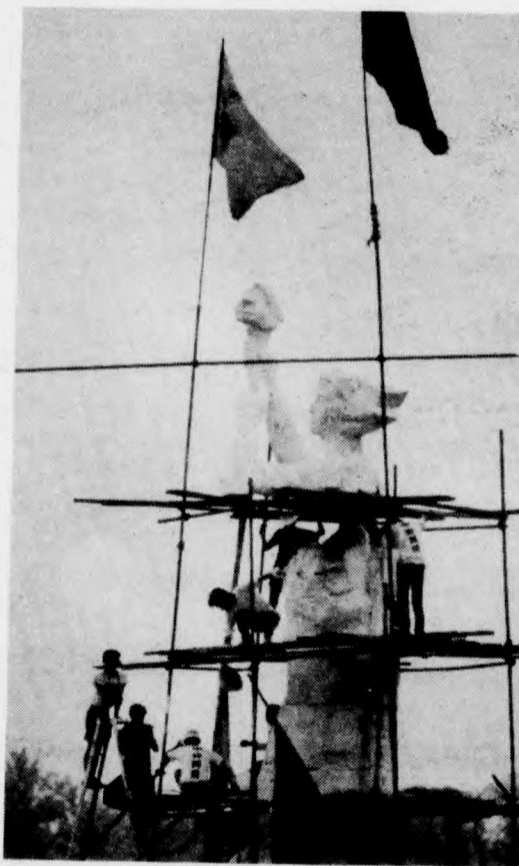
Most of the people who died in the streets were workers. They were not university students, they were just ordinary folks from the city who went out to support the students and defend them.

Those people are very anonymous from a foreign point of view — we can't know who they are. Accordingly, when I talk to students and intellectuals they may say, well, I personally don't know anybody who was

killed. That's because most of the people were workers and not part of the same social circle.

Were the workers and average people who joined with the students severely disciplined?

I know that the first police investigations were to nab worker-activists. The communist party's great fear is that the workers will become politicized. It's quite hilarious. They know enough Marxism to know that if the



workers abandon you you're dead.

Any workers who were activists were rounded up very, very quickly. Within the first week of the massacre. The workers tended to be the most radical. They're the ones who attempted to steal weapons, and try and hide weapons with the idea of using them again.

At first the students were calling for an end to corruption. How did things progress from there?

The students pushed then for open dialogue with the government on some fairly modest demands. The government resisted and

resisted and resisted. The more there was resistance to dialogue, on the part of the government, the more radical became the student demands for political change.

What pushed it over the top was probably the hunger strike in the middle of May. Certainly that is what garnered the support of the average folks on the street of Beijing. They saw students ready to commit suicide in order to work for some kind of a political opening in the country. So it emotionalized the issue. Ordinary people got involved and started backing the students.

It's at that point that the government lost any ability to see a way out of this problem they had created by refusing to deal directly with the students.

The students never really called for an end to socialism — in fact, according to your book, they were playing the *Internationale* right up until the end.

Yeah, yeah, the heart of the movement was really a reform of socialism, not an end to socialism. And the *Internationale* became the hymn of the movement because it expressed the great ideals of nineteenth-century socialism that they felt had been lost, that the Chinese communist party had turned its back on.

And I think there's a part in your book where the tanks are shooting out the loudspeakers...

... Yeah, as they're playing the *Internationale*.

Now, eventually, once the army moved in, some of the students get very angry and call for the end of socialism. It's too late now, they said. The Chinese leadership has shown that socialism doesn't work in China.

They remained a minority. I think most Chinese students felt they wanted to be a loyal opposition to the party. They were not calling for an overthrow of the party. Of course, by the time the guns started firing, then a lot of people changed their minds and it's left this kind of demoralization among Chinese people.

It's interesting when early society pulls this doublethink or tries to remake history, you go from being a patriot to a rebel.

Yes, And I think many of the leaders of the democracy movement have hope that there will be a reversal of verdict on this, and that they will appear in the end to be the heroes.

There is a precedent for this. In 1976, after Premier Chou En Lai died, there were demonstrations that resulted in people being killed and arrested and then within three years the verdict on this was reversed. It was admitted that this was not a counter-revolutionary incident, it was revolutionary and the people involved in it were heroes. That was 13 years prior to 1989, so there's some hope that the 1989 incident will be handled, eventually, in the same way.

Certainly it's the government's hope that gradually time will wear down any concern about the democracy movement and it'll just become something in the past — people won't care anymore.

Could it come back to haunt the party leaders?

It could, yeah. I think that as long as Deng Xiaoping is in power, everybody from the leadership on down to the common people

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Timothy Brook stands in front of York's replica of the Goddess of Democracy statue. The original Goddess (right) was erected by Chinese students during the Beijing democracy demonstrations in 1989. It was destroyed by soldiers during the slaughter that followed.

• Photo by Matt J. Chromecki