

NEW YORK TIMES
30-May 2019

New Documents Show Power Games Behind China's Tiananmen Crackdown *New Documents Show Power Games Behind China's Tiananmen Crackdown*

By Chris Buckley

BEIJING — One by one, China's shaken leaders spoke up, denouncing the student protesters who had occupied Tiananmen Square until the army rolled in. They heaped scorn on Zhao Ziyang, the Communist Party leader purged for being soft on the demonstrators, and blamed the upheaval on subversives backed by the United States.

This scene was played out among Chinese Communist Party leaders soon after troops and tanks crushed pro-democracy protests on June 3-4, 1989, according to a collection of previously secret party speeches and statements published Friday in Hong Kong.

“Kill those who should be killed, sentence those who should be sentenced,” Wang Zhen, a veteran Communist with a famously fiery temper, said of the party's opponents, according to the collection, “The Last Secret: The Final Documents From the June Fourth Crackdown.”

The newly published documents lay bare how after the massacre, party leaders quickly set about reinforcing a worldview that casts the party and China as menaced by malign and secretive forces. It is an outlook that continues to shape Chinese politics under Xi Jinping, the party leader facing off with President Trump in a trade war.

“This view that China, and to be more specific and accurate the Chinese Communist Party, is surrounded by enemies has been dominant since 1989,” said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University and author of “China Tomorrow: Democracy or Dictatorship?”

The upheavals of 1989 are barely mentioned these days in China; censorship and security controls silence efforts at public commemoration. But that time left a deep mark on politics.

Students occupied Tiananmen Square after the April 1989 death of Hu Yaobang, a reformist party leader who had been sidelined, and their protests evolved into a passionate movement for cleaner government and more democratic rights.

Mr. Zhao and his supporters favored defusing the protests through negotiations. But hard-liners prevailed, and pushed Mr. Zhao from power. Overnight on June 3, 1989, soldiers fatally shot hundreds, maybe thousands, of protesters and bystanders in Beijing, and bloody confrontations erupted in other Chinese cities.

The 209 pages of documents emerged from meetings called in June 1989 to consolidate support for the armed suppression. Each official stepped in line behind Deng Xiaoping, the elderly leader who ordered the crackdown, and each denounced Mr. Zhao, the Communist Party general secretary ousted for favoring compromise to end the months of protests.

“Dictatorship has its own tools; it’s not just lip service or something propped up there to admire — it’s there to be used,” said Bo Yibo, another powerful veteran official, in the collection issued by New Century Press, a small publisher that has defied China’s efforts to censor books about that time.

The comments suggest how close the leaders felt the Communist Party came to losing control.

“At that time the party had simply become an underground party, and our government also went underground,” Chen Xitong, the mayor of Beijing who defended the armed crackdown, told the other officials. “We were hemmed in everywhere.”

That deep-seated fear explains why the party moves quickly to crush any semblance of social unrest, most recently by quashing a small group of students who turned to militant Marxism as a solution to China’s yawning inequalities.

Even officials such as Hu Qili and Yan Mingfu who had backed Mr. Zhao’s more moderate policies turned on him, often criticizing him for poor leadership, said Warren Sun, an expert on Chinese Communist Party history at Monash University in Australia.

Bao Pu, the publisher of New Century Press whose father is a former top aide to Mr. Zhao, said “the ultimate secret found in these documents is how the party has this mechanism so that officials disregard their own beliefs and morals, and obey the No. 1 leader.”

“When Deng Xiaoping shows his cards, everyone falls into line,” he said.

Since coming to power in 2012, Mr. Xi has redoubled demands for obedience to himself as the top leader, and entrenched his power in 2018 by abolishing a term limit on the presidency, meaning that he can hold power indefinitely.

The new collection of documents joins a succession of books smuggled out of China that have shed light on the upheavals of 1989, a subject that the Communist Party subjects to ruthless censorship.

In 2001, scholars published “The Tiananmen Papers,” a collection of reports and documents that drew controversy, especially because some researchers challenged the authenticity of its accounts of high-level meetings. Mr. Bao, the publisher in Hong Kong, also helped issue the memoirs of Mr. Zhao, the fallen party leader, and a diary-like account by Li Peng, the Chinese premier who energetically supported the crackdown on the protests.

The new collection showed how Chinese officials asserted the view that China was threatened by subversive forces from abroad, particularly the United States. The public security minister singled out George Soros — still a target of conspiracy theories — as a supporter of liberal party officials.

“In demonizing domestic critics and exaggerating the role of foreign forces, the victorious conservatives revealed their blindness to the real problems affecting the regime,” Andrew J. Nathan, a professor of Chinese politics, writes in an introduction to the documents. While the hard-line officials acknowledged public ire about inflation and corruption, they treated political demands for more open government as nothing more than a tool of Western subversion.

For all the vitriol directed at Western influence in the newly published speeches, Deng, the party patriarch, wanted China to plow ahead with opening up to foreign investment. The officials were quick to voice their support.

“As for this fear that foreigners will stop investing, I’m not afraid,” Mr. Wang, the elderly party leader, said. “Foreign capitalists are out to make money, and they’ll never abandon a big market for the world like China.”