



The Tibetan Uprising of 1959: Resource Guide

Created by:

Emily Breniman, Lauren Elkins, Kaden Hendrick, Tristan Carr, Kristyn Haughn, Kade Fetterolf

Edited by:

Céline Kennard

¹ Tibetans demonstrate in front of the United Nations headquarters, on March 31, 1959 in New York. Photo: AFP.

Context:

Sino-Tibetan relations go back to the 13th century when China and Tibet were integrated into the expanding Mongol Empire and existed as part of the “Great Khanate,” the portion of the empire which contained Tibet, China, and most of East Asia, known to the Chinese as the Yuan Dynasty. Throughout the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Tibet remained Chinese territory with a small amount of independence throughout the years. Eventually, when the Qing emperor was overthrown, China formed a republic and the Tibetan government took the opportunity to claim independence, ruling autonomously from 1912-1950. Despite this declaration of independence, the Chinese government did not recognize Tibet as a country and believed it to be rightfully theirs.² Tibet provided a much needed water source and a mining industry from which the Chinese government could profit.³

During the time of Tibet’s independence the nation was largely isolated, allowing for a culture free from excessive outside influence. Religion—particularly Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism—was and is heavily present in Tibetan culture.⁴ The Dalai Lama, believed to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, and the reincarnation of a past

² Nina Shen Rastogi, “Why Does China Care About Tibet?” Slate. March 28, 2008. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2008/03/why-does-china-care-about-tibet-and-when-are-monks-allowed-to-get-violent.html>.

³ Rastogi, “Why Does China Care About Tibet?”

⁴ Michael van Walt van Praag, “Learn a Little About Tibet,” University of Massachusetts. <https://www.umass.edu/rso/fretibet/education.html>.

lama, is both the spiritual and political leader of the country.⁵ There have only been fourteen Dalai Lamas in Buddhist history, the current being Tenzin Gyatso, who was only fifteen at the time of the invasion.⁶

In 1950, the People's Republic of China sent troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to invade Tibet, to which the Tibetan government responded a year later by consenting to sign a treaty securing the power of the PRC over Tibet's affairs.⁷ However, China's occupancy was unwelcome and tensions rose over the years with several revolts taking place in 1956 and in 1958. In response to these revolts, the PLA threatened to bomb the city of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Tensions only grew when rumors surfaced of a plot to kidnap the Dalai Lama and take him to Beijing. Thus, when Tenzin Gyatso was invited to come alone to the PLA headquarters for a "theatrical performance and official tea," the uprising of March 1959 was set into motion.⁸

On March 10th, 300,000 Tibetans surrounded the Norbulingka Palace in an attempt to intercept the Dalai Lama's acceptance of the invitation. On March 17th, PLA officers aimed their weapons at the palace, an action which led Tenzin Gyatso to evacuate to India where he remains in exile today. Fighting began two days later, however the Tibetans were outnumbered and outgunned and on March 21st, the PLA attacked Norbulingka, slaughtering thousands of men, women, and children who were still camped outside. In the aftermath, the PLA executed the Dalai Lama's guards and destroyed Lhasa's major monasteries and many of their inhabitants.⁹

⁵ "The Dalai Lama," BBC. September 21, 2009.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml.

⁶ "The Dalai Lama," BBC.

⁷ "Tibetans Revolt against Chinese occupation," History.

⁸ "Tibetans Revolt against Chinese occupation," History.

⁹ "Tibetans Revolt against Chinese occupation," History.

Timeline of Events [1950 - Present Day]:

1. The UK House of Commons agrees to recognition of China's dominion/claim over Tibet, on the condition that Tibet remains entirely autonomous – June 1950
2. The People's Liberation Army invades Chamdo, surrounding and outnumbering the Tibetan forces – October 7th, 1950
3. Tibetan representatives meet with government officials in Beijing to negotiate the Seventeen Point Agreement, allowing the PLA's entrance into Tibet, on the condition that they retain and respect the nation's pre-established systems – May 23rd, 1951
4. The Seventeen Point Agreement is ratified by the 14th Dalai Lama – October 24th, 1951
5. The Tibetan Uprising of 1959 begins – March 10th, 1959
6. Tibetan protestors take to the streets of Lhasa to rebel against invading Chinese forces and begin fortifying the city – March 12th, 1959
7. Tibetan Women gather in a peaceful demonstration of resistance in front of the Potala Palace of Lhasa in an event that would be later referred to as Women's Uprising Day. The leader of these women, Pamo Kusang would help spark future demonstrations of the same sort as well as the movement towards women's independence in Tibet – March 12th, 1959

8. Chinese artillery is placed within the effective range to attack Norbulingka – March 12th, 1959

9. Tibetan women stage another demonstration in front of Potala Palace, this time led by “Gurteng Kunsang” who was imprisoned and eventually executed in 1970 – March 14th, 1959

10. Preparations for the Dalai Lama’s evacuation from Lhasa to India were set into motion as Tibetan soldiers looked to secure a route – March 15th, 1959

11. Areas nearing the Dalai Lama’s palace are attacked, leading to the hastening of his escape from Tibet – March 17th, 1959

12. The Dalai Lama is secretly escorted out of Tibet with his family and some officials in the middle of the night to flee for shelter in India, arriving there on March 31st – March 18th, 1959

13. In response to protestors seizing some Chinese machine guns, Norbulingka is attacked in an effort to disperse/kill any present rebels – March 20th, 1959

14. The last battle of resistance between the People’s Liberation Army and the Tibetan Rebels is fought in Jokhang, lasting three hours and resulting in the PLA’s victory and capture of Jokhang – March 23rd, 1959

15. Choekyi Gyaltsen, the 10th Panchen Lama of Tibet calls on all Tibetans to support the invading Chinese government – April 1959

16. The Panchen Lama retracts his statement made in April following his return and visit of Tibet, and writes the document known as the 70,000 Character Petition, a criticism of the PRC's abuse of Tibetans – May 18th, 1962

17. The Buddhist monk, Palden Gyatso, is arrested by Chinese officials for his participation in the demonstrations in March. He spends 33 years in imprisonment as Chinese “re-education” camps until he is released in the year 1992 – June 1959

18. The International Commission of Jurists provides a report known as the Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic to the United Nations. Within this report China is accused of the attempted genocide of the Tibetan people as well as other massacres, torture, murder, attacks of monasteries, and extermination of some Tibetan sub-groups. Alongside these claims was the infraction of sixteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – 1960

19. The TAR or Tibet Autonomous Region is officially established after being under the government of the Dalai Lama from 1951 to 1959 – 1965

20. The Middle Way Approach is developed to aid in putting Sino-Tibetan conflict to rest and is further elaborated when presented to Parliament - 1973

21. The Cultural Revolution or Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution leads to destruction in Tibet. As a result, less than ten of Tibet's original monasteries remain – 1966 to 1976

22. Delegates from the exile government of the TAR visit their homeland, received by their people with tears and kindness. Amongst this group, the Dalai Lama's brother also returned to Tibet for a time – 1970 to 1980

23. The Dalai Lama delivers his address to the European Parliament, requesting their intervention, and presenting the Strasbourg Proposal of 1988, elaborates on the Middle Way Approach method for seeking reconciliation between China and Tibet – June 15th, 1988

24. The 10th Panchen Lama, Choekyi Gyaltsen passes away – January 28th, 1989

25. The Dalai Lama names 6-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima the 11th Panchen without consulting the government of China, leading to the PRC naming Gyaincain Norbu as the 11th Panchen Lama though he is denied and rejected by exiled Tibetans or those not living amongst a primarily Chinese population in certain sectors of Tibet – May 14th, 1995

26. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama as named by the 14th Dalai Lama, disappears along with his family and has not been found or heard from since – May 17th, 1995

27. Tibetan protests erupt on a large-scale alongside many other international protests during the Olympic torch relay that would end in Beijing during the Summer Olympics – 2008

28. During the observance of the events of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising Day, marches consisting of

multiple different monasteries would begin their march through Lhasa on March 10th. These marches were eventually met with militaristic forces from the PRC, eventually leading to clashes between the two groups causing shootings, beatings, fires, and arrest to be made – March 14th, 2008

29. A young Tibetan monk by the name of Tapey hailing from the Kirti Monastery sets himself on fire in protest of Chinese oppression in the marketplace of Ngawa City – February 27th, 2009

30. Following Tapey's example, as of July 2020, a reported 156 monks, nuns, and average Tibetans have committed to self-immolation in protest and defiance of Chinese influence and oppression – February 2009 to Present day

Historical Bios:

14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, also known as Gyalwa Rinpoche

Born July 6, 1935 to a farming family, he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama at the age of two. At the age of six his monastic education began.

Following the invasion in 1950, the Dalai Lama assumed full political power. In 1954 he met with Mao Zedong and other Chinese officials, however the tension remained. In 1959 after the suppression of the Tibetan Uprising by the Chinese military, the Dalai Lama was forced into exile alongside over 100,000 Tibetans. Since then he has lived in Dharamsala in Northern India.

The 14th Dalai Lama has since been a prominent figure in politics and activism, traveling the world, receiving many awards, publishing many books, and fighting for peace.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Brief Biography," His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/brief-biography>.

Mao Zedong

Born December 2, 1893 to a peasant family in Hunan province. He graduated from university to become a teacher and began working at a university library. Here, he began reading Marxist literature and in 1921 helped to found the Chinese Communist Party.

After the opposing nationalist party, the Kuomintang, launched an anti-communist campaign, Mao and his comrades retreated to the southeast. During World War II these opposing groups briefly worked together, but soon afterwards their conflict resumed. The CCP was victorious and Mao Zedong established as the People's Republic of China's leader in 1949. Only one year after the PRC's founding, Mao Zedong ordered the initial invasion of Tibet.

After much internal strife in the 1960s and the death of over 1.5 million people during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong attempted during the 1970s to improve international relations. However, following a series of heart attacks, Mao died on September 9th, 1976.¹¹

Key Texts and Photos:

1. A peasant Tibetan, Nangsan Nyima, showing his first new dress in 69 years to his friend. This photo was found on a website that describes the invasion of Tibet as “democratic reform.” Photo by Lan Zhigui



¹¹ “Historic Figures: Mao Zedong,” BBC, 2014, https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/mao_zedong.shtml.

2. Armed Chinese Soldiers and Tibetan Monks



3. Tse-tung, Mao. “On the Policies for Our Work in Tibet -- Directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.” Transcript by The Maoist Documentation Project.

Marxist.Org.

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_20.htm

4. Dalai Lama. “1961 Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the Second Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day.” Dalailama.com.

<https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/10th-march-archive/1961>

Discussion Questions:

- (1) Nangasan Nyima photo: This photo makes the argument that Tibetans benefited from the PRC’s occupation. How does the photo benefit the PRC’s narrative about Tibet?
- (2) 1961 Speech: In this speech, the Dalai Lama states that the Tibetan people “reasserted their Tibetan independence.” How does this statement from the Dalai Lama counter arguments made by the PRC?
- (3) What does the Armed Chinese Soldiers photo tell us about the Tibetan Uprising?
- (4) How can the image of the Armed Chinese Soldiers present the perspective of both the

Tibetans and the Chinese?

(5) How does the narrative differ between the 1961 speech from the Dalai Lama and the Selective Works from Mao Zedong?

Further Reading:

Michael van Walt van Praag, "Learn a Little About Tibet," University of Massachusetts.

<https://www.umass.edu/rso/fretibet/education.html>.

This article provides basic information about Tibet, its early history, the invasion, and the contemporary situation. The source of information for this article came from Michael C. van Walt van Praag, who studies international law and his published work, *The Status of Tibet: History, Rights and Prospects in International Law*.

"The Dalai Lama," BBC. September 21, 2009.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml.

This article discusses the Dalai Lama and Tibet's belief system, including the process by which Dalai Lamas are chosen.

"Tibetans Revolt against Chinese occupation," History. A&E Television Network, November 24, 2009, last updated March 8, 2021.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/rebellion-in-tibet>.

This article contains a brief yet informative recap of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, including the invasion of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950 and the events that would eventually lead up to the uprising in 1959.