



Tibet in Agony: Lhasa 1959

Jianglin Li

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The Chinese Communist government has twice invoked large-scale military might to crush popular uprisings in capital cities. The second incident—the notorious massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989—is well known. The first, thirty years earlier in Tibet, remains little understood today. Yet in wages of destruction, bloodshed, and trampling of human rights, the tragic toll of March 1959 surpassed Tiananmen.

Tibet in Agony provides the first clear historical account of the Chinese crackdown in Lhasa. Sifting facts from the distortions of propaganda and partisan politics, Jianglin Li reconstructs a chronology of events that lays to rest lingering questions about what happened in those fate-filled days and why. Her story begins with throngs of Tibetan demonstrators who—fearful that Chinese authorities were planning to abduct the Dalai Lama, their beloved leader—formed a protective ring around his palace. On the night of March 17, he fled in disguise, only to reemerge in India weeks later to set up a government in exile. But no peaceful resolution awaited Tibet. The Chinese army soon began shelling Lhasa, inflicting thousands of casualties and ravaging heritage sites in the bombardment and the infantry onslaught that followed. Unable to resist this show of force, the Tibetans capitulated, putting Mao Zedong in a position to fulfill his long-cherished dream of bringing Tibet under the Communist yoke.

Li's extensive investigation, including eyewitness interviews and examination of classified government records, tells a gripping story of a crisis whose aftershocks continue to rattle the region today.

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