

EXCHANGE.

KILLING THEIR CHILDREN

Canberra, New South Wales, Australia

Robin Munro's excellent description of the Tiananmen massacre ["Who Died in Beijing, and Why," June 11] provides a carefully reasoned account of many of the events of that night. We do not question Munro's eyewitness observations, nor his analysis that the government made a sharp distinction between students and workers and singled out the working class for the terror of that night. (Members of the working class also received the brunt of the mistreatment in the months that followed, as discussed in our *Nation* article of January 22.) We are convinced, though, that Munro is in error on one essential point. Strong evidence is available that students retreating south through Tiananmen Square were set upon by troops sometime between 5 and 5:30 A.M., and that a substantial number of young people were killed or wounded.

By Munro's account, he and journalist Richard Nations had been watching the first contingents of students peacefully leaving the Monument to the People's Heroes at the center of the square at 5 A.M. when the journalists noticed that the statue of the Goddess of Democracy had disappeared from view. They walked north several hundred yards through the tent city to investigate. Munro writes that a phalanx of tanks rolled past them toward the monument, crushing everything in its way. By the time Munro and Nations had returned to the vicinity of the monument, it was aswarm with soldiers, and students no longer were in evidence. Munro apparently was on the northern side of the monument, trapped amid the milling troops and the cacophony of many dozens of tanks, entirely out of sight and sound of the students retreating hundreds of yards to the southeast.

Accounts of what Munro missed are revealed in a recording taped later that morning by an Australian student at one of Beijing's universities as his Chinese schoolmates returned to campus from the square. A dozen voices spontaneously recount to one another the horrors they have just experienced. Very similar accounts were provided in mid-June 1989 by Hong Kong university students who were among the last group of evacuees from the square.

These eyewitness accounts agree that impatient troops stormed the monument to evict the students who remained, most of whom were on the northern steps and atop the monument, either waiting their turn or determined never to leave. At first the troops climbing the monument steps shot over the students' heads at the student loudspeaker system, but some of the soldiers soon lowered their sights. One of the students from Hong Kong had seen a student

shot next to him, and as he clambered down the southern steps of the monument desperately trying to help carry the dying student, a second student fell wounded beside him.

Several of the students on the tape had already left the monument, but were near the tail end of the column. They were attacked and beaten by troops, and in the melee students fell and were trampled by those behind. As one of the student voices notes, "A lot of people were stampeded to death at the end. During the retreat from the square there was chaos." The assault by the troops soon escalated into gunfire. One of the accounts on the tape tells a harrowing story:

"At 4 A.M. the lights in the square had been turned off. Then the troops surrounded us. When the lights went on again, many of the students heaved a sigh of relief and let down their vigilance. Some even returned to their tents to catch a nap. But then tanks moved into formation in a solid row and rapidly rolled right over the tents. The students who'd gone into the tents must all have been crushed. Then soldiers picked up the poles from the collapsed tents and rushed toward us and started beating us.

"I was at the edge of the column, trailing behind. There were also a lot of female students at the back. Their heads had been beaten bloody and they were screaming and crying. When the soldiers came at us they struck at our heads with their rifle butts. . . .

"I started running, alongside a huge fellow from Beijing University. He stopped to help pull some students to their feet so they wouldn't get squashed. This was because in front of us a lot of students had already fallen to the ground and the ones at the back were stamping over them. Many were already dead. From the sides, the soldiers were shooting. A lot of students fell with the shots. Then, in order to avoid more casualties, we tried to hold back the students coming from behind. Told them not to rush forward. Then we saw the military police coming up close behind. They were slashing their way through. I was chased over to a place where there was a pile of dead bodies."

The Chinese government, confident that there were no outside witnesses to these events, has claimed repeatedly to the world that no students were killed during their withdrawal from the square. The eyewitness accounts presented here, and many others that we have in our files, give the lie to such claims. Quite terrible events, it is clear, occurred in the square that night. *Anita Chan*
Jonathan Unger

MUNRO REPLIES

Beijing

The new evidence presented by Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger of killings of students by troops during the final clearing of the

square must be carefully and seriously considered. These accounts are flatly contradicted, however, by what Richard Nations and I actually saw, and also by all the eyewitness evidence—which comes from trained observers: Chinese as well as Western journalists—that we have since been able to piece together. The student accounts cited by Chan and Unger are indeed harrowing; but for the most part they are clearly not true.

First, the notion that Nations and I "missed" the alleged atrocities is wrong. We were absent from the monument for no more than five minutes. We were not "trapped" behind troop lines, "entirely out of sight and sound of the students retreating." Nor were we cut off by tanks. We arrived back at the monument well ahead of the approaching armored line. And contrary to what Chan and Unger assume, several hundred students were still on the monument at that time; only the top level was in fact "aswarm with soldiers."

Second, journalists who witnessed, from all angles, the events on and around the monument during our five-minute absence to the north (these included Claudia Rosett of *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, Fermín Rodríguez and José Luis Márquez of *Televisión Española*, John Pomfret of the Associated Press and the Chinese writer and journalist Lao Gui) all agree that no killing, panic, "trampling-to-death stampede" or even serious injury occurred—although like ourselves it was their expectation of just such an eventuality that led them to remain on the scene in the first place. If Chan and Unger's claim of killings on the monument is correct, then they need to explain an improbable conspiracy of silence on the part not only of these journalists but also of the students themselves. Some students certainly were pushed and beaten as the troops stormed the top level. But upon our return to the monument, from where the evacuation was still slowly proceeding, Nations and I talked to numerous students, including picket marshals who were actually organizing the retreat. Not one of them reported that any students had just been killed.

Third, Nations and I retreated to the east side of the Mao Mausoleum, from where we finally lost sight of the monument, just in back of the single picket line that was protecting the last of the student evacuees. We remained there for a further half-hour, long after the departing student column had left the square entirely, by which time it was daylight and only a small crowd of some 50 to 100 people still stood around. Since the only exit from the square at this time was through the southeast corner, via the east side of the mausoleum, any student survivors of the alleged killings would necessarily have passed right by us. Chan and Unger specify
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that the killings occurred “sometime between 5 and 5:30 A.M.” But Nations and I did not leave the square until 6:15. Even if we had missed seeing the fleeing survivors, it is scarcely possible that no one else in the small crowd, which remained remarkably relaxed, would have seen them.

Chan and Unger insist that “quite terrible events” occurred in the square during the student evacuation. As a longstanding and outspoken critic of the Chinese authorities’ appalling human rights record, I find it invidious to have to record otherwise. A massacre certainly occurred elsewhere in Beijing that night. But Nations and I were in the square. Chan and Unger were not.

Robin Munro