

CHAPTER 17

The June 7th Massacre

JUNE 7, 1968 was one of the most brutal and chilling massacres of all, and one the Tibetan people will never be able to forget. As the conflict between the two Cultural Revolution factions became increasingly bitter with even the military taking sides, the TMD forces gave all kinds of support to the Nyamdrel and in their hatred for the Gyenlok faction, they were ready to confront them on any convenient pretext. On the morning of May 27, 1968, the corpse of a Chinese member of Gyenlok and employee of the Tibet long-distance telegraph office, who had been secretly detained by Nyamdrel a few days earlier, was found dumped outside Nangtsé-shak [the former courthouse] on the north Parkor street. I actually saw that shrouded corpse on my way to work that morning. From what people said, the body not only bore the signs of torture but also had nails driven into the crown of the head and soles of the feet. Word spread that it had been brought by two members of Nyamdrel's Farmers and Pastoralists Command on the back of a bicycle and dumped there. The Gyenlok were furious and held an emergency meeting where they announced that debts of blood should be repaid in kind, the loudspeakers on the roofs of the Gyenlok bases started to play mourning music and rallying songs, and people were fearful as they heard the rumble of preparations for retaliation coming from those bases. Ordinary citizens tried to buy their provisions in the morning, since by noon the two factions started hurling insults and accusations through loudspeakers and shooting at each other, and no one went out in the streets. At that time, the Tsukla-khang temple was occupied by Gyenlok, and since the place where I worked was nearby, I could clearly hear their loudspeakers roughly cursing Nyamdrel over the murder.

Then, on June 7, I heard the sound of gunfire and the occasional grenade being thrown during the morning, paid no attention, and went on sawing timber, but by three o'clock in the afternoon when the noise of machine-gun fire and grenades exploding around the Tsukla-khang intensified, the foreman of the timber yard told us to pack up our tools at once and go home. Even before we had packed up, the gunfire became louder still. Walking through the Parkor on my way home, I did not see a single other person, and as I headed apprehensively toward the meat market, I clearly saw bullets fired from the rooftop of the old Surkhang house hitting the door panel of a shop. When I got to the meat market there was a crowd of people standing and looking back toward the Parkor. I tried to ask what had happened in the Tsukla-khang, but learned only that there had been a violent battle and did not get any of the details.

Sometime after I got home and the noise of gunfire around the temple could no longer be heard, the relatives of a neighbor of ours, a meat seller, whose cousin was among the Gyenlok faction occupying the Tsukla-khang together with the spouses of two of our other neighbors, gathered in an agitated state, and we wondered what had happened. Then, just as it was getting dark, the cousin arrived with his mother leading him by the hand. A little while later, when the sound of weeping came from our other neighbors, it was apparent that their spouses had been killed, wounded, arrested, or come to some other kind of harm.

It is inevitable that people get killed and wounded in conflict and that one side prevails over the other, but on that occasion, rather than wondering which side had won, people found the events too dreadful to contemplate, so a terrifying story went around that the PLA had slaughtered Tibetans in the Lhasa Tsukla-khang. A few years later it happened that Tubten Lodro, the cousin of our meat seller neighbor, and I were in the same group of workers breaking rocks, and he told us in detail the story of how he had survived the hail of bullets when Chinese soldiers launched an attack on the temple. This was his account:

We had gathered in the Tsukla-khang at that point because it was occupied by the propaganda subcommittee of the Gyenlok number 4 command (*Si ling pu'u bzhi pa*), and the reason we insisted on occupying it, against the wishes of the Lhasa people, was that the Tsukla-khang is the tallest and the most central building in the city, and loudspeakers positioned on its roof could be heard in all quarters, which was an important advantage in the propaganda war. While the two

factions were locked in confrontation, one of the main objectives in the struggle was to destroy or capture [the opponent's] propaganda departments and equipment, and Gyenlok had mounted several attacks on Nyamdrel's Farmers and Pastoralists Command based in the former Gyu-mé monastery, which was one of their propaganda units. Nyamdrel made loud boasts that they would destroy the Gyenlok propaganda subcommittee in the Tsukla-khang, and in their announcements they repeatedly threatened us with annihilation and in particular made threats against some of our propaganda personnel.

Therefore, the main reason for gathering at the Tsukla-khang was to defend our propaganda subcommittee, and there were also many taking refuge there because they could not remain at home in the face of their threats. However, in terms of arms and other resources, we were no match for the Nyamdrel because they had the support of the TMD and most of their members held positions of political and economic power in government departments. Some of the Gyenlok were schoolteachers, but most were just ordinary workers, and except for a few teachers from people's schools (*dMangs btsugs slob grva*) and a few leaders of city neighborhood committees who belonged to the Gyenlok side, those gathered at the Tsukla-khang were just ordinary citizens. Only a few were armed and there were many women. Moreover, we did not announce or call either directly or indirectly for any other agenda than the defense of the Cultural Revolution, the defense of Red political power, national unity, and Chairman Mao's thought, and while we were aware of the possibility of an attack by Nyamdrel's Farmers and Pastoralists Command on our propaganda subcommittee, none of us would have believed that the PLA itself would come and crush us mercilessly. That is something I find incredible even now.

Anyway, on June 7, Nyamdrel began firing continuously into the Tsukla-khang from neighboring buildings like the old Samdrup Potrang, Do-ring, and Jutéling houses so we could not get out onto the roof and had to stay on the middle floor. A little after midday, when the noise of gunfire had subsided a little and we went out onto the roof, PLA soldiers came jumping across the rooftops of adjacent buildings, Méru-nying, Ga-tro-shak, and Jam-khang, and in an instant there were soldiers all over the roof of the Tsukla-khang. We were in no position to take on the army, and even if we had been able to do so, opposing the army would have been contrary to our revolutionary stand.

At the same time, we were confident that as long as we did not oppose them the army would not just attack us at will, so those of us in the temple stood together holding up the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* and chanted slogans from the *Quotations* in unison, like “Revolution is no crime, to rise up is justified” and “The people respect the army, the army looks after the people.” It did us no good. One of the army commanders fired his pistol in the air, whereupon the soldiers fired machine guns and whatever weapons they had straight into the group standing there. Some of us were hit and fell to the ground, and others fled to either side.

I fell to the ground and pretended to be dead, and after the soldiers had kicked us a few times, they went after those who had scattered and fled, throwing grenades or shooting at anything at all in the darkness of the temple, and for a while the air was filled with the noise of their shouts, explosions, and gunfire. Lying there on the ground, I felt something wet and cold on my cheek, and when I touched it to see what it was, my hand became red with blood. I assumed I must have sustained a serious wound, although I felt no pain, which I thought was because of being so terrified, but in fact the blood on my face had dripped from the dead bodies on either side and I had not been injured at all. The soldiers went through all three floors of the temple, arresting the Gyenlok supporters and beating them as they led them away, even the wounded. Those who were wounded screamed from the pain, and some of them called out pleading to be killed rather than endure it. Once the soldiers had carried out their suppression and gathered all their [detainees] together, the Nyamdrel supporters came and beat them again, and some who had not been seriously wounded so far were crippled by the beatings they were given at that time. Most horrific of all was a girl who had been shot in the abdomen and was sitting with her hand covering the wound to prevent the intestines spilling out, until the Nyamdrel kicked and stamped on her belly and her intestines poured out into her lap. I too was kicked and struck with rifle butts many times, and seeing the behavior of the soldiers and the Nyamdrel, I never imagined that I would survive. Later on when things had calmed down, the family members, spouses, children, and parents, of those occupying the temple gathered outside the door, and after the soldiers gave permission, a group of us went back to our homes accompanied by our relatives. My mother came and took me home.

He told us stories of that episode more than once, in a voice choked with emotion. In any case, the soldiers slaughtered a total of fifteen Tibetans on that occasion, both men and women, and many more were wounded so severely that they never recovered. The bodies of those killed were taken to the Lhasa Mentsi-khang [hospital] together with the wounded, and the corpses were left there until the central government's Cultural Revolution Subcommittee reached a decision concerning the incident. Since it was summer, the corpses rotted and residents in the vicinity of the Mentsi-khang were exposed to an unbearable stench.

Differing accounts of that military crackdown circulated in society at large. According to one that enjoyed wide currency, the method used by Nyamdrel and the TMD to defeat and eliminate the Gyenlok faction was to produce allegations that could justify a crackdown on the grounds that they were endangering the security of the southwest border of the Motherland, which the army was responsible for safeguarding. Thus, the earlier incident of the murdered corpse dumped in the Parkor was intended to provoke the Gyenlok, but when no extreme reaction was forthcoming, the second step was to take advantage of popular resentment against the Gyenlok propaganda subcommittee occupying the Tsukla-khang to do something even more daring: massacre the occupants on the pretext of expelling them by public demand. They were confident that this would provoke an extreme reaction from the Gyenlok, which would allow the [military] to crack down on them once and for all.

While there may have been differing standpoints and objectives among the actual members of Nyamdrel and Gyenlok, since in general both factions stood for the defense of Red political power and Mao Zedong's thought, the differences between them excited no sympathy among the Tibetan public. Nonetheless, to mercilessly slaughter a group of ordinary Tibetans without any warning in the course of securing a strategic objective was to treat Tibetan lives as less valuable even than the lives of beasts, something to be disposed of at will, and that is why Tibetans referred to this incident as the "June 7th massacre." For some time afterward, the Tsukla-khang was occupied by Chinese soldiers who used several of the chapels as toilets and pigsties, and the main temple hall (*dKyil 'khor mthil*) was turned into a slaughterhouse where yaks, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens were butchered.

Then people focused all their attention on the decision the central government's Cultural Revolution Subcommittee would reach concerning the incident. If they were to exonerate the army's massacre of Tibetans and declare Gyenlok a counterrevolutionary organization, Gyenlok was not

going to lay down its weapons and bow down in homage. The character of the organization could change if it were to be excluded [i.e., not designated counterrevolutionary], and then there would be an excuse for those alienated from the Chinese government to stage an uprising, and some hoped that this would happen. But the subcommittee ruled that a couple of the army commanders involved in the incident had made errors, and a few of the leaders concerned were transferred to positions elsewhere. Both factions were recognized as revolutionary organizations, those who had lost their lives in the Tsukla-khang were lauded as “fallen revolutionary heroes,” and their rotten corpses were put in a tomb in one corner of the Chinese mausoleum (*Dur khang*) west of Lhasa with a tombstone inscribed, MAY FALLEN HEROES NEVER DIE. Their relatives were awarded compensation of 2,000 or 1,500 *yuan* according to the number of children in the family, and the wounded were given medical expenses and nominal compensation, so the anticipated confrontation between two factions divided over substantial issues never came to pass.

As there was no subsidence of the ongoing conflict, the Gyenlok, having learned their lesson, preempted a further offensive against them by concentrating their fighters and weapons at bases such as Yabshi Taktser, old Yu-tok, Mentsi-khang, and Tengyé-ling. In this deteriorating situation, most of the people at the carpentry cooperative where I worked went to fight with Nyamdrel, while the remainder, the elderly and the few individuals capable of thinking for themselves, could not face the prospect of staying where they were and moved the cooperative's work to a printing workshop in the TMD headquarters west of the city, so I went along with them. Inside the army base we were at no particular risk from the conflict, but there were repeated outbreaks of heavy fighting around Lhasa, and even the main commercial street, known as the People's Street, where we had to go every fortnight or so to collect our *tsampa* ration, was impassable. Once when we got there, we found some construction workers and a few others, unable to proceed and wondering what to do next. Finally, with all the builders carrying their gear and wearing battered straw hats, aprons, and gloves, and together with the children, women, and old people, we walked straight onto the main street. At the lower end, to either side of the main entrance to the TAR government compound, were the Nyamdrel fighters carrying various firearms and hand grenades, occupying sandbagged barricades, while at the upper end of the street, on either side of the Mentsi-khang, were similarly armed Gyenlok fighters. A few armed men approached us menacingly and angrily demanded, “Which side do you belong to?”

“We are class enemies,” we replied with an air of desperation, “with no opinion either way.”

Some of them even showed concern, saying, “How do you dare enter such a dangerous place? You’d be better off keeping a low profile.”

For several weeks during the Chinese military anniversary that year, there was no way to go into Lhasa even to collect rations, and we had to wait to be given the army’s leftovers. All the same, apart from the difficulty of those supply trips into Lhasa, being able to work in the safety of the army compound during those months of fierce fighting and have an income, I was doing better than I had been for several years.

Sometime after, there was some respite in the factional fighting in China, which had been the principal factor behind the fighting in Tibet, and the central government Cultural Revolution Subcommittee summoned representatives of both factions in Tibet to address them on the need to bring the conflict to an end. At the same time, the chairman of the central government’s Tibet Work Committee, Zhang Guohua, whose status had been the main issue over which the factions had divided in the first place, was posted elsewhere in China, and the past errors committed by a few leaders such as Wang Qimei were acknowledged. Military leaders like the TMD political commissar Ren Rong and general Zeng Yongya were put in charge of the Tibet Work Committee and the autonomous region [government], and the fighting gradually died down.

The Cultural Revolution campaign itself was still not over, however, and those workplaces that had closed down remained closed, so employment was as hard to come by as before. Moreover, since overall productivity, transportation, and so on had been severely affected during the troubles, apart from stockpiled commodities, everyday necessities were extremely scarce, and on the occasions when the shops had sugar, molasses, cigarettes, soap, candles, and so on for sale, the shop staff would clandestinely inform their relatives and friends that such and such an item would be available on a certain day, and they in turn would inform their own friends and associates, so word traveled from one person to the next and when the day came there would be a big crowd waiting at the door. The quantities of the commodity on sale were never sufficient for all the people who came to buy, so inevitably they would jostle with each other, the glass display cabinets and tables in the shop would get broken, many people would lose their purses, and children and the infirm would be injured in the crush. After that, the shops had to start dispensing such commodities through a small window opening onto the street, so as not to have a ruckus inside.

The item in greatest demand was lighting. In the old days, electricity was not widespread in Tibet, and people used kerosene lanterns, candles, or oil lamps, according to what was available. These things had to be brought from India by traders, but they could be readily bought in the shops at any time of day. After the imposition of Communist rule, once the Nga-chen power station was completed, houses in the city were wired to receive electricity, but it was only for show. While the Chinese compounds always had electricity, ordinary dwellings in the city got a very weak supply for no more than ten days a month, and often none at all during winter and spring when the water level was lower. Candles and kerosene were nowhere to be found, and if lamp fuel was especially needed it would have to come out of the monthly ration of half a pound of edible oil. We had no choice but to use the thick lubricating oil meant for vehicle maintenance and engine oil dregs and suchlike, although the smoke not only covered everything in the house in black soot but also went in our lungs, so the phlegm we coughed up turned completely black. It was rare to find Tibetans in good physical health at that time, and this was one of the reasons. The construction of the Nga-chen power station was one of the main examples used by the Chinese in their claim to be developing Tibet and improving living standards, but if a detailed account of how Tibetans suffered and lost their lives in the construction of that power station were to be given, who could fail to be shocked? In reality, all the power stations, bridges, highways, and hospitals in their list of development achievements benefited only the Chinese themselves, and the fact that Tibetans benefited not at all can clearly be seen from the difficulty we had in being able to light a lamp after dark.

The next stage in the conflict between the two factions was a competition to expose “counterrevolutionary organizations” and “undercover spies,” and those among us “class enemies” with bad political records, and especially those who were formerly in contact with foreigners, were rounded up at once by Nyamdrel and detained in a so-called “study group” in the Pabongka Labrang. Gyenlok then immediately detained a similar group of “class enemies” in Tengyé-ling, and both sides tried to uncover underground groups and spies by investigation, interrogation, and intimidation. Not only that, but during the two or three months they were there the detainees had to have food brought to them by family members, so their families also had to bear the hardships and expenses of their mistreatment.

Since the start of the Cultural Revolution, the category of people to be prosecuted under the slogan “Strengthen the proletarian dictatorship” had been widened, legal criteria [for prosecution] had been suspended altogether—

er, and the implementation of any leftist agenda whatsoever went ahead, so courts and prisons everywhere were filled to capacity and the investigation, detention, incarceration, and punishment of alleged offenders was permitted. Since any criticism was “opposing [Party] policy” and would result in the critic being “hatted” for “lacking commitment,” no one could say anything. The neighborhood committee leaders who treated the “class enemies” in their charge with utmost cruelty had the confidence of the higher authorities, and the more zealous ones made their “class enemies” stay in the evening political education meetings until midnight on the pretext of “class struggle” and “proletarian dictatorship” and made them do unpaid work during the day, for which they had to bring their own provisions.

To give a general list of the unpaid jobs they were given: first, in early spring when everyone did willow planting, the “class enemies” had to spend many days cutting the willow shoots in advance, then of course they had to join the ordinary people in planting them, but they also had to make up for all the planted shoots that failed to take root, so just the spring willow planting gave them about a month’s work. Then there was “helping out” with the spring sowing, starting with clearing out the irrigation channels and spreading manure on the fields, then weeding, watering, and so on, which added up to about three weeks. During the summer rains they had to fix the leaking roofs in the committee building and clear the drains in the streets, and in the autumn they had to “help out” with the harvest, from cutting the crop right up to storing it in the granary once the threshing was over, which added up to two or three months. All year round, cleaning and sweeping up inside and outside the committee building and washing the streets was a task imposed on “class enemies,” and for a time, so was emptying the toilets in each committee area. Similarly, it was their duty to make black borders and canopies on the house walls where Mao’s slogans were painted, repaint them after the summer rains, and maintain them. This was a much more onerous task for “class enemies” in the countryside than for those in the city: there are still slogans like MAY CHAIRMAN MAO LIVE FOR 10,000 YEARS and Mao’s quotations written in Chinese characters on the mountainside using white stones that can be seen from several miles away, which was something small groups of “class enemies” were forced to do. Similarly, the walls erected on either side of the highway, half a mile apart in some places, inscribed with Mao’s quotations and finished with black borders and rain canopies, were certainly the compulsory work of “class enemies” in that area. Otherwise, they were continually obliged to perform various occasional unpaid tasks in the name of “helping out the community,” such as

repairing the leaders' own houses or cutting firewood, and this practice of obligatory unpaid work went on more or less until the time of Mao's death.

Since those were the prevailing conditions at the time, some brazen characters who called themselves "the laboring masses" would tell any "class enemies" in slightly better accommodations than themselves that they had to swap. According to their own whim, using the threat of force, and regardless of whether the occupants agreed or not, they would set a deadline to vacate their houses. They would move their own things into the houses of individual "class enemies" and simply take possession of items like storage trunks that the occupants could not move out immediately, just like bandits. In our Banak-shöl neighborhood committee there were many cases of "class enemies" being forced to swap houses, something made possible by the policies of the Chinese Communists.