

## **The Lhasa Uprising: March 10, 1959** **Sequence of Events**

By: Tseten Samdup

### **Background**

Chinese troops first entered Tibet in 1950 and by October the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had penetrated Tibetan territory as far as Chamdo, the capital of Kham province. The region was routed and the Governor, Ngawang Jigme Ngabo, was taken prisoner. The same year Chinese forces were also infiltrating Tibet's north-eastern border province, Amdo.

The same year, the 15-year-old Dalai Lama, his entourage and select government officials, evacuated the capital and set up a provisional administration near the Indian border at Yatung. In July 1951 they were persuaded by Chinese officials to return to Lhasa. Nevertheless, on September 9, 1951 3000 Chinese troupes marched into the capital.

By 1954, 222,000 members of the PLA were stationed in Tibet. In April 1956, the Chinese inaugurated the Preparatory Committee for the Autonomous Region of Tibet (PCART) in Lhasa, headed by the Dalai Lama and ostensibly convened to modernize the country and bring about democratic reforms. In effect, it was a rubber stamp committee set up to validate Chinese policy in the region.

In the late fifties, Lhasa became increasingly politicized and a non-violent resistance movement evolved, organized by "Mimang Tsongdu", a popular and spontaneous citizens' group. Posters denouncing the occupation went up and stones and dried yak dung were hurled at Chinese street parades. During this period, when the directive from Beijing was still to woo Tibetans rather than oppress them, only the more extreme Mimang Tsongdu leaders and orators faced arrest.

### **The First Resistance**

In February 1956, revolt broke out in several areas in Eastern Tibet and heavy casualties were inflicted on Chinese troops by local Kham and Amdo guerrilla forces. Chinese troops were relocated from western to eastern Tibet to strengthen their forces to 100,000 and "clear up the rebels". Attempts to disarm the Khampas provoked such violent resistance that the Chinese decided to take sterner measures. The PLA then began bombing and pillaging monasteries in Eastern Tibet arresting lay people, monks and guerrilla leaders and publicly torturing and executing them to discourage the large-scale resistance there were facing.

In Lhasa, 30,000 PLA troops maintained a wary eye as refugees from the fighting in distant Kham and Amdo swelled the population by around 10,000 and formed camps on the city's perimeter.

By December 1958, revolt was simmering and the Chinese military command was threatening to bomb Lhasa and the Dalai Lama's palace if the unrest was not contained. To Lhasa's south and northeast, 20,000 guerrillas and several thousand civilians were engaging with Chinese troops.

### **Lhasa Revolts**

On March 1, 1959, while the Dalai Lama was preoccupied with taking his final Master of Metaphysics examination, two junior Chinese army officers visited him at the sacred Jokhang cathedral and pressed him to confirm a date on which he could attend a theatrical performance and tea at the Chinese Army Headquarters in Lhasa. He said he would fix a date when the examination ceremonies had been completed.

George Patterson, Northern India correspondent for the Daily Telegraph wrote, "This was an extraordinary occurrence for two reasons: one, the invitation was not conveyed through the Kashag (the Cabinet) as it should have been; and two, the party was not at the palace where such functions would normally have been held, but at the military headquarters – and the Dalai Lama had been asked to attend alone".<sup>1</sup>

On March 7, 1959, the interpreter of General Tan Kuan-sen, one of the three military leaders in Lhasa, telephoned the Chief Official Abbot demanding the date on which the Dalai Lama would attend their army camp events. March 10 was confirmed.

On March 8, 1959, Women's Day, the Patriotic Women's Association was treated to a harangue by General Tan Kuan-sen in which he threatened to shell and destroy monasteries if the Khampa guerrillas refused to surrender. Mrs. Rinchen Dolma Taring writes in her biography, "... we knew that the ordinary people of Lhasa were being driven to open rebellion against the Chinese – though they would have to fight machine-guns with their bare hands".<sup>2</sup>

On March 9, 1959, Brigadier Fu summoned the Commander of the Dalai Lama's bodyguard and told him that on the following day there was to be no customary ceremony as the Dalai Lama moved from the Norbulinka summer palace to the army headquarters, two miles beyond. No armed bodyguard was to escort him and no Tibetan soldiers would be allowed beyond the Stone Bridge – a landmark on the perimeter of the sprawling army camp. Fu also ordered that the event was to be kept secret.

Nevertheless word quickly spread through Lhasa. By **March 10, 1959**, over 100,000 Tibetans had surrounded the Norbulinka palace, forming a human sea of protection for their Yeshe Norbu (Precious Jewel). They feared he would be abducted to Beijing to attend the upcoming Chinese National Assembly and never permitted to return to Tibet. This mobilization forced the Dalai Lama to cancel acceptance of the army leader's invitation and a stalemate prevailed.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tibet in Revolt*, George Patterson, Faber and Faber, London, 1959

<sup>2</sup> *Daughter of Tibet*, Rinchen Dolma Taring, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1970

On March 12, 1959, 5,000 Tibetan women took to the streets to demonstrate carrying banners demanding “Tibet for Tibetans” and shouting “from today Tibet is independent”. They presented an appeal for help to the Indian Consulate-General in Lhasa.

Mimang Tsongdu members and their supporters had erected barricades in Lhasa’s narrow streets while the Chinese militia had positioned sandbag fortifications for machine guns on the city’s flat rooftops. Three thousand Tibetans in Lhasa signed up to join the rebels manning the valley’s ring of mountains.

### **The Escape of the Dalai Lama**

On March 15, 1959, Chinese heavy artillery was seen being moved to sites within range of Lhasa and particularly the Norbulinka. Rumours were rife of more troops being flown in from China. By nightfall Lhasa residents were certain that the Dalai Lama’s palace was about to be shelled.

At approximately 4:00 pm. on March 17, the Chinese fired two mortar shells at the Norbulinka. They landed short of the palace walls in a marsh. This triggered the Dalai Lama to finally decide to leave Lhasa. In his autobiography he writes, “There was no certainty that escape was physically possible at all – Ngabo had assured us it was not. If I did escape from Lhasa, where was I to go, and how could I reach asylum?”<sup>3</sup>

At 10 pm. on the night of March 17, wearing a soldier’s uniform with a gun slung over his shoulder, the Dalai Lama marched out of the Norbulinka and onto the danger-filled road to India and freedom. His mother and elder sister had preceded him, dressed as Khampa men; his youngest brother disguised as a pint-sized soldier.

Late on the night of March 19, 1959 fighting broke out in Lhasa. Hand-to-hand combat raged for two days with the odds stacked hopelessly against the poorly equipped and inexperienced Tibetan resistance. Veteran Daily Mail war correspondent, Noel Barber, dubbed Lhasa’s March 20, 1959 “Bloody Friday”.

The Norbulinka was bombarded by 800 shells on March 21. Thousands of men, women and children camped around the place wall were slaughtered and the homes of about 300 government officials within the walls were destroyed. In the aftermath, 200 members of the Dalai Lama’s bodyguard were disarmed and publicly executed by machine-gun. Lhasa’s major monasteries, Ganden, Sera and Drepung were shelled – the latter to beyond repair. Monastic treasures and precious scriptures were destroyed. Thousands of monks were either killed on the spot, transported to the city to work as slave labour, or deported. In house-to-house searches the residents of homes harbouring arms were dragged out and shot on the spot.

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<sup>3</sup> *My Land and My People*, The Dalai Lama, Panther Books, UK, 1962

The number of dead from the 1959 Lhasa Uprising and the city's subsequent fall has never been substantiated. "No figures are available", writes George Patterson, "but more than 10,000 Lhasa Tibetans are known to have disappeared; either killed or sent into forced labour in other parts."<sup>4</sup>

On April 18, 1959, the Dalai Lama, his mother, sister, brother, three cabinet ministers and approximately 80 other Tibetans crossed safely into India at Tezpur, Assam. There they were greeted by Indian officials and a press corps of nearly 200 correspondents, all eager for what they later called "The Story of the Century".

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*Tseten Samdup is a former communications officer for the Office of Tibet, UK and is currently co-editor of World Tibet Network News (WTN). Samdup lives and works in Mumbai, India.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Tibet in Revolt*, George Patterson,