

At China's Ministry of Truth, History Is Quickly Rewritten

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES JUNE 12, 1989

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In the week since the bloody crackdown on the democracy movement in Beijing, the Chinese propaganda machinery has been put into full swing, seeking to transform the event into a heroic operation that saved the country from "a counterrevolutionary plot."

Here in Shanghai and in every other city in China, the newspapers and television stations have mounted a barrage of film clips, interviews and statements from leaders portraying accounts of the crackdown by diplomats, foreign journalists and witnesses as "rumors."

The bloody massacre described in the foreign press - and in foreign radio broadcasts beamed at China - never took place, Chinese news reports say. According to the official television stations and newspapers, what actually occurred was a largely peaceful operation, vigorously supported by public opinion, aimed at "quelling the turmoil" brought about by "a small number of bad elements."

Rewriting History

The campaign is reminiscent of past efforts in this country to rewrite history. The difference this time is that the rewriting is taking place within days of the historic event itself.

An extraordinary series of broadcasts over several nights on national television

illustrates the tone of the propaganda effort. For two nights, both the early and late evening news programs broadcast segments of a street interview done by ABC News in Beijing shortly after the army's assaults. A man is shown being interviewed, his voice rising with anger and his arms imitating the motion of a machine gun, as he describes a scene of terrible carnage committed, he says, by the army.

"Tanks and armored personnel carriers rolled over students, squashing them into jam, and the soldiers shot at them and hit them with clubs," the man was shown telling an American interviewer. "When students fainted, the troops killed them. After they died, the troops fired one more bullet into them. They also used bayonets. They were too cruel. I never saw such things before."

A caption on the bottom of the screen during the interview identifies the man as "somebody spreading rumors about the cleanup of Tiananmen Square." After the man speaks, the news announcer warns the public to beware of believing such rumors, then says that the man is wanted by the police and he appeals to the public to turn him in. Taken Into Custody

Tonight, the national news showed the same man, looking haggard and terrified, in police custody, retracting in front of the cameras what he had said to ABC News. The news announcer says that the man, whose name he gives as Xiao Bin, identifying him as an unemployed 42-year-old factory worker, was turned in one hour after the appeal to the public by two shop assistants who recognized him from his picture. They said they caught him in the act of telling someone that 20,000 people had been killed in the military crackdown.

"I never saw anything," Mr. Xiao says of the Beijing crackdown. He goes on, his head bowed, "I apologize for bringing great harm to the party and the country." He also admitted that he was a counterrevolutionary. [ABC News, in a statement issued in New York on Sunday, said, "We are deeply distressed to learn that in this instance the Chinese authorities intercepted unedited news material that was being satellited, and used it for political purposes."] Television broadcasts such as this one are being shown all across China, generally twice each night on news programs that have expanded from a half-hour to 90 minutes.

In essence, the official version of the events is this: The troops arrived in Tiananmen Square about 4 A.M. on Sunday morning, June 4. The protesting students who were camped out on the square withdrew quickly, so that after only about half an hour the operation was complete. Television footage accompanying

this account showed soldiers in the early morning peacefully beginning the task of cleaning up the debris left over from the long occupation of the square.

In a televised interview, Yuan Mu, the official Government spokesman, claimed that at most 300 people were killed in the operation, most of them soldiers. An army commander standing nearby then said that "not a single student was killed." An Unanswered Question

Neither man explained how the dissidents, if they were only "a very small group," nonetheless managed to kill up to 300 heavily armed soldiers and to disable or destroy dozens of tanks, armored personnel carriers and trucks.

Early in the propaganda campaign, television reports showed pictures of the mutilated and burned bodies of soldiers. For the last few days, there have been segments on the news programs showing local Beijing leaders visiting wounded soldiers in the hospital.

A heavily bandaged soldier interviewed on television tonight described in detail how his unit was attacked by "hooligans" with clubs and metal rods. All during the week, individuals described as witnesses have testified on television that the army's behavior was disciplined and orderly and that they were attacked by hooligans.

Chinese television has not shown scenes of families grieving over the deaths of loved ones in the crackdown or images of hospitals full of civilian dead and wounded. Both were frequently shown in foreign reporting of the army crackdown. Is the Propaganda Working? Instead, people arrested since the crackdown, often looking bruised and exhausted, have been shown on television admitting that they instigated the violence by attacking troops. Chinese journalists have conducted interviews in the streets of many cities and inside factories in which citizens express their "anger" at the "foreign rumors" concerning the Beijing operation.

"Seeing the true reports of how a very small group of people attacked our People's Liberation Army made me very angry," said one man interviewed on a street in the city of Wuhan. Textile workers in Shijiazhuang, south of Beijing, also expressed "anger."

It remains unclear whether the Government's propaganda is effectively countering contrary versions of events that are available through a large number of other sources. These include efforts by students to disperse to other cities and give their own accounts of the Beijing crackdown, which stress indiscriminate firing by the army at unarmed civilians and heavy loss of life among students and others.

Wall and shop windows in cities like Shanghai have been full of reproductions of Hong Kong Chinese newspapers containing full accounts and numerous photographs of the Tiananmen incident. In the last couple of days, virtually all of them have been torn down and the Chinese authorities have tried to stop the dissemination of information from outside the country. Visitors flying into Shanghai in recent days have said that airlines ask passengers to throw all newspapers into a garbage bag before they disembark. Voice of America and BBC

Another major source of unofficial information is the radio. Transcripts of Chinese-language broadcasts by the Voice of America and the BBC were tacked onto walls in many places here for several days. Consequently, one subtheme of the official propaganda campaign has been to attack the credibility of the Voice of America.

"Every thoughtful Chinese is reflecting on what the Voice of America is really trying to accomplish," a newscaster said on tonight's broadcast. "Researchers have carefully compared the Voice of America reports with our own reports and they have concluded that our own reports are better."

In Shanghai during the last week, many Chinese have told reporters that they do not believe the official version of the events in Beijing. But people expressing this point of view to foreign reporters may not represent a majority view. Foreign analysts here are undecided over which version, the official or the foreign, is most believed.

"On the one hand," said one foreign observer, "the Chinese are not badly informed. Many of them over the years have become highly cynical about most of what they read or see in the official media."

"But, it is also possible," he went on, "that many people might prefer the official version of things because, in this instance, the truth is so unpalatable. People might just have a hard time believing that their own Government could have done such a thing."

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