



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on December 31, 2017

Declassified Cable: Death Toll at Tiananmen Square Was at Least 10,000

A recently declassified British diplomatic cable is shedding new light on the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. According to the document, written on June 5, 1989 — just over 24 hours after the mass killing — the death toll was at least 10,000. This is more than three times the estimate of nearly 3,000 commonly reported.

The diplomatic cable was written by then-British ambassador to China, Sir Alan Donald and was based on information provided by a source who had spoken to a “good friend” who was part of the State Council — China’s ruling cabinet. Sir Alan described the State Council member as a reliable source who “has previously proved reliable and was careful to separate fact from speculation and rumour.”



There has never been a solid number put to the death toll of the massacre at Tiananmen Square. The Chinese Red Cross says that roughly 2,700 civilians were killed and the Chinese government puts the number at 200 to 300. While Sir Alan’s estimate is considerably higher than those estimates, it is not without merit or support: It was reported in 2014, that a confidential U.S. government file quotes a source within the Chinese military as claiming that Communist Party of China had placed the number of dead civilians at 10,454 — a number that matches the closing statement of Sir Alan’s cable. He ended with, “Minimum estimate of civilian dead 10,000.”

The details of the massacre are spelled out in grim detail in Sir Alan’s cable. Protests had been staged in as many as 400 cities nationwide for several weeks, culminating in a massive protest at Tiananmen Square the night of June 3-4. As nearly a million peaceful protesters — including many students — gathered in the square to demand reform of the communist government and its policies, government leaders — frustrated with their inability to quash the rising demands for freedom and concerned that civil war was brewing — decided to put an end to the movement. With as many as 300,000 troops already deployed to Beijing, Communist Party leaders sent in the 27th Army of Shanxi Province.

In his cable, Sir Alan described the troops of the 27th Army as “60 per cent illiterate” and said they were “called primitives.”

That the soldiers of the 27th Army acted like “primitives” is clear from Sir Alan’s description of their actions. Though previous unarmed troops had attempted to peacefully disperse the crowd, Sir Alan wrote, “The 27 Army APCs [armored personnel carriers] opened fire on the crowd before running over them. APCs ran over troops and civilians at 65kph.” 65 kilometers per hour is roughly 40 miles per hour.



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Though the students had been “given one hour to leave the square” by previous troops, Sir Alan wrote that “after five minutes APCs attacked.” He added, “Students linked arms but were mown down. APCs then ran over the bodies time and time again to make, quote ‘pie’ unquote.” The remains of the murdered protesters were then “collected by bulldozer” before being “incinerated and then hosed down drains.”

The barbarous behavior of the troops of the 27th Army — which Sir Alan speculated were chosen because they were “the most reliable and obedient” to the communist government — went beyond even the events described above. The cable describes soldiers — who were “ordered to spare no one” — using hollow-point bullets and says that “snipers shot many civilians on balconies, street sweepers etc for target practice.” “Wounded girl students begged for their lives but were bayoneted,” Sir Alan wrote, adding, “A three-year-old girl was injured, but her mother was shot as she went to her aid, as were six others.”

Even after the first wave of killing, the 27th Army’s bloodthirstiness was not sated. The cable says that “1,000 survivors were told they could escape but were then mown down by specially prepared MG [machine gun] positions.” When ambulances of other Army units “attempted to give aid” to the victims, they “were shot up, as was a Sino-Japanese hospital ambulance.” Sir Alan adds, “With medical crew dead, wounded driver attempted to ram attackers but was blown to pieces by anti-tank weapon.”

One part of Sir Alan’s account shows that not all of the soldiers of the 27th Army were such cold-blooded killers. At least one officer found it too much. He was killed by his own men. According to the cable, “27 Army officer shot dead by own troops, apparently because he faltered. Troops explained they would be shot if they hadn’t shot the officer.”

In the wake of the massacre and while the remains of the victims were being “hosed down drains,” the communist rulers of China moved to secure even more power over the lives of citizens by using the massacre as an object lesson. All through the night between June 3 and 4, Beijing Television — which normally signed off at night — broadcast a statement by the Beijing Government Martial Law Headquarters saying:

Tonight a serious counter-revolutionary rebellion took place. Thugs frenziedly attacked People’s Liberation Army troops, seizing weapons, erecting barricades, beating soldiers and officers in an attempt to overthrow the government of the People’s Republic of China.

For many days, the People’s Liberation Army has exercised restraint and now must resolutely counteract the rebellion. All those who refuse to listen to reason must take full responsibility for their actions and their consequences.

For the next several months, portions of Beijing were placed under martial law and many of the survivors of the massacre were imprisoned or exiled. Many others were charged with “violent crimes” and executed.

More than 28 years after the atrocities of that night, China is still under the tyranny of communism. The reform those 10,000 people died for has still not come.

Photo showing man blocking tank column at Tiananmen Square, June 5, 1989: AP Images



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