

# **The Tibet Riots, getting stuck in the middle of the uprising in Lhasa.**

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Walking to lunch and seeing a street of shop front shutters clatter down was not enough to know something was wrong. It took a few distant explosions. Groups of weapon clad youths ran past, and in the distance plumes of black smoke rose from some buildings before it began to sink in.

Our overland tour from Nepal into Tibet had arrived in the Tibetan capital two days before. And much like the rest of the world we were none the wiser about what was going to happen. Even our stocky guide's constant reworking of our daily sightseeing due to 'protests' fell on dumb ears. For me my mind was already on planning the last of my route into mainland china. Not to find myself on March 14th in the middle of the second Tibetan uprising.

A tour had been the only way into Tibet from Nepal. Without a tour there would have been no Tibet permit allowing one access to this autonomist region. We were a group of twenty. From early teens to seventies we were a diverse group. Most sectioned off into there Jeep's cliché groups of five. Today would be different and the true reality of strangers and raw personality would surface.

Our hotel was going into lock down. The hotel roof offered a panoramic view of the whole city. A sight, that was chilling. There was already a row of hotel workers lined up alongside one rooftop ledge. Their eyes looking out at the distant, evolving, skyline. A cityscape scene that could have been taken from a war movie. Loud thuds and distant explosions filled the air as torrents of thick black smoke rose up from all corners of the city skyline. To the east several rounds of gunfire sounded off as a thunderous boom shook the building. Another plume of smoke rose up from a behind a group of buildings that sat under the picturesque ice capped mountain backdrop.

My camera already poised I pushed past a few bell boys and hoisted myself up on the 4 foot high rooftop ledge. It gave me a clear view of the streets below. We were at an intersection. There was a large crowd walking up the road directly north from our position, while to the south only a few people seemed to be on the streets. Some looking around as if searching for their own answers, others still pulling down metal shutters. To the east was a view of the city skyline under the serene mountains, to the west an obscured street with only a row of banks and shops visible.

There was movement ahead. A small moped came through, dodging its way through the crowd. A man in a light brown leather jacket was hunkered down low as its tiny engine revved high. He swerved as far from every person as he could. A man up ahead ran towards him as if trying to stop and tell him something. The moped veered sharply to the right to avoid the man. But in doing so was forced to slow down. A few more people ran towards the moped from the left. The moped stopped. The rider looked up for a second before putting his head down again and darting up onto the footpath. It was now apparent he was running from the gathering mob of people.

The footpath had been a bad escape path. It was directly beneath my vantage point where a woman had a small flower stall. She stood out in front of the small bike. The rider kept going as if he was about to hit the lady only to find a rush of new comers grab hold of his little silver moped and bring it to a whining halt. The brown leather coated rider toppled over to his left. No one helped. A small crowd closed in on him as he tried to get up.

A young woman lashed out with a hard kick to the riders head. He fell back down to a seated position. Another kick came in and this time jarred his shoulder. He sat, legs spread eagled, as if stunned, or excepting fate. A man with a wooden stick ran up and smacked the rider squarely across the top of the head, snapping the wooden stick in two. The rider now covered up sluggishly. Another belt from the broken end of the stick sent out a load moan from the man. The crowd stood for second or two before dispersing. Another lone young woman took another kick at the riders

head as she walked away.

These were ordinary people. Men and women who moments ago were walking along with equal concern as those of us on the rooftop. They could not have known the rider unless he had been a wanted felon on the news. But that seemed unlikely. It was random calculated violence the likes of which I had never seen in person on such a scale before. The only thing I could associate with it was gang violence. They knew why and who they were fighting, we didn't.

More people emerged from the street to the east. A group holding an elderly Tibetan lady that was bleeding profusely from the forehead ran for shelter. I was filling my camera with images I never thought I would see. Images that made no sense. They worried me. I had no answers as to what was going on.

The rooftop was full of the tour guests and staff by now. Everyone jostling for the relative safety it offered to the incredible scenes unfolding below.

"It's about time they fought back."

I looked around and saw a large frame standing beside me peering over the ledge. "What's going on?" I asked replacing the batteries in my camera.

"It's the Tibetans I think," said the large man with a Dutch drawl. "They are protesting against the Chinese."

"We want our freedom."

We both looked over at a red jacketed maitre d' from the hotel as he looked on at our nervous and perplexed faces. "We want our rights back and we want the Chinese to go."

My mind flashed over history in an instant and with it I relaxed. This was not a random mob. No killer virus on the rampage. It was the long speculated Second Tibetan uprising. And we were in the middle of it.

A sudden cry of pain and panic came from our right. I looked over to see the old white haired Dutch guy from our tour being led away by hotel staff. His left eye a pocket of blood. He had been hit by bottle thrown by a mob below our hotel.

More debris came flying up as we launched ourselves off the ledge. Bottles, sticks, rods of metal and the odd brick landed sporadically around us. Taking heed the majority ran for the door leading back down. I sat behind the ledge with a few others. We were safe from projectiles there, but also pinned down. It was a mob, not an army and I figured the barrage wouldn't last long. It didn't. The mob dispersed. I looked over the ledge and instead of seeing an angry mob I saw the two young Australians from our tour running after them, video camera in hand.

Looking over at the Tibetan maitre d' I shook my head, "Are they stupid? They're heading for trouble."

The pock faced Tibetan looked at me as if in shock. "No! Never. They are guests. They would never hurt them. In fact they will protect them. We want this story to get out."

It was only a matter of minutes before the young Australians had also been captured by our guide. They had made it back to the rooftop and were videoing the bank across the street. The mob had torn it apart and was busy ripping the ATM out from the wall. No cash, just lots of wires. The air had grown thick with smoke, and as I sniffed at it I got the whiff of that familiar nasal clenching smell of tear gas. It meant the Chinese military were nearby.

The two Australians had overheard me telling the maitre d' about the Chinese coming. And that they would not be so friendly. Even the Tibetan maitre d' warned them off, but it was no use. They were high on adrenaline and youthful immortality.

I peered over the rooftop ledge in time to photograph a group of men set fire to an abandoned moped. The fire must have given them an idea along with the money less ATM. Jerry can's of gasoline were soon being emptied out over the pillaged store fronts. The watery liquid ran like a burst main over the store fronts pathway.

A face from the mob stared up at me. It was a woman. His face blackened by smoke. She looked behind to the rest of the mob and then pointed up at us. My mind froze on the thoughts of the old Dutch man's injured eye and of the mob now rushing forward to begin dousing our hotel in gasoline.

To my right I caught a glimpse of the maitre d'. His right hand raised high into the air in a fist. He looked on at the mob in stern proud solidarity. I did the same and raised my fist into the air. Behind us others followed. Below the mob looked up. And then, one by one they raised their own hands up into fists of unison.

A man turned and threw a burning rag into the shop fronts and the within seconds the orange flames burst out from the broken windows. The fire spread like an all consuming beast. The whole block was soon ablaze. The mob's work done they dispersed into different directions.

The black smoke was thick and the wind was in our direction. Breathing became hard without covering our mouths. A few people panicked that the fire would spread across the road and catch onto our hotel. I didn't see it happening; it was too barren a road. The only way it could happen was if the tree alongside our path caught fire and then fell into us. A long shot. I was more concerned by the toxic fumes from the fire as they swept down on us and filled the hotels corridors below.

A hotel worker called out in Tibetan from the other side of the hotel roof. A huge trail of thick smoke was swirling up behind him. Running over to the other side I peer down to the roadside below. Nothing. I stretched further out; my fear of heights was nowhere to be found.

My heart began to pump fast as adrenaline launched into my blood. There was an upturned car on fire right against the wall of our hotel. Flames leapt up as people ran from the impending explosion along the street.