A nine-year-old Panchang Rinpoche was faced with certain death. The novice monk found himself on a treacherous mountain pass with thousands of other Tibetans fleeing a brutal crackdown being enforced by the Chinese military. Troops from the People's Liberation Army were beginning to outline the bedraggled refugees whose only alternative was to climb further into the relative safety of India. He was one person had a good idea. All the yaks in the area were sent up the mountains to pave a way through the snow.

"But one person had a good idea: All the yaks in the area were sent up the mountains to pave a way through the snow," said Rinpoche. "That was the beginning of a new era. Of course I had no idea what was shortly to happen, but at that moment I was, I think, conscious of history as it actually occurred."

History, as the expression goes, was on the side of the victors and on March 10 it was reported that in parts of Lhasa it was impossible to walk in a straight line amid the piles of corpses. The Tibetan government-in-exile has estimated that, since the Chinese invasion of Tibet nearly 79 years ago, over one million Tibetans have died as a result of the occupation.

Tibet would be the world’s tenth-largest nation if it were still a recognised country, but this land-locked giant has remained shrouded in secrecy since the Chinese guns fell silent – a silence which is intentional and enforced.

With the Himalayan mountain range in southern Tibet serving as a high-altitude Berlin Wall, the people of this region are denied the opportunity to speak out and remain virtual prisoners in an open-air jail. In its 2016 Freedom in the World report on human rights worldwide, respected US-based think-tank Freedom House ranked Tibet second only to Syria as the world’s least free place.

The Chinese state has continued to rule Tibet with an iron fist and with a very bright blue sky," said the Dalai Lama in the book Heirs to Tibet, where he outlined the situation on the ground in Lhasa on March 10 1959. "I recall hearing the noise of the crowd. I recall saying…"

Today marks a sombre date in the Tibet calendar, commemorated every March 10. It is known as Tibetan Uprising Day. But as the struggle for freedom goes on, even here, the ripples from Brexit will be felt.

**EUROFILE**

Today marks a sombre date in the Tibet calendar, explains campaigner ELEANOR BYRNE-ROSENGREN. But as the struggle for freedom goes on, even here, the ripples from Brexit will be felt.

Among the mass of escapees was the Tibetan people’s spiritual leader – the Dalai Lama. Not covered around the world for his advocacy of Tibetans’ rights and of non-violence, the Dalai Lama was only 21 when he had to flee as heavily-armed Chinese troops entered Lhasa. The Chinese Red Army was waging a military campaign in an attempt to reassert control over Tibet, which had initially been invaded and occupied by the Chinese in 1950 but had never recognised or accepted Beijing’s rule.

"I remember it was a sunny spring day with a very bright blue sky," said the Dalai Lama in the book Heirs to Tibet, where he outlined the situation on the ground in Lhasa on March 10 1959. "I could hear the noise of the crowd. I recall saying…"
Tibetan language competition in Ngahe, eastern Tibet, to be cancelled on the basis that “the Tibetan language contains words that can be used to express opposition to Chinese rule.” The authorities warned the organisers of “serious consequences” if they did not comply with their order. Detained Tibetan language advocate Tsultrim Wangchuk has paid with his liberty for championing his mother tongue and now faces a prison term of up to 15 years after featuring in a New York Times article which highlighted his attempt to ensure Tibetan children have access to indigenous language education.

Seized by the authorities in late January 2017 and held since in detention without trial, his efforts to save the threatened language began after local officials closed down Tibetan classes, leaving his close family without access to mother tongue learning: “My nieces want to become fluent in Tibetan but don’t know where to go. Our words will be lost to them,” he told the newspaper shortly before his arrest.

Tsedel Wangchuk is a long list of Tibetans harassed, detained, imprisoned and tortured for their language advocacy. In December 2011 Tibetan monk Khenpo Dolma, left a note, in which she said that she could no longer “bear the pain of the endless Chinese harassment of innocent Buddhists who quietly studied at the institute.”

“Information can trickle out of Tibet,” says Free Tibet campaigner John Jones. “Sometimes it is slow and intermittent and other times, sudden; flashes of illumination like sitting in a thunderstorm during a power cut.”

Founded in 1987, Free Tibet campaigns for Tibetans to be able to determine their own future. In its 30 years the organisation has seen the obs and flows of the Tibetan struggle for freedom.

Most recently the spotlight fell on Tibet in 2018. In the same year that Beijing hosted the Olympic Games, mass Tibetan protests were put down with brutal force by the Chinese military and security services, followed by a suffocating crackdown that left Tibetan feeling trapped and unable to tell the world of their oppression.

The frustration and rage left across Tibet materialised in stack fashion when a number of Tibetans, from all manner of backgrounds, began to set themselves on fire in protest against the occupation. These self-immolations, which experienced a peak around 2011 and 2012, seized global attention. Over 140 Tibetans have carried out self-immolation protests since 2009, with most of them proving fatal.

The politically charged self-immolations demand global attention, yet speaking out on Tibet carries real consequences. A superpower with a thin skin, the Chinese government has made it its policy to try and intimidate governments that raise human rights concerns in Tibet, or who even meet the Dalai Lama. China has considerable economic clout, which it has used to apply pressure on governments including Princes, Norway and South Africa, all of which rebuffed the Dalai Lama, apparently giving into pressure.

In its 30 years Free Tibet campaigns for Tibetans to be able to determine their own future. This March 10, rallies to commemorate the 58th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising will take place in cities worldwide, including London, New York, Delhi, Kathmandu and Sydney. They bear testimony to the tenacious character of a movement and struggle which has borne fruit on Tibet.

The UK’s will to hold China to account risks diminishing further. As part of the EU, the UK has been able to put some pressure on China over Tibet. Under the umbrella of the EU’s External Action Service (EEAS) the UK has contributed to constructive statements while also being shielded from China’s direct anger. However, a post-Brexit Britain will no longer be shielded from Beijing’s anger should it speak out. In this new era, the UK government will need to work on its own to make these necessary interventions on human rights violations in China.

The UK government, in conjunction with its European partners, has made some modest but useful interventions on human rights in Tibet in the past, but that position is weakening. If the military trade deal Theresa May carved out with Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan sets a new precedent, then that is a real cause for concern.

Despite harsh and often brutal treatment, the Tibetan people, and their unique way of life, have shown a remarkable capacity for survival. This March 10, rallies to commemorate the 58th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising will take place in cities worldwide, including London, New York, Delhi, Kathmandu and Sydney. They bear testimony to the tenacious character of a movement and struggle which has borne fruit on Tibet.

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