

## MASSACRE AT TLATELOLCO

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Mexico in 1968, much like in many other countries throughout the world, experienced a student movement to demand political and social changes. Although this was not the first time students in Mexico had initiated protests, the events that took place at Tlatelolco became a tragedy in Mexican history. The movement officially began on July 22, 1968 and lasted only a few months until the massacre at Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968. The casualty estimates in the massacre range from around twenty or forty nine, as government accounts suggest, to well over seven hundred.<sup>1</sup> The movement succeeded in uniting people and bringing political discussions into the public to attack “the one party system that had ruled Mexico for over forty years.”<sup>2</sup> Even though the government ended the student movement in October through the use of extreme violence, the students left a legacy that is still felt today.

The student movement came about in a political climate that was dominated by the *Partido Institucional de la Revolución Mexicana* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which had come to power in the 1940s.<sup>3</sup> The party saw itself as the embodiment of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>4</sup> One of the characteristics and criticisms of this party has to do with the Cardenista myth.<sup>5</sup> The key was to maintain the façade

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> The PRI was actually created out of the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (Party of the Mexican Revolution, PRM). It was reorganized in 1946 placing an emphasis on national unity. But other than the name not much changed. Donald J. Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State: Student Conflicts 1910-1971* (College Station: Texas A&M Press), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lázaro Cárdenas was the president of Mexico from 1934-1940. His administration was based on the fact that the strong government could develop the economy for “the benefit of the poor people who fought in the Mexican revolution.” By expanding the power of the presidency, Cárdenas sought to receive the support of the workers and peasants following the ideals of the Mexican revolution. Julie A. Erfani, *The Paradox of the Mexican State: Rereading Sovereignty from Independence to NAFTA* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 56.

of the president being “the personification of a perpetually strong, progressive state,”<sup>6</sup> and there was also an emphasis on modernization and economic growth. But, during the last few years of the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) the myth of the strong executive branch of the government began to be criticized. The student movement in Mexico City showed the weakness of the Mexican state. The only response the government had for the students was violence and repression, displaying the flaws in their political system.

It was not the first time that students in Mexico had organized and protested. The difference was that in the past the students’ demands and protests related directly to school issues. Students demanded “easier exams, higher grades, or the removal of an unpopular administrator,”<sup>7</sup> but those were not the goals of the students in 1968. The Mexican government was quick to accuse the students of subversion. Rather than see the students’ critique of the political system as valid, the government chose to point the blame at communist groups, foreign influence, or anyone else who wanted “to embarrass Mexico before the world.”<sup>8</sup>

The student movement coincided with the 1968 Olympics, held in Mexico City. For those in the government, this was an opportunity to show the world how much Mexico had developed and that the Mexican Revolution was a success.<sup>9</sup> This put a lot of pressure on the government to make sure that there were no problems while they had the attention of the entire international community. Mexico invested 140 million dollars in preparing for the Olympics. The government constructed high-rise apartment buildings, hotels, a transportation system, and a stadium with murals by the famous Mexican painter, Diego Rivera.<sup>10</sup> All of these projects were supposed to show that Mexico was a modern, “stable, and democratic” nation.<sup>11</sup> The student protests and the way the government dealt with them portrayed a different Mexico.

Early in 1968, there were no apparent problems with the students. It seemed like the country came together in order to make the Olympics a success. There were no anti-war protests like in Paris and the United States and no incidents like at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. Student and government relations had remained fairly peaceful. Soon that changed, relatively quickly.

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<sup>6</sup> Erfani, *The Paradox of the Mexican State*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 11, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 37.

The Mexican generation that came of age in the 1960s had been influenced by a variety of sources. They had witnessed the Cuban Revolution, the rise of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara and even the Mexican labor disputes in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Also, unlike the demonstrations of the past, the student participants were middle class.<sup>13</sup>

The problems began on July 22, 1968. It was a conflict between groups of students from rival schools that was eventually joined by street gangs.<sup>14</sup> The conflict flowed over into the next few days. The conflict itself did not start the protests, but rather the way the police reacted to this conflict. The protests began after the government sent in their riot police, known as the *granaderos*.

The *granaderos* went after any student that they saw in the area, whether or not they were involved in the conflict. There were also reports of the students fleeing to avoid the violence, only to be pursued by the *granaderos*.<sup>15</sup> During these events, students were jailed and tortured.<sup>16</sup>

As was expected, there were discrepancies between government and eyewitness accounts. The government claimed that the students' violence was what caused them to call in the *granaderos*. This story made it easy for the government to defame the students. The eyewitness accounts, which were not reported in the papers, described a scene in which the *granaderos* were provoking violence and "looting and breaking windows."<sup>17</sup>

One of the main student groups at this time was the *Federación Nacional de Estudiantes Técnicos* (National Federation of Technical Students, FNET). Following the first few days of violence, FNET organized a peaceful protest march on July 26, 1968. They wanted to protest the use of violence against the students and the efforts of the government to make the students look bad. Even though the march

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History*; Translated by Luis Alberto Fierro (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 201.

<sup>14</sup> The schools were the Vocational School 2 and *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* (National Polytechnic Institute) against a group from Isaac Ochoterena Preparatory; Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Soldatenko, "México '68: Power to the Imagination," *Latin American Perspectives* 143, 32, no. 4 (July 2005), 118.

<sup>16</sup> It was not only the use of the police that angered the students, but it was also the reputation of the *granaderos*. This was not the first time that they were used as a repressive force. The government called on the *granaderos* in the past to put an end to labor disputes, or any other situation where the government felt threatened; Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

was legal and peaceful, the police were called in and violence ensued.<sup>18</sup> This set the tone for the rest of the movement. The protesters intended to have peaceful demonstrations, but they were met with police violence. This police violence helped bring the movement together and resulted in students responding with militancy.

While FNET was mainly protesting the use of police violence, other student groups were participating on more ideological grounds. Students from *Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos* (National Center of Democratic Students, CNED) and *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) were being criticized by the government for being too politically liberal. Some in the government referred to these groups as communists.<sup>19</sup> However, the government did not stop at simply harassing students. On July 26, the day of the protest, the police invaded the Communist Party headquarters and arrested Eduardo de la Vega Ávila and other members of the party, who were referred to as the "76 red agitators" in the newspapers.<sup>20</sup> The government continued to justify their actions by asserting that the communists and other students did pose a threat to the government.

The students responded by going on strike, and the members of UNAM and *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* (National Polytechnic Institute, IPN) created a list of demands. The list included the release of the students that had been arrested, disbandment of the *granaderos*, and compensation for students and families of students who had been injured.<sup>21</sup> None of these demands were met. The government refused to negotiate and violence continued into August.

The next major step in the student movement was the creation of a new student organization that would represent all the schools in the country.<sup>22</sup> The organization was the *Consejo Nacional de Helga* (National Strike Council, CNH). They had a six-point petition, which outlined the demands of the students:

1. Liberty for political prisoners
2. Dismissal of [police chiefs] Generals Luis Cueto Ramírez and Raúl Mendiola, and Lt. Colonel Armando Frías
3. Abolition of the *granaderos* corps, direct instrument of repression, and prohibition of the creation of a similar corps

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<sup>18</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, translated by Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 325-6; Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 43, 205 n. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, 326.

<sup>22</sup> The groups that were included were UNAM, the IPN, the Normal Schools, the College of Mexico, the Chapingo School of Agriculture, the Iberoamerican University, the Lasalle University, and the national universities in the provinces. Ibid., 328.

4. Abolition of Articles 145 and 145 *bis* of the Penal Code, judicial instruments of aggression
5. Indemnification of the families of the dead and injured who had been victims of the aggression since July 26
6. Clarification of the responsibility of officials for the acts of repression and vandalism committed by the police, granaderos, and army<sup>23</sup>

Just as before, the government was unwilling to negotiate. The government believed that it could not have met any of the demands without appearing to have lost control. This would then lead to more requests.<sup>24</sup> Even though the demands of CNH were very specific, there was a greater goal of the movement. By demanding rights and attempting to hold the government responsible for its actions, they were calling for a true democracy in Mexico.

Since the government did not respond to the demands, the students continued with mass demonstrations, winning the support of professors and other intellectual groups. One of the more successful actions of the CNH was its use of brigades. Brigades were small groups within the organization that printed flyers, made speeches, and helped rally popular support for their cause. Each brigade “went far beyond the aims and policies of the CNH.”<sup>25</sup> Michael Soldatenko stated that “the key was not the leaders or organizations but the actions of thousands of students that educated and incorporated increasing numbers of Mexicans.”<sup>26</sup> Women played a large role in this aspect of CNH.<sup>27</sup> This method of using participatory democracy to try and reform the political system was the strongest strategy of the CNH.

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<sup>23</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 252.

<sup>24</sup> The CIA identified that as one of the problems with the Mexican government. The CIA recognized in a top secret report that the Mexican government was not handling the student movement well and that violence would continue unless the government changed its strategy. CIA Weekly Report, *Mexican Government in a Quandary Over Student Crisis*, 23 Aug 1968.

<sup>25</sup> Soldatenko, “México ’68: Power to the Imagination,” 121.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Even though women participated in this aspect of the movement, there was not that large of a role for them in the movement. CNH, just like Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, was organized in the same way society functioned. Many times women were stuck with stereotypical gender roles such as cooking and cleaning. But the author argues that women were able to redefine gender roles by participating in passing out flyers. Soldatenko, “México ’68: Power to the Imagination,” 121-2; Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 87.

The period from August 13 to August 27 has been recognized as “the Golden Age of the Movement.”<sup>28</sup> Marches taking place on these two dates to the Zócolo<sup>29</sup> were among the largest and “most festive.”<sup>30</sup> The scene that Elena Poniatowska and Michael Soldatenko describe resembles that of a festival. They describe the atmosphere as optimistic; the students believed they had already made some impact on the political system and society. The students thought President Díaz Ordaz could not refuse to open dialogue between the opposing factions.<sup>31</sup> The demonstrators had pictures of famous revolutionaries such as Poncho Villa, Zapata, Hidalgo, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara.<sup>32</sup> Salvador Martínez de la Roca, a member of the action committee of UNAM, stated the goal of the students that day. “We had to take over the Zócolo; we had to deconsecrate the Zócolo—and we did, three times.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite the optimism of the students, President Díaz Ordaz refused to negotiate. In an address to the nation on September 1, 1968, he said:

It is evident that non-students had a hand in the recent disturbances; but it is also evident that, whether intentionally or just by going along, a good number of students took part.... The other road is open. We would not like to see ourselves forced to take measures against our will, but if it is necessary we will do so; whatever is our duty, we will do; just as far as we are forced to go, we will go.<sup>34</sup>

In his response, Ordaz hinted that the government was not going to tolerate the demonstrations or disruptions anymore, especially since the Olympics were right around the corner.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the CNH still continued with their public discussions and distribution of flyers. In an attempt to further the movement, they organized another march.

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<sup>28</sup> Soldatenko, “México ’68: Power to the Imagination,” 122.

<sup>29</sup> The Zócolo is Mexico City’s main square.

<sup>30</sup> Soldatenko, “México ’68: Power to the Imagination,” 123.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Padre Miguel Hidalgo was the leading figure in the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821). As a priest, he was influenced by the ideas of the French Enlightenment and wanted a government that would help the peasantry. Poncho Villa and Emiliano Zapata were key leaders in the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) who appealed to the lower classes. Ernesto “Che” Guevara was a revolutionary from Argentina who traveled throughout South and Central America developing his Marxist revolutionary ideas. He also participated in revolutions in Cuba and Bolivia before he was killed in 1967. Even today, he remains a powerful revolutionary icon.

<sup>33</sup> Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Soldatenko, “México ’68: Power to the Imagination,” 123-4.

<sup>35</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 260.

This march would be both nonviolent and silent. Students placed white tape over their mouths in protest.<sup>36</sup> They then marched to the Zócalo in silence. This was an attempt to change the way that the media and others perceived them. Their peaceful demonstration showed that they were neither violent nor “out of control.”<sup>37</sup> The Great Silent March also served as inspiration for other groups who had not yet become involved. Mainly, it showed that students were not powerless.<sup>38</sup>

The government eventually agreed to written negotiations with the students in the days following the Great Silent March. But, on September 18, 1968, the army invaded University City in an effort to break-up UNAM. The government stated that UNAM was the center of subversion and had been controlled by outside forces.<sup>39</sup>

The students responded with violence, and the army then took over the IPN. After this, violence continued to spread to other schools. The leaders of CNH and other groups were forced to stay in hiding to keep from being arrested. This was all happening as the Olympic visitors were beginning to arrive. President Díaz Ordaz seemed to think that he had beaten the students into submission, so he sent two representatives to negotiate. The students refused to negotiate until the army pulled out of UNAM. The army left UNAM on September 30, and the representatives from CNH met with the president’s representatives on October 2.<sup>40</sup>

Events seemed to quiet down until protesters began to assemble in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas for another rally. Soldiers, tanks and jeeps surrounded the plaza, but nothing was done by the army to prevent the rally.<sup>41</sup> With the military blocking off the plaza, the organizers decided to cancel the march to IPN. However, the soldiers still invaded the rally. Some soldiers were dressed in civilian clothes, distinguishing themselves with a white handkerchief or glove on their hand. A helicopter began dropping flares, and soldiers calling themselves the Olympic Battalion fired into the crowd. The plaza erupted into absolute chaos. One of the eyewitnesses said:

There was nothing we could do but keep running. They were firing at us from all directions.... A girl came by shouting “You murderers, you murderers!” I took her in my arms and tried to calm her down but she kept screaming, louder and louder until finally the youngster behind me grabbed hold of her and started shaking her. I

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<sup>36</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 261.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-3; Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, 332.

<sup>41</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 264.

noticed then that her ear had been shot off and her head was bleeding. The people in the crowd kept piling on top of another.<sup>42</sup>

The military would not let the Red and Green Cross ambulances into the plaza until much later. By then, many of the dead and injured were already taken by the military.<sup>43</sup>

There were differing versions of what happened that night in the Plaza. The soldiers and the government claim that they only used violence in response to being fired at by students. There are also differing accounts of how many people were killed that night. The government estimated twenty-nine casualties, but many who were present that night believe that hundreds, possibly as many as seven hundred people were killed.<sup>44</sup> They even accused the government of disposing or burning many of the bodies to hide the truth.<sup>45</sup> In the official history the students are painted as the instigators. However, most people know and believe the story told through the eyewitness accounts and testimonies of the survivors. Paco Ignacio Taibo, a writer and participant, wrote:

Here is the truth confronting the official version propagated by the Grand Commission of the Senate that the students had incited the shooting. Today, all the world knows that the provocateurs were soldiers in civilian clothes and with a white glove belonging to the Olympia Battalion.<sup>46</sup>

Following the massacre, there were many that were trying to find out why this happened. But, there was not much available evidence because the government had quickly covered it up. The massacre ended the 1968 student movement. The government stood by their story that some of the students were armed, and the police only fired into the crowd after being shot at. The government also came up with confessions from some of the movement’s leaders who acknowledged the CNH had communist goals and that the students in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas were armed. The army also added to the case against the students with “a list and photographs of arms it found in buildings around the plaza,” which proved there was a “revolutionary conspiracy.”<sup>47</sup> Although this supposed evidence is not convincing, considering the power that the government had in coercing these confessions, there has been a period of silence

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<sup>42</sup> Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, 219-21.

<sup>43</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 265.

<sup>44</sup> Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Paco Ignacio Taibo II, ‘68 (New York: Editorial Siete Cuentos, 2004), 97.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, 266.

concerning the true story of what happened in Tlatelolco. Even as late as the 1990s, there was no mention of the Tlatelolco protest in primary-school textbooks. Ernesto Zedillo, when he was minister of education before becoming president, tried to insert a neutral paragraph about the protest into a textbook, but he was forced to take it out, due to pressure from government officials.<sup>48</sup>

Recently, there has been more interest in what actually happened that day in October, specifically in finding out what real role the Mexican government played in the massacre. On June 10, 2002, President Vicente Fox signed a freedom of information law in Mexico. With this law, many secret police, military and intelligence documents were made available to the public.<sup>49</sup> Currently, new investigations are being performed to see what measures the government took to hide the events. Some soldiers have come forward to confirm the eyewitness accounts.<sup>50</sup>

Just as these Mexican documents have been opened, United States CIA documents on this topic have also been made public. The CIA documents showed that the United States government had been informed on the students' actions in Mexico. A White House memo from July 31, 1968 talks about communist involvement. The Mexican government claimed to have proof that the communists were behind the disturbances. Although the CIA did not have evidence to back this claim up, they agree that the USSR might have somehow been involved.<sup>51</sup>

Many historians recognize the massacre at Tlatelolco as a turning point in Mexican history. Even though the students were defeated, they struck a large blow against the government, leading to political changes. The way that the government responded to the demonstrations and protests showed the weakness of the political system, and it also showed the lengths to which the government would go to hold on to power. The extreme use of violence in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas and the subsequent government has not been forgotten. The student movement was a large step towards democracy in Mexico.

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<sup>48</sup> "Echoes of a Shooting," *The Economist* 349, no. 8088 (3 Oct 1998): 42.

<sup>49</sup> Kate Doyle, "Mexico Opens the Files," *The Nation* 275, no. 5 (5 Aug 2002): 7.

<sup>50</sup> "Echoes of a Shooting," *The Economist*, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Bowdler to Lyndon Baines Johnson, White House Memorandum, *Student Disturbances in Mexico City* (31 July 1968).