

# What happened in the tlaxelolco massacre history essay



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The Plaza of the Three Cultures, known as the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Spanish, symbolizes Mexico's unique cultural heritage. La Plaza de las Tres Culturas was once the center of one of the most powerful Native American empires, the Aztecs, located in the ancient city of Tlatelolco. The square contains the remains of the Aztec temples and is flanked by the Colonial Cathedral of Santiago, and the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (Department of Foreign Affairs) building. "Las Tres Culturas" is in recognition of the three periods of Mexican history reflected by those buildings: pre-Columbian, Spanish colonial, and the independent "mestizo" nation. The plaza not only represents three cultures but is an important reminder of the Mexican spirit of determination. It is the site where the Aztecs made their final stand against the Spanish army in 1521 and the massacre of 1968. It has been called Mexico's Tiananmen Square, Mexico's Kent State. During the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), there were several antecedents to the 1968 student confrontations with the Mexican government, but nothing comparable to the Tlatelolco Massacre that occurred on the night of October 2, 1968, in Mexico City's Plaza de las Tres Culturas.

### Background

The year 1968 was a year of political turmoil around the world. The International Olympic Committee—headed by Avery Brundage from the U. S.—had chosen Mexico as the first Third World country ever to host the Olympic Games. This was aimed both to draw oppressed countries into imperialist-dominated world sport and to showcase Mexico as a model of U. S.-sponsored growth and relative stability. Mexico was supposed to provide a

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contrast to the national liberation struggles which were shaking most of Latin America, Asia, and Africa and sparking rebellions in the imperialist citadels from Detroit to Paris as well. To date, no other Latin America country has subsequently hosted the Olympic Games. The Mexican government invested a massive \$150 million in preparations for the Olympics, an ostentatious amount considering the poverty that existed in Mexico. The Mexican president during the Olympics, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz ineptly strained tenuous conditions in Mexico in an attempt to preserve the peace. During the Díaz Ordaz presidency, Mexicans endured the suppression of independent labor unions, peasant farmers, and the economy.

From this general dissatisfaction with President Díaz Ordaz, the student movement was born. Initially their demands were limited to greater employment and respect for university autonomy; however, the struggles of the factory workers and rural peasants soon resonated with them. This movement of rebellious students was touched off on July 24 when a fight between gangs at two high schools connected with the longtime rivals, the Mexican National Autonomous University (UNAM) and National Polytechnical Institute (IPN, or “Poli”), was viciously put down by antiriot police called *granaderos*. When outraged vocational students protested, *granaderos* attacked again, killing many.

In response, students seized buses and put up barricades to defend their schools. Student strikes and takeovers hit high schools all over the capital. The high school students were supported by UNAM and IPN students.

Students from 70 universities and preparatory schools in Mexico formed a grassroots National Strike Council (CNH) and put forward six strike demands: <https://assignbuster.com/what-happened-in-the-tlatelolco-massacre-history-essay/>

disband the granaderos; fire police chiefs; investigate and punish higher officials responsible for the repression; pay compensation for students killed and injured; repeal laws making “social dissolution”-breaking down of society-a crime (under these laws many independent unionists and communists had been jailed); and free political prisoners, including students arrested in the recent disturbances as well as those seized earlier for social dissolution.

Within three days the government had to call in the army to take back several Mexico City prepas (preparatorias-high schools connected to universities). There were clashes which led to many hundreds of arrests and injuries. Thirty-two students had been killed since the first confrontation, but this only fired up the youths’ resistance. The student strike spread to the UNAM, IPN, and universities throughout the country, supported by a majority of professors. By late August and September the students were calling marches of 300, 000 to 600, 000 people; important contingents of workers and peasants participated regularly. Over the coming months, the student movement gained support from students outside the capital and other segments of society that continued to build until that October, despite several instances of violence.

### CNH Tactics

Student brigades strained their creativity and skills to foil police and get the word out. Engineering students designed balloons which would burst when they got to a certain height and rain leaflets on the heads of pedestrians. Acting students put on realistic street theater in which a student and a

conservative woman in pearls and heels carried out loud debates in crowded markets. Hundreds of observers would be drawn in, the majority on the side of the youth, and the advanced would be quietly contacted by “undercover” students in the crowd.

Some students found that they and the barrio or slum dwellers spoke what seemed to be two different languages. They had to throw out “bookish” talk and learn from the vivid “caló” slang of the streets. After a full day of brigade work, they would spend the night in classrooms they had taken over, discussing the conditions and outrages the masses had exposed them to and figuring out how to use this new knowledge in their leaflets and agitation.

The red and white buses of the IPN, always with some daring students and a loudspeaker perched on the roof, became famous for a kind of roving speak-in. Workers, market vendors, and even mariachi singers would climb up on the bus roof one after another to voice their support or disagreement with the students’ demands or tactics and to air their grievances. In some neighborhoods, just the appearance of an IPN bus was enough to immediately attract crowds of hundreds of people who would gather around. Students captured the spirit of the people in a way that the national government was never able to do. In fact, the national government was despised by its people.

### Mexican Government

The turmoil of the 1960s in part reflected a widespread dissatisfaction among Mexicans with the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The PRI was aptly described in 1968 as “entrenched, stagnant, and primarily <https://assignbuster.com/what-happened-in-the-tlatelolco-massacre-history-essay/>

self-serving” in the eyes of many Mexicans. The PRI controlled the nation with an iron fist for over 70 consecutive years. The party has been known to use violence, manipulation and corruption to win elections and hide information from the public, such as the details concerning the Tlatelolco massacre. President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz was known for an authoritarian manner of rule over his cabinet and country, despite Mexico being a democratic country. Luis Escheverria, Interior Secretary to Ordaz, was also known for a “ no nonsense” attitude against student protesters.

The Mexican government’s planned response to the student rally on the evening of October 2 was called Operation Galeano. The most definitive account of this operation, culminating with the Tlatelolco Massacre, is found in a Mexican special prosecutor’s report released in November 2006.

According to this report, early on October 2 elements of the military’s Estado Mayor Presidencial (the Presidential High Command) were placed in apartments on the upper floors of the Chihuahua apartment building and other apartment buildings surrounding Tlatelolco’s Plaza de las Tres Culturas. Once the rally started, the Army, using from 5, 000 to 10, 000 soldiers (the accounts varying) and more than 300 tanks and other vehicles, would surround the plaza to prevent those attending the rally from fleeing, while armed military men in civilian clothes, members of a unit called the Batallón Olimpia that had been organized to help protect the Olympic Games, would prevent anyone from entering or leaving the Chihuahua apartment building, in which the organizers of the rally were to be arrested. The “ planned” response of the government ended in bloodshed by the order of Luis Escheverria.

## Tlatelolco Massacre: The Event

On October 1, the CNH held two rallies at UNAM. Speakers urged the thousands of students present to attend an October 2 rally at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, in the Tlatelolco area of Mexico City, to be followed by a march to Casco de Santo Tomás to demand the withdrawal of authorities from the IPN campus. On October 2, 1968, approximately 10,000 people, most of them students carrying red carnations, arrived in the vast colonial plaza of Tlatelolco for a demonstration. At 6:04 p. m. green and red flares dropped from helicopters, soldiers burst into the square, tanks blocked the exits and an elite plainclothes battalion stormed the speakers' platform on the third-floor balcony of an apartment building, where the National Strike Committee, the leadership body of the student movement, was stationed and opened fire. The gunfire lasted for sixty-two minutes, then started again and continued for hours. Late in the evening, when the shooting finally ceased, scores of demonstrators lay dead and wounded—children and the elderly among them.

The official government explanation of the incident was that armed provocateurs among the demonstrators, stationed in buildings overlooking the crowd, had begun the firefight. Suddenly finding themselves sniper targets, the security forces had simply returned the shooting in self-defense. By the next morning, newspapers reported that 20 to 28 people had been killed, hundreds wounded, and hundreds more arrested. Most of the Mexican media reported that the students provoked the army's murderous response with sniper fire from the apartment buildings surrounding the plaza. El Día's morning headline on October 3, 1968 read as followed: "Criminal  
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Provocation at the Tlatelolco Meeting Causes Terrible Bloodshed.” The government-controlled media dutifully reported the Mexican government’s side of the events that night, painting the students as trouble makers who needed to be brought to order by any and all means necessary.

### Olympic Games 1968 Controversy

The death of hundreds did not even phase the International Olympic Committee. They did not consider to cancelling the games, due to their belief that the massacre was an isolated event involving a social minority. On October 16, 1968, an action by two African-American sprinters at the Mexico City Olympics shook the sporting world. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medalists in the men’s 200-meter race, took their places on the podium for the medal ceremony barefooted and wearing civil rights badges, lowered their heads and each defiantly raised a black-gloved fist as the Star Spangled Banner was played to show their support for the student protesters and the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Some people (particularly IOC president Avery Brundage) felt that a political statement had no place in the international forum of the Olympic Games. In an immediate response to their actions, Smith and Carlos were suspended from the U. S. team by Brundage and banned from the Olympic Village. Those who opposed the protest said the actions disgraced all Americans. Supporters, on the other hand, praised the men for their bravery.

### Tlatelolco Massacre: Response and Investigation

Some argue that an understanding of the domestic political context within

Mexico explains why the government reacted in such a harsh manner.

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Mexico stayed relatively isolated from other foreign powers which provided them more freedom in their ability to deal with their domestic problems. The strongest censure from abroad that Mexico received for the massacre was a mild finger wagging from the representatives of a few foreign governments. The world's failure to confront and condemn the actions of the Mexican government fueled the killing rampage throughout Mexico in the years to follow.

In 1998, President Ernesto Zedillo, on the 30th anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre, authorized a congressional investigation into the events of October 2. However, the PRI government continued its recalcitrance (defiance of authority) and did not release official government documents pertaining to the incident. Eventually in 2001, President Vicente Fox, the historic president that ended the 70-year reign of the PRI, attempted to resolve the greatest of these unanswered questions: who had orchestrated the massacre? President Fox ordered the release of previously classified documents concerning the 1968 massacre. The documents revealed that the students did not open fire first and showed that the snipers were members of the Presidential Guard, who were instructed to fire on the military forces in order to provoke them. President Fox also appointed Ignacio Carrillo Prieto in 2002 to prosecute those responsible for ordering the massacre. In June 2006, an ailing, 84-year-old Luis Echeverría was charged with genocide in connection with the massacre. He was placed under house arrest pending trial. In early July of that year, he was cleared of genocide charges, as the judge found that Echeverría could not be put on trial because the statute of limitations had expired. However, in March 2009, after a convoluted appeal

process, the genocide charges against Echeverría were completely dismissed. Despite the ruling, prosecutor Carrillo Prieto said he would continue his investigation and seek charges against Echeverría before the United Nations International Court of Justice and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

In October 2003, the role of the U. S. government in the massacre was publicized when the National Security Archive at George Washington University published a series of records from the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, the FBI and the White House which were released in response to Freedom of Information Act requests.

The LITEMPO documents detail:

That in response to Mexican government concerns over the security of the Olympic Games the Pentagon sent military radios, weapons, ammunition and riot control training material to Mexico before and during the crisis.

That the CIA station in Mexico City produced almost daily reports concerning developments within the university community and the Mexican government from July to October. Six days before the massacre at Tlatelolco, both Echeverría and head of Federal Security (DFS) Fernando Guterres Barrios told the CIA that “ the situation will be under complete control very shortly”.

That the Díaz Ordaz government “ arranged” to have student leader Sócrates Campos Lemus accuse dissident PRI politicians such as Carlos Madrazo of funding and orchestrating the student movement.

Still, some today believe the United States government was only concerned with security and safety during the Olympic Games '68 and was not involved in the Tlatelolco massacre in any form. Determining who is at fault however, will not change the events that occurred on October 2, 1968. The blood and tears shed that day are still fresh in the minds of those who witnessed the horrific event.

### Remembering Tlatelolco

In 1993, a stele was erected to remember those who lost their lives. The former headquarters of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs is now a memorial museum called " Memorial 68" to remember the Mexican student demonstrations and the Tlatelolco massacre victims and survivors. Each year the anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre is marked with a march to the same plaza and a protest for the release of government records. On October 2, 2008, the 40th anniversary, two marches were held in Mexico City to commemorate the event. One traveled from Escuela Normal Superior de Maestros (Teacher's College) to the Zocalo. The other went from the Instituto Politecnico Nacional to the massacre site of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. According to the " Comité del 68" (68 Committee), one of the organizers of the event, 40, 000 marchers were in attendance.

Unfortunately, still too many are unfamiliar with the events that occurred since the massacre fails to appear in most history textbooks. When asked how this could be, high school Headmaster Samuel Gonzalez Montano, replied, " You can't teach anything that didn't officially happen." As of now, the newest generation of Mexicans only have a general knowledge of the

events surrounding the '68 Olympic Games, which are unavoidably intertwined.

Gregory P. Groggel, a graduate of the University of Puget Sound, recounts:

During a visit to the plaza, I encountered a group of boys playing soccer. When I inquired from one of them if he knew what happened in October of 1968 here in the plaza, he shrugged and looked around. I told him some 300 people died. He seemed lost and turned slowly to read the memorial he was sitting in front of and had lived near his whole life. The end of it reads:

Who? Whom? No one. The next day, no one.

The plaza awoke swept;

The newspapers said for news

the state of the weather.

And on the television, on the radio, in the theaters,

there was not a single change in the program,

not a single announcement.

Nor a moment of silence at the banquet

(or following the banquet).

The deaths of so many youths and protesters must not be forgotten. They deserve more than a simple moment of silence. Remember Tlatelolco. Fore,

“ those who can not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”(George Santayana)