

Students Confront the Government: The Massacre at Tlatelolco

The Massacre at Tlatelolco, Mexico

1. Narrator's Announcement

Attention! Attention! Serious fighting has been reported in Mexico City. Last night, October 2, 1968, police and federal troops fired on university students when they were having a demonstration in the plaza at Tlatelolco (tlot-e-LOL-co). The government reports that 29 people are dead and 80 are wounded. A spokesperson for the students says at least 500 were killed on the spot and 1000 are seriously wounded. How did this happen? Who is responsible? What is the accurate number of deaths? Why did this happen? Let's go back to the beginning.

2. Reader

In Mexico in the mid-1960s, students complained that they had no voice in the government nor in the universities they attended. When they did try to speak out, the police brutally attacked them. When students had a strike at the National University in 1966, federal troops were sent in to restore order. What began as a grievance in 1968 quickly became a movement that attracted tens of thousands of Mexicans who were discontent with the government. The students focused their attention on the police, the corruption in the government and the unwillingness of the government to meet with them. Basically the student movement was an attempt to confront the lack of true democracy in Mexico.

3. Reader

The following petition was issued by a committee of students in the summer of 1968. It addressed their concerns regarding police brutality and the issue of impunity, which means to not be punished for human rights violations. Students sent the petition to Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and distributed it widely throughout Mexico City. This is what the petition requested:

Six-point petition:

1. Disband the riot police force
2. Dismiss top police officials
3. Restore autonomy, or self-rule, to the National University of Mexico
4. Free all political prisoners
5. Repeal the anti-subversive article in the criminal code which punishes Mexicans for challenging the status quo
6. Compensate the wounded and the families of all those killed in clashes with the police

4. Reader

In other parts of the world in 1968, students were challenging government policies and practices. Students organized demonstrations in Egypt, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Uruguay. In France, the university was closed down by student protesters. In the U.S. students—and others—were protesting the war in Vietnam and were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Most of these demonstrations were focused against the respective governments' policies and practices.

5. Reader

The Olympic Games were scheduled to begin in Mexico City on October 12, 1968. Millions of pesos went into the construction of stadiums, hotels, housing for athletes, and a new subway system to move the tourists around. The Olympics were an opportunity to show the world that Mexico was a modern, progressive country. Many Mexicans applauded this and wanted to increase tourism in Mexico. The Olympic Games were an opportunity to bring in millions of tourist dollars. Other Mexicans questioned the millions of pesos that were taken away from programs to alleviate widespread poverty among Mexicans.

6. Reader

In mid-August, as city workers were putting the finishing touches on the various construction projects before the Olympics, university students held a huge demonstration on their campus. The rally lasted into the night, until the government moved tanks and armored cars in the area.

Pause for Discussion

Why do you think the students chose this particular time for a demonstration?

What do you think happened next?

7. Narrator

At least one student was killed that night. In response to the confrontation with the students and the students' petition, the government issued this statement:

The Government of the Republic is most willing to meet with the representatives of the teachers and students at educational institutions connected with the present problem, in order to exchange views with them and acquaint itself directly with their demands and suggestions, with the aim of definitely resolving the conflict that our capital has experienced in recent weeks, a conflict which in fact has affected the lives of all its inhabitants to some degree.—Luis Echeverría, August 22, 1968. Secretary of Internal Affairs and future President of Mexico, 1970–76.

8. Reader

The meeting the government proposed never took place. When students protested the brutal response of the government, the President of Mexico, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, made the following remarks in his State of the Union address, September 1, 1968:

We have been so tolerant that we have been criticized for our excessive leniency, but there is a limit to everything, and the irremediable [unacceptable] violations of law and order that have occurred recently before the very eyes of the entire nation cannot be allowed to continue.

Pause for Discussion

Imagine you were a government official in charge of student affairs.

How would you describe the student movement to the president?

What would you recommend that the government do?

Do you think this conflict could be settled without more violence at this point?

9. Narrator

Who are the people involved in the protests? Where do they come from? Why did they get involved in the student movement?

10. Reader

The people who were involved in the 1968 movement were mainly university students and intellectuals, although workers and artists in and around Mexico City joined the protests. Most of the students were from the middle class, including approximately a quarter from lower middle class families. These students generally were the first generation in their family to be able to get higher education. Although many of the students benefited from the government's emphasis on education, they lacked an effective voice in their education or in the affairs of their nation.

11. Reader

University students in Mexico are accustomed to being involved in political discussions; challenging the system is expected of students. The universities are training grounds for politicians and the National University was designed to be autonomous, or free from outside control. In 1968, the student movement was a loosely-knit organization of students that did not have a specific ideology. They did have a goal, however, which was to open up the political process so their voices would be heard.

12. Reader

When asked how she got involved in the student movement, a University student replied, “I was totally and absolutely fed up with authoritarianism. I just couldn’t take it any more. It was affecting every important thing in my life.”—Human Rights Advocate

13. Reader

“Young peasants, workers, and students are facing a very dim future since job opportunities are being created for the benefit of special interests rather than society as a whole. We are constantly told, ‘You are the future of the country.’ But we are constantly denied any opportunity to participate in the political decisions that are being made today... We want to and ARE ABLE to participate today, not when we are 70 years old.”—Gustavo Gordillo, student

14. Reader

“Everybody shuts himself up in his own little world. Adults look to anything young people do as an attack on their principles and their moral code. That’s the reason behind their illogical hostility toward long hair. What does long hair have to do with decency or whether a kid’s good or bad? I like having long hair.”—Gustavo Gordillo, student

15. Reader

Students made banners to carry at demonstrations and put handbills on every post they could find. They also made up chants that they repeated during marches. This is what they said:

Mexico-Freedom-Mexico-Freedom-Mexico-Freedom—Chant at demonstrations

THE AGITATORS ARE IGNORANCE, HUNGER, AND POVERTY—
Banner at a demonstration

PEOPLE, OPEN YOUR EYES!—Handbill

DON’T SHOOT, SOLDIER: YOU’RE ONE OF THE PEOPLE TOO—
Banner at demonstration

Pause for Discussion

How would you describe the students?

What do the students want?

16. Narrator

The student demonstrations attracted attention throughout Mexico. People responded with comments like these:

17. Reader

I didn’t get any kind of a formal education because my folks couldn’t afford to send me to school. But if education nowadays is the sort that produces students like that, I’m glad I didn’t go to school. I’ve never in my life seen such disrespectful, vulgar, foul-tongued people.—José Alvarez Castaneda, cab driver

18. Reader

The student movement is not the work of delinquents, nor does it intend to subvert Mexican institutions. The student leaders are ready and willing to initiate a dialogue with the highest authorities in the country.—Herbert Castillo, engineer

19. Reader

Students aren’t worth a damn. When the government represses them, they retaliate by yelling and throwing stones. They do lots of shouting every time, but that’s all. What’s needed are firearms.—Cleofas Magdaleno Pantojo Segura, peasant

20. Reader

They’re just a bunch of long-haired hippies.—Tlatelolco resident

21. Reader

It took all our family savings to send our son to the University, and first thing we knew, he was involved in some protests. As soon as I learned what he was doing, I got on a bus, went to Mexico City, and brought him home.—Parent of a University student

22. Reader

The government is convinced there's only one public opinion in Mexico: the one that applauds it, that toadies to it. But there's another public opinion: one that criticizes, that doesn't believe a word the government says, and yet another one, one that doesn't give a damn, that turns a deaf ear to any more promises, that hasn't been taken in, that's indifferent, that no one has been able to take advantage of, a public opinion that despite its suspicious attitude and its ignorance is a free opinion.—José Fuente Herrera, engineer

23. Reader

What do you punks think you're doing? Do you really think you're such hot stuff you can overthrow the government? That'll be the day!—Police officer to student

Pause for Discussion

The above statements were taken from interviews by a journalist.

What are some of the different perceptions you find in these statements?

Why do you think there was such diverse reaction?

If you were interviewed about the student activists, what would you say?

24. Narrator

After the students sent their petition to the government, they continued to press for dialogue. Some of their protests were spontaneous actions, while others were in the form of strikes and rallies. Actions were coordinated by the Student National Strike Committee. The police responded by occupying school campuses in the city. Following the government's orders, police arrested students they considered disorderly, and they injured hundreds of others.

25. Reader

In response to police occupation of the campus, students organized a demonstration that was called "the silent march." They distributed the following flyer that also included the six points from the petition:

TO THE PEOPLE:

The National Strike Committee invites all workers, peasants, teachers, students, and the general public to the GREAT SILENT MARCH in support of our six-point petition:

We have called this march to press for the immediate and complete satisfaction of our demands by the Executive Power.

The day has come when our silence will be more eloquent than our words, which yesterday were stilled by bayonets.

26. Reader

One of the student organizers, Luis González de Alba, wrote this description of the Silent March which took place on Friday, September 13, 1968:

The helicopter hovered overhead just above the treetops. Finally, at the appointed hour, 4:00 p.m., the march began in absolute silence. This time the authorities could not even claim that we had provoked them by shouting insults. A number of delegates maintained that if the demonstration was a silent one, it would fail to show people how angry we were. Others said that none of the demonstrators would keep their mouths shut. What chance was there of controlling and shutting up several hundred thousand boisterous young people who were in the habit of

singing and shouting and chanting at demonstrations: It was an impossible task, and if we failed it would betray the weakness of our organization. That's why the youngest kids wore adhesive tape over their mouths. They themselves chose to do that: they put tape over each other's lips to make sure they wouldn't make a sound. We told them, "If a single one of you fails, we all fail."

27. Narrator

This is what happened next. As soon as we left Chapultepec (cha-PUL-tay-pec) Park, just a few blocks farther on, hundreds of people began to join our ranks. All along the Paseo de la Reforma, the sidewalks, the median strips, the monuments, and even the trees were full of people, and every hundred yards our ranks doubled. And the only sound from those tens of thousands and then hundreds of thousands of people were their footfalls. Footfalls on the pavement, the sound of thousands of marching feet, the sound of thousands of feet walking on, step by step. The silence was more impressive than the huge crowd. It seemed as though we were trampling all the politicians' torrents or words underfoot, all their speeches that are always the same...

Since we had resolved not to shout or talk as we had during the other demonstrations, we were able to hear—for the first time—the applause and the shouts of approval from the dense crowds supporting us along the line of march, and thousand of hands were raised in the symbol that soon covered the entire city and was even seen at public functions, on television, at official ceremonies: the V of Venceremos ("We shall win").... This symbol of unswerving, incorruptible, indomitable will appeared in the most unexpected places, from that time on till the massacre later. Even after Tlatelolco, the V kept appearing, even at the Olympic ceremonies, in the form of the people's two uplifted fingers

28. Reader

After the Silent March a handbill was distributed throughout Mexico City that said, "You can see that we're not vandals or rebels without a cause—the label that's constantly been pinned on us. Our silence proves it."

29. Reader

The next day *The New York Times* gave this description of the September demonstration:

...the students have plastered the walls and bulletin boards with revolutionary mottoes. In the School of Economics, quotations from Mao Tse-tung are seen...The auditorium of the School of Philosophy and Letters has been renamed "Auditorium Ernesto Che Guevara," and classroom doors have been painted with such names as "Lenin Room" or "Ho Chi Minh Room." ...From almost all the students come expressions denoting great lack of respect for governing officials, the PRI, which has ruled under various names for almost 40 years...

Pause for Discussion

What are the references used by *The New York Times* meant to imply?

What do you think its perspective is on the students movement?

30. Reader

A policeman climbed up on the platform to speak at a meeting; he said he was a decent person, took his uniform off and stamped on it, and then asked us for money to go back to the part of the country he came from. He was so angry that tears were streaming down his face.—Julián Acevedo Maldonado, student

31. Reader

Mexico had never seen such huge and enormously enthusiastic spontaneous demonstrations as the ones organized by the student.... The 1968 student movement really shook

Mexican society to its foundations, and that's why the government began to be so afraid of it.—Félix Lucio Hernández Gamundi

Pause for Discussion

What do you think will happen next?

What do you think could be done now to prevent further violence?

32. Narrator

The place was Tlatelolco, a large plaza in Mexico City. The date was October 2, 1968. An estimated 4,000–10,000 people gathered in Mexico City at Tlatelolco to listen to student speakers demand that the government listen to their grievances. On that same night, Mexico's Ministers of the Interior and Defense gave orders to the army to move in on the student protestors at Tlatelolco.

33. Reader

At approximately 7:00 p.m. riot police moved into the crowd, swinging clubs and chains against protesters and spectators. People in the crowd tried to defend themselves, using rocks and bare fists. Snipers in a nearby building responded, supposedly to protect the crowd. Within minutes the army entered the area with armored vehicles and automatic weapons. Three hundred tanks, assault troops, jeeps, and troop transports surrounded the entire area. Thousands of Mexicans were caught in crossfire. Anyone who moved was fired upon.

34. Reader

The terror lasted until 4:00 a.m., when the army crushed the demonstration and gained control. By then, at least 500 students and spectators were killed and at least 1,000 were seriously wounded. Two thousand people were jailed. The incident took place on the same spot on which the Aztecs made their last stand of major resistance against the Spaniards under Cortés in 1521, which was the original Noche Triste. It is also the site of ancient Aztec human sacrifice rituals.

35. Narrator

A week later, the official 1968 Olympic Games began in Mexico City as though nothing had happened. However, some people did know. Solidarity with the students was expressed within the Black Power Movement and elsewhere with the raised fist. Not everyone acted "as though nothing had happened."

36. IN MEMORY OF TLATELOLCO

Darkness breeds violence
and violence seeks darkness
to carry out its bloody deeds.

That is why on October 2 they waited for nightfall
so that non one would see the hand
that held the gun, only its sudden lightening flash.

And who is there in the last pale light of day?
Who is the killer?

Who are those who writhe in agony, those who are dying?
Those who flee in panic, leaving their shoes behind?
Those who fall into the dark pit of prison?
Those rotting in a hospital?

Those who become forever mute, from sheer terror?

Who are they? How many are there? Not a one.

Not a trace of any of them the next day.

By dawn the following morning the Plaza had been swept clean.

The lead stories in the papers
were about the weather.
And on TV, on the radio, at the movie theaters
the programs went on as scheduled,
no interruptions for an announcement,
not a moment of reverent silence at the festivities.
(Because the celebration went right on, according to plan.)

Don't search for something there are no signs of now:
traces of blood, dead bodies,
because it was an all an offering to a goddess,
the Eater of Excrement.
Don't search in the files, because no records have been kept.

But I feel pain when I probe right here: here in my memory
it hurts, so the wound is real. Blood mingling with blood
and if I call it my own blood, I betray one and all.

I remember, we remember.
This is our way of hastening the dawn,
of shedding a ray of light on so many consciences that bear a heavy burden,
on angry pronouncements, yawning prison gates,
faces hidden behind masks.
I remember, let us all remember
until justice comes to sit among us.
—Rosario Castellanos

37. Narrator

Although news of the massacre was suppressed in Mexico, it spread throughout the world. In Paris, 2,000–3,000 students demonstrated in support of Mexican students and workers. Police took 400 persons into custody for identity checks after police clashed with students proclaiming their solidarity with the students of Mexico.

38. Reader

International Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage announced that the Olympic Games would open in Mexico City as scheduled on October 12, 1968, despite the clash between students and the police.

39. Reader

Octavio Paz resigned his prestigious position as Mexico's Ambassador to India, because he felt he could no longer represent a country that murders its youth.

40. Reader

An editorial/letter to *The Times*, a London newspaper, states that Mexico's prestige is being seriously affected by the disturbances and "bloodletting." Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz has decided that everything must be subordinated to restoring foreign confidence in "Latin America's most stable country, and that everything is being done to reassure foreign investors and tourists that the country is stable."—*The Times*, October 4, 1968

41. Reader

Mexico's Secretary of Finance returned from Europe on October 3, 1968 after meeting with European Foreign Ministers and representatives from the International Monetary Fund. The Secretary came with a large loan in his pocket, proof that confidence in Mexico was as strong as ever.

“The growth rate for 1968, he said, would certainly reach seven percent and there had been no flight from the peso during the recent disturbances.”—*The Washington Post*, October 5, 1968

42. Reader

Until recently, Mexican textbooks have omitted the story of the 1968 Student Movement.

43. Reader

There was no mention of the Mexico City riots at a high-level conference on Mexico-United States affairs, held in Mexico in April 1969. A U.S. representative stated, “Mexicans and Americans have common values and shared attitudes. Our two countries are committed to decency and justice; they are opposed to tyranny and oppression...” —Report of the Ninth Conference on the Mexico-United States Interparliamentary Group, 1969

44. Reader

Two weeks after the massacre, the following editorial was printed in a Mexican newspaper, without naming the event:

There was beauty and bright glow in the souls of these dead youngsters. They wanted to make Mexico a land of truth and justice. They dreamed of a marvelous republic free of poverty and deceit. They were demanding freedom, bread, and schooling for those who were oppressed and forgotten, and were fighting to do away with the sad expression in the eyes of children, the frustration of teenagers, the cynicism of older people. In some of them there were perhaps the seeds of a philosopher, a teacher, an artist, an engineer, a doctor. But now they are merely physiological processes come to a sudden end inside skins cruelly ripped apart. Their death has wounded each and every one of us and left a horrible scar on the nation’s life.—Editorial by José Alvarado, *Siempre!*, October 16, 1968

45. Narrator

Every year on October 2, silent services are held to remember the victims of the student massacre. In 1993, on the 25th anniversary, a commemoration was held in the Plaza Tlatelolco, to which about 100,000 people came. Private citizens built a monument inscribed with the names of the known victims, and decorated it with flowers and candles.

As a result of this gathering, survivors met and formed a Truth Commission. They called upon lawyers, prominent Mexican leaders, and people concerned with human rights to investigate the actions of 1968. One of the first tasks was to find out how many people were killed and who they were. A member of the commission said,

One of the first things that the members of the Commission did was to write to all of the responsible government officials and to get the files of 1968...And none of them has responded favorably. But people are coming in with their testimonies, and they are sending their testimonies. The trouble is that there was a lot of intimidation on these people not to talk.

She goes on to say,

This is the Truth Commission that emerges 25 years after an event in a regime that has basically remained unchanged, although there has been a tremendous move towards democracy in Mexico on the part of society. It is a completely spontaneous civilian effort with no government support whatsoever.—Human Rights Advocate

46. Reader

I think it has taken me about 25 years to realize and to understand what actually happened to us as a generation. Thanks to the 25-year commemoration, I think a lot of us now have, for the first time, been able to really sit down and talk about this.—Human Rights Advocate

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