

The student movement and Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?

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In the summer of 1968, Mexico was experiencing the birth of a new student movement.

But that movement was short-lived. On Oct. 2, 1968, 10 days before the opening of the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, police officers and military troops shot into a crowd of unarmed students. Thousands of demonstrators fled in panic as tanks bulldozed over Tlatelolco Plaza.

Government sources originally reported that four people had been killed and 20 wounded, while eyewitnesses described the bodies of hundreds of young people being trucked away. Thousands of students were beaten and jailed, and many disappeared. Forty years later, the final death toll remains a mystery, but documents recently released by the U.S. and Mexican governments give a better picture of what may have triggered the massacre. Those documents suggest that snipers posted by the military fired on fellow troops, provoking them to open fire on the students.

The Beginning Of A Movement

In 1968, student movements were breaking out all over the world — including in France, Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, Japan and the United States.

Mexico, like many countries in the prosperous 1960s, had spawned a vibrant middle class that enjoyed a quality of life unimaginable in previous decades. These children of the Mexican Revolution that now lived in comfort were, for the first time, able to send their own children to university in unprecedented numbers.

The student movement got its start from a street fight between high school students after a football game. The students confronted the Mexico City riot police sent there to end the skirmish. After hours of student resistance, the army was called in to quench the violence. The siege ended when the soldiers blasted the main door of the National Preparatory School in San Ildefonso with a bazooka, killing some of the students in the building.

The National University oversaw the Preparatory School, so the involvement of university officials and students was inevitable. In the following hours, the students decided to organize and protest against the violence exerted by the riot police. Over the following months, Mexico City witnessed a series of student protests and rallies against repression and violence.

The Massacre

Students expected the government to give in to their demands, but they were greeted with a clear message from the president: “No more unrest will be tolerated.” The army proceeded in the following days to seize the National University, with virtually no resistance from the students, and later the National Polytechnic Institute, with active and violent student resistance.

After these events, the students rapidly called for a new gathering on Oct. 2 at the Three Cultures Square in the Tlatelolco housing complex. Thousands of students showed up to get firsthand knowledge of the movement’s next steps. As the gathering was ending, soldiers arrived to capture the movement’s leaders. They were greeted by gunshots from the buildings surrounding the square. The troops then opened fire, turning the evening into a shooting that lasted nearly two hours.

Over the following days, the official account of the events would be that the students — infiltrated by communist forces — had fired on the army, and the soldiers had to fire back to defend themselves.

The 40-Year Search For The Truth

Under an authoritarian regime, no formal investigation into the killings was ever initiated. But a renewed hope to find the truth arrived in 2000 with the election of President Vicente Fox, who broke nearly 70 years of one-party rule. In November 2001, Fox ordered the creation of a “special prosecutor for crimes of the past” to investigate the Tlatelolco massacre. But little was uncovered about the killings or those killed.

The number of civilian casualties reported has ranged between four — in the official count directly after the event — and 3,000. Eyewitnesses recount seeing dozens of bodies and prisoners being trucked away to military bases. But despite efforts by both the student leaders and the special prosecutor to compile the names of the dead, only about 40 have been documented. No siblings, parents or friends of the remaining casualties — if they exist — have come forward to add names to the list.

But new information has come to light through the release of official documents. They reveal that the Presidential Guard — a branch of the military — had posted snipers in the buildings surrounding Tlatelolco Plaza on the day of the massacre. The idea was that the snipers would shoot at the troops posted around the square, and the troops would think student snipers were shooting at them — and then they would open fire.

Using the documents, first-person accounts and archival news reports, along with historic recordings — many of which have never been broadcast before — Radio Diaries has woven together a clearer picture of what happened on Oct. 2.

This story was produced by Joe Richman and Anayansi Diaz-Cortes of Radio Diaries. Thanks to George Lewis and NBC News for some of the audio used in this story.

P.S.

* “Mexico’s 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?”. Heard on All Things Considered. Radio

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