

Blood on the Plaza

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In the tumultuous backdrop of the late 1960s Mexico, a pivotal moment is forever marked in Mexican history: the Tlatelolco Massacre of October 2, 1968. Unfolding amidst the stage of the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics, this tragic event emerged as a brutal response to student protests, laying bare an intricate relationship of political, social, and global forces. This research delves into the events leading up to and following the Tlatelolco Massacre, scrutinizing the role of student activists and the actions of the Mexican Government under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Against the charged atmosphere of the late 1960s, this study unfolds in Mexico City, probing the interconnected dynamics of race, class, and globalization. Utilizing, “Eyewitness and Newspaper Accounts of the Tlatelolco Massacre” and “The Tlatelolco Massacre: Declassified U.S. Documents on Mexico and the Events of 1968,” this research aims to construct a compelling historical argument. It contends that the Tlatelolco Massacre represents a stark manifestation of state-sanctioned violence deployed to suppress dissent, highlighting broader implications for issues of social justice and government control of social classes.

Leading up to the 1968 Olympic Games hosted by Mexico, dissent was brewing nationwide. A series of strikes by doctors, ambulance staff, and rail workers unfolded during the summer and early autumn of that year. Simultaneously, the student movement gained momentum, with the CNH (Consejo Nacional de Huelga), led by figures such as Raúl Álvarez Garín, Gilberto Guevara Niebla, and other orchestrations numerous demonstrations and protests.¹ The escalation of tensions became starkly evident on July 23 when paramilitary riot forces, known as granaderos, forcefully marked a critical turning point as confrontations between the state and students

¹ Victoria Carpenter, “‘You Want the Truth? You Can’t Handle the Truth’: Poetic Representations of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 21, no. 1 (2015): 35-49.

transformed into public displays of violence. As the summer progressed, dissent continued to rise amidst the charged atmosphere of 1960s Mexico, setting the stage for heightened social and political tensions. Notably, two significant players emerged in the narrative of dissents: the granaderos and Batallón Olympia, a paramilitary group commissioned by the Mexican government for additional security during the Olympic Games.

The granaderos, known as riot police, and Batallón Olympia became increasingly entangled in the wave of protests, actively infiltrating the crowds of demonstrators at the plaza. This strategic involvement of paramilitary forces adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics of dissent, indicating a concerted effort by the government to suppress and control the rising tide of social unrest. The choice to deploy paramilitary force suggests a deliberate escalation of response, moving beyond conventional law enforcement methods. The government's enlistment of the Batallón Olympia for security during the Olympics implies a strategic decision. It aims not only to ensure the physical safety of the events but also to quell any potential disruptions stemming from the ongoing protests. The infiltration of these forces into the plaza highlights a confrontation between state-backed entities and the protestors, most of whom were deemed lower class. The deployment of these paramilitary forces had a profound impact on lower-income neighborhoods. The increased militarization and control measures may have been more acutely felt in these areas, creating an environment of fear and intimidation. The lower class, already marginalized, found themselves subject to heightened scrutiny and control, further limiting their agency within the socio-political landscape.

The government's efforts to shape Tlatelolco into a self-contained independent city were motivated by a desire to maintain social segregation and control. By providing all essential amenities within Tlatelolco, the state aimed to prevent interaction between the lower and upper

classes, viewing it as a means to avoid potential social unrest.² The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) sought to maintain their political dominance by keeping different social groups isolated so that they were able to control the narrative. This approach involved providing all essential amenities within Tlatelolco, creating an environment where residents had little reason to interact with individuals from different social strata such interaction was perceived as a political catalyst for social unrest. However, this attempt at social engineering faced resistance from the residents of Tlatelolco. Despite the government's efforts to create a self-contained city, the community found ways to undermine the state's control. Residents, resilient in their pursuit of autonomy and social connection, resisted the imposed isolation. Their resistance played a crucial role in the eventual participation of the district's inhabitants in broader social and political movements. Their ability to find ways to connect and resist isolation laid the groundwork for a sense of community that transcended the government's boundaries. Unfortunately, this participation also exposed them to the tragic events of the Tlatelolco Massacre after a meeting of their collective resistance and engagement became a focal point of government scrutiny and control.

Survivor accounts, however, tell a different story, one where a government agent, identifiable by white gloves, infiltrated the crowds and triggered a brutal military response.³ This glaring discrepancy in narratives not only underscores the immediate challenge of historical accuracy but also raised profound questions about the reliability of official government records. The mention of "chronic unrest there and indications that agitators are planning distributions

² See Davis S. Dalton, "1968 Today: Parallels Between Tlatelolco and the Current Moment in Mexico" *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* Travesia 27, no. 4 (2018): 551-60 for more about the amenities that the state provided to Tlatelolco.

³ Anon, "The Mexican Student Movements of 1968: An Olympic Perspective" *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 6 (2009): 814-839; See Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico* Translated by Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1975) for more eyewitness accounts.

during the Olympics have already led the government to tighten its control on the students” further amplifies the complex socio-political atmosphere leading up to the massacre.⁴ The revelation that agitators were planning distributions during the Olympics suggests a coordinated effort to amplify dissent, drawing attention to the broader context in which the government’s response unfolded.

An unfortunate counterpoint to the envisioned symbols of peace and unity surrounding the Olympic Games was the stark reality of heightened security measures in response to the Tlatelolco Massacre. After the massacre, the government was concerned that student protestors might disrupt the games. In a strategic effort to maintain an appearance of normalcy and prevent any alarm among Olympic visitors and participants, most of the soldiers and police were strategically positioned out of sight around the stadium. They adopted inconspicuous postures, slouching behind trees and crouching in bushes, aiming to strike the delicate balance between maintaining security and not unsettling the atmosphere of the global event.⁵ Inside the stadium, the covert involvement of the Batallón Olympia added another layer to the security measures. Members of this paramilitary group seamlessly mingled with visitors, blending into the crowds while using walkie-talkies to communicate with one another. This covert communication network allowed for swift coordination in the event of any more disturbances, underscoring the government’s determination to ensure the smooth process of the Olympic Games despite the recent tragic events.

The decision by the government to tighten its control on students in response to these indications reveals a proactive stance “determined to prevent disruptions of the games and to protect the visitors.”⁶ This indicates not only a heightened state of alertness within the government but also a strategic move to maintain stability during the significant international event of the

⁴ CIA Weekly Summary, *Student Unrest Troubles Mexico*. July 19, 1958, Secret.

⁵ Harry Blutstein, *Games of Discontent: Protests, Boycotts, and Politics at the 1968 Mexico Olympics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021).

⁶ CIA Weekly Summary, *A Renewed Violence in Mexico*, October 4, 1968, Secret.

Summer Olympic Games. The tightening control on students, often at the forefront of social and political movements, reflects a broader pattern of authorities seeking to curb dissenting voices. In essence, the combination of conflicting narratives, the symbolic significance of the government agents, and the revelation of preexisting unrest and planned agitations paints a picture of the atmosphere leading up to the unfortunate massacre.

President Díaz Ordaz, during the tumultuous events of the late 1960s in Mexico, skillfully presented a narrative of concern for Mexican achievements and a desire for peace. In his addresses, he painted the student unrest as a threat to the nation's hard-won accomplishments, appealing to what he deems as "genuine" who sought tranquility.⁷ However, this public façade of statesmanship sharply contrasts with covert collaborations between Díaz Ordaz and his cabinet with the CIA. Díaz Ordaz and his circle received daily briefings from the CIA on left-wing rebels, exposing a clandestine engagement with foreign powers. The Mexican leader justified the escalation of force against students, strategically framing their movements as not only endangering domestic stability but also as potential threats to Mexico's international prestige, tying the unrest to the upcoming Olympics. The president's public justification of increased force created a narrative that sought to link the students' protests with a broader, orchestrated effort to tarnish the nation's reputation on the global stage.

The uncertainty surrounding the exact number of casualties following the Tlatelolco Massacre is emblematic of the disagreements between the government and families as they "continue to disagree about which group initiated the bloodshed that followed and about the number and identities of those killed."⁸ This ongoing dispute extends beyond mere statistical

⁷ Elisa Kriza, "Anti-Communism, Communism, and Anti-Intervention in Narratives Surrounding the Student Massacre on Tlatelolco Square (Mexico, 1968)" *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2019, pp. 82-96.

⁸ Nora E. Jaffary, Edward Osofsky, and Susie S. Porter, eds. *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009).

differences and delves into the fundamental question of responsibility namely, which group was the instigator of the violence that ensued, and the contentious issue of the identities and total count of those who lost their lives. There are also reports on October 3rd, that up to five hundred were wounded.⁹ The lingering ambiguity underscores the immediate challenges associated with establishing a historically accurate account and reveals the persistent tensions between official narratives and live experiences of those directly affected.

Despite the government's efforts to downplay the extent of the bloodshed through media channels, the strike council emerged as a formidable force that successfully halted student protests. The strike council's ability to bring as a formidable force that successfully halted student protests. The strike council's ability to bring a temporary end to the protests reflects a pivotal moment in the aftermath of the massacre. It highlights the resilience and strategic effectiveness of organized resistance against the government's oppressive measures placed on the lower class. This success, however temporary, signaled a collective determination to defy the imposed tale and control, serving as a testament to the strength of the collective voice against authoritarian suppression.

The subsequent occurrence of the Olympic Games, just 10 days after the traumatic events of October 2nd presents a stark juxtaposition against the backdrop of lingering unrest. The nation found itself grappling with the aftermath of a tragic turning point in its history, marked by the suppression of dissent and the loss of lives. The decision to proceed with the Olympic Games within this context was not only a testament to the government's desire to showcase normalcy and control but also laid bare the complexities of reconciling a traumatic national vent with the pursuit of international prestige. The lingering unrest, palpable in the collective consciousness of the nation, cast a shadow over the Olympic Games. Transforming what was meant to be a global

⁹ DIA Intelligence Information Report, Army Participation in Student Situation, Mexico City, October 18, 1968, Confidential.

celebration into a somber reflection of internal conflict. The connection of the celebratory international event against the backdrop of unresolved trauma and discontent encapsulates the intricate dynamics of a nation torn between projecting stability to the world and confronting the internal scars of a recent tragedy that their nation had caused.

The Tlatelolco Massacre stands as a haunting emblem of the intricate interplay of political, social, and global forces. From the government's attempt to shape Tlatelolco into a self-contained city to isolate social classes to the deployments of paramilitary forces escalating the suppression of dissent, the tragedy unfolded against a charged atmosphere of social and political tensions. The residents' resilient resistance, symbolized by their defiance of imposed isolation, eventually exposed them to the government's scrutiny and control, leading to the tragic events of the massacre. The conflicting narratives reveal agitations during the Olympics, and the government's preemptive control measures on students contribute to the complex socio-political atmosphere preceding the massacre. The tragic saga of Tlatelolco reflects the complex tapestry of political maneuvering, societal resistance, and global implications. Amid conflicting narratives and heightened controls, its legacy persists, shaping Mexico's historical awareness. In essence, the aftermath of the Tlatelolco Massacre of October 2, 1968, is characterized by a tumultuous relationship of conflicting narratives, resilient resistance, social class isolation, and the complex intersection of domestic turmoil with international events. The unresolved disputes over casualties, the success of the strike council in halting protests, and the uneasy staging of the Summer Olympic Games, all contribute to the legacy of Tlatelolco, a legacy that extends far beyond the immediate events of the massacre and continues to shape the historical consciousness of Mexico.