October 2 marked another anniversary of the 1968 massacre in Tlatelolco Square, a former prehispanic marketplace in Mexico City. Students and others were gunned down by soldiers and government agents at a peaceful demonstration, and the repression of dissidence—and of information—that followed continues to this day. IRC Board Member Kate Doyle of the National Security Archives tells a dual story here. On the one hand she writes about the need to name the individuals whose deaths became one of the most ignominious chapters in Mexico's history. On the other, she chronicles how despite Mexico's greater access to information, actually obtaining the documents that shed light on a dark past can be a major challenge—marked by arbitrary decisions, unclear rules, and government-imposed obstacles.
For more articles by Kate Doyle and collaborators throughout the Americas, see IRC Americas Program's Issue Area: Right to Know and Communications Rights.

Americas Program Special Report

The Dead of Tlatelolco

By Kate Doyle | October 13, 2006

Who are the dead of Tlatelolco? *Archivos Abiertos* is determined to find an answer.

It seems like a simple question. Who among the thousands gathered in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* on the afternoon of October 2, 1968, did not return home that night? Who fell, instead, at some dark moment, caught between agents shooting from the apartments surrounding the square and the soldiers swarming below? Who died from their wounds as a Red Cross ambulance careened through the streets of Mexico City toward some emergency room? Who succumbed days later in a hospital bed?

Who are the dead? What were their names?

They are questions that have haunted Mexico for 38 years. Perhaps in another place, at another time, they would have been answered simply—with autopsy and death certificates, police reports, hospital records, film and photographs, and good journalism.

But Mexico was not that place, and 1968 was not that time. Mexico in 1968 was a nation of secrets and lies, where rumors trumped facts, propaganda masqueraded as news, and government officials were accountable to no one.

As a consequence, today we have neither an official nor an unofficial version of the massacre at Tlatelolco that explains its enduring mysteries: What orders did the PRI-led government give its military, police and intelligence services on October 2? Which senior officials in the administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz gave those orders? Why did the shooting begin?

And who died?

In the face of the government's refusal to explain its role over the decades that followed 1968, others have tried: journalists, writers, the former leaders of the student movement, historians, political analysts. An independent "truth commission" convened in 1993, but failed to reach a definitive conclusion due to lack of resources, time, and authority; the *Comisión Especial del 68* tried again in 1998 but was stymied by the lack of evidence.

Elena Poniatowska wrote her groundbreaking account in 1971, based on personal testimonies. Former student leaders, such as Luis González de Alba, have contributed important eyewitness accounts of the massacre. Sergio Aguayo established new facts in his invaluable book, *1968: Los Archivos de la Violencia*. His unprecedented access to the documents of the Interior Secretariat (General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations, or IPS by its Spanish acronym) helped make his analysis the most definitive to date.

And yet, no one has solved the problem of the dead.

"[O]ne of the aspects of clarification still pending is the number of those killed," wrote Aguayo in 1998. "As long as this issue is unresolved, it is difficult to claim that Tlatelolco has reached a final point" (*Los Archivos de la Violencia*, 250).

Waiting for Fox

Shortly after taking office in 2000, President Vicente Fox promised to clarify the events at Tlatelolco. By naming a Special Prosecutor charged with investigating the "dirty war"—beginning with the 1968 massacre—and opening secret intelligence archives to public scrutiny, Fox appeared to signal that his government would no longer tolerate the official cover-up.

"We are prepared to face the ultimate consequences in the clarification of these events," he told an audience gathered outside the national archives to inaugurate the dirty war collection.

That was four and half years ago. As the 38th anniversary of Tlatelolco passed, we wait for clarification; there has been none, to date.

Last December, the team of investigators and analysts responsible for writing a definitive truth commission-style report for the Special Prosecutor's office completed its work and turned the document over to Dr. Ignacio Carrillo Prieto. When Carrillo failed to present it to the President, a draft version was leaked to a handful of prominent writers and reporters. The National Security Archive posted the draft on our website in order to provide broad public access to it and prod the Fox administration to publish an official version.

Fox responded by promising that the final report would be issued on April 15, but the deadline has come and gone without comment from the President.

How many died at Tlatelolco? *Archivos Abiertos* decided we should try and investigate the issue ourselves.

Names and Numbers

Was it hundreds?

John Rodda, a sports writer for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, was in Mexico to cover the Olympics when the massacre took place. Based on what he witnessed and the interviews he gathered, Rodda originally reported that 325 people died in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*.

Many present in the plaza that night came to the same conclusion. Students, passers-by, and residents of the Tlatelolco apartment complex told of witnessing hundreds of bodies: lying in pools of blood, stacked up against the walls of the church, or tossed into trucks that arrived after the shooting stopped to clean up the mess.

In the days and weeks and years following the massacre, the range of estimates of the number of victims fluctuated wildly. President Díaz Ordaz's spokesman, Fernando Garza, guessed shortly after the shooting stopped that seven people had died; hours later, he raised the number to 20. *El Día* counted 30 bodies. *Siempre!* counted 40. On October 5, the National Strike Council, which had organized the rally at Tlatelolco, said 150 civilians and 40 soldiers had been killed. "Not one," General José Hernández Toldeo told *Proceso*, when asked in 1978. In 1993, Félix Fuentes—who, as a reporter with *La Prensa* in 1968, had written a gripping first-hand account of the massacre—could only speculate: "The calculation of those killed has oscillated between 200 and 1,500."

The plaza of Tlatelolco today.

Somehow the estimate settled on 300. The number appears repeatedly: in books, editorials, articles, memoirs. I have used the number in my own writing. But without documentation, it is meaningless. "It is terrible to have arrived at a number of those killed by consensus," observed Aguayo (*Los Archivos de la Violencia*, 249). And by guessing at numbers without linking them to names, we confiscate the very identities of the victims of Tlatelolco: their faces, their families, their lives before they were lost.

Archivos Abiertos decided to investigate the names of the victims of Tlatelolco. We spent some eight months conducting an exhaustive review of records found in the IPS, DFS, and Sedena collections of the *Archivo General de la Nación*. Although we consulted many of the extraordinary books written about the massacre, we were determined to rely exclusively on primary documents to piece together the puzzle.

Of course, documents can be misleading. Official records can contain errors and distortions, just as memory can. But read collectively and critically—and checked against secondary sources and eyewitnesses—they can also provide the solid evidence necessary for the construction of accurate history. Official records are the best weapons we have to challenge decades of official silence about the past. They also solve the problem of trying to write history "by consensus"—what Luis González de Alba critiqued as an exercise of "suppositions … without facts, without research, without interviews to the contrary, without the historical and detective work that the events deserve" (cited in *Los Archivos de la Violencia*, 13).

Our Sources

The decision by the Fox government to force the release of millions of military, police, and intelligence files in 2002 was a watershed for openness in Mexico—and a radical break with the past. The reality of trying to obtain those files, however, and use them in an investigation is a tremendously difficult task. The collections include no index. The archivists rely on internal, unpublished rules—that seem to change frequently and without warning—to decide what to release and what to deny. The process can frustrate even the most persistent researcher to the point of defeat.

There are three distinct record groups.

The ***Dirección Federal de Seguridad*** (DFS) collection in the AGN's Gallery 1 includes hundreds of documents containing information gathered by the intelligence agency in the aftermath of the massacre, and numerous references to the dead. We relied heavily on the DFS records to construct our list. The release of the documents is maddeningly arbitrary, however. One day we would be told that a document we wanted to read was reserved and could not be released. Weeks later, we would receive the same document without difficulty from a different archivist. Over time, we gathered several versions of the same documents: some with pages missing, others with sections deleted, still others released in full. The inconsistencies reflect the lack of archival guidelines regulating the disclosure of information from Gallery 1. The directorate of the national archives should insist on the creation of a set of clear and defensible rules and publish them, so that archive staff and outside researchers alike will understand how to proceed.

In Gallery 2, the documents of the ***Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales*** (IPS) from *Gobernación* also provided evidence on those killed at Tlatelolco. An important report by then-Attorney General, Julio Sánchez Vargas, titled "*Tlatelolco: 2 de octubre*," contains details from the autopsies of 15 identified people killed at Tlatelolco, and an additional ten more unidentified. Without a real index, however, the labor involved in trying to review the IPS records is immense. Researchers cannot request individual documents, but must comb through entire boxes of unorganized paper in search of relevant information.

The records of the ***Secretariat of Defense*** in Gallery 7 of the AGN contain nothing pertinent to the massacre at Tlatelolco. It is clear from a review of the documents in that gallery that Sedena withheld a vast amount of documentation from the collection it turned over to the AGN. For example, "partes militares" exist that announce the deaths of two army soldiers on October 2, but we found them in a book published by *Proceso* in 1980, not in the archives. President Fox—who charged the Army as well as the Interior Secretariat and intelligence service with turning over their records of the dirty war—should demand compliance by the armed forces of his own executive order and require that Sedena records be disclosed.

We also consulted the ***Informe borrador del Fiscal Especial***, *Que no vuelva a suceder*, (Special Fiscal Draft Report, *So that it doesn't happen again*) written in 2005 with extensive use of the AGN dirty war archives. It was not a useful document. Although the section concerning Tlatelolco is eloquent and detailed in describing the student movement of 1968, it is riddled with errors and comes to no definite conclusion about who was killed on October 2. Among the list of the victims of Tlatelolco, for example, are people who died at student protests that took place before October 2 (such as Román Nájera Valverde, who died in August 1968; see p. 72). Records are sometimes mischaracterized, such as a draft of the Attorney General's report on Tlatelolco, which is described as a document "apparently elaborated by the CNH [*Consejo Nacional de Huelga*]" (see p. 60, footnote 216). And in several cases, it was impossible to verify information used by the Fiscal's investigators because the documents have been *resguardado por la Fiscalía* and are no longer open to the public.

Until the final version of the Special Prosecutor's report is made public, it will be impossible to use the draft in an

investigation of the events at Tlatelolco. We await President Fox's decision to release it, as he pledged.

Registry of the Deaths of Tlatelolco

Eight months after *Archivos Abiertos* launched our search for official records, we can now publish an initial and definitive list of the names of those who were killed at Tlatelolco. The result is surprisingly low, though no less powerful in its implications. To date, we have found records confirming the deaths of 44 men and women in the archives of the dirty war. Thirty-four of the victims are identified by name. Ten more people are listed as "unknown."

There may be others, but we have not yet found them in the archives or in any other official registry. We will continue to search for new evidence. What we do know is that the death of each of the 44 individuals found in the files of the dirty war is documented in more than one declassified government record. Each one is cross-checked against the secondary sources available to us. Each one represents a life lost in the senseless attack by government forces on the student movement—an attack that killed not only students but soldiers, workers, a teacher, a housewife, a 15-year old *doméstica*, and an unemployed father.

All of the government documents related to the 44 victims may be found on the National Security Archive's Web site.

In the hope of identifying the ten victims of Tlatelolco that remain nameless, and other victims not yet identified in files of the dirty war, *Archivos Abiertos* is launching a new blog (http://muertosdetlatelolco.blogspot.com/), where friends and family members can register information, documentation, photographs, and memories about their loved ones lost on October 2, 1968. We hope, through this electronic citizen registry to be able to arrive at a more definitive list of Tlatelolco's victims, and to memorialize those lost.

To participate in the *Registro de los Muertos* de Tlatelolco, go to the Web site of the National Security Archive's Mexico Project and click on the link to our blog on Tlatelolco.

Together, we can construct an accurate history of the events of Tlatelolco—a history based on facts as well as the painful memories that linger.

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Resources:

National Security Archive
http://www.nsarchive.org/

Proceso
http://www.proceso.com.mx/

Blog on Tlatelolco
www.muertosdetlatelolco.blogspot.com

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