27. The 1692 Mexico City Revolt (1692)*

Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, like his friend Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Source 26), was an important Mexican luminary. Born in 1645 in Mexico City, he entered the Society of Jesus at age fifteen, took his vows two years later, but left the order in 1667 or 1669. In 1672 he became a professor of astrology and mathematics at the University of Mexico and the following year was ordained as a secular priest, serving as chaplain of the Hospital del Amor de Dios from 1682 until his death in 1700. He was also an almoner (church official responsible for distributing charity) for the Mexican archbishop Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, as well as a corregidor general (book examiner) for the Holy Office of the Inquisition. In addition, Sigüenza was the leading scholar of his day on Pre-Conquest indigenous history. He formed a close friendship while at the hospital with Juan de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a prominent indigenous judge-governor who bequeathed to him a rich body of documentation about his ancestors, the indigenous nobility of Texcoco; Sigüenza would use this material, along with the writings of the Nahua chronicler Chimalpahin, in his reconstruction of the ancient history of the Mexica (Source 20).

The excerpt from Sigüenza’s writing included here comes from a letter he wrote in late August 1692 to his friend, the Spanish admiral Andrés de Pez y Malzarraga, in which he described Mexico’s most dramatic urban riot prior to the independence wars. Admiral Pez was then in Madrid urging the crown to finance the occupation and fortification of the Bay of Pensacola on the northwest coast of Florida, a voyage Pez undertook the following year, with Sigüenza acting as cartographer. Sigüenza probably hoped that Pez would publish his letter in the imperial capital in order to correct some false notions about the uprising that the enemies of the Mexican viceroy, the Conde de Galve, had suggested to King Charles II.

A number of circumstances provoked Mexico City’s plebeian population, particularly its Indian sector, to revolt on June 8, 1692. These included pirate raids, earthquakes, flooding, a solar eclipse, and a food shortage caused by a combination of incessant rains, a crop blight, and the high price of food, along with the popular perception that the state had mishandled the food crisis. The catalyst came when a state prosecutor, Escalante y Mendoza, encountered the Indian woman described in the following passage, lying unconscious on the stairs of the vicerregal palace. The woman’s companions complained that she had fainted in a crush at the grain market. Escalante y Mendoza ordered that she be attended to, but did not pay her any particular attention. A short time later, an angry mob gathered in the city center, lamenting their mistreatment at the granary and brandishing a corpse they claimed was that of the Indian woman. The mob’s anger escalated until it erupted in the

*Miguel León Portilla et al., eds., Historia documental de México, vol. 1 (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1965), pp. 264–269. Excerpt translated by the editors. All footnotes have been added.
Bands of men came pushing their way into the square from the street where I stood (it would have been the same on others that opened into the square). Spaniards came, carrying their swords unsheathed, but seeing the same thing that had stopped me in my tracks, they too stopped. But the blacks, mulatos [people of African and Spanish parentage], and all who were plebeians were shouting, “Death to the Viceroy and to any who defend him!” And the Indians shouted: “Death to the Spanish and the gachupines [derogatory term for those whom came from Spain] who eat our corn!” And exhorting each other to be brave since no Cortés was around to defeat them, they flooded into the square to accompany the others in throwing rocks. “Hey señoritas!” said the Indians to each other in their language. “Come with joy to this war, since God wants the Spaniards to be finished in it. It does not matter if we die now without confessing! Is this not our land? So what do the Spanish want with it? . . .”

Some reinforcements of honorable people had entered through the doorway of the military barracks by the Casa de la Moneda that was next to it and from other places. These people, since they were locked in the palace, had thought they were very safe. It did not occur to them that the rioters would fight with their utmost determination if they faced no opposition. If it is true that they had loaded all their muskets the night before, as they told me, there must have been neither gunpowder nor bullets in the palace because after twenty-five or thirty musketeers had fired from the roof, not another shot was heard. Those who entered to help were ill-prepared, and of the few soldiers who were already there, two or three were very badly wounded, while another had burned his left hand when a musketroon exploded, and the remaining ones were injured from being stoned head to toe, so the auxiliaries did not do any good. They were useless, not because they came without firearms which were not available, but rather because, as they said, they did not have anyone to lead them and give them arms. And, in the end, everything there was confusion, commotion and shouting because, because neither His Excellency [the Viceroy] nor anyone in his family was at home. And few people were there except some maids and other servants. There was not even a sufficient number of soldiers (already quartered in the palace) in the Guards Corps to do their duty of presenting arms to the Captain General when he returned to the palace, such as should always be practiced among a well-disciplined infantry.

The moment the gates were shut and the people found themselves without any opposition, there arose a grating and horrific howl that struck fear in those who heard it . . . It appeared to me that up until then, judging from their size, the number of rebels who filled the square exceeded ten thousand. . . . I returned to the spot where I realized . . . that not only Indians, but people of all colors without any square where I realized . . . that not only Indians, but people of all colors without any . . .
their cause by carrying into that place the Indian woman they pretended had died. Evidence proves that Indians were there, but they were not alone. Many others who frequented pulquerías (taverns selling pulque), a liquor obtained from maguey cactus were mixed in with them, and these (as if speaking for all of them) had encouraged the Indians days earlier in what they wanted to do and what they were to steal on this occasion.

In a matter as grave as that which is treated here, I would not dare to definitively state either that it was the Indians who—without the counsel of others—began the riots, or that others who were involved—among them Spaniards—persuaded them to do it. Many of those who could hear the riots affirmed and ratified the latter position, but I saw more evidence of the former. . . . [Sigüenza describes how leaseholders had left over two hundred large wooden chests holding European and local merchandise in the central square. Ed.] The remainder of the square was filled with stalls made of reeds and mats where Indians sold things during the day and where they slept at night. All of this commerce meant that one of the most expensive and most glorious squares in the world looks to some like a badly built village and to all like a pigpen. You are familiar with this since you have seen it many times, and you also know that it has always been understood as bad government to permit such stalls in this place (that must by its nature be open and free), because both the material they are made of and the goods in the chests is so highly flammable.

With things such as they were, since they had not succeeded in accomplishing anything by throwing stones except surrendering their arms without any benefit at all, the rebels decided to set fire to all sides of the palace. The reeds and mats from which the stalls and huts were made provided more than enough material for the task, and the Indian men and women started to rip them apart and heap them against the palace doors and set them on fire. They accomplished this in the blink of an eye. They started the fire (for I do not know what reason) next to the second largest chest that was close to the palace fountain. Since it held only sugar, its flames were intense and high. Next followed the patio door, where the Treaty and Court rooms, those of the scribes of the chamber, and the stores of bulleted and sealed paper were all located. After this, the jail of the court that the bailiff had locked at the start of the riot was burned, and neither he nor those who assisted him in his quarters, could impede the masses from arming themselves with carbines. . . . [Sigüenza describes the fire spreading to other governmental buildings. Ed.]

No sound was heard from the rebels other than “Death to the Viceroy and the Corregidor” and with the palace already burning on all sides, the rioters moved on to the municipal buildings, where the Corregidor lived, to set it on fire as well. Since he valued his own life and that of his wife, he had fled the place, but his carriage was the first to which they set fire and pelted with rocks. While it was being consumed by flames, they brandished it around the whole square as if in triumph. Afterward, some were driven to kill the coach’s mules because they were also burning, while others immediately set fire, with great mountains of burning bedrolls, reeds and planks, to the offices of the public scribes and those of the municipal council . . . [and to other buildings].

They did not need to waste even a quarter of an hour in this because of both their great numbers and the care and diligence and determination with which they worked. It is remarkable that between six in the afternoon when the riot had started, until this point—about seven-thirty—they worked their hands and mouths with equal tenacity. We have already seen how much they had already accomplished with their hands. With their voices, they were no less execrable and rude. One did not hear anything in the whole square other than “Long live the Holy Sacrament! Long live the Virgin of the Rosary! Long live the King! Long live the Santiguénes! Long live pulque!” But to each of these acclamations (perhaps because they were watchwords used so they would know each other) they added, “Death to the Viceroy! Death to the Viceroy’s Wife! Death to the Corregidor! Death to the Spaniards! Death to bad Government!” And they shouted this not so plainly as I write it here, but rather with the addition of such shamelessness, curses, and vulgarities aimed at those figures that I think have ever been pronounced before this occasion by rational men. I know very well everyone participated in this crime, but it was Indians alone who participated in burning the houses of the city government and the palace.

I have already related how the zaramillos of the Baratillo had immediately accompanied those who passed by them with the Indian woman whom they feigned had died. Like servants or slaves who stole from their employers’ houses, or those who helped such thieves or bought items from them, they began to loot goods from the square . . . they began to break through doors and roofs, that were very weak, and to load up on merchandise and coins while the Indians (who knew, because of their regular presence on the square, which of all the chests were the best stocked) set the fires.

The Indians who witnessed this saw that they should also participate in getting their hands on such considerable spoils and so, joining other Indians, mulattos, blacks, chinos [half-castes], mestizos, lobos [wolves], and vile Spaniards, gachupines and criollos [American-born Spaniards], that were there, they fell at once on the chests holding iron goods, to get axes and iron bars which they used to break open other chests. And those who did not have any, armed themselves with machetes and knives . . . .

At this hour, instead of an alarm, all the church bells sounded and then there appeared the reverend fathers of the Company of Jesus and of la Merced whose exhortations, accompanied with prayers of the Holy Christ and the choruses and devout mases of the rosary might have served to calm the people. They sang litanies with soft music to the image of the Holy Mary. And the whole community came into the soft music to the image of the Holy Mary. And the whole community came into the square. But since stones then rained on them from all around, the holy order that the square. But since stones then rained on them from all around, the holy order that
Central Themes
Indigenous people, state formation, urban life, land and labor, race and ethnicity

Suggested Reading

Related Sources
6. Markets and Temples in the City of Tenochtitlan (1519)
26. Sor Juana: Nun, Poet, and Advocate (1690)
32. Hidalgo’s Uprising (1849)
60. Chronicles of Mexico City (1938)
68. Eyewitness and Newspaper Accounts of the Tlatelolco Massacre (1968)

Eighteenth-century Mexico was a time of great change. Over the same period, the spread of the European economy disrupted the living standards of indigenous peoples responsible for the mass production of products like bread and tobacco.

While the Bajío region of Mexico saw significant increases in population, the Mexican population was heavily influenced by European demands for labor. This demand triggered economic changes, leading to the production of cash crops such as tobacco and coffee, which replaced indigenous crops like corn and red corn. This period marked a significant demographic shift in Mexico’s indigenous population.

Demographic changes in Mexico were also evident in the Viceroyalty of New Spain.