

## Why New Mexico's 1680 Pueblo Revolt Is Echoing in 2020 Protests

Indigenous groups in the Southwest are imbuing their activism this year with commemorations of the 340-year-old Pueblo Revolt, one of Spain's bloodiest defeats in its colonial empire.

By Simon Romero

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ALBUQUERQUE — While protests over police violence against African-Americans spread from one city to the next in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing in May, the missive scrawled in red paint on the New Mexico History Museum reached further back in time: "1680 Land Back."

The graffiti invoked another rebellious juncture in what is now the United States: the uprising in 1680 when Pueblo Indians handed Spain one of its bloodiest defeats anywhere in its vast colonial empire. From the protests in the late spring against New Mexico's conquistador monuments to the writing last month emblazoning the walls of Santa Fe and Taos celebrating the Pueblo Revolt, the meticulously orchestrated rebellion that exploded 340 years ago is resonating once again.

The increasingly energetic activism in New Mexico points to how the protests across the country over racial injustice and police treatment of African-Americans have fueled an even broader questioning about the racism and inequality that endure in this part of the West.

Indigenous groups are referring to the Pueblo Revolt in organizing drives over such issues as stolen lands, the Justice Department's deployment of federal agents to Albuquerque and the Trump administration's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit Native peoples especially hard.

"The Pueblo Revolt was the most successful Indian revolution in what is now the United States," said Porter Swentzell, a historian from Santa Clara Pueblo, one of New Mexico's 23 tribal nations. "Twenty twenty is energizing this upsurge of activism inspired by the revolt that was building for years."

In recent decades, commemorations of 1680 in New Mexico and Arizona were already challenging the traditional centering of early American history on the English colonies in Plymouth or Jamestown. Now Representative Deb Haaland, a member of New Mexico's Laguna Pueblo who is one of the first Native American women elected to Congress, is among the prominent figures raising awareness about the Pueblo Revolt.



The Pueblo Action Alliance mounted a campaign on social media that proposed replacing statues of Spanish conquistadors with Popé sculptures. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

Others from tribal nations are illuminating the revolt's significance in ways that go well beyond street protests, including filmmaking, history, the visual arts and archaeology.

The resurrection of the Pueblo Revolt comes at a time when discussions of the country's past are increasingly contentious. This month, President Trump said he would create a 1776 Commission to help "restore patriotic education to our schools." The president also said the federal government would oppose attempts by public schools to include in their curriculums the 1619 Project, published by The New York

Times, which examines slavery's profound consequences across the full spectrum of U.S. history.

Still largely unknown outside the Southwest, the basic details of how the blood-soaked insurrection crystallized — and eventually produced lasting gains in Pueblo sovereignty — have long riveted scholars.

The Pueblo Revolt succeeded in dislodging a European power from a large part of North America for a considerable stretch, in contrast to other Native rebellions around the same time, like King Philip's War in New England.

But even after Spain reasserted control over New Mexico, the Pueblos secured lasting concessions. The Spanish generally allowed them to remain in their lands, ceded to some demands for autonomy and provided ways for tribal members to lodge legal complaints about mistreatment by colonial officials.

The seeds of the rebellion started long before 1680 with the Spanish settlers and Franciscan friars who, after conquering New Mexico, imposed forced labor, evangelism and demands for tribute on Native peoples in the frontier province throughout much of the 17th century.

Pueblo Indians mounted one rebellion after another, as did Indigenous peoples elsewhere in Spanish-occupied lands, but it took a visionary shaman named Popé to orchestrate the mother of all revolts.

Popé, from the Tewa-speaking Ohkay Owingeh nation that endures in northern New Mexico to this day, did so by secretly piecing together a web of alliances among Pueblo peoples speaking languages as varied as Hopi, Keres and Zuñi.

Popé's meticulous plotting unfolded amid almost unimaginable catastrophe. While estimates vary, the Spanish conquest is thought to have triggered a crash in the Pueblo population from around 80,000 at the start of the 17th century to about 17,000 before the revolt. Famine and epidemics in the years leading up to 1680 ratcheted the death toll higher.

"Popé is kind of this Mad Max figure in a postapocalyptic world where he could see all these ancestral villages emptied out on the landscape," said Matthew Liebmann, a Harvard archaeologist who has worked extensively in the Pueblo of Jémez.

Before the revolt, the Spanish prohibited Indians in New Mexico from riding horses. So Popé sent long-distance runners hundreds of miles to Pueblos around the province with knotted cords of what is thought to be yucca or perhaps strips of deer hide.

Tunyo is a mesa where as many as 2,000 Pueblo people took refuge in the 1690s to face off against the Spanish during a monthslong siege. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

Insurgents were told to untie a knot each day until the last knot was unfastened, when the Pueblos would rise up in unison. When the Spanish found out about the conspiracy, it was too late.

On Aug. 10, 1680, the Pueblos launched their revolt, pillaging haciendas, torching churches and seizing horses and harquebuses. They killed 21 Franciscan priests and 401 settlers, including some entire families. After Pueblo warriors laid siege to Santa Fe, the Spanish survivors fled to El Paso.

It took Spain more than a decade to violently reconquer New Mexico, situating the Pueblo Revolt alongside major Indigenous uprisings in the Americas such as the Tupac Amaru Rebellion in the Andes in the 1780s that has also echoed, inspiring the names of guerrilla groups in Uruguay and Peru and even the American rapper Tupac Amaru Shakur.

The new attempts to draw on the legacy of the Pueblo Revolt have set off complex reactions in the Southwest. Some people of Hispanic descent who extol their own Indigenous ancestry also view the insurrection as a source of pride, while others have felt targeted by the activism.

Richard Barela, vice president of Unión Protectoriva de Santa Fé, a Hispanic mutual aid group, said he opposed glorifying the Pueblo Revolt. He contended that doing so reflected efforts not only by Native activists but by Anglos who hold considerable economic and political power in New Mexico to “erase” centuries of Hispanic culture that blended European and Indigenous traditions and bloodlines.

“Popé demanded that everything European be destroyed, including the massacre of men, women and children,” Mr. Barela said.

Still, new generations of Pueblo Indians say they are rediscovering a part of the past that seems uniquely relevant as the country is riven by questions over historic racial injustice, such as the lingering effects of slavery and ethnic cleansing.

Reyes DeVore, a member of Jémez Pueblo who spent part of her childhood in California, said she was unaware of the revolt until moving as a teenager to New Mexico, where she saw Jémez runners commemorating the revolt each August.

Ms. DeVore, 32, said she later read the work of Joe Sando, a Pueblo historian who wrote widely about the revolt, before joining Pueblo Action Alliance, an activist group created in the wake of the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access pipeline in North Dakota.

Citing the contentious delays in distributing federal aid to tribal nations during some of the deadliest phases of the present pandemic, Ms. DeVore said that the tumult of 2020 had laid bare how tribes continued to be dismissively treated by the government.

“We were left to fend for ourselves because the U.S. government doesn’t give a damn about Indigenous peoples,” said Ms. DeVore, whose group recently completed a month of organizing around the Pueblo Revolt.

While hewing to social distancing measures that limit in-person activism, the Pueblo Action Alliance mounted a campaign on social media that described how the Pueblo Revolt was carried out, promoted running to honor the revolt’s messengers and proposed replacing statues of Spanish conquistadors with Popé sculptures.

The strengthening of a broader Native American movement at a time of political tumult is not without precedent. The American Indian Movement was created in Minneapolis in 1968 in response to police brutality against Native Americans in the Twin Cities.

“We have multiple tribes coming together to get rid of statues celebrating our genocide,” said Justine Teba, a member of the Native liberation group the Red Nation. *Adria Malcolm for The New York Times*

Another Pueblo activist, Justine Teba, said the protests over conquistador monuments around New Mexico this year also drew on the example of the successful drive undertaken over the past decade to discontinue Santa Fe’s annual celebration of the 1692 Spanish reconquest of New Mexico.

Ms. Teba, who prefers to use the Tewa name of ‘Ogap’oge for Santa Fe, said the forging of unity among dozens of New Mexico’s Pueblos in 1680, and the support of the revolt by other Native peoples such as the Apaches, offered a template for contemporary organizing.

“They were able to oust our colonizers by unifying and that’s basically what’s happening today,” said Ms. Teba, 27, a member of the Native liberation group the Red Nation. “We have multiple tribes coming together to get rid of statues celebrating our genocide.”

The new activism is drawing on the fast-expanding body of work about the Pueblo Revolt in a variety of fields. John Jota Leños, a California filmmaker who made an animated film about the revolt, said the uprising remained “living history” for many Pueblo people.

“This is very different from how Americans tend to exile history to the past,” Mr. Leños said.

Mr. Leños also cited the work of Virgil Ortiz, a visual artist from Cochiti Pueblo whose pieces envision a dystopian future in which time travelers return to 1680 to help their ancestors.

Indigenous archaeologists, shredding the common glorification of New Mexico’s reconquest in 1692 as “bloodless,” have shown that warriors from various Pueblos actually mounted intense wars of resistance to the reoccupation.

Joseph Aguilar, an archaeologist from San Ildefonso Pueblo, recently used drones to examine the topography of Tunyo, a mesa where as many as 2,000 Pueblo people took refuge in the 1690s to face off against the Spanish during a monthslong siege.

Even after a semblance of calm returned to New Mexico, the revolt left an imprint. After the United States conquered New Mexico in the 1840s, the Pueblos preserved much of their hard-won autonomy, in contrast to other Indigenous peoples who were removed from their lands.

“The revolt’s biggest legacy is that it allowed people to remain in their homelands and maintain sovereignty, language, culture,” Mr. Aguilar said. “That’s why people are looking back to that time for some kind of strength.”