



Colonization and Resistance: Through a Pueblo Lens

We're used to hearing about revolutions in the US, France, Latin America, and Haiti. Less frequently do we hear about the role of Indigenous Americans in this revolutionary history. The first large-scale, successful revolt against colonizers in the United States was launched in 1680 by the Pueblo people of New Mexico. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 temporarily drove out the Spanish and helped ensure the endurance of Pueblo culture and communities into the present. In this video, Jerad Koepp interviews Porter Swentzell about the causes, experiences, and long-term effects of the revolt.

0:11

Narrator speaking; text bubble with name

Map of the United States and zooms in on Santa Fe; Text box: 19 Pueblos...; art depicting brutality of Spanish conquest

Art depicting Spanish conquest

Illustrations and paintings depicting different events from the Age of Revolutions

Hi, I'm Jerad Koepp (Wukchumni), a small tribe from Central California and the 2022 Washington State teacher of the year.

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 started here, among the dozens of Pueblo communities living under Spanish colonial rule in what is today New Mexico. By 1680, the Pueblos and other indigenous communities in this region had endured over 80 years of brutal Spanish conquest.

Spanish massacres, forced conversions by Catholic missionaries, and dire economic conditions pushed the Pueblo communities of New Mexico to the tipping point. Pueblo leaders joined forces and cast off Spanish rule—for a time.

This revolution is part of a long age of revolutions that swept across the Atlantic World and beyond. But it, like other uprisings of Indigenous and enslaved people, rarely gets included in the narratives about the Age of Revolutions.

1:07

Screen shows sign for Poeh Cultural Center; transition music; header: Pueblo Society...

Text box introducing second narrator; timeline from 1500-1700

Timeline zooms in on 1540; U.S. map zooms in on New Mexico; text box: 17th century...

I'm here today at the Poeh Cultural Center in Pojoaque Pueblo to speak with Dr. Porter Swentzell, an education leader and historian from Santa Clara Pueblo.

KOEPP: What was Pueblo life like before Spanish arrival?

SWENTZELL: In 1540, when the first Spanish conquistadors invaded our homelands, there probably was somewhere in the vicinity of a hundred different villages, each independent and autonomous from each other, speaking a multitude of languages, somewhere around perhaps a hundred thousand people living in these villages.

KOEPP: Why did the Spanish invade?

SWENTZELL: One of the sort of key events, of course, is when the Spanish invaded Mexico in the early 1500s.

2:00

Map zooms in on New Mexico, then transfers to the Gulf of Mexico; text defining Mexica people

Archaic illustration of an indigenous person directing conquistadors

One of the main peoples that they were focused on colonizing initially were Mexica people, or more often known as Aztec people.

In their oral traditions they talked about a homeland far to the north and a sacred lake to the north. And so the Spanish got into their imagination that there was this place to the north and based on the riches that they found in the Valley of Mexico, they thought there must be something even more amazing to the north.

Timeline highlighting 1540 with a painting depicting Spanish conquistadors embarking on their expedition above; U.S. map outlining the route the Spanish took; text: Coronado's...

Painting of an indigenous revolt

2:59

Timeline of the 14th-15th century; archaic art of the revolts; transition music; header: Colonization

Art showing Spanish invasion

More art showing brutality of the Spanish invasion

3:44

Timeline shows 1598: Juan de Onate...; map showing Pueblo villages; text: 17th century...

Painting of indigenous and Spanish conversing

Painting of Acoma, Pueblo; timeline shows 1599: Acoma Massacre; Painting of the event above timeline

4:37

Timeline shows 1600: Franciscan...; illustrations of conquistadors

This triggers a major expedition, a major invasion led by an individual by the name of Coronado. They rampaged through Pueblo country, they're deeply disappointed by the lack of cities of gold.

In Mexico, all the Indigenous people that notice all these soldiers had just disappeared and headed off north, decided that maybe they'll give a try and take their homelands back and revolt against the Spanish.

So there's this massive series of revolts in Mexico that come very, very close to completely ejecting the Spanish from Mexico.

So when the Spanish invade Pueblo country, they immediately go into houses demanding food, demanding clothes, demanding. . . people.

And you can imagine the sheer horror—they come into your home, they take your food, they take your kids, you can't speak to them, right? They speak some other language, right? And then when you refuse them, they physically assault you, they murder you, right? And so that's what it basically looks like on the ground level.

So there's a very famous example of Juan de Oñate sending his nephew to go see what is out on the western areas right towards Hopi. They stop at Acoma (what's today Acoma, Pueblo) and they meet with resistance.

And so there's this violent exchange, and Acoma people end up, you know—this is another example from the very beginning—they kill those scavengers, right? And they chase off.

And so the uncle learns about this, and he brings his forces over to Acoma Pueblo, and basically, destroys the entire village, launched a massive assault on the village, burns it down, kills hundreds of people, takes whoever's left alive as prisoners, sentences able-bodied men to have a foot cut off and sentenced to 25 years in servitude.

This becomes something of a special project of the Spanish Empire that's not so much about making money (they end up losing enormous amounts of money on New Mexico in terms of the cost).

And so Franciscan priests came into New Mexico, and they began to go to each of the Pueblo communities to build massive mission complexes.

Illustrations of mission complexes; transition music; header: Resistance

5:27

In the first 20 years of the Spanish War, and so the very first part of the 1600s, the Spanish built 60—and I say the Spanish built, but we built them under, you know, their orders at spearpoint, basically—60 massive mission complexes.

KOEPP: How did the Pueblo people resist Spanish colonization prior to 1680?

SWENTZELL: Continuously, and in every way. We spend a lot of time focused on 1680, on this one particular revolt, but when you start to dig into the documents a little bit, you start to see there was a revolt like almost every year or every other year.

We've always maintained our agency, always been looking out for future generations, always looking out for how we might continue to carry on who we are.

Painting of an indigenous revolt

In the middle of all of it, there's continuous revolts. Various public communities planning revolts, more regional revolts, the killing of a priest, the burning of the church. . .

6:14

Paintings showing Pueblo culture; transition music; header: Causes of Revolt

By the 1670s though, you start in the later part of the 1600s, you get a couple governors that align with the church and they launch major campaigns to suppress Pueblo traditions: dances and culture and things of that nature.

KOEPP: By the time the 1680 revolt happens, is it. . . more of an accumulation of grievances than a single event that sparked it?

SWENTZELL: When we're talking about the reasons behind, it was 33 Franciscan priests in New Mexico at that time. Um, two-thirds of them died, basically immediately in the revolt. So they were. . . basically target number one, um, so that tells a little bit of that story, right?

7:12

Photo of an archaic bell

Um, the churches were among the buildings that were destroyed almost immediately. And then the bells—these giant bells that were dragged 100,000 miles across all sorts of terrain and hung up on a church in New Mexico—were then smashed into tiny little pieces. And that's no easy task—to take a giant bell and smash it into little chunks.

So those three things to me, you know, tell the story: this is really about cultural preservation, about maintaining our way of life, making sure that the beliefs that were passed on to us from the beginning of time wouldn't be lost in that moment.

Timeline shows 1670s: Pueblos struck by famine...

So in the 1670s, there's major famine that occurs and then connected with that, epidemics breakout.

8:05

Text: Spanish launch campaign

There's a major failed revolt in the eastern part of New Mexico, right? And so right—leading right up into the 1680 revolt, this is kind of like the church and the governor have linked together, they're working hard to suppress Pueblo culture and traditions, there's a massive famine, crop failure, epidemics, all happening in the decade before 1680. And basically, people are saying, "enough is enough", right?

Text: 1675: Po'pay and dozens...; U.S. map that zooms in on Santa Fe

And this leads up to that moment also where the Spanish governor arrests many religious leaders in the Pueblos. They take them to Santa Fe to be executed.

8:53

Text box; 17th century...

Quite a few of them are from the Tewa speaking villages north of Santa Fe, and about 2,000 Tewa fighters show up on the heights above Santa Fe and say, “If you execute our religious leaders, we’re gonna burn the place down.”

Photo of a statue of Po’pay

And so they’re like “Okay, we’ll just flog them in public”, right? Flog within the inch of their life.

Text box: Po’pay

One of those individuals was a Tewa man by the name of Po’pay. And so he was flogged, his sentence was commuted from execution to flogging, so and he left and he ran away to Taos Pueblo to kind of hide out even though they’re a Tiwa-speaking village. And at that time he started to begin working in coordination and usually he’s highlighted as, like, the leader, right? But he’s just one of many, many leaders, right?

9:45

*Transition music; header:
Revolution*

And so it’s always important to note there was many—every village had people working and there’s many that we won’t know who their names are.

KOEPP: How does cooperation between the Pueblos start to take off?

SWENTZELL: The sort of final message came in the form of runners that were sent out with instructions to revolt on a particular day, alright?

*Drawing depicting the
“runners”*

And so, the runners carried yucca cords that all had knots tied into them. And as the runners brought those cords to each village and let the leaders know: “Untie a knot each day and on the last day—the last knot is untied—that’s the day the revolt will happen.”

10:37

*Timeline shows Aug.
10 1680: Pueblo Revolt
begins; drawing of the
Pueblo Revolt*

Some of the villages are hesitant to revolt and for a good reason, some had in just a few years prior had revolted all by themselves and no one supported them, and so some of those villages didn’t join.

And so, some people revolt, some of the villages revolt on the designated day, some get the news and so they revolt the next day, so it’s a rolling series— and then even some wait an extra day beyond that to see if, was everybody gonna do this, right?

Drawing of Pueblo Revolt

And so, it’s not, you know, sometimes it’s told like everybody rolls all at once, right? But, you know, a span of three or four days is incredibly impressive in 1680, right? That this is a rolling revolt that paralyzes the Spanish colony.

11:25

Text: August 21st...

It’s after August 10th, especially in the northern areas, groups of Tewa and Tiwa fighters surround Santa Fe, some Keresan-speaking fighters as well, and cut off the water supply—basically besieged Santa Fe.

This is a pretty unique story in that sense that the Spanish were ejected out. But I also like to point out that, at the same time and in the surrounding decades, there was innumerable Indigenous revolts in Mexico, and in some of those revolts, the Spanish were ejected for 80-90 years, right?

And so, I always like to emphasize the story—those are the stories we don’t hear in the United States at all, right? The Pueblo Revolt isn’t a common story, right? And it’s unique within what is now the outline of the United States, but in terms of the Indigenous experience in the Americas, there’s other revolts like it, right? It’s not the only one.

12:25

World map zooms in on Americas, highlighting areas of colonization; text box: Spanish-controlled...

Modern photo of an indigenous protest

Transition music; header: 1680 to Today

13:21

Timeline shows 1692: Spanish return to New Mexico

Photo of a cross surrounded by ruins; drawings of indigenous people in everyday life; text box: Encomienda system

14:16

Image of Pueblos standing in front of Pueblo infrastructure

Painting depicting a village

Outro music; OER logo

One of the things that I think is really important is that even in the midst of colonization, that Indigenous peoples not only here in New Mexico but all around the world, we have continuously been fighting on behalf of our nations and to continue on our ways of life, right?

And this is just one example—one small example—of so many others around the world, right?

And that also, those events that happened then are very much a part of the story of today and are part of the story of how we continue to battle on behalf of our communities, to carry on who we are and our languages, our traditions.

So the fight that happened in 1680 is still the fight that's going on today.

Today, you've heard how the Pueblo peoples united under a common cause, and for 12 years, seized back their land, chased out the colonizers, and tore down Christian churches.

You might think that the eventual return of Spanish rule meant that the revolt didn't matter. But as you'll learn in this unit, there were many revolutions in the world after 1680, and many didn't end in a permanent victory for the revolutionaries.

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 might not have evicted the Spanish forever, but it did produce important and lasting changes, especially for the Pueblo peoples living under Spanish colonization after 1692.

The revolt put fear into the hearts of later Spanish colonizers. After their return, Spanish rule was less violent, forced conversion became less common, Pueblo religion was more tolerated, and the forced labor of the encomienda system was ended.

These changes contributed to the endurance of Pueblo cultural traditions into the present.

In this unit, and in later units, you'll encounter more examples of revolutions and more examples of colonization. You might start to think that the ideals of sovereignty and resistance to the rule of foreign kings was invented by American revolutionaries, or the European Enlightenment.

But don't be fooled—the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 is just one example among many of the ways that colonized people across the world found their own methods to resist foreign rule.

Indigenous Americans were not merely victims of the so-called Age of Revolutions, they were active participants in forging and contesting the modern world.



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