

The Pueblo Revolt

by Edward Countryman

In 1680 the people known collectively as “Pueblos” rebelled against their Spanish overlords in the American Southwest. Spaniards had dominated them, their lives, their land, and their souls for eight decades. The Spanish had established and maintained their rule with terror, beginning with Juan de Oñate’s invasion in 1598. When the people of Acoma resisted, Oñate ordered that one leg be chopped from every man over fifteen and the rest of the population be enslaved, setting a pattern that lasted four-score years. Now, rising virtually as one, the Pueblos drove out Spanish soldiers and authorities. The rebels allowed many Spaniards to flee, but twenty-one Franciscan priests died at their hands, and they sacked mission churches across their land. It took twelve years for Spanish troops to reconquer Pueblo country. They never did conquer the Hopi, who had been the westernmost contributors to the rebellion.

Three hundred and thirty years later, Pueblo people still live in ancient villages across the Southwest, in many ways on their own terms. A proud statue of the rebellion’s leader, Popé (or Po’pay), is one of New Mexico’s two pieces in the National Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol. The Pueblo Revolt was the greatest and most successful rebellion of its sort in North American history. What happened? What did it signify? What did it achieve?

Unquestionably, one of revolt’s dimensions was religious. From Pecos Pueblo near the edge of the Great Plains to Acoma and Zuni in western New Mexico, Pueblo people had had enough of Christianity, after eight decades of living in what historian Ramón Gutiérrez has described as an imposed theocratic utopia. Backed by armed force and not reluctant to use the whip, Catholic missionaries had set out to destroy the ancestral Pueblo world in every respect, including what people could believe and how they could marry, work, live their lives, and pray. When the rebels could capture Franciscan priests, they killed them, sometimes after torturing them. They destroyed Catholic images, tore down mission churches, and defiled the vessels of the Catholic Mass. They put an end to marriages on Christian terms. They restored the kivas where Pueblo men had honored their ancestral *Kachinas*. With Catholic symbols and Spanish practices gone, the Pueblos set out to restore the lives their ancestors had lived.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

Po’pay’s great achievement was to coordinate the Pueblos. The enormous, open distances of the Southwest posed a major problem. He solved it by dispatching runners carrying knotted ropes, each separate knot to be untied, one day at a time, until the chosen day, August 11, 1680. The runners had to deal with language differences as well. There was no distinct “Pueblo” people, speaking one language and sharing one culture. Instead, the Spanish conquerors had found Keres, Tompiros, Tewas, Tiwas, Towas, Piros, and Zuni, all living in similar-looking adobe villages (*pueblos*, hence the name), as well as Utes, Navajos, and Apaches. Their languages differed greatly, and their relations with one another were not always friendly. Nonetheless, Po’pay’s plan worked nearly perfectly. The Spanish rulers in Santa Fe received only the barest warning before the revolt broke out.



Statue of Po’pay given by New Mexico for display in the National Statuary Hall Collection. (Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol)

Despite the differences, as the late historian Jack D. Forbes demonstrated decades ago, the Southwest's people were not strangers to one another at all. Neither distance nor language formed a barrier against communication. People in their settled adobe villages had had centuries to build relationships and customs, of commerce, alliance, peace, and war. By the time the Spaniards arrived, the settled tribes had also built relationships and customs with nomadic groups (the Utes, Navajos, and Apaches), creating webs of trade and understanding. In this regard Pueblo people were not much different from other settled horticultural villagers, including the Caddo of East Texas, the Mandan of the Upper Missouri Valley, and the Huron on Georgian Bay, all of whom also dealt regularly with nomadic neighbors. Pueblo languages differed, but so did Basque, Castilian, Catalan, Portuguese, and other tongues of the Iberian Peninsula. If a conflict led to war, village people knew how to abandon their permanent sites and find refuge among wanderers. If anything, the Spanish invasion intensified Native connections with one another. They learned about horses, mules, burros, cattle, sheep, and Spanish tools and weapons. Pueblo people had not worked out anything like the Great League of Peace and Power that the Iroquois developed about the time of Columbus to solve their own problems and that served them well throughout the colonial period. But the Pueblos and their neighbors possessed many ways other than warfare for dealing with one another.

The 1680 uprising was no isolated event. The seventeenth-century history of modern New Mexico and northern Mexico is punctuated by unrest and rebellion. Many of the region's people had been conquered and none liked their situation, but they understood that though they greatly outnumbered the Spaniards, their foes were ruthless, organized, and determined. The Spanish possessed firearms and steel weapons superior to anything the Natives could muster. But despite all the odds against successful resistance, Spanish records show instance upon instance of plans and outbreaks among American Indians who supposedly had been "reduced" to Christianity and Spanish ways.

Other Native people besides the Pueblos took part in the revolt. Neighboring Apaches and Navajos remained free of Spanish dominion, both because of their nomadic way of life and because Spanish power had reached its limits. But for decades such people had had to deal with frontier warfare. Forbes suggested that "Pueblo Revolt" is actually a misnomer, and that the term "Great Southwestern Revolt," reaching beyond Pueblo country, describes the late seventeenth-century events more accurately.

As he and, more recently, Andres Resendez also show, the revolt's context spans much of the North American continent. Long before the revolt Native people knew how to communicate across long distances. News had reached Pueblo country quickly after the fall of the Nahua capital, Tenochtitlan, to Spanish conquistadors in 1521. When French Jesuit Jacques Marquette traveled down the Mississippi in 1673, he learned from Illinois Indians that he could reach the Pacific Ocean via the Missouri, South Platte, and Colorado Rivers. Spaniards in Mexico City knew about the French ventures, including not only Marquette's trip but also fur-trading *coureurs de bois* and Robert La Salle's journey to the mouth of the Mississippi in 1682. So did the Pueblos' neighbors to the east. So, in all probability, did Pueblo people themselves.

Without question Po'pay and his associates knew of the successful Pueblo resistance to the initial Spanish contact in 1540. They had reason to know about other Native resistance to Spaniards as well. They probably did not know about the ongoing seventeenth-century Iroquois-French conflict in the St. Lawrence Valley and eastern Great Lakes region, King Philip's War in New England in 1675–1676, or Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, also in 1676. But, like the near-simultaneous founding of Spanish Santa Fe (1598), English Jamestown (1607), and French Quebec (1608), the Pueblo Revolt and the woodland wars emerged from similar situations. By the late seventeenth century, Native peoples and the Europeans they faced were not strangers to one another, whether we look at Pueblo country, Texas, the

Mississippi Valley, the Great Lakes, or the Eastern woodlands. All were caught up in violent reverberations, as their worlds collided, ground against one another, and interlocked.

Slavery, rather than symbolic religious conflict, may have provided the deep underpinning of the southwestern events. Legal enslavement of American Indians by Spaniards had been forbidden by royal decree since the mid-sixteenth century, but that did not stop the actual practice. So-called “just wars” provided one loophole, and on that basis Apaches, Utes, and others who refused to acknowledge Spanish authority were fair game for enslavers. Settled Christian Indians, such as the Pueblos, could be enslaved for a period of time, if they resisted their condition. Forced *encomienda* labor, supposedly rendered in return for the benefits the Spaniards had brought, was not far from actual slavery. Enslaved Indians often ended up in the booming, labor-hungry silver mines of Chihuahua, but some were taken farther south and a few as far as Cuba, to work side by side with captured Africans. A lively traffic flourished across the plains in Native women and children, for both sexual exploitation and domestic labor. Outside the Spanish zone, slaving frontiers were pushing westward onto the plains both from New France and from the British colonies, particularly newly founded South Carolina. Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo country lay many miles from the European centers, but its people were caught up in an enormous web whose most-shared institution was human bondage.

For a very long time, the twelve years of Pueblo independence, from 1680 to 1692, remained virtually blank in historical terms. Knowing the importance of written records to the Europeans from their eight decades of subordination, the rebels destroyed Spanish documents and returned to their ancestral ways of remembering, thus closing off conventional historical inquiry. About the only clear point seems to be that Po'pay quickly lost the power he had gained as the revolt's leader. But archaeologist Matthew Liebmann has reconstructed the historical material culture of Jemez Pueblo (known to its own people as Walatowa) in the mountains northwest of Albuquerque. Working with Walatowa's present-day people, he has linked archaeological evidence with their traditions and pieced together an account of what happened between the overthrow of the Spaniards and their return. Liebmann's project is presently making its way from a doctoral dissertation to a scholarly book. When the book appears, it will open yet another dimension of the history of the Great Pueblo Revolt.

The Spanish return in 1692 was a military conquest, just as 1598 had been, but it did not lead to a full restoration of their authority, due in part to the Spaniards themselves. Secular Spanish officials began trying to rule “their” Indians in enlightened terms. They saw New Mexico not as mission country, where the friars had to be protected as they went about their task of saving Native souls, but rather as a buffer zone, protecting the precious silver mines from the not-so-distant French and even the British. They saw the New Mexican people as possible allies in the game of transcontinental empire, to be courted rather than conquered. The self-sacrificing, martyrdom-seeking zealotry of seventeenth-century Franciscan “Conquistadors of the Spirit” slackened into routine business.

How the Pueblo villagers took advantage of changed Spanish goals and worked out their own terms for dealing with the Spaniards remains to be fully explored, but the results have proven permanent. Consider Acoma, high on a mesa west of Albuquerque. Its people have inhabited the same site for more than a millennium, rebuilding their village after the conquest of 1598. From a distance, Acoma's most visible structure is the fortress-like church of San Esteban del Rey. Acoma people constructed the church between 1629 and 1640, hauling the raw material for its high, thick walls up from the foot of the mesa. The church survived the rebellion and it remains in use, but a short walk takes visitors past ladders that lead to the rooftop entrances of kivas, where the old ways also endure. Spanish friars, soldiers, and civil administrators had tried to suppress those traditions, but they could not do it. Property at Acoma descends from mother to youngest daughter, which is the traditional Acoma way. For legal purposes,

Acoma and the other eighteen functioning pueblos are self-governing tribes, not sub-units of New Mexico.

If the purpose of the rebellion was simply to drive out Spanish ways, it failed, because the Spaniards came back and remained until Mexican independence in 1821. The Spanish were followed by two successor republics, Mexico and, ultimately, the United States. There could be no complete return to how Pueblo people had lived prior to the Spanish conquest. But if the rebels' purpose was to reassert their own ways in a new setting, their rebellion succeeded, because Acoma and places like it survive, on terms that their people set for themselves.

Edward Countryman, *University Distinguished Professor of History at Southern Methodist University*, is author of such books as *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era (2011)*; *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790 (1981)*, winner of the *Bancroft Prize*; and *Shane (1999, with Evonne Von Heussen-Countryman)*. He is working on a study of how American Indians learned about the problems that Europeans were bringing to them during the colonial era.
