

Mexican War of Independence



The **Mexican War of Independence** (1810–1821) was an armed conflict between the people of Mexico and the Spanish colonial authorities which started on September 16, 1810. The movement, which became known as the Mexican War of Independence, was led by Mexican-born Spaniards, Mestizos and Amerindians who sought independence from Spain. It started as an idealistic peasants' rebellion against their colonial masters, but ended as an unlikely alliance between Mexican ex-royalists and Mexican guerrilla insurgents.

Background

The struggle for Mexican independence dates back to the decades after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, when Martín Cortés (son of Hernán Cortés and La Malinche) led a revolt against the Spanish colonial government in order to eliminate privileges for the conquistadors.^[1]

After the abortive Conspiracy of the Machetes in 1799,^[2] the War of independence led by the Mexican-born Spaniards became a reality with the Grito de Dolores coming 11 years after the conspiracy, which is considered in modern Mexico to be a precursor of the War of Independence. As indicated perhaps by the failed conspiracy, before 1810 the movement for independence was far from gaining unanimous support among Mexicans, who became divided between nonindependent persons, autonomists and royalists.

Beginning of the War

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a local priest and member of a group of educated *Criollos* in Querétaro, met in *tertulias* (salons) and in 1810 arrived at the conclusion that a revolt against the colonial government was needed because of the events of the Peninsular War. Hidalgo had already achieved notoriety—he gambled, fornicated, had children out of wedlock and didn't believe in Hell. Most seriously, he encouraged his parishioners to illegally grow vines and olives.^[3]

Originally Hidalgo worked closely with co-conspirator Ignacio de Allende, a noble and member of the Basque society living in San Miguel. Hidalgo originally supported naming Allende head of the revolutionary military, but the two men quickly became rivals. Hidalgo seized control of the militia. The conspirators were betrayed by a member of the group and Hidalgo turned to his parishioners in the town of Dolores. Around 6:00 am of September 16, 1810, he declared independence from the Spanish crown, and war against the government in what was known as the *Grito de Dolores*.^[4] The revolutionary army decided to strike for independence and marched on to Guanajuato, a major colonial mining centre governed by Spaniards and criollos. There the leading citizens barricaded themselves in the granary. The rebel army captured the granary on 28 September, and most of the Spaniards and Criollos were massacred or exiled. Among the many dead were nobles who were co-conspirators like Allende, who never forgave Hidalgo for the massacre. Consequently, Allende refused to fight alongside Hidalgo, and the two divided forces were easily defeated.

On October 30, Miguel Hidalgo's army encountered Spanish resistance at the Battle of Monte de las Cruces, fought them and achieved victory. However, the rebel army failed to defeat the large and heavily armed Spanish army in Mexico City.^[5]

Rebel survivors of the battle sought refuge in nearby provinces and villages. The insurgent forces planned a defensive strategy at a bridge on the Calderón River, pursued by the Spanish army. In January 1811, Spanish forces fought the Battle of the Bridge of Calderón and defeated the insurgent army, forcing the rebels to flee towards the United States-Mexican border, where they hoped to escape.^[6] However they were intercepted by the Spanish army. Hidalgo and his remaining soldiers were captured in the state of Coahuila at the Wells of Baján (*Norias de Baján*). They faced court trial of the Inquisition on 30 July 1811, and were executed. Hidalgo's body was mutilated, and his and Allende's heads were displayed in Guanajuato as a warning to Mexican rebels.

Following the death of Father Hidalgo, the leadership of the revolutionary army was assumed by José María Morelos. Under his leadership the cities of Oaxaca and Acapulco were occupied. In 1813, the Congress of Chilpancingo was convened and on 6 November of that year, the Congress signed the first official document of independence, known as the "Solemn Act of the Declaration of Independence of Northern America". It was followed by a long period of war at the Siege of Cuautla. In 1815, Morelos was captured by Spanish colonial authorities, tried and executed for treason.^[7]

Independence

From 1815 to 1821 most of the fighting by those seeking independence from Spain was done by isolated guerrilla bands. Out of these bands rose two men, Guadalupe Victoria (born José Miguel Fernández y Félix) in Puebla and Vicente Guerrero in Oaxaca, both of whom were able to command allegiance and respect from their followers. The Spanish viceroy, however, felt the situation was under control and issued a general pardon to every rebel who would lay down his arms.

After ten years of civil war and the death of two of its founders, by early 1820 the independence movement was stalemated and close to collapse. The rebels faced stiff Spanish military resistance and the apathy of many of the most influential criollos. The violent excesses and populist zeal of Hidalgo's and Morelos's irregular armies had reinforced many criollos' fears of race and class warfare, ensuring their grudging acquiescence to conservative Spanish rule until a less bloody path to independence could be found. It was at this juncture that the machinations of a conservative military caudillo coinciding with a successful liberal rebellion in Spain, made possible a radical realignment of the pro-independence forces.

In what was supposed to be the final government campaign against the insurgents, in December 1820, Viceroy Juan Ruiz de Apodaca sent a force led by a royalist criollo officer, Colonel Agustín de Iturbide, to defeat Guerrero's army in Oaxaca. Iturbide, a native of Valladolid, had gained renown for the zeal with which he persecuted Hidalgo's and Morelos's rebels during the early independence struggle. A favorite of the Mexican church hierarchy, Iturbide was the personification of conservative criollo values, devoutly religious, and committed to the defense of property rights and social privileges; he was also disgruntled at his lack of promotion and wealth.

Iturbide's assignment to the Oaxaca expedition coincided with a successful military coup in Spain against the monarchy of Ferdinand VII. The coup leaders, who had been assembled as an expeditionary force to suppress the American independence movements, compelled a reluctant Ferdinand to reinstate the liberal Spanish Constitution of 1812. When news of the liberal charter reached Mexico, Iturbide saw in it both a threat to the status quo and an opportunity for the criollos to gain control of Mexico. Ironically, independence was finally achieved when conservative forces in the colonies chose to rise up against a temporarily liberal regime in the mother country. After an initial clash with Guerrero's forces, Iturbide switched allegiances and invited the rebel leader to meet and discuss principles of a renewed independence struggle.

While stationed in the town of Iguala, Iturbide proclaimed three principles, or "guarantees," for Mexican independence from Spain; Mexico would be an independent monarchy governed by a transplanted King Ferdinand, another Bourbon prince, or some other conservative European prince, criollos and peninsulares would henceforth enjoy equal rights and privileges, and the Roman Catholic Church would retain its privileges and position as the official religion of the land. After convincing his troops to accept the principles, which were promulgated on

February 24, 1821, as the Plan of Iguala, Iturbide persuaded Guerrero to join his forces in support of the new conservative manifestation of the independence movement. A new army, the Army of the Three Guarantees, was then placed under Iturbide's command to enforce the Plan of Iguala. The plan was so broadly based that it pleased both patriots and loyalists. The goal of independence and the protection of Roman Catholicism brought together all factions.^[8]

Iturbide's army was joined by rebel forces from all over Mexico. When the rebels' victory became certain, the viceroy resigned. On August 24, 1821, representatives of the Spanish crown and Iturbide signed the Treaty of Córdoba, which recognized Mexican independence under the terms of the Plan of Iguala.^[9] On September 27 the Army of the Three Guarantees entered Mexico City and the following day Iturbide proclaimed the independence of the Mexican Empire, as New Spain was to be henceforth called. The Treaty of Córdoba was not ratified by the Spanish Cortes. Iturbide, a former royalist who had become the paladin for Mexican independence, included a special clause in the treaty that left open the possibility for a criollo monarch to be appointed by a Mexican congress if no suitable member of the European royalty would accept the Mexican crown. Half of all the government employees were Iturbide's courtiers.

On the night of the May 18, 1822, a mass demonstration led by the Regiment of Celaya, which Iturbide had commanded during the war, marched through the streets and demanded that their commander-in-chief accept the throne. The following day, the congress declared Iturbide emperor of Mexico. On October 31 Iturbide dissolved Congress and replaced it with a sympathetic junta.^[10]

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