

Struggle for Mexican Independence

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Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto waves the Mexican national flag on the main balcony of the National Palace during ceremonies called 'The Shout' marking the start of celebrations of Independence Day in Mexico City on September 15, 2016. Pedro Parado/AFP/Getty Images

On September 16, 1810, a priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla issued a historic proclamation urging his fellow Mexicans to take up arms against the Spanish government. Known as the “Grito de Dolores,” Hidalgo’s declaration launched a decade-long struggle that ended 300 years of colonial rule, established an independent Mexico and helped cultivate a unique Mexican identity. Hidalgo is now known as the father of Mexican independence. The anniversary of his declaration is celebrated as the country’s birthday.

Mexico was under Spanish rule

The land that is now Mexico fell into Spanish hands in August 1521 when Hernán Cortés and his army of conquistadors toppled the Aztec empire. Cortés ushered in three centuries of colonial rule and imported new diseases that destroyed native populations. Under orders from the Spanish king, Cortés founded a capital city — Ciudad de Mexico — on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. A series of colonial governors took command of the territory, which was dubbed New Spain.

The earliest revolt against the Spanish colonial government was led by Martín Cortés. Martín was the illegitimate son of Hernán Cortés and his translator, a Mayan-born woman known as La Malinche. In the years leading up to the Mexican War of Independence, most plots to end Spanish rule were devised by criollos, or Mexican-born Spaniards. Within Mexico's highly divided caste system (created by Spanish elites) the criollos ranked below native Europeans. Their approach largely excluded native Mexicans and mestizos — people of mixed ancestry like Martín Cortés — who were often deprived of the most basic political and civil rights.

Hidalgo's declaration of war

Napoleon's invasion and occupation of Spain from 1808 to 1813 heightened the revolutionary feeling in Mexico and other Spanish colonies. On September 16, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a respected Catholic priest, issued a passionate rallying cry known as the "Grito de Dolores" ("Cry of Dolores"). It amounted to a declaration of war against the colonial government. So named because it was publicly read in the town of Dolores, the Grito called for the end of Spanish rule in Mexico, the redistribution of land and an idea that the criollos' earlier plans had deliberately omitted: racial equality. Though a criollo himself, Hidalgo extended his call to arms to mestizos and people of native descent. Their significant contribution of manpower changed the tenor of the revolt.

Hidalgo led his growing militia from village to village on the way to Mexico City, leaving in their wake a bloodbath that he later came to deeply regret. In January 1811, Hidalgo was defeated at Calderón. He fled north but was captured and executed by firing squad in Chihuahua. Others took the helm of the rebellion, including José María Morelos y Pavón, Mariano Matamoros and Vicente Guerrero, who all led armies of native and racially mixed revolutionaries against the Spanish royalists. Known as the Mexican War of Independence, the conflict dragged on until 1821. That year, the Treaty of Córdoba established Mexico as an independent constitutional monarchy under Agustín de Iturbide. Just 18 months later, republican rebels removed the emperor and established the first Mexican Republic.

September 16 celebrates Mexican independence

The day Hidalgo issued the Grito de Dolores, September 16, 1810, marked the beginning of Mexico's struggle for independence. Its anniversary has been a day of celebration across Mexico since the late 19th century. The holiday begins on the evening of September 15 with a symbolic reenactment of Hidalgo's historic proclamation by the president and the governor of each state. The next day, typical activities include parades, bullfights, rodeos and traditional dancing. In 2010, the festivities included a special — if somewhat morbid — feature: In honor of the country's bicentennial, the remains of 12 men who fought for Mexican independence — including Hidalgo, Morelos, Matamoros and Guerrero — were unearthed in a military ceremony led by President Felipe Calderón.

Many non-Mexicans, particularly in the United States, mistake the Cinco de Mayo (May 5th) holiday for a celebration of Mexican independence. That holiday actually commemorates the Mexican army's 1862 victory over France at the Battle of Puebla during the French-Mexican War.

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Guided Reading Questions

Answer the guided reading question in complete sentences and complete thoughts.

1. What were the consequences of Hernan's Cortez' conquest of Mexico in 1521?
2. When Father Miguel Hidalgo issued his historic proclamation, known as the "Grito de Dolores," urging his fellow Mexicans to take arms against the Spanish government name three of the immediate outcome.
3. What was one of the earliest revolts against the Spanish colonial government? Who led the revolt? What was one of the main groups that engineered most of the plots to overthrow the government?
4. Explain the influence and the significance of Father Hidalgo's rallying cry known as the "Grito de Dolores?"
5. During Hidalgo's march to Mexico City he was defeated at Calderon. What was the outcome of Hidalgo's defeat at Calderon? Did the Revolution fall into chaos?
6. September 16, 1810, marked the beginning of Mexico's struggle for independence. It is a day of celebration across Mexico. What is their traditional way of celebrating the anniversary of their independence?
7. Many Americans mistake Cinco de Mayo for Mexican Independence Day. What is Cinco de Mayo?