Mexican Independence and Anguish

Modern day Mexico was known as New Spain until it became independent of the Spanish. In the late 1700s, New Spain was Spain’s most important and rich colony. However, not everyone in New Spain shared the wealth. New Spain was made up of several different classes of people. At the top were the peninsulares, people who were originally born in Spain (they were also known by the insulting term gachupines). They usually owned the most land and held higher government positions. Beneath the peninsulares were the creoles (or criollos), people of supposedly pure Spanish blood who were born in the colony, not Spain. The creoles were usually from the upper classes, but most were never appointed to important government jobs. Then came the mestizos, people who were of mixed Indian and Spanish blood. While some mestizos were wealthy, most were not rich and few held government positions. Finally, at the bottom of New Spain’s hierarchy were the Indians, some of whom were still slaves. Although more numerous in nearly every other American colony, New Spain also had African slaves.

By the 1790s, many people in New Spain were tired of being ruled by the Spanish. The monarchy in Spain set limits on what those in New Spain could produce and every product of New Spain was supposed to be traded to Spain, not with other European countries who might be willing to pay more. New Spain produced the most silver in the world, but the silver was taken directly from Mexico to the Spanish crown. Creoles were also angry that all important government jobs were held by peninsulares. In the late 1700s, Spain also began taxing the Catholic Church heavily, which hurt nearly everyone. The Church had been lending money to people to buy land, goods, or to start businesses. When the Church no longer had money to lend, the economy of New Spain was practically ruined. The people of New Spain were suffering from extreme poverty.

When Spain was conquered in 1808 by Napoleon and King Ferdinand VII of Spain was basically a prisoner, many creoles of New Spain decided it was time to break away from Spain. They began meeting in secret clubs called literary clubs. The literary club of Queretaro in Bajio, was led by a creole priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. He would become one of the leaders of the movement for independence in Mexico.

Not every person in New Spain was for independence. Usually, the more wealthy creoles were more loyal to Spain. The leaders of the literary club nonetheless planned for independence. Their goals for the revolution were not drastic. They still maintained that they were loyal to King Ferdinand VII (who was still a prisoner of the French). Some creoles planned to launch a rebellion in 1810, but their plans were discovered by Spanish authorities before the movement could begin. The leaders had to decide whether or not to abandon the movement or call on the poor masses for help. Father Hidalgo emerged as the leader and he favored starting the rebellion at all costs, even if that meant including the poor. Hidalgo was sympathetic to the poor, but he may have wanted to involve them simply because the rebellion had no chance to succeed without the poor people’s help. On September 15, 1810, Hidalgo rung the bells of his church at Dolores and the people assembled. According to legend, Hidalgo shouted, “Long live Ferdinand VII. Long live religion. Long live the Virgen de Guadalupe. Death to the gachupines.”

The people rallied to Hidalgo. He began leading armies of mestizos, Indians, and African slaves from town to town defeating Spanish soldiers. Hidalgo also angered the other creoles when he abolished slavery, ended the unfair tax Indians had to pay, and declared at Guadalajara that land would be redistributed and given to Indian communities who had their land stolen by the Spanish. Hidalgo marched under a banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe and more followers joined at every town.

Armed with machetes and rusty rifles, Hidalgo still managed to capture the city of Guanajuato. Once they took the city, nearly every Spanish person was killed and Hidalgo was unable to prevent rioting and looting. Hidalgo could have taken Mexico City, but for some reason he retreated to attack another Spanish army. Many followers deserted after the retreat, and Hidalgo lived an extravagant life of luxury, music, and drinking. Hidalgo and other leaders were captured by the Spanish and put on trial by the government and the church. Hidalgo was tortured, stripped of his position as priest, and then forced to recant everything his rebellion stood for. He was then executed by firing squad on July 31, 1811. His head was placed in a cage and mounted on the roof of the Alhondiga de Granaditas to serve as an example.

After Hidalgo’s death, the movement for independence was led by a priest named Jose Maria Morelos. However, he was defeated and captured by the Spanish. He never recanted under torture and was shot.

Despite the death of the first two leaders, the rebellion eventually succeeded and Mexico became independent. But the final leader chosen by the creoles was Augustin Iturbide, who had previously fought against the rebellion. Iturbide was famous for his cruelty; he burned villages used by the rebels, and he also sometimes had the wives or rebels rounded up in camps and occasionally they were beheaded to punish the rebels for committing an atrocity. Mexico became independent in 1821 under Iturbide’s leadership. Iturbide was made emperor in 1822 and he was initially loved by most Mexicans, who saw him as a liberator and a founding father, much like George Washington. But things would not turn out well for Iturbide. He would rule for only ten months.
Mexico had serious problems once it was independent. The country was completely bankrupt and poverty was severe. But Congress mostly argued about whether or not to get rid of Iturbide; they were not even making much progress in writing a constitution. Iturbide made the situation worse. Annoyed at criticism in the newspapers, Iturbide shut them down. Congressmen then planned on overthrowing Iturbide, and he placed several leaders in jail, and then dissolved Congress and set up a military government. Fearing a dictatorship, Mexicans rebelled and were led by a General from Veracruz named Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Iturbide left Mexico, but unaware that congress condemned him to die, Iturbide came back a year later. He was tried and then executed by firing squad.

Meanwhile, after Santa Anna overthrew Iturbide, he allowed the Congress to finally develop a constitution. In 1824, Mexico adopted a constitution similar to the U.S. It was a federal government with national and local governments sharing power, it had three branches, and it guaranteed certain rights. However, Catholicism was the only religion that people were allowed to practice under the new constitution. A war hero, Guadalupe Victoria was the first elected president in 1824. But not much improved in Mexico. The Congress still went through endless debates, agreeing on nothing except the belief that poor people should have no say in their government. Victoria was unable to accomplish much as he could not fix Mexico’s badly damaged economy. But Victoria finished his term as president, something that no one else did for over 20 years.

In 1828 there was a very close election in which General Manuel Gomez Pedraza narrowly won over General Vicente Guerrero. Rather than accept defeat, Guerrero used the military to overthrow Pedraza and take power. Once again, Santa Anna helped in overthrowing the government. Santa Anna then won even more fame when Spain tried to reinvade Mexico in July, 1829. At the Battle of Tampico, Santa Anna boldly attacked and defeated Spain. He became known as the "Hero of Tampico." But politics still were not working out for Mexico. Vice President Anastasio Bustamente wanted to be president, and he used the military to overthrow his own president. Congress also believed Guerrero was behaving badly, and declared him "mentally incapable of governing." Guerrero was eventually hunted down, tried, and shot by a firing squad.

Bustamente was a strict conservative and his policies angered more liberal politicians in Mexico who wanted a more democratic government. Santa Anna led yet another rebellion in the name of liberty, but Bustamente quickly left Mexico. To make his rebellion seem more legitimate, Santa Anna had Pedraza finish his term. Santa Anna was then elected president in 1832. He would serve as president 11 different times, and he handled each one badly. Politics bored and perhaps scored him. Santa Anna preferred to spend time fighting battles, betting on cockfights, and chasing women. Every time Santa Anna took power, he always left other people in charge. In 1833, Santa Anna unofficially retired letting Gomez Farias basically act as president of Mexico. Farias had Congress abolish forced tithing to the Catholic Church and he made education secular rather than Catholic. Conservatives were upset, and Santa Anna led a revolt against his own government to get rid of the man he had put in power. Santa Anna once again named a replacement, but this time he named a very conservative Catholic as his replacement. Congress was dissolved yet again, and a new one elected which immediately did away with the Constitution of 1824 and replaced it with a new charter that basically made it even more difficult if not impossible for anyone not extremely rich to hold office or have a say in politics.

But the new charter and insuring that only the wealthiest ruled in Mexico did not make Mexico any better. Mexico would continue to experience instability, Santa Anna would emerge again to overthrow governments. When Guerrero overthrew Pedraza in 1828, Guerrero set a dangerous example in which the military would constantly intervene and overthrow governments. This led people to have much less respect for the laws and the government, since the laws and government were always changing and being broken. In the years immediately after independence, Mexico's government was filled with corrupt and illegal deals, bribes, and rigged elections. Historian Enrique Krauze argues that Mexico's greatest problem was "the political incompetence of Mexico's leaders..... [who] could not create a... politically stable state." Between 1822 and 1847, the office of the presidency changed hands 40 times, and three constitutions would be created. The creole leaders had no experience in law making and politics before independence because the Spanish king always appointed Spaniards to the more important political jobs in Mexico. As a result, the creoles had no practical experience in creating and enforcing laws effectively, and they acted as if making a new set of laws would magically fix all of Mexico's problems. And with all the military revolts against the government, the economy in Mexico simply became worse, causing many people to live with crushing poverty. The people were so used to miserable conditions and their government being overthrown that many Mexicans saw uprisings against their government as a form of entertainment. When an uprising would begin, people would dance, sing, and party in the streets.

Unfortunately, Mexico's troubles were nowhere near ending. To the north of Mexico was another recently independent country which was growing stronger and more aggressive. Soon, the United States would cause even more suffering and humiliation for Mexico.
Comparing Mexican Independence with the American Revolution

1. Why did Mexicans want to be independent from Spain?

Why did Americans declare independence from Great Britain?

2. What happened in the end to the first leaders (Hidalgo, Morelos) in the movement for independence in Mexico?

Did the American leaders who fought against Great Britain experience the same fate as Mexican leaders such as Hidalgo and Morelos? Explain.

3. Was Iturbide a good first ruler of the newly independent country of Mexico? Explain.

Was Washington similar to Iturbide when he became president of the U.S.? Explain.

4. When Pedraza narrowly won the election of 1828 over Guerrero, what happened?

What happened when Thomas Jefferson narrowly won the bitter election of 1800 over John Adams in what Jefferson called "The Revolution of 1800"?

5. The Mexican and American Wars for independence were very similar in many ways. Both were fighting to be free of control from a European country, both succeeded in becoming independent, and both created written constitutions with three branches of government. Why did events after independence turn out so differently for Mexico? Give at least two reasons.

6. If you were alive in the 1830s and you were observing political events, what would you say is Mexico’s biggest problem or failure that would probably lead to more trouble in the future? Why?

If you were alive in the early 1800s and you were observing political events, what would you say is the United States' biggest problem or failure that would probably lead to more trouble in the future? Why?