



The History of Mexico

Small Summary of a Great Epic

The first inhabitants of the Americas are thought to have crossed the Bering Straits from Asia around 50,000 BC. The earliest evidence of human life in central Mexico dates from about 20,000 BC, and the first signs of civilization appear in about 1,500 BC. Olmec cities were built in the jungles of the Gulf coast, and although little evidence of them remains, the Olmecs were the first people in the Western hemisphere to work on hieroglyphic and numeric systems.

In the Valley of Mexico, Teotihuacán (a name later given to it by the Aztecs meaning 'the place where people became gods') became the first truly urban society in the Western hemisphere from about 300 AD. To the south the great Mayan centres in the lowlands of present-day Guatemala and Honduras reached their peak at about the same time and perfected an extraordinarily accurate calendar. But Teotihuacán was abandoned in mysterious circumstances around 750 AD, and the Mayan centres were also in decline by 800 AD.

A Spanish expedition led by Hernan Cortés landed on the Gulf coast near Veracruz on 21 April 1519 with just 500 men, fighting dogs and horses. Cortés promptly burned the boats that had carried them from Spain to prevent his men from returning. In less than three years they were to establish control over most of Mexico. Their biggest asset was their ability to forge alliances with warring factions within the Aztec empire. Tenochtitlan finally fell to Spanish control on 13 August 1521.

Quickly the Spanish monarchy established control over what it called *Nueva España* (New Spain) and ruled for 300 years through a series of viceroys. The total population of Mexico fell from an estimated 25 million at the time of the Conquest to just six million at the start of the nineteenth century, of which no more than half were indigenous peoples. Many were massacred by the Spanish, but most were victim to European diseases against which they had no immunity.

The Catholic Church enforced mass conversions and became the most powerful and wealthy institution in the colony. Annual convoys of galleons carried silver and gold as tribute to the Spanish crown. Only gachupines, Spaniards from Spain, could hold high office. Criollos (Creoles, born in Mexico of Spanish blood) and mestizos (of mixed race) were relegated to positions of inferior status while the indigenous peoples were treated as slaves.

Continued on Page Two

History of Mexico / Continued from Page One

The French Revolution and the American Wars of Independence coincided with decline of Spanish power. A Creole priest, Miguel Hidalgo, raised the cry 'Mexicanos, Viva Mexico!' on the steps of his parish church in Dolores on 16 September 1810, the date recognized today as marking Mexican independence. General Santa Ana became president or dictator on 11 separate occasions, during which time Mexico was constant prey to foreign powers.

In 1845 the US annexed Texas and in 1848 invaded Mexico City; it paid \$15 million for most of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. France temporarily invaded Veracruz in 1838 and in 1861, Napoleon III took Mexico City where he installed Archduke Maximilian as 'emperor' for a brief period. Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian and the only indigenous person ever to be president of Mexico, then took power in 1867, enacting reforms to reduce the power and wealth of the Catholic Church. Church property was confiscated, marriages and burials became secular ceremonies and priests were forbidden to wear their robes in public.

General Porfirio Díaz took power in 1876 and retained it as a virtual dictator until 1911. He enforced a policy of ruthless industrial "modernization," mainly controlled by foreign investors. In the countryside, the power of large landowners was vastly enhanced. In 1910 Francisco Madero stood against Díaz in the presidential election and was imprisoned, but he escaped to Texas where he called for Mexicans to rise up against Díaz. Armed revolutionary groups emerged, led by Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco in the north and Emiliano Zapata in the south. In 1917, the Mexican congress established a new constitution containing most of the revolutionary agenda (a mandatory eight-hour day, national ownership of mineral rights, the distribution of land to the peasantry) which remains the basis of the Mexican Constitution today.

When President Obregon was forced to stand down for breaching the 'no re-election' clause of the constitution in 1928, the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) effectively began. Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president in 1934 and he gave new pace to the distribution of land and nationalized the Mexican oil industry. Four decades of astonishing industrial growth followed a model of 'corporatist' intervention at every level of Mexican society. Despite Mexico's oil wealth, this model collapsed under a mountain of debt in 1982.

Today, cotton, coffee, sugar, and tomatoes are Mexico's major export crops. The nation continues to have substantial mineral resources; in addition to the world's fifth largest petroleum reserves, Mexico is the leading producer of silver and a major exporter of lead, copper, and zinc. Some of Mexico's most significant industries produce iron, steel, automobiles, refined petroleum and petrochemicals, and processed foods.

Continued on Page Three...

History of Mexico / Continued from Page Two

Despite its natural resources and growing industry, Mexico's economy has been volatile in recent years. A combination of debt relief, foreign investment, and privatization of industries long owned by the government has helped, as has the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. A recently signed trading agreement with the European Union should do still more to help improve the nation's position in world trade. Recent election reform led to a major change in the nation's politics, with the National Action party candidate Vicente Fox Quesada triumphing over the PRI candidate and putting an end to more than 70 years of PRI rule.