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Fighting for an Independent Mexico; How Does It Stack Up in the Revolutionary World?

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How Does It Stack Up in the Revolutionary World?

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In 1821 Mexico became an independent nation setting itself up as an empire under Emperor Agustin de Iturbide, however, not all was good in the empire and in just a couple years Iturbide was executed and a presidency was formed in the empire's wake. The years that it took for the war against Spain to be won were hard and many died on both sides but the ultimate goal was successful in the end with the forming of a free and independent Mexico. Why though did the Mexican Empire fail to survive when other revolutions such as the American Revolution succeed? History has showed that the American Revolution from one European power that brought forth the United States of America and birthed a republic succeeded in creating a lasting nation and legacy. However, Mexico has seen turbulent times since gaining their independence from a European power. There are differences that make each revolution different though they may seem to follow a similar premise. Effective leadership, unity and administration of area and resources play significant roles in the differences that had lasting effects on the survival of the nations.

Much of the writing of the Mexican War of Independence has been mainly twofold; critical of some of the leaders and focused on the first true leader of the revolution, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. This has led to some years being left out of the historical discussion of the war. Also while speaking of the American Revolution or French Revolution a reader will be directed to the years 1776 and 1792 respectively, the same cannot be said for the Mexican Revolution. In many scholarly searches a reader would be taken to the turn of the 20th century and the days of Pancho Villa or Porfirio Diaz instead of Mexico's break from Spain and successful attempt to form an independent nation. While for the most part many of the leaders of the American Revolution had been English military officers or officials who changed allegiances to the United States they have always, apart from one notable exception, been viewed as heroes but many of the Mexican leaders have come to be looked at much more critically.

From the time when Spain conquered the Aztec Empire until 1821 Mexico had been ruled by the Spanish Empire, however, in 1810 a priest from Delores cried out to his parish about the injustices of the empire and began to look for support to break away from the authority of Spain. The priest, Miguel

Hidalgo y Costilla was a Criollo and he called out in his “Grito de Delores” for all able bodied men who were born in Mexico to take up arms and defend the land of Mexico from the higher class Spanish born citizens. While it is argued what was said exactly we do know that this call became the rallying cry for many in Mexico to stand up against the Peninsular class of Spain and fight for independence.[1] This call has become a famous moment in history for Mexicans just as Patrick Henry’s quote “Give me liberty or give me death” has become famous in America History.

Like other revolutionaries Hidalgo thought to the future of his revolution as he went on in the subsequent years from his famous Grito. In the proclamation called “Nine Laws to Avoid Disorder and Bloodshed” Hidalgo lays out something of a civilized plan to the actions that revolutionaries would be taking. Hidalgo calls for mercy to those surrounding peacefully but also death to those who stand in the way or object to the revolution. One important note of this proclamation is the first order which calls for no actions to be taken against clergy except in cases of high treason.[2] This is something of a departure from other revolutions where the clergy became targets such as in France during their revolution and the Reign of Terror.

José María Morelos’ 1814 “23 Points for the Constitution Sentiments of the Nation” is the first major outline of what an independent Mexico might look like in terms of being a nation on the world stage. In it he dictates that Mexico be free of foreign influence and that all men be free. It is also worthy of note to point out that Morelos was adamant that only American born citizens be allowed to live and work in Mexico and that foreigners should be excluded except in very special circumstances.[3] In “Decree Concerning the War of the Castes” Morelos calls for the idea of the castes to be put aside for the term American, this is the first proclamation that truly talks of unity and it is the first hand account of one of the first leaders of the revolution. Since the beginning of the war was actually meant to free Mexico from the people born under the authority of the Spanish crown Morelos also set up the frame work of why and how a war between the classes should be fought if it would come down to fighting within the castes.[4] He went on to lay out how to deal with those who disagree and “Medidas Políticas” is the proclamation by Morelos that outlines the consequences to those who, notably from the rich landed class, do not side with the insurgents in the war. Some interpretations have listed this decree as part of his reform efforts while other see it more as a warning to those in Oaxaca, an area he was looking to enter in 1812.[5] Whichever the case we know that Morelos, like Hidalgo, meant to drive out the landed ruling class of Spanish born colonials from Mexico and have the freedom to rule independently.

These early writings could be seen in the same context as pamphlets written by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin and even the Pennsylvania Chronicle. The latter of which came to Franklin’s aid when many in the colonies thought him to turn his back on their cause in protesting the stamp act.[6] These texts show the cause to rebel against the authority of Spain which, like England, was changing several laws that were causing many in the more common sectors distress in such an unforeseeable future. Some scholars have pointed out, taking account of Hidalgo’s ethnicity as a Criollo that the war really began for more power to be given to the Criollo class during the days of Charles the IV and the Bourbon Reforms which sought to take away much of that power. Some have even argued that the war was in fact to restore the crown to Ferdinand VII, who had ruled briefly after Charles IV’s abdication in 1808 just prior to Joseph I. It would be hard to show that the war was to restore the crown from Napoleon rule to Spanish rule since the war continued after Ferdinand VII regained the throne from Joseph I.[7]

Like in the American Revolution many leaders of the Mexican War for Independence had fought at one time for the nation that had controlled the colony. Washington had fought for England and in Mexico Iturbide had been a Spanish soldier. Even Hidalgo had been subject to Spanish diocesan rule as a priest. However, unlike Washington who fought for the colonies from the beginning we see in “Mexican Birthdays: Independence and Revolution, 1810 and 1910” that Iturbide was not loyal to Mexico from

the start and only switched sides once convenient for him to do so. In fact it was in a battle with Iturbide that saw Morelos, one of the original leaders of the revolution, get killed. Iturbide was a Criollo who fought along with other mixed ancestry soldiers after changing allegiances to win the war.[\[8\]](#) Changing sides was seen in the American Revolution too; however, it was a bit more notorious and led to a much less pleasant outcome for General Arnold once discovered. In this way some historians have begun to view Iturbide as being a less than noble character of the time period. For the most part though historians have left out much of his role in the early part of the war apart from his brutal tactics in fighting the rebels and the majority of the information that we have on Iturbide is actually from Iturbide himself. What we then begin to see in "Royalist scourge or liberator of the patria? Agustin de Iturbide and Mexico's War of Independence, 1810-1821" is something more along the lines of an opportunistic man who used what was available to him and self-promotion to earn titles within the royalist government and then again as a rebel leader. In fact as the war drew on we learn from this article that many of the conscripted soldiers of New Spain had similar backgrounds and ethnicities as the rebels so the New Spain army begins to decrease in size. Not long after Iturbide begins to move away from Royal cause to rebel cause. This article does show future historians a bit more information that casts him in such a light that we do begin to see if perhaps the best interests of the independent nation were less important than his own.[\[9\]](#) For a man that styled himself as the George Washington of Mexico this article brings a question to the mind of what is the goal of the general? A famous example of Washington's zeal to win independence was seen at Valley Forge where Washington encamped in an area chosen by congress but not by him and not a place where he wanted to be camped due to the lack of supplies. More over Washington has been billed a peacemaker for politicians of the American Revolution trying to recruit citizens and the citizens but more memorable is the leadership he showed during that hard winter when the soldiers had no food, no shoes and were fighting just to stay alive.[\[10\]](#) While Iturbide did fight for his men and the actions taken during some battles where he was accused of cruelty against insurgents this was done mostly to clear his own name.[\[11\]](#) In such actions we do see vast differences in the two commanding generals. Washington was intent on the preservation of the army, congress and young nation while Iturbide sought personal gains that could and in some ways did come at the expense of the Mexican nation.

Some historians, such as Jamie Rodriguez have called the revolution violent and disastrous and certainly compared to the Cadiz Revolution which saw the creation of Juntas in New Spain but the Spanish Constitution of 1812 were rejected in the New World and ideas from the American and French Revolutions became more appealing to those in New Spain. It is sources such as, *We Are Now the True Spaniards*, that tends to look more favorably on the Spanish classes than whether or not the cause of the insurgents was just. While academic at its core Rodriguez's work does not expand on the ideas of the revolution past the enlightenment of the Spanish nobles during Napoleon's occupation and looks at the turmoil of revolution caused by the rebel army seeking independence.[\[12\]](#)

Similarly to the French Revolution we have scholarly notes on the violence against the landed elite in this case known as Gachupines, the Spanish born people. In "The Murder of the Gachupines in the Mexican War of Independence" we find that much of the anger towards Spain and the violence was directed towards this group. While the beginning of the war did focus on the reforms brought before Joseph I was placed on the throne of Spain by Bonaparte the war for independence showed that the Mexican born people wanted to be ruled from within and by their own hand. Spanish authority had to be expelled from the nation at any cost.[\[13\]](#)

Some of the areas in Mexico did not rely on Spain for guidance and support like other areas did. In fact the Yucatan as discussed in "Yucatecan-Mexican Relations at the Time of Independence: The Yucatecan Pronunciamiento of 1821" could function as a completely independent government in their own right and even after the war many of the officials in the Yucatan did not want a completely federal government that would have control over the affairs of the Yucatan businesses and administration.

This type of division is even more evident when we learn of the series of successions that the Yucatan went through in the 19th century. This sort of distrust and dysfunction took Mexico away from the unity that many of the first leaders had tried to develop.[\[14\]](#) The Yucatan was not alone in their thinking that an independent Mexico might not have all the answers. In "Opinions on the Newly Independent Mexican Nation: Documents from the Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, NewMexico, 1820-43" we see that divisions are still very much present and even many administrative questions such as education, which is now offered to many more people, are being asked since many officials are in new and uncharted territories. Also there has been a departure from the stance taken by Morelos in the beginning of the war that the religion of the land was to be Catholic and now Mexico is beginning to take an anticlerical stance.[\[15\]](#) Quickly more divisions are growing and we see some of the same problems seen in the Reign of Terror and in the early American Rebellions such as Shay's and the Whiskey Rebellion which did see some violence based on class division but was also supported by the landed elite who saw a negative aspect and in some cases geography played a role in how the reactions were manifested. The further away from the central government the louder, more violent and more spontaneous the response would seem. However, many of the leaders did not represent federal officials and for the most part were local men who held respect within their home areas.[\[16\]](#) This is similar to the Yucatan issue where we see multiple secessions in the years after Mexico's independence. It is also important to note that while many in the United States did quarrel with one another politically it would be almost eighty years later when open and violent conflict would erupt in the United States.

From the history that has been written we see that ideas were not thought of as one and unity was still far off. In fact the nation which was first formed to be independent was made into an empire that would not last long and former comrades would soon be at each other's throats and the Emperor would be executed by his former friends and subordinates. So why did the Empire that had successfully won its independence fail where the United States of America, who had formed a democracy, succeed? France would eventually succeed with Napoleon as the dictator and then emperor but Mexico shrugged off their empire for a president and, while it has sometimes been a violent history the presidency has lasted since the fall of the empire in 1823.

Much of the writing in terms of the failure of the empire has been focused on the lack of proper administration and the size of the empire in terms with natural resources. When Mexico broke free from Spanish Rule the empire formed but it formed in the remnants of New Spain which was an extensive body of land. The Mexican Empire ran from modern day northern California to eastern Texas and south to what is now Costa Rica. This size of an area that has limited resources that would provide viable profits for a nation needing funds became a problem quick for Iturbide. Not only was there difficulties in governing such a large area with a centralized government, it has been written that such a feat was impossible, Iturbide dissolved the congress which led to many who enjoyed the regional government to oppose Iturbide. No one wished to have their newly acquired voice taken away from them. Rebellions popped up quickly and one such rebellion in Veracruz was led by a former general of independence war and future president of Mexico, Santa Ana.[\[17\]](#) This action is strikingly different than those taken by George Washington, who went to Valley Forge on the orders of congress.[\[18\]](#) Washington was the commanding general that won the American Revolution and he has gone down in history as one of the greatest generals to ever live but in the end one of his most famous acts was his resignation from Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. This was an unknown act and one in which he did so that he could return to a quiet and peaceful life in Mount Vernon.[\[19\]](#) This was not the action that Iturbide took after the war in becoming emperor.

In the success of the American Revolution we can infer that the smaller size of the nation would have helped and having already established regional or state governments would also be helpful in the terms of a transitional government. The bodies of the state legislatures and the national legislature

helped to ease any administrative issues that would arise apart from the localized rebellions at the beginning. The leadership on the national level would also be helpful when the legislative branch, judicial branch and executive branch would work together. Men like Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton and Washington would be able to work together in keeping their new nation free from turmoil.[20] It became clear from the beginning of the Mexican Empire that Iturbide, Santa Ana, Vicente Guerrero and Guadalupe Victoria[21] would have trouble working together and in fact it was Santa Ana who would build an army in an effort to rebel against the empire and would eventually become president several times and even wage a war against the United States.

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