

Mexico's Fight for Independence

Leaders of Mexican Independence

Mexico's fight for independence from Spain began in 1810 with the efforts of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and other revolutionary leaders. The fight lasted for approximately eleven years.

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla was born on May 8, 1753, near Guanajuato, Mexico. The second child born to Creole parents, Hidalgo graduated with degrees in theology and philosophy from the Colegio de San Nicolás in 1773. He then followed in the footsteps of his elder brother and entered the priesthood in 1778. He became the parish priest of the city of Dolores twenty-five years later in 1803. Hidalgo's influence in Dolores extended well beyond religious matters; the priest concerned himself with the economic plight of his poor, indigenous parishioners and often spoke out against the effects of Spanish oppression.

In 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte deposed the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, and installed his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne. Though the colonists in New Spain publicly supported their new king, most were secretly divided into two camps: those who supported the reinstatement of Ferdinand VII and those who sought independence from Spain altogether. Hidalgo became a prominent member of a secret society that supported the latter, and in 1810, their plot to revolt against Spanish rule was exposed. Hidalgo, instead of fleeing to evade capture by the Spanish authorities, decided to forge ahead with the revolution ahead of schedule and summoned the townspeople in Dolores by ringing the church bell on September 16, 1810. Known as the *Grito de Dolores*, or "Cry of Dolores," Hidalgo's call to arms marked the beginning of the Mexican Revolution and a decades-long socioeconomic class war.

Hidalgo drew most of his support from indigenous people and mestizos, and his army successfully captured many of the cities and towns west of Mexico City, the capital of New Spain. Hidalgo made a misstep in 1811, however, when he decided not to capitalize on his momentum and capture Mexico City. The priest's support waned and royalist efforts to put down his rebellion grew. Hidalgo was captured while trying to flee to the United States later that year and was executed.

José María Morelos and Other Revolutionary Leaders

José María Morelos was born on September 30, 1765, in Valladolid, Mexico. Morelos was of mixed Spanish, African, and indigenous descent and grew up in poverty. Like Hidalgo, Morelos attended the Colegio de San Nicolás and became a priest. Much of Morelos's early time as a priest was spent ministering to the poor. Morelos joined Hidalgo's revolution in early 1811 and assumed leadership of the rebellion later that year.

From 1812 until his death in 1815, Morelos and his forces captured and maintained control over much of southwest Mexico, relying heavily on guerrilla tactics. Morelos and other revolutionaries established the Congress of Chilpancingo in 1813 and declared Mexican independence from Spain that year. The congress drafted a new constitution that emphasized equality. Unfortunately for Morelos, the Congress of Chilpancingo was forced to relocate frequently to evade royalist forces. He was captured in 1815 and shot for treason.

Following the death of Morelos, Vicente Guerrero took up the fight for independence. He was considered so important to the cause, in fact, that a Mexican state is named for him. Beyond this fact, Guerrero is also considered significant because he was of African descent, much like Morelos. It is important to note that New Spain was not simply home to Spanish, indigenous, and mestizo peoples, but also to people of mixed Spanish, African, and indigenous descent. Agustín de Iturbide was sent out to fight Guerrero because he was becoming a real threat to Mexico City. However, Iturbide had become part of a new conservative independence movement in response to a liberal takeover of the Spanish government, and he convinced Guerrero to join him. Together they created the Plan de Iguala, which was the foundation for Mexican independence. Iturbide was chosen by the Creole elites to lead the new nation, and he removed Guerrero and other rebels from their positions.