



Colonial Mexico

The ancient civilizations of Mexico lasted about **2500 years**. Then, in the 15th Century, a group of Spanish explorers arrived in the newly discovered continent of America. They were under orders from the Spanish Crown to turn what is today's Mexico territory into a Spanish colony.

Hernán Cortés, the leader of a small group of *Conquistadores*, arrived to Veracruz, a town on the Gulf of Mexico, and went on to the Aztec capital *Tenochtitlan*.

Moctezuma, the Emperor of the Aztecs, welcomed Cortés, as he believed the Spaniard might be their returning God, as Aztec's legend said.



Cortés and his men settled in *Tenochtitlan*. However, when Cortés left the city for a few days, the men he left behind, mistakenly believed that a large gathering of Aztecs were grouping together to threaten them. In reality they were only preparing for a religious ceremony. The Spanish attacked and many of the Aztecs were massacred.

Cortés returned and the Aztecs demanded that Moctezuma expel the Spanish. The emperor tried to reason with his people but he was stoned to death.

The new Emperor *Cuitláhuac* chased the Spaniards out of the city. Cortés and his men fled with everything they could take from the palace. This was called **Noche Triste** (The Sorrowful Night).

Later Cortés regrouped and helped by the Kingdom of Tlaxcala, built ships to attack Tenochtitlan using the canals. Meanwhile, the Spanish had brought the disease smallpox from the old world, and this killed many of the Aztecs, including the Emperor *Cuitláhuac*.

Cortés returned to Tenochtitlan with about 50,000 men, mainly native allies. After a heroic attempt by the remaining Aztecs to defend the city, the new Emperor *Cuauhtémoc* surrendered on August 13, 1521. **The Aztec Empire was no more and the New Spain was born.**



The Colonial Period



After the fall of the Aztec Empire, Spain called their new lands the **Viceroyalty of New Spain**, and ruled over Mexico for the next three hundred years. Tenochtitlan, the old capital of the Empire, became known as Mexico City. The Spaniards built palaces and churches on their own style.

All the old buildings and temples belonging to the indigenous tribes were destroyed. The buildings materials were reused in the construction of the new colonial city.

The New Spain, as Mexico was called then, was a rich source of mineral wealth, especially silver. The Spaniards developed a colonial economy in Mexico, based on the hacienda system and export-import trade with mainland Spain.

Haciendas were very large enclosures of land, which produced a variety of crops, and employed many workers who lived on the land. These workers were paid low wages and were dependent on the hacienda owner for their livelihood.

Haciendas were often, but not always, linked to mines, which employed many indigenous workers. Production from the mines was shipped back to Spain once a year, accompanied by many armed ships to protect the cargo from pirates.



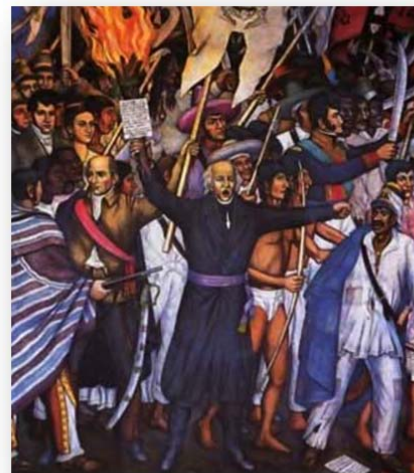
The Spaniards also wished to change the native religions, languages and cultures. Missionaries were brought over from Spain to convert the indigenous populations to Roman Catholicism. Churches and monasteries were built, and religious orders began to educate the natives according to Spanish beliefs.

The population increased as more Spaniards emigrated to New Spain and Spanish became the official language of the country. The indigenous populations had few rights and were often exploited. Mexico was greatly influenced by the Spanish way of life and culture. The combining of Indian with Spanish traditions gave birth to a new country.

Fight for Independence

While Mexico remained a colony, rulers that governed Mexico came from mainland Spain. However, both native Mexicans and Creoles (people of Spanish descent born in Mexico) were unhappy with this system. They wanted to govern the country themselves.

On September 16th 1810, in the town of Dolores, Guanajuato, Miguel Hidalgo, the village priest, called his parishioners to mass and urged them to fight for independence from Spain. This is known as the "**Grito de Dolores**" (the Shout), a very important moment in Mexican history. What began as a small movement with a few hundred followers soon grew to about 100,000 people - including creoles and mestizos, and workers from the mines, factories, and haciendas.



Father Hidalgo was captured, then tried and executed in 1811, but the struggle continued. Fighting broke out in many parts of Mexico. The people wanted the end of rule by the Spanish, the equality of races, and the redistribution of land. After a war which lasted eleven years and in which many people died, Mexico finally achieved its **independence from Spain in 1821**.

The month of September is a time of great celebration in Mexico. Mexicans proudly remember the beginning of the fight for independence on the night of September 15th-16th, which is a *fiesta* (party) night and a National holiday.

The main square (*zócalo*) of every town in Mexico is decorated with flags and coloured lights. Everyone goes to the *zócalo* for food, dancing and fireworks. At 11 o'clock the mayor appears and reminds the people of the heroes who made Mexico a free nation. He leads the **Grito**, when everyone shouts "**Viva Mexico!**" (Long Live Mexico!) and the fireworks begin.

In Mexico City, thousands of people gather in the country's largest *zócalo*, to listen to the President of Mexico give the *Grito* from a balcony in the National Palace. They watch as he waves the Mexican flag and rings the same bell that Miguel Hidalgo rang in the village of Dolores, more than 200 years ago.

