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Mexico's Fight for Independence



Written by Terry Miller Shannon

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People celebrating Mexican Independence Day in Mexico City

▼ ▼ ▼ Honoring Freedom ▼ ▼ ▼

If you're ever in Mexico on September 16, you'll find yourself in the middle of a big celebration. You'll see parades, fireworks, food, confetti, toys, horseback riders, rodeos, bullfights, and many happy people! September 16 is Mexican **Independence** Day; Mexicans are honoring their country's freedom.

What Is Independence?

It is self-rule. As you get older, you will have more independence and responsibility. You will rely on yourself, decide what's important to you, and make rules to live by.

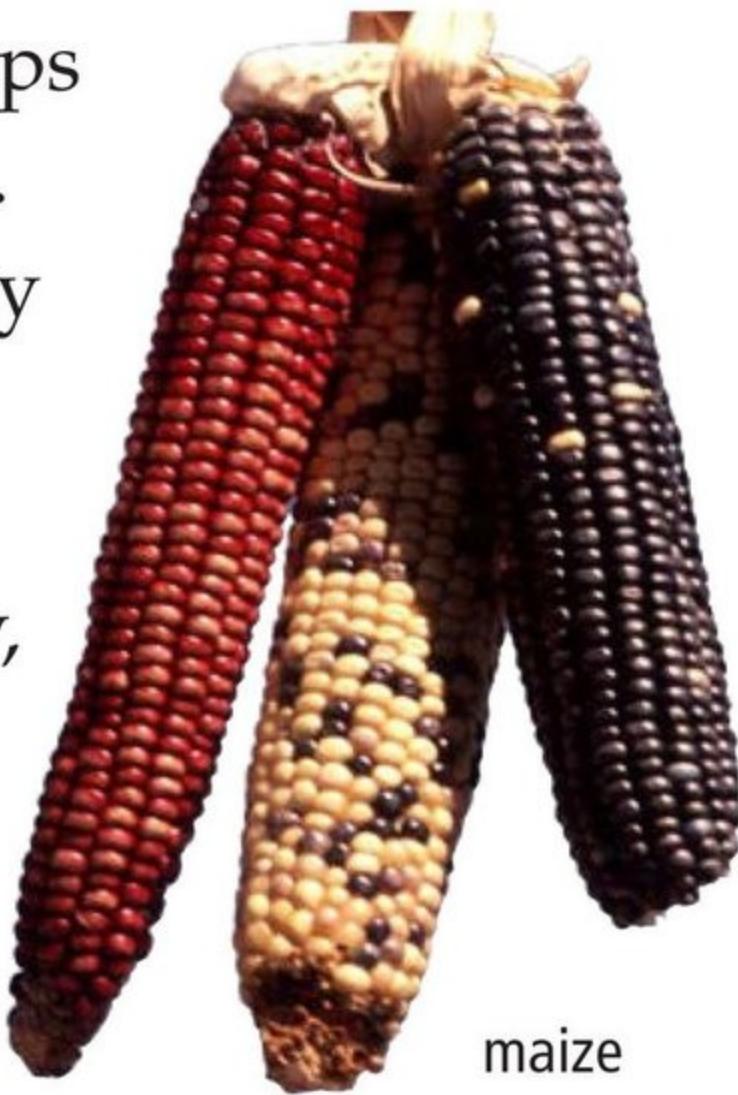
In the case of Mexico, when the country won its independence, Mexicans were responsible for making their own laws. Freedom like that is worth much sacrifice and work.



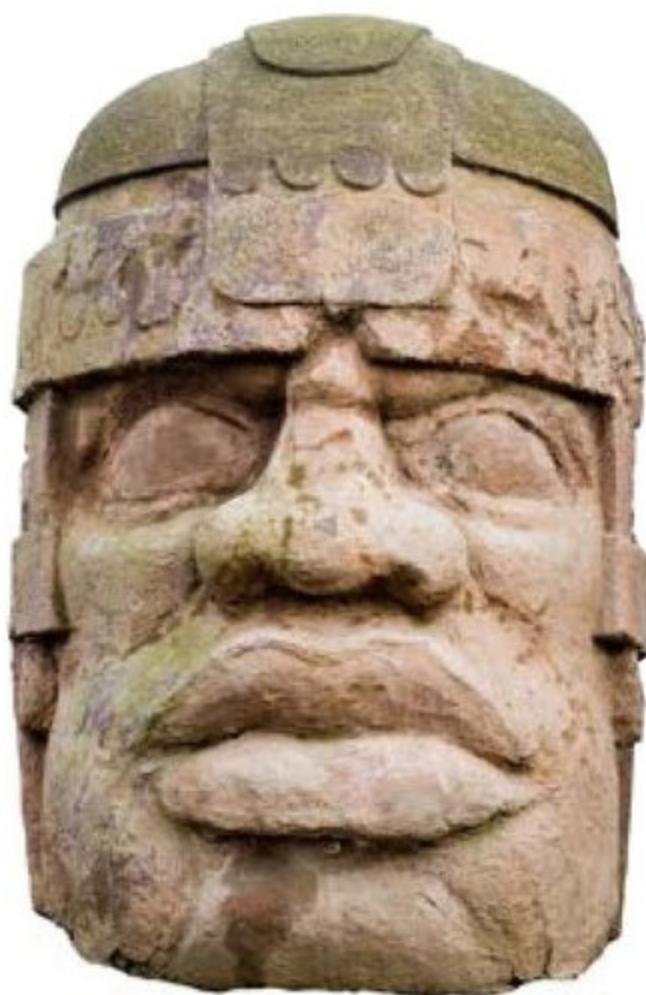
▼ ▼ ▼ The First People in Mexico ▼ ▼ ▼

The land that we now call Mexico, long before Mexico became a country, was occupied by groups of people living in tribes. These people were the **native** people of Mexico who were born there before people from other lands arrived. This book is about the people of Mexico and their fight for independence.

There were three major groups or **civilizations** in early Mexico. Each group had a particular way of living. For many years, they hunted animals and gathered wild plants for food. Eventually, they began to farm to feed the people in their villages. Their most important crop was maize, or corn.



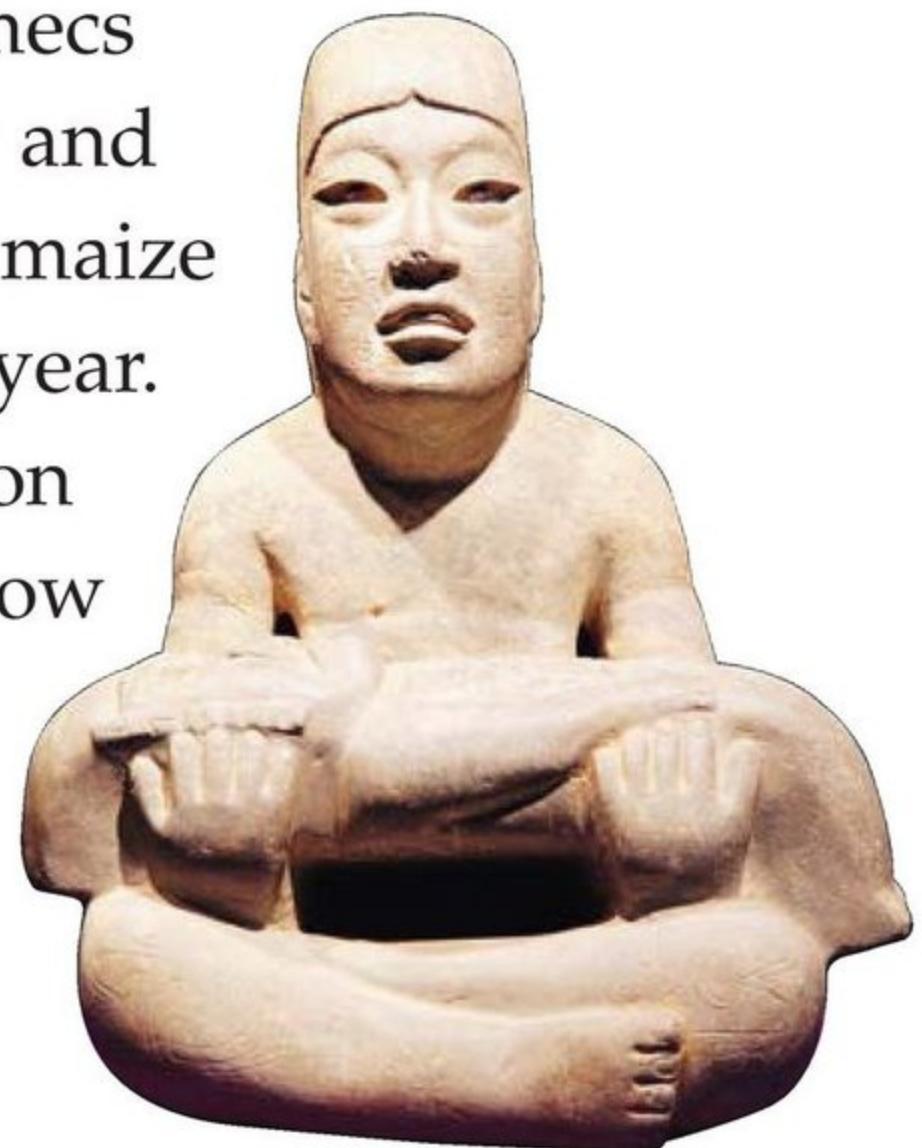
maize



The first great civilization was the Olmec (OL-mek). They lived in the coastal lowlands along the Gulf of Mexico. The climate in that area allowed the Olmecs to grow and harvest maize twice a year.

The abundant food production allowed the civilization to grow strong.

No one knows exactly why the Olmec civilization ended around 200 BC.



Olmec statues



Ruins such as this pyramid tell much about Mayan civilization.

The next major civilization, which started around AD 300, was the Mayan. By around AD 900, the Maya were thriving. They excelled in architecture and art. They also made astronomy tables that were quite accurate, and developed a mathematical system that included zero. (Zero was an advanced concept for that time.) Unlike the Olmecs, the Mayans left written records of their lives, so we know much more about them. But like the Olmecs, the Mayans were another advanced civilization that suddenly and mysteriously disappeared.



Tenochtitlán, an early Aztec city

The third great Mexican civilization was the Aztec (AZ-tek). By 1430, the Aztecs ruled the Valley of Mexico, and then they spread over the entire country. They built an impressive city called Tenochtitlán (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN), which was essentially Mexico's capital city. Tenochtitlán was on an island in Lake Texcoco (tex-KOH-koh). The city had 200,000 residents, with 400,000 more living nearby. In the early 1500s, there were about 1.2 million people living in the Valley of Mexico, the area Mexico City now occupies.

In 1517, a Spanish ship led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba (frahn-SEES-co er-NAHN-dez deh COR-doh-ba) sailed from Spain to Mexico. Mexico's native peoples had never seen white-skinned people, sailboats, cannons, gunpowder, or horses. They believed the Spaniards were gods who were led by Quetzalcoatl (keht-sahl-KOH-ahtl), a god of the tribes that the Aztecs had conquered. The Aztec emperor, Montezuma (mon-tuh-ZOO-muh), gave the Spaniards gifts of jewelry made of precious stones, silver, and gold. The gifts only made the Spaniards greedy for more riches. Before returning to Spain, they fought native tribes to take even more riches back home.

More Spaniards arrived by sea in April 1519—this time they were led by Hernán Cortés (er-NAN kor-TEZ). Cortés hoped to take Mexican land for himself.



▼ ▼ ▼ Spanish Rule ▼ ▼ ▼

When Cortés and his men, along with native enemies of the Aztecs, marched into Tenochtitlán, they were amazed by the city's beauty, with every building painted white. Montezuma gave dinner parties for the Spaniards and invited them to stay. Cortés repaid Montezuma's hospitality by imprisoning the Aztec ruler. Cortés's men killed the Aztec leaders. Later, Montezuma was killed, either by the Spaniards or by his own men who were angered at his weakness. Soon more Spanish arrived to fight the Aztecs.

In the meantime, the Aztecs began dying of smallpox, a disease brought to Mexico by the invaders. The Aztecs had no defenses against the disease. By the time the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs, two-thirds, or about 130,000, of the people of Tenochtitlán were dead.



Ruins at Tenochtitlán



Catholic churches in Mexico are reminders of Spain's religious influence.

By 1550, the Spanish ruled Mexico. Diseases such as smallpox brought from Europe weakened the natives. There were about 20 million native people in Mexico when Spain conquered the country. One hundred years later, there were only about 1.2 million natives left in all of Mexico.

Spain ruled for three centuries, calling the area New Spain. The conquerors' main goal was wealth, so they stole Mexican treasures. They also set up a system in which Spanish **immigrants** owned the land, and they made the natives their slaves. This created two classes of people in Mexico: the very rich and the very poor.



Today, people are free to protest in the streets of Mexico.

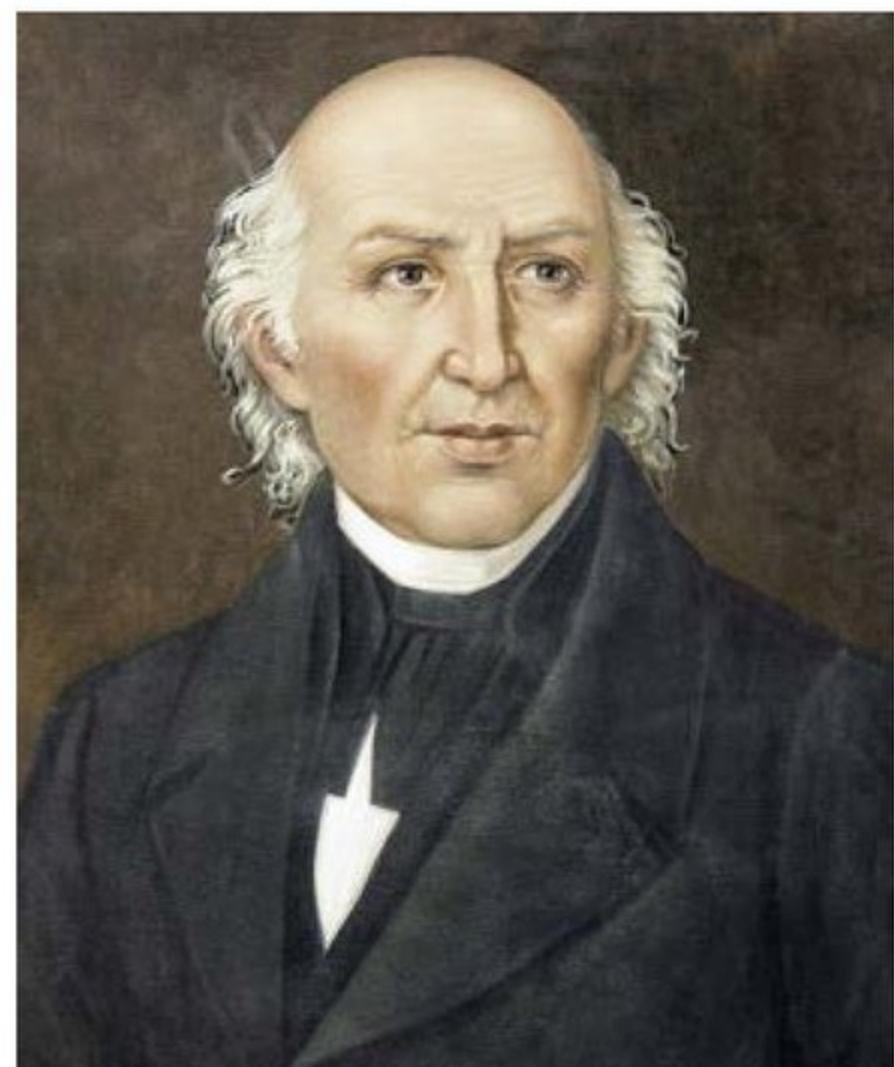
Over the years, the Spanish immigrants married the natives of Mexico. Their children were a mix of Spanish and native blood. As time went by, these mixed-blood people became the majority. They considered themselves true Mexicans, not Spaniards or natives.

By the beginning of the 1800s, the Mexican people yearned for their country to become independent. They were inspired by the way other countries fought to win freedom. Mexicans no longer wanted Spain to rule their country; they wanted to be a free country led by Mexicans. For that, they'd need a **revolution**, or a fight to replace the Spanish rulers with their own form of government.

▼ ▼ ▼ Revolution! ▼ ▼ ▼

The Creoles (KREE-ols) were the first group of Mexicans to think about revolution. They were born in Mexico to parents from Spain who had settled in Mexico. Compared to people living in Mexico and born in Spain, the Creoles were regarded as second-class citizens. They didn't have the same privileges as those born in Spain. They were unhappy with their lack of political power and began to plan a revolution. The Spaniards learned of their plans and the Creoles were forced to begin the revolution ahead of schedule.

Very early on September 16, 1810, a priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (mee-GEL ee-THAL-go ee kos-TEE-ya) rang the bell of his church in the town of Dolores. He yelled: "Viva México!" (BEE-ba MEH-hee-coh) and "Viva la independencia!" (BEE-ba la in-deh-pen-DEN-see-ah). This is known as the cry of independence. Hidalgo was calling out to Mexicans, urging them to fight Spanish rule and to reclaim Mexico for their own.



Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla



"Lord, if I have done well, thou knowest it; if ill, to thy infinite mercy I commend my soul."

Last statement prior to execution in 1815

José María Morelos
y Pavón

By the end of October 80,000 people had joined Hidalgo's army. Hidalgo's soldiers conquered two large cities and a few others, but they were defeated in the biggest city—Mexico City. In 1811, Hidalgo was captured and killed by the Spanish, but the fight for independence continued.

The next leader of the rebellion was another priest, named José María Morelos y Pavón (ho-ZE ma-REE-a mo-REH-los ee pah-BON). He issued the first formal call for independence at a congress he held in 1813. He wrote up a constitution for a Mexican **republic**. However, in 1815, Morelos was also captured and killed by the Spanish.

For the next five years, there was no real leader for Mexican independence, and by 1816, Spanish soldiers had killed most of the rebels. Spain's king forced Mexicans to pay taxes, and the king's harsh actions caused many Mexicans who hadn't taken part in the revolution to now turn against Spain.

In 1820, there was a revolution in Spain, and the Creoles believed this would be a perfect time to try again for independence. In 1821, a Spanish colonel named Agustín de Iturbide (ah-gus-TEEN deh ee-tur-BEE-deh) was sent with 2,500 Spanish soldiers to stop a Mexican rebellion in central Mexico.



Spanish troops enter Mexico City.

A group of powerful Creoles approached Iturbide and convinced him to betray his Spanish commander. He agreed to fight alongside them with his army in the Creoles' fight for independence. In exchange, Iturbide was to have the power to dictate the terms of Mexico's independence.

In September of 1821, Iturbide led troops to conquer Mexico City, the center of Spanish government. He declared himself the head of the new independent government of Mexico. Spanish officials escaped and returned to Spain.



Mexico's National Palace is built on the site of Montezuma's palace.



Agustín de Iturbide

Mexico was now independent! The Mexicans fought for their freedom for 11 years. They may have lost as many as 600,000 lives. At last, their long years of sacrifice had paid off—they were free and independent.

But the Creoles couldn't agree on how Mexico's government should work. Some people wanted a monarchy, ruled by a king. Others desired a republic like the United States, governed by Mexico's citizens. Iturbide decided for everyone in 1822 when he established a monarchy by declaring himself Emperor Agustín I. He was not a good ruler, and the people turned against him. By 1823, he was dethroned.

▼ ▼ ▼ **Republic** ▼ ▼ ▼

After Iturbide was **dethroned**, a congress was established. This congress wrote a constitution for a democratic country, similar to the United States. However, there were still major disagreements. One group wanted a strong central government and wanted Roman Catholicism to be the national religion. Another group wanted the states to have more power, and they wanted to be free to worship as they wished.

At last in 1824, the groups reached a **compromise**, and Mexico became a republic. They formed a national government led by a two-house congress. A governor and a legislature led each state. The first president was Guadalupe (hwah-dah-LOO-peh) Victoria.



Guadalupe Victoria

Do You Know?

Mexico's national flag was created in 1821. Green represents independence, white is for religious purity, and red stands for the Spanish who joined Mexicans in the fight for independence, plus the blood of Mexican heroes.





A girl in traditional dress riding in Independence Day festivities

Cinco de Mayo

Cinco de Mayo (SEEN-ko deh MY-oh), May 5th, is not Mexican Independence Day. It celebrates the victory of a small group of Mexicans over the French army at the Battle of Puebla.

▼ ▼ ▼ Celebration! ▼ ▼ ▼

The Mexican people will never forget the people and events that led to their country's independence. Mexican Independence Day is a huge celebration, or **fiesta**, every year throughout Mexico.

Each year, the celebration begins on the night of September 15. People all over Mexico gather in town centers. In Mexico City, around half a million people crowd into the city square.

Everyone watches the clock. At exactly 11:00, the crowd quiets. Mexico's president comes out of the palace onto the balcony. He wears a sash of red, white, and green, and carries a large Mexican flag.

The president rings the same liberty bell that Hidalgo rang when he called the people to fight against the Spanish for their freedom. As Hidalgo did so many years ago, the president shouts, "Viva México!" and "Viva la independencia!" His voice booms through loudspeakers.



Mexicans gather in city squares to celebrate.



Traditional clothing is just part of the Independence Day festivities.

The crowd screams “Viva México!” and “Viva la independencia!” while they toss confetti and blow on their horns. Everyone sings Mexico’s national anthem. Red, white, and green fireworks light the sky. Similar ceremonies take place all over Mexico at the same time.

The next day, September 16, is Independence Day. Mexicans celebrate with parades, feasts, rodeos, bullfights, and horseback riding competitions. Statues of Hidalgo are decorated with red, white, and green flowers. It’s a fine celebration in honor of Mexico’s long, hard, yet rewarding fight for independence.



Statue of Hidalgo

▼ ▼ ▼ Independence Timeline ▼ ▼ ▼

By 15,000 BC: First native inhabitants known to be living in Mexico



1200-200: Olmec civilization prospers

AD 300-900: Mayan civilization prospers



1300-1520: Aztec civilization prospers

1325: Aztec city of Tenochtitlán founded on the island in Lake Texcoco



1520: Hernán Cortés conquers Tenochtitlán for Spain.

1520-1810: Mexico is a colony of Spain.

1810: Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla leads the revolution against Spain.

1821: Agustín de Iturbide leads the war for independence. Mexico wins independence.



1822: Iturbide is Mexico's first emperor.

1824: Mexico becomes a republic; Guadalupe Victoria is Mexico's first president.

▼ ▼ ▼ **Glossary** ▼ ▼ ▼

anthem	a song of national pride (p. 21)
civilizations	groups of people with a certain way of living (p. 6)
compromise	a decision in which both sides of an argument give up certain things to reach an agreement (p. 18)
Creoles	people born in Mexico whose parents were born in Spain (p. 13)
dethroned	removed from power (p. 18)
fiesta	Spanish word for “festival” (p. 19)
immigrants	people who move into one country from another (p. 11)
independence	freedom from the control, influence, support, or help of others (p. 4)
native	belonging to a location by birth (p. 5)
republic	a government in which power belongs to the citizens (p. 14)
revolution	removing one government from power to replace it with another (p. 12)

▼ ▼ ▼ **Explore More** ▼ ▼ ▼

On the Internet use www.google.com to find out more about topics presented in this book. Use terms from the text, or try searching for glossary or index words.

Searches to try: *Mexican history* or *independence*.

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Back cover: Mayan ruins at Chichen-Itza

Title page: Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City

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