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Latin America:
An Interpretive History

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Popular Revolution in Mexico

New Spain initially started on the same path as the rest of Spanish America. Taking advantage of the political vacuum in Spain in 1808, the creoles maneuvered to form a local junta to govern the viceroyalty, a move calculated to shift political power from the Spaniards to the Mexican elite. Alarmed by the maneuvering, the peninsulars feared the loss of their traditional, preferred positions. They acted swiftly to form their own junta and thus shoved the creoles aside. The creoles plotted to seize power and enlisted the help of Father Miguel Hidalgo, the parish priest of the small town of Dolores. In September 1810, the peninsulars discovered the plan and jailed the leaders. The wife of one leader, Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez, got word to Hidalgo, who on September 16, 1810, rang the church bells to summon the mostly mestizo and indigenous parishioners.

But Hidalgo's ideas were different from the other creole leaders. Well educated, and profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, Hidalgo professed advanced social ideas. He believed that the Church had a social mission to perform and a duty to improve the lot of the downtrodden. Personally, he bore numerous grievances against the peninsulars and the Spanish government—he had been educated by the Jesuits until their expulsion in 1767, and he had been investigated by the Inquisition on charges of mismanaging funds while he was the rector of the College of San Nicolás Obispo in Valladolid.

When his parishioners gathered, Hidalgo exhorted them to rise up and reclaim the land stolen from them 300 years before: "Long live Ferdinand VII! Long live America! Down with bad government! Death to the Spaniards!" Hidalgo's words fell on fertile ground. The town of Dolores was a mere ten miles from Guanajuato, making it dependent on the mining economy. In 1809, an unusually dry summer had decreased maize production, ruining many small farmers. Food prices had quadrupled, and miners couldn't feed the mules needed in mining, leading to layoffs of mine workers.

Hidalgo had unleashed new forces. Unlike the creoles who simply wanted to substitute themselves for the peninsulars in power, the mestizo and indigenous masses desired far-reaching social and economic changes. There were 600 people gathered in Dolores; as they marched toward Guanajuato, the numbers swelled to 25,000. At Guanajuato, the intendant, the local militia, the peninsulars, and some creoles barricaded themselves in the granary, leaving the city defenseless. The lower classes of Guanajuato

joined the insurgents and burned and pillaged the city. By the time the mob reached Mexico City, it numbered 60,000 to 80,000, and in their rampage they made no distinction between creole and peninsular. With energies released after three centuries of repression, the indigenous and mestizos struck out at all they hated. The creoles became as frightened as the peninsulars, and the two rival factions united before the threat from the masses.

Hidalgo did little to discipline the people under him. Indeed, his control of them proved minimal. His ideas were disorganized, vague, and at times contradictory. While voicing his loyalty to Ferdinand, he denounced the abuses of the viceregal government—later he declared Mexico free and independent. He threatened the peninsulars with death, and he abolished slavery. Poised before Mexico City, he hesitated then ordered a withdrawal, an action that cost him much of the allegiance of the masses. The Spanish army regained its confidence and struck out in pursuit of the ragtag rebels. Once captured, the royalists tried Hidalgo before a nine-member panel that included six creoles. In mid-1811, ten months after the Grito de Dolores, a firing squad executed him. His severed head was mounted on the wall of the granary at Guanajuato, a clear warning to others.

Nonetheless, Hidalgo's banner was taken up by another parish priest, José Maria Morelos. Morelos came from a poor mestizo family and worked as a mule driver; through great personal effort he became a priest, always assigned to the poorest, backwoods parishes, where poor indios and mestizos labored. He had joined Hidalgo's movement, but after Hidalgo's death he determined that undisciplined hordes were not the answer. He trimmed the forces, organized them into a more disciplined force, and tried to appeal to the creoles while still carrying Hidalgo's banner of social reform. He defined his program: establish the independence of Mexico; create a republican government in which the Mexican people would participate with the exclusion of the wealthy nobility and entrenched officeholders; abolish slavery; affirm the equality of all people; terminate the special privileges of the Church as well as the compulsory tithe; and partition the large estates so that all farmers could own land. At Chilpancingo, he declared that Mexico's sovereignty resided in the people, who could alter the government according to their will. He called forth pride in the Mexican—not in the Spanish—past. His program contained the seeds of a real social, economic, and political revolution and thereby repulsed peninsular and creole alike. He ably led his small, disciplined army in central Mexico for more than four years. In 1815, the Spaniards captured and executed him. The royalists immediately gained the ascendancy in Mexico and dashed the hopes of the mestizos and indigenous for social and economic changes. New Spain returned momentarily to its colonial slumbers.

When independence was won it Mexico, it was under conservative leadership, a reaction to Ferdinand's acceptance of the liberal 1812 constitution. The peninsulars and creoles in New Spain rejected Spanish liberalism

just as they had earlier turned away from Mexican liberalism. In their reaction to the events in Spain, they decided to free themselves and chart their own destiny. They were joined by the Church hierarchy, who feared the loss of property and secular restrictions if the liberals in control of Spain had their way. The peninsulars and creoles selected a pompous creole army officer, Augustín de Iturbide, who had fought against Hidalgo and Morelos, first as their instrument to effect independence and then as their emperor. The most conservative forces of New Spain ushered in Mexican independence in 1821. They advocated neither social nor economic changes. They sought to preserve—or enhance if possible—their privileges. The only innovation was political: a creole emperor replaced the Spanish king, which was symbolic of the wider replacement of the peninsulars by the creoles in government. The events harmonized little with the concepts of Hidalgo and Morelos but suited creole desires. The Mexican struggle for independence began as a major social, economic, and political revolution but ended as a conservative coup d'etat. The only immediate victors were the creole elite.

Map 3.1 Latin America in 1830

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