

Hidalgo's Call for Mexican Independence

Shortly before dawn on September 16, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla made a momentous decision that revolutionized the course of Mexican history. Within hours, Hidalgo, a Catholic priest in the village of Dolores, ordered the arrest of Dolores' native Spaniards. Then Hidalgo rang the church bell, as he customarily did to call the Indians to mass. The message that Hidalgo gave to the Indians and *mestizos* called them to retaliate against the hated *gachupines*, or native Spaniards who had exploited and oppressed Mexicans for ten generations.

Although a movement toward Mexican independence had already been in progress since Napoleon's conquest of Spain, Hidalgo's passionate declaration was a swift, unpremeditated decision. "¡Mexicanos, Viva Mexico!" Hidalgo told the Mexicans who were the members of New Spain's lowest caste. He urged the exploited and embittered Mexicans to recover the lands that were stolen from their forefathers. That he was calling these people to revolution was a radical change in the original revolution plot devised by the *criollos* (Mexican-born Spaniards).

Groups of *criollos* across Mexico had been plotting to overthrow the authority of *gachupines* who, because of their Spanish nativity, had legal and social priority over the *criollos*. When Joseph Bonaparte replaced King Ferdinand as the leader of Spain, the *criollos* recognized a prime opportunity for Mexican sovereignty. The nucleus of this movement was a group of intellectuals in Queretaro led by the corregidor of Queretaro, his wife and a group of army officers distinguished by the adventurous Ignacio Allende. The *criollos'* plan for revolution did not originally focus on the manpower of the Mexicans. Rather, the *criollos* sought to avoid military confrontation by convincing *criollo* army officers to sever their allegiance to the *gachupines*. By claiming loyalty to the defeated King Ferdinand, the *criollos* aimed to establish Mexico as an independent nation within King Ferdinand's Spanish empire. The *gachupines* who claimed authority under Bonaparte's rule would be driven out of Mexico.

Hidalgo had close ties with this group. Approaching sixty years of age, Hidalgo was beloved and greatly respected by Mexicans. Once the dean of the College of San Nicolas at Valladolid in Michoacan (now Morelia), Hidalgo was a well-educated, courageous humanitarian. He was sympathetic to the Indians, which was unusual amongst Mexican clergymen. Against *gachupine*

law, Hidalgo taught Indians to plant olives, mulberries and grapevines and to manufacture pottery and leather. His actions irritated the Spanish viceroy who, as a punitive measure, cut down Hidalgo's trees and vines.

Gachupines were alerted to the *criollos'* independence movement by *criollo* officers who had refused to join the revolutionary movement and by a priest who had learned of the plot through a confessional. Hidalgo was among the central figures targeted for arrest on September 13, 1810. The Queretaro corregidor's wife informed the *criollos* of the *gachupines'* plan. Allende immediately departed from Queretaro to inform Hidalgo. Allende arrived in Dolores in the early morning hours of September 16. His message forced Hidalgo to make the most significant decision of his life, a decision which marked the first struggle for Mexican independence and that would distinguish Hidalgo as the national hero of the revolution. The *criollos* had not gained enough military alliance to forfeit the *gachupines* rule, as the plot had leaked three months before the *criollos* target date of December 8. Hidalgo had three possible options. He could await arrest, flee Dolores or call on the Indian and *mestizo* forces. His decision to call the exploited groups to revolution completely changed the character of the revolution. The movement became a bloody class struggle instead of a shrewd political maneuver. When Hidalgo called the Indians to action, he tapped into powerful forces that had been simmering for over three hundred years. With clubs, slings, axes, knives, machetes and intense hatred, the Indians took on the challenge of the Spanish artillery.

When the Indian and *mestizo* forces, led by Hidalgo and Allende, reached the next village en route to Mexico city, they acquired a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint whose image was of a woman of color. The Virgin of Guadalupe, who was indigenous to Mexico, became the banner of the revolutionary forces as Hidalgo and Allende led the path toward Mexico City and the expulsion of the *gachupines*.

Hidalgo later regretted the bloodbath he had incited with his fateful cry of Dolores. When he made his hasty decision in the pre-dawn hours of September 16, he had not foreseen the mass slaughter of Spaniards. Before the revolutionary troops descended upon Mexico City, Hidalgo retreated with only a few associates to Dolores, where he would be executed by the *gachupines* only a year later. Despite his ambiguous relation to the violent class struggle of the Mexican revolution, Hidalgo is still revered as the father of Mexican independence.

Eleven years of war, decades of despotic Mexican rulers and political unrest proceeded Hidalgo's cry of Dolores. Yet throughout the years of turmoil, El Grito de Dolores, "Mexicanos, viva Mexico," has persevered. Every year at midnight on September 16, Mexicans shout the grito, honoring the crucial, impulsive action that was the catalyst for the country's bloody struggle for independence from Spain.