

The Tide Turns

By early 1865 the French army controlled nearly all of Mexico. Imperial forces had forced Juárez to Paso del Norte, on Mexico's northern border with the United States. Stalwarts like Porfirio Díaz were defeated. But in these darkest hours, the tide turned. A combination of drastically changing international conditions, a series of serious (and perhaps inevitable) blunders by the emperor and his government, the inherent contradictions that undermined the empire from the outset, and the persistence of Juárez defeated Maximilian.

The transformation of France's international situation was most crucial, for it resulted in the withdrawal of the French Army. The defeat of the Confederacy ended the U.S. civil war in 1865 and the defeat of Austria in war with Prussia in 1866 together drastically altered the international situation for France and shook Napoleon's support. The U.S. government pushed for the withdrawal of French troops from Mexico. Prussia threatened France. In response, in January 1866, Napoleon informed Maximilian that the French army would leave within the year. Although Maximilian refused to abdicate, he could not maintain his throne without French troops.

Maximilian was not at any point able to put his military house in order. The original convention signed between Maximilian and Napoleon III provided for 25,000 French troops and 8,000 Foreign Legionnaires to stay eight years. The agreement did not mention a commander-in-chief. The imperial army and government were divided in the best of times. The army consisted of small contingents of Austrian and Belgian troops, as well as French soldiers, and several thousand Mexicans, who operated without a unified command structure. Because of deep, personal dislike, Maximilian did not communicate at all with the French commander Marshall Bazaine. The Austrians never recognized French leadership. There was not enough money to properly fund the military. Mexico was supposed to pay for the expenses of the French expeditionary force after July 1, 1864, but could never fulfill this agreement. Napoleon III promised that "however events in Europe might turn out, the assistance of France should never fail the new empire." But Napoleon III, rather than maintain a minimum 20,000 troops in 1867, withdrew entirely.

The former archduke trusted Napoleon III, who wrote him in 1864: "I beg that you will always count upon my friendship . . . You may be sure that my support will not fail you in the fulfillment of the task you are so courageously undertaking." They would prove hollow words indeed.

Another important error was the emperor's difficult relations with the Catholic Church. Maximilian refused to rescind the Liberals' Reform Laws. A decree in early 1865 reaffirmed the sale of church property, revised Church procedures, and provided for liberty of worship. As a result, the Mexican Church hierarchy never committed its full resources to the empire.

The new ruler went to Mexico without adequate financial arrangements. There were never enough funds to operate the government, fight the war, and carry out new programs. If Maximilian had the monies to institute a more far-reaching public works program, for example, he might have won over more of the population.

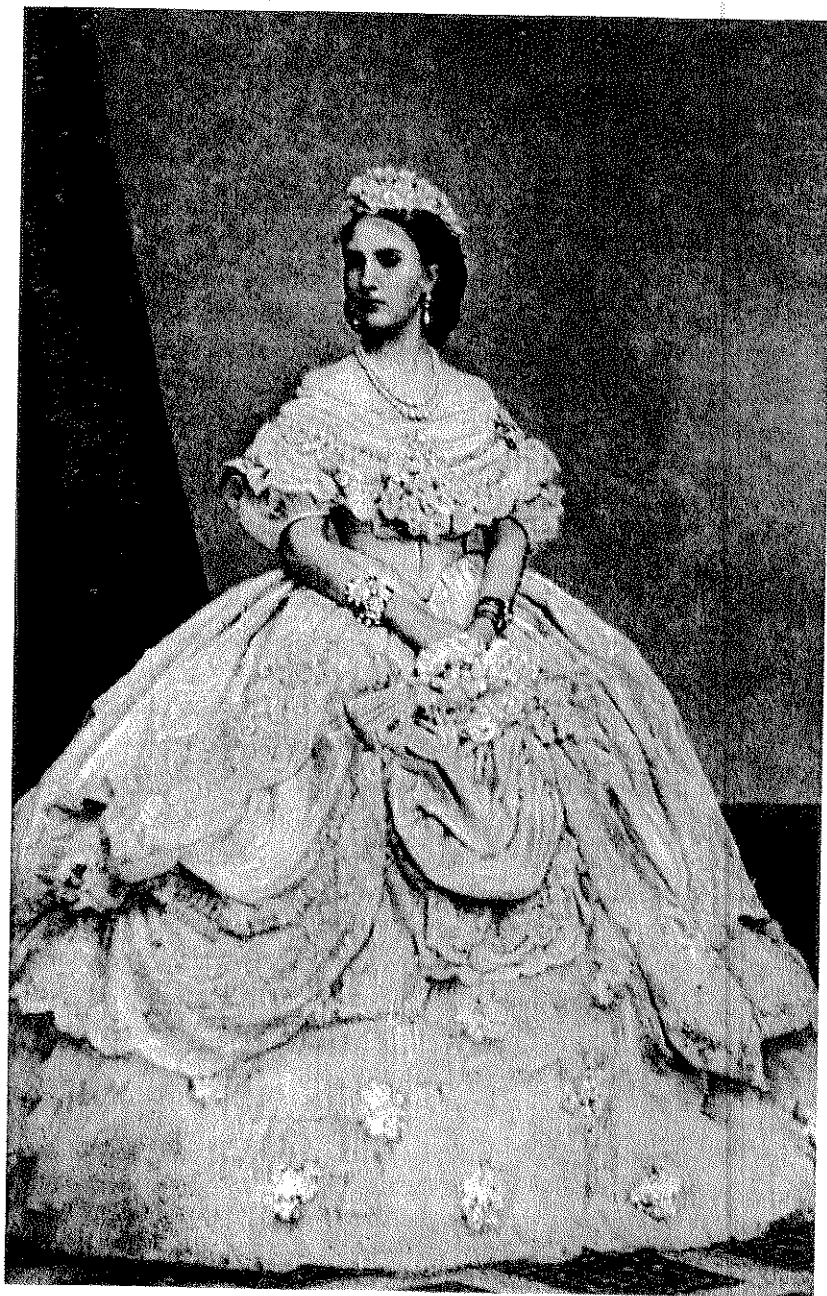
Frustrated at every turn, Maximilian vented his displeasure:

There are three classes which are the worst thing I have found in the country so far, the judicial functionaries, the army officers, and the greater part of the clergy. None of them know their duties and they live for money alone. The judges are corrupt, the officers have no sense of honor, and the clergy are lacking in Christian charity and morality.

And this was in October 1864! He was at the time still quite optimistic about his prospects.



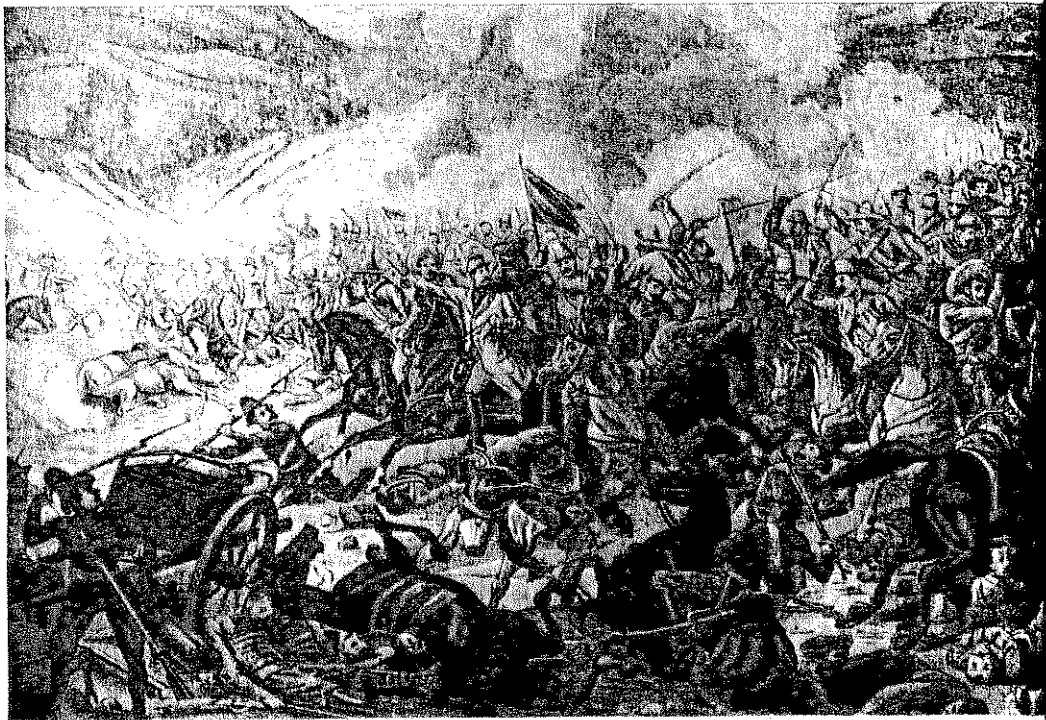
Maximilian



Carlota

Maximilian made other mistakes as well. Frustrated by continued guerrilla warfare in the face of his almost certain victory, in October 1865 he proclaimed that any Mexicans who continued to fight the empire would be shot summarily. Unfortunately for the emperor, Juárez would use this decree later to justify his order to execute Maximilian. The former archduke also erred when he dispatched his wife to Europe to drum up support for his faltering enterprise. For all her later reputation as unbalanced, Charlotte had acted as his most trusted counsel. Her sympathetic presence might have saved him from the firing squad. Her failed attempt to obtain support in Europe drove her to despair and pushed her over the edge to madness. Charlotte herself had misjudged badly, for it was she who had dissuaded her husband from abdicating in mid-1866. It had been Charlotte who had demanded that he “be a man and hold out.”

As Maximilian and Charlotte tried mightily to win over their new Mexican subjects, Benito Juárez fought on. The defeats of 1864 led to even darker days,



The Battle of San Lorenzo, April 10, 1867

as his government wandered north through San Luis Potosí, then Saltillo and Monterrey, and eventually to Chihuahua in 1865 and 1866. The French pushed Juárez to the border at Paso del Norte, but the stubborn president refused adamantly to cross the border to the United States and safety. By early 1866, however, Juárez had turned the tide. In June 1866, the Conservatives' best general, Tomás Mejía, lost a crucial battle at Matamoros. The Liberals let him and his army go after they surrendered, opening the door for many desertions from the imperial army. Miramón, another Conservative general, suffered defeat at Zacatecas in February 1867, forcing Maximilian to leave Mexico City on February 13. A new group of young Liberal generals pushed the French south, taking back Chihuahua, then the northwest, Jalisco, and Oaxaca. In March 1867, Bazaine took the last of the French army home. Maximilian again decided to stay. With his generals Miramón, Mejía, and Márquez, the emperor set up his headquarters in Querétaro. In May 1867 after a long siege Querétaro fell. On June 19 the Mexicans shot Maximilian, Miramón, and Mejía. (Márquez avoided capture.) The nation had regained its self-respect.