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The Wars for Independence

Hidalgo and Early Success

Born in 1753 of moderately well-to-do criollo stock, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla spent his first twelve years on the Hacienda de San Diego Corralejo in Guanajuato, where his father served the owner as *mayordomo* (resident manager). Encouraged by his father, the boy moved with his older brother, José Joaquín, to Valladolid (today Morelia) and matriculated at the Jesuit College of San Francisco Javier. The brothers had been at their studies only two years when shocking news reached the city: King Charles III of Spain had banished the Jesuits from New Spain and all Spanish possessions in the New World. Left without teachers, the boys had to interrupt their schooling, but within a year they had enrolled in the diocesan College of San Nicolás Obispo, also in Valladolid, and one of the nineteen colleges and seminaries in Mexico that prepared students for degrees eventually to be awarded by the Royal and Pontifical University in Mexico City. Young Miguel Hidalgo steeped himself in rhetoric, Latin, and Thomistic theology, and, in the tradition of generations of Mexican priests before him, found time to study Indian languages. His bachelor's degree was awarded by the University of Mexico in 1774, and he immediately began preparations for the priesthood. The bishop celebrated his sacrament of ordination in the fall of 1778.

Enthusiastic and self-assured, the twenty-eight-year-old priest returned to Valladolid to teach at the College of San Nicolás Obispo, where he eventually became rector. But he was scarcely exemplary from the church's point of view. Before the turn of the century the Holy Office of the Inquisition had been apprised, by rumor and fact, of a curate whose orthodoxy was suspect, who questioned priestly celibacy, who read books proscribed by the *Index Expurgatorius,* who indulged in gambling and enjoyed dancing, who challenged the infallibility of the Most Holy Father in Rome, who doubted the veracity of the virgin birth, who dared to suggest that fornication out of wedlock was not a sin, who referred to the Spanish king as a tyrant, and who—

alas—kept María Manuela Herrera as a mistress and procuress. Hidalgo was hailed before the Inquisition in 1800, but nothing could be proved. The testimony was carefully filed, however, to be used later.

Hidalgo's future fortunes and misfortunes were cast when, in 1803, he accepted the curacy of the small parish of Dolores. Devoting only minimal time to the spiritual needs of his parishioners, Father Hidalgo concerned himself primarily with improving their economic potential. He introduced new industries in Dolores: tile making, tanning, carpentry, wool weaving, beekeeping, silk growing, and wine making. He preferred to spend his spare time reading and engaging his fellow criollos in informed debate rather than listening to the confessions of his Indian charges. A few years after his arrival in Dolores, Hidalgo's path crossed that of Ignacio Allende, a thirty-five-year-old firebrand who was a captain in the Queen's Cavalry Regiment in nearby Guanajuato. Allende took the priest into his confidence and introduced him to a coterie of friends: Juan de Aldama, also a military man; Miguel Domínguez, a former corregidor of Querétaro, and his wife, Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, remembered in Mexican history as *La Corregidora*; Epigmenio González, a grocer; Marino Galván, a postal clerk; and a few others.

The group had organized a "literary club," but the members were less interested in disputing the latest tour de force of Goethe, Schiller, Wordsworth, or Chateaubriand than in plotting the separation of the New Spain from the old. As converts were attracted and the plans matured, a date was set for the uprising—December 8, 1810. Although the conspirators were all admonished to hold their tongues, Marino Galván, the postal clerk, leaked the news to his superior who, in turn, informed the audiencia in Mexico City. The forewarned Spanish authorities moved on September 13, when they searched the house of Epigmenio González in Querétaro, found bountiful arms and ammunition, and ordered the arrest of the panic-stricken owner. The events of the next few days are known to every Mexican schoolchild, for they are repeated every September 16 amidst a wide array of Independence Day celebrations.

Doña Josefa entrusted Ignacio Pérez with the task of carrying the news of the arrest to Ignacio Allende in San Miguel. Not finding him at home, the messenger relayed the news to Juan de Aldama, who immediately set out to inform Father Hidalgo in Dolores. When, about two o'clock on the morning of September 16, he arrived at the priest's house, Aldama found Allende there also. The three realized that orders for their own arrest had probably been issued and decided to strike out for Independence at once. Hidalgo rang the church bells summoning his parishioners to mass earlier than usual that morning.

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811). One of the most renowned individuals in nineteenth-century Mexican history, Father Hidalgo provided the initial spark for the Independence movement.

Assembled at the little church in Dolores the Indians and mestizos, including a group of prisoners already released from the local jail, were harangued about matters of this world, not the next. The exact words of this most famous of all Mexican speeches are not known, or, rather, they are reproduced in almost as many variations as there are historians to reproduce them. But the essential spirit of the message is this:

> My children: a new dispensation comes to us today. Will you receive it? Will you free yourselves? Will you recover the lands stolen three hundred years ago from your forefathers by the hated Spaniards? We must act at once. . . . Will you not defend your religion and your rights as true patriots? Long live our Lady of Guadalupe! Death to bad government! Death to the gachupines!

The immediate response to the *Grito de Dolores* was enthusiastic. With Hidalgo at their head, the motley band of poorly armed Indians and mestizos struck out for San Miguel, picking up hundreds of recruits along the way. When they stopped for a rest about noon at the hamlet of Atotonilco, Hidalgo entered the local church and emerged carrying a banner of the Virgin de Guadalupe—the dark-skinned lady who had appeared to Juan Diego almost three centuries before. The priest adopted this Virgin as the emblem of his crusade, but for reasons less religious than political. How better appeal to the masses who would make up the rank and file of his revolutionary army? The devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe as the patron of all

New Spain had expanded in the eighteenth century, especially into Indian communities.

By dusk Hidalgo's band had taken San Miguel without difficulty, for the local militia joined the rebels. The day's dramatic events should have ended with the imprisonment of the local Spanish populace, but as night fell the unpredicted happened. The Indians were not ready to rest on their laurels and bed down for the night. If it were true that the Spaniards were to blame for everything that had befallen the aboriginal population of Mexico since the arrival of Cortés in 1519, then it was time that they be held accountable. Hidalgo's army became a mob. Bent on destruction, they moved through the streets with their clubs, slings, machetes, bows and arrows, lances, and occasional firearms, and they pillaged in blind despair. Hidalgo could not reason with them, and only Ignacio Allende, racing through the streets on horseback and warning prompt retribution, was able to contain the passions of the crowd. By morning chaos had begun to subside, but the problem would prove monotonously recurrent during the next few months. From San Miguel the rebels moved on Celaya, and after taking the town the mob again subjected the gachupín population to pillage. But Celaya was merely a rehearsal for a major encounter at Guanajuato, where the rebel army would be seriously opposed for the first time.

Hidalgo asked the intendant of Guanajuato, Juan Antonio de Riaño, to surrender the city, and he offered full protection to the Spanish citizenry in return. But the news from San Miguel and Celaya had already reached Guanajuato, and Riaño knew that Hidalgo could give no such assurance. He felt it better to make a stand and congregated the Spanish population in the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, the public granary. Although his people were greatly outnumbered, he believed they could hold out until reinforcements from Mexico City arrived.

Shortly before noon on September 28 Hidalgo began his approach to Guanajuato. He was joined by hundreds of workers from the surrounding silver mines. As the first wave of Indian foot soldiers rushed the improvised fortress, Riaño gave the order to open fire. Hundreds of Indians were cut down by the intendant's artillery. Before the second assault began, Riaño led a group of soldiers outside the wall to position them strategically. Just as he was about to re-enter the granary through the huge wooden gate, he took a musket ball on the side of the head and fell dead on the spot. But it would not have mattered at any rate. The attackers, led by Juan José Martínez (known affectionately by his nickname El Pípila), gathered up a bunch of soft pine torches used in the mines and laid them at the foot of the wooden gate. They set fire to them, and, as the gate was consumed, a few In-

dians charged through into the central patio. They were quickly followed by hundreds, perhaps even a thousand. Within the hour most of the gachupines were dead. They were stripped, and their naked bodies were dragged unceremoniously through the streets to the nearby cemetery of Belén, where they were buried in makeshift graves. It was then time for the looting.

An eyewitness to the events of that day was eighteen-year-old Lucas Alamán, later one of Mexico's most renowned conservative statesmen and historians. In his multivolume history of Mexico he recollected:

> This pillage was more merciless than would have been expected of a foreign army. The miserable scene of that sad night was lighted by torches. All that could be heard was the pounding by which doors were opened and the ferocious howls of the rabble when the doors gave way. They dashed in in triumph to rob commercial products, furniture, everyday clothing, and all manner of things. The women fled terrorized to the houses of neighbors, climbing along the roof tops without yet knowing if that afternoon they had lost a father or husband at the granary. . . . The plaza and the streets were littered with broken pieces of furniture and other things robbed from the stores, of liquor spilled after the masses had drunk themselves into a stupor.[1]

It took a day and a half to restore order. The casualty figures were tremendous: over five hundred Spaniards and two thousand Indians killed. Hidalgo and Allende now felt strong enough to split their army into two striking forces, and within a month they had captured Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, and Valladolid. By late October Hidalgo had an army of about eighty thousand marching on Mexico City. The anticipated battle took place on October 30 at the Monte de las Cruces, and there Hidalgo proved that sheer numbers could overcome a small, well-equipped, and disciplined professional army. The Spaniards were forced to retreat back into the city, and as Hidalgo camped on the hills overlooking the capital, he pondered what to do next.

A decisive strike at the capital might have ended the Wars for Independence after only a month and a half of fighting. But Hidalgo had taken heavy losses at Las Cruces, he was short on ammunition, and he was uneasy about turning his mob loose on Mexico City—they would have devastated the capital. Over Allende's objections he therefore decided to order a retreat rather than follow up his victory; as a consequence the Wars for Independence would drag on for eleven more years.

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1. Lucas Alamán, *Historia de México* (Mexico City, 1942), 1: 403–04.

Moving northwest toward Guadalajara many of the rebel troops, their greatest opportunity denied, began to desert. At the same time Spanish forces under General Félix Calleja started to regroup. Guadalajara fell to the insurgents unopposed, but in January 1811 the royalist troops from the south caught up with the rebels and engaged them at the Puente de Calderón on the Río Lerma. Again Hidalgo and Allende had the numerical superiority, but General Calleja conducted his operations superbly and, in addition, was aided by a battlefield accident. A Spanish artillery shot hit a rebel ammunition wagon, and the resulting explosion caused a grass fire in the midst of Hidalgo's army. Panic ensued, and thousands of rebels broke rank and fled. The retreat turned into a rout. Hidalgo, Allende, and a number of other leaders recognized the futility of trying to regroup their forces and so moved northward, hoping to obtain relief in Coahuila and Texas. But their days were numbered. In March 1811, near the scorched desert town of Monclova (Coahuila), they were ambushed by a Spanish detachment that had been forewarned they were going to pass that way. Captured by Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas, the rebels were marched in chains to Chihuahua, where Allende and the other nonclerical leaders were immediately executed as traitors. Hidalgo, because he was a priest, was subjected to an arduous trial conducted under the auspices of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Finding him guilty of heresy and treason, the court defrocked him and turned him over to the secular arm for execution. At dawn on July 31 the firing squad did its job. Hidalgo's corpse was decapitated, and his head, fastened to a pole, was displayed on the charred wall of the granary in Guanajuato as an object lesson to potential rebels.

ITURBIDE AND THE PLAN DE IGUALA

King Ferdinand VII was not concerned only with events in Mexico. He found himself facing insurrection in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America as well. To quell all of these movements he assembled a powerful fighting force for service in the New World. While the troops underwent the final preparations, Colonel Rafael Riego proclaimed himself in revolt against his sovereign and was promptly seconded by thousands of troops. The Spanish insurgents demanded that Ferdinand swear allegiance to the Spanish Constitution of 1812, a liberal document that affirmed the sovereignty of the peo-

ple, contained several mildly anticlerical provisions, and enunciated a liberal bill of rights. When the conservative criollos in New Spain learned that King Ferdinand had yielded to Riego's demands and accepted the Constitution, many for the first time decided to cast their lot with the revolution for Independence. Ironically, a conservative colony would thus gain independence from a temporarily liberal mother country.

Of the numerous defections from the cause of Spain to that of an independent Mexico the most significant was that of Agustín de Iturbide. Born in Valladolid of conservative Spanish parents in 1783, Iturbide early displayed an interest in pursuing a military career. He entered the army at the age of fourteen and soon received a royal commission as a lieutenant in the infantry regiment of Valladolid. When Father Hidalgo issued his Grito de Dolores in 1810, Lieutenant Iturbide decided to support the crown in its fight against the rabble that followed the banner of Guadalupe. For almost a decade he fought against the insurgents and on several occasions distinguished himself in the zeal with which he persecuted the enemy.

In the fall of 1820 Viceroy Apodaca invited Iturbide, by then a colonel, to discuss plans for a new offensive against Vicente Guerrero. Iturbide was placed in charge of twenty-five hundred men and left Mexico City for the south in late November. After a few indecisive skirmishes he asked Guerrero to a meeting during which he proposed to make peace—not war. Iturbide's price for the treason he was contemplating was to dictate the terms of Independence. But Guerrero was not easily convinced of either Iturbide's sincerity or his ideas for an independent Mexico. A series of conferences had to be held before the guerrilla warrior and the new convert could issue, on February 24, 1821, their *Plan de Iguala*.[2] Unlike the United States Declaration of Independence, which berated the mother country in a tirade of denunciations, the Plan de Iguala had an entirely different orientation and appeal. To attract conservative support it praised the Spanish endeavor in the New World and held out Spain as the most Catholic, holy, heroic, and magnanimous of nations. But after three hundred years of tutelage it was time for Mexico to strike out on its own. The plan contained twenty-three articles but only three major guarantees: first, the independent Mexican nation would be organized as a constitutional monarchy, and the crown would be offered to King Ferdi-

2. In Mexican history revolutionary movements are almost always preceded by a plan that outlines the principles to be embraced and seeks to widen the base of support.

nand or some other appropriate European prince; second, the Roman Catholic religion would be given a monopoly on the spiritual life of the country and its clergymen would retain all the rights and privileges they currently enjoyed; and, third, criollos and peninsulares would be treated equally in the new state. To uphold the promises a new army, the *Ejército de las Tres Garantías* (the Army of the Three Guarantees) would be placed directly under Iturbide's command.

In the Plan de Iguala, Iturbide played his cards with consummate skill. The proposal was imaginative, even brilliant, in its conception. Mexicans were weary of a decade of war, and many of stout heart had given up hope. The liberal Constitution of Apatzingán had failed to attract sufficient support, and it was clear that to succeed the movement needed help from the conservatives. With liberalism temporarily manifesting itself in the mother country, the timing was perfect. In seeking to reconcile the interests of opposing factions, the plan changed the nature of the fight for Independence. Instead of urging death to the gachupines, Iturbide curried their favor. He recognized and capitalized upon the fact that both liberals, who favored the establishment of a republic, and conservatives, who preferred an absolute monarchy, could compromise on this plan as it held out the best hope for Independence, something that both groups wanted most.

Within several weeks the broadly based plan began to yield its first dividends as converts began to arrive. Military contingents throughout the country joined the Army of the Three Guarantees; priests urged cooperation from the pulpits; Masonic groups pledged support; and thousands of drifters again took up the cause. But, most importantly, the community of Spaniards, some fifty thousand strong, found in the Plan de Iguala the promise of a good future in a newly independent Mexico; as a result they, too, pledged support. When Guanajuato, Puebla, Durango, Oaxaca, Querétaro, and Zacatecas all fell to the insurgents, Viceroy Apodaca tendered his resignation. The Spanish crown, however, was unprepared to accept the inevitability of a rebel victory and appointed a replacement, Juan de O'Donojú, as Captain-General of New Spain. O'Donojú quickly perceived that Apodaca had assessed the situation correctly. New Spain was irrevocably lost, and there was little to be gained by not recognizing the fact. At the town of Córdoba, Iturbide and O'Donojú affixed their signatures to a treaty that, for the most part, accepted the terms of the Plan de Iguala. The highest-ranking Spanish official in New Spain had thus recognized Mexican Independence. But Iturbide, thinking of the future, incorporated into the Treaty of Córdoba one important modification. If no suitable European monarch could be persuaded to accept the Mexican crown, a Mexican congress could choose a New World emperor

instead. The commander of the Army of the Three Guarantees had begun to feather his own nest.

The Effects of the Wars for Independence

Iturbide's triumphal entry into Mexico City in September 1821 marked the end of eleven years of war. The *Gaceta Imperial de México* proclaimed theatrically that not even Rome in its days of grandeur had ever witnessed such an exultant spectacle. Upon receiving gold keys to the city the commander-in-chief explained that they would be used to lock the doors of irreligion, disunion, and despotism and to open the doors of general happiness. But the first door Iturbide opened in Mexico City was that of the great cathedral on the central plaza. Cementing his future relationship with the archbishop, he received communion and listened to a Te Deum offered in his honor.

From the campaigns, Mexico acquired not only its share of heroes and traitors but also a legacy of political violence and economic devastation. The wars exerted an incalculable influence on Mexico's future. The army had converted the dream of Independence into reality and was by no means ready to step aside and allow civilians to control the nation's destiny. For a full century the Mexican military would be very much involved in the political processes of government and would bargain with opposing factions for a greater and greater share of the nation's wealth. The military clique would constitute a ready instrument for unscrupulous politicians to use for their own purposes. More important yet, the basic issues separating different segments of society had not been resolved. Competing groups had cooperated long enough to achieve a common end, but, once Independence was achieved, the alliance called together by the Plan de Iguala proved very transitory. For some the revolution was simply anticolonial in nature and therefore it was over; others wanted its momentum to be carried into the arena of political and economic reform. The internal struggles between liberals and conservatives, between republicans and monarchists, between federalists and centralists, and between anticlericals and proponents of clerical privilege would consume the energies of the neophyte nation for much longer than the most pessimistic political analyst would have dared to predict.

If in 1821 it was difficult to predict the instability that was about to ensue, the roots of discord could be traced back into the colonial past, both for creoles and indigenous groups. The armies of the independence period were made up of Indians (more than half) and castas (just under a fourth). Although their goals were very different from

those of the elites, the rural masses had been active in the fighting, mostly in pursuit of resolving their local grievances over the preservation of their communities and traditions, culturally mixed as they were by the end of the colonial period. Their participation garnered them little advantage as their concerns were ignored and their privations increased after independence. They could take little solace in the fact that the politically articulate groups in Mexico City demonstrated precious little ability to govern even themselves.

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