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August 11, 2014

Dissension in Old Mexico

An essay of how New Spain became a nation-state

The following essay was submitted by Javier Martinez to the Historical Online Learning Foundation (HOLF) at its request. Its use as a background document for American-Mexican War OnLine is provided by special agreement between HOLF and the author.

As a Mexican historian it can be difficult to understand the history of early Mexico unless you remember that this is the early XIX century, over 170 years ago. There were many factors and influences on the country that are not as strong as they are in the current day as they were then. The first factor to consider is how the New Spain colony worked and the quality of life of its residents. New Spain was a successful colony in many aspects. Although most New Spaniards were poor, there were no great famines or periods of insufficient food for its residents in its long history of over 300 years as a colony. Most residents of New Spain were extremely happy with their situation to include the illiterate and poor people who were in the same, if not better, living conditions than those they had always known. There was no under-current of despair within the populace or sense of oppression by the subjects of the colonial government.

The real power during the New Spain period was the catholic church. A cardinal or bishop was far more powerful than a governor or a city mayor. All New Spaniards, rich or poor, Indians or creole, Spaniards or whatever were feverishly religious. The church controlled everything from education to hospitals, to civil records to the financial system. Many rich people bequeathed all their belongings and estate to the church upon their death. By 1800 the catholic church held the majority of the best land in New Spain.

The Spanish Monarchy was supported by the church, and New Spaniards were happy subjects of Spain. After all, the popular sentiment was that it was God's will that Spain control the colony. The Spanish Monarch reigned over all the land.

Mexican Historians try hard to find evidence of New Spaniards looking forward to their independence. Maybe an article or two can be found by some odd New Spaniard influenced by the French Revolution or the American War of Independence. But those ideas were weak and timid in the collective mind of the colony. That sentiment changed dramatically when Bonaparte invaded Spain and put his brother, Joseph, on the Spanish throne.

The Bonaparte's were the devil for the future of the church. The first rebellions occurred against the Spanish colonial government because it was clueless about what to do under the monarchy of Jose Bonaparte.

Oddly enough, although Mexico celebrates its independence on September 16th (not 5 de Mayo as many Americans believe) that date was when a rebellion under catholic priests started. That date is celebrated by eating delicious Mexican food and drinking good tequila and shouting "Viva Mexico!! Viva Hidalgo!! Viva Morelos!!" (Morelos and Hidalgo being the priests that lead the 16th September rebellion) But Hidalgo didn't shout viva Mexico.. He shouted "Viva Fernando VII!!! Viva Espana!!!" Hidalgo, and many others who did not want to be under a Bonaparte ruler, planned to overthrow the Spanish government. Then they thought, maybe if God was good, Fernando VII would grace the new nation with the glory of his presence. During that period Fernando VII was the most popular guy in the New Spain. Oddly the King enjoyed this popularity despite the fact that Fernando VII was mentally ill and one of the worst kings in Spain's history.

The rebellion quickly overpowered the confused Spanish garrison but the victors did not know what to do next. Almost all of them agreed that they needed a government that was lawful, Spanish, and led by a catholic prince as ruler. But Spain, along with most of Europe, was in flames fighting Napoleon.

An anecdotal writing by Morelos, who spoke about a "New Nation" has attracted the interest by Mexican historians. Morelos wrote a further treatise "Under the blessing of a Catholic prince" that reflected his idea of a future for New Spain.

Then after 11 years of war in 1821, the Cadiz (the reformist courts in Spain) declared that New Spain was independent. This was not an act of enlightenment but motivated more by "real politik". The Cadiz didn't want to share seats with New Spain Americans when new courts were formed. That political motivation was combined with the hard truth that Spain had neither the soldiers nor the strength in America to enforce its policies. There were few options.

So suddenly, without asking for it, New Spain was independent. The leaders of the rebellion didn't want it. They had a new country of their own... but what can they do??

The most prominent families in New Spain started killing each other. Not one of them was a catholic prince. But one of them was pious enough to convince a part of the clergy to crown him as Emperor Guadalupe Victoria. Meanwhile the colony of New Spain was falling apart. Central America and the territories in modern southern Mexico decided to start new countries. There was no opposition to their secession from the old government structure of New Spain.

Then some soldiers start to think republican ... horrors of horrors! The first emperor of Mexico was defeated and the real power of Mexico was taken by the generals who did it. Some of them supported the church but a few started to think differently. Concurrently, regions in Mexico organized as states and regional warlords took control. Mexico was a country only in name. The states pursued independent goals. The states showed no interest in the affairs of their neighbors. Some states went republican. Some states were dominated by radicals who even hanged a handful of priests!! There were some states that assumed a government structure that were almost theocracies. New Spain was a complete mess.



The chaos caused a disruption of the trade and mercantile systems that had made New Spain the jewel of the Spanish empire. Quality of life started to suffer for all citizens of the new independent region. The leading families of the new states and the leaders of the republican movement reached a compromise with the church. The compromise reached appeared like a Catholic republic. The people involved, the leaders of the emerging states

within the Mexico region of New Spain, believed it could work. All the state presidents and governors got the blessing from the church. All of them were soldiers or ex-soldiers and knew you needed to have an army to keep control of your state. Local military forces were raised.

Throughout the decades of the 1820s and 1830 more and more voices rose to claim assets and power from the church. War and conflict followed one after another. The wars spread at the Regional level, the national level and occasionally against a foreign invader, against Spain twice, Americans once in Texas, and against the French thrice.

Through it all a sense of a national sentiment was not strong. Most people looking at all that war and killing greatly missed the colonial period. There was enough proof in the people's collective mind that Mexico needed the guidance and rule of an European power. A catholic power. A Mexican sentiment was extremely low by the start of the Mexican-American War. The odd effect of the war was that it strengthened the Mexican national identify. Despite losing most than half of its remaining territory, the new nation-state gained a little bit of identity.

After the Mexican-American War, those invading powers that followed suffered badly in Mexico. France, notably, left several tens of thousands of corpses nationwide when it was ejected after trying to install a European monarch in the 1860s.

But it wasn't until the start of the XX century that you find a country where most of the people living in Mexico agree that they are Mexicans, and that Mexico must be ruled by one of their own.

Viewing the Mexican-American War's effect on the Americans it is obvious that the war gained a lot for the USA. Besides the obvious large amount of territory, the war gave the citizens of the United States a strong identity and a new perception of themselves. The American Civil War was still to be suffered through and the nation that emerged from it became truly united. But the Mexican-American War was when a world power was born and it was born in Mexico.

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