

Introduction: Mexico in the 21st Century

In 1991, Walmart, a U.S. corporation that runs a chain of discount department stores, opened its first store in Mexico. Today, Walmart operates more than two thousand stores in Mexico and employs more than 209,000 people, making it the largest private employer in the country.

Walmart's rapid expansion is part of a larger trend of economic change in Mexico. Since the 1980s, Mexico's leaders have focused on increasing Mexico's ties to the global economy. In the last three decades, Mexico has seen a massive influx of multinational corporations and foreign retail stores. Parts of the country are now almost indistinguishable from the United States, a jarring change to many Mexicans. This economic change has been matched with political reform. In 2000, for the first time in seventy-one years, Mexicans elected a president who was not a candidate of the leading party, the PRI.

But as the country focuses on entering the global marketplace, inequality continues to pull Mexican society apart. Mexican business executives jet from continent to continent while poor people in the cities are caught in a widening web of crime and drug trafficking. At the same time, much of Mexico's rural indigenous population lacks basic services such as running water, sanitation, and access to primary education.

Walmart's presence in Mexico highlights another important feature of Mexico today—the country's evolving relationship with the United States. Despite an uneasy past, the United States and Mexico ushered in a new era of integration and cooperation in 1994 with the North Ameri-

can Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which dramatically increased trade among North American countries. Today about two-thirds of Mexico's trade is with the United States, and about one-tenth of U.S. trade is with Mexico. At the same time, growing U.S. concerns about immigration, drug trafficking, crime, and border security have strained this relationship. Mexican leaders have often been frustrated by U.S. policies toward Mexican immigrants in the United States.

In this reading, you will be asked to step into the shoes of Mexicans and consider Mexico's future. The readings trace the history of Mexico, from its precolonial past to its most recent political and economic changes. You will be asked to consider the same questions that the people of Mexico are now debating: What principles should guide the development of Mexico's economy? How should Mexico define its relationship with the United States? How should it define its relationship with the rest of the world? How should Mexicans address their country's inequality and poverty? How should they address increasing rates of crime and violence?



Sgt. 1st Class Gordon Hyde, U.S. National Guard.

This photograph shows the U.S.-Mexico border. On the right is the Mexican city Tijuana. On the left are the outskirts of San Diego, California in the United States.

Part I: Mexico's Beginnings

In the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Mexico City, a plaque in front of a sixteenth-century church contains the following inscription: "On August 12, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtemoc [emperor of the Aztecs], Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernán Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat: it was the painful creation of the *mestizo* nation that is Mexico today."

The inscription reflects the mixed feelings that Mexicans have toward their country's origins. Mexicans today have a great deal of pride in their indigenous past. The achievements of the region's early civilizations hold a prominent place in Mexican history and culture. Many Mexicans remember the resistance of the Aztecs during the Spanish conquest as the heroic defense of a sophisticated society against savage Spanish *conquistadors* (conquerors). At the same time, Mexicans cannot deny their Spanish heritage and the influence of nearly three hundred years of Spanish colonialism on Mexican society. Most Mexicans are *mestizo*, a mix of indigenous and European ancestry.

Tensions between indigenous and Spanish, conquered and conqueror, continue to exist today. The descendants of Spanish *conquistadors* continue to control much of Mexico's land and wealth. At the opposite extreme, millions in rural indigenous communities are among the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere. For members of Mexico's *mestizo* majority, the divisions are more complex.

For those who want to understand Mexico today, understanding early Mexican history is crucial. As you read, try to note the connections between past and present.

Early Mexican Societies

The region which is now Mexico is geographically diverse, with arid desert in the north and fertile valleys in the central region. When the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, it was inhabited by diverse groups and kingdoms. The largest and most sophisti-

cated of these societies were located in what is now central Mexico and Central America.

Who were the early inhabitants of this region?

Olmec society, often described as the "mother civilization" of this area, flourished as early as 1200 B.C.E. The Olmecs were known for their fine art, great stone monuments, and for the creation of pictographs that were used as a written language. This was the first known written language in the Western Hemisphere. The Olmecs also developed sophisticated cultivation and irrigation techniques for farming. These developments greatly influenced later societies in the region, such as the Mayas.

The Mayas constructed their first city-states around 150 C.E. in what is today the country of Guatemala. The Mayas built huge



This Olmec stone sculpture is more than six feet wide and nearly nine feet tall. The Olmecs were known for their fine art, and their inventions influenced later societies in the region.

Philo Nordlund (CC BY 2.0).

stone pyramids, palaces, and temples. They also developed a complicated calendar system, possibly to help them determine optimal times to plant or harvest their crops. Their society was hierarchical, with the nobility ruling over commoners and slaves. In order to expand their territory, the Mayas conquered neighboring kingdoms. The Mayas forced the conquered kingdoms to pay a regular tax but otherwise left them to govern themselves. In later centuries, the center of Maya civilization extended north to the Yucatán Peninsula. Maya people still live in Mexico today.



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The ruins of the city of Teotihuacán today. The Pyramid of the Sun is to the right.

The rise of the Mayas occurred alongside the development of the city of Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico (the location of present-day Mexico City). Historians are not sure of the exact origin of the people who built this city, although they often refer to them as Teotihuacanos. The construction of Teo-

tihuacán was carefully planned, with wide thoroughfares connected in a grid pattern. The architecture and art of the people of Teotihuacán show that religion was very important to them. In the heart of the city was a ceremonial center of approximately two square miles that held numerous stone pyramids and temples. The city's Pyramid of the Sun is the third-largest pyramid in the world. (The larg-

Highlights of Major Early Mexican Societies

Society	Dates	City/Region	Great Achievements
Olmec	1200 to 800 B.C.E.	Southern Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mother civilization” • First written language in Western Hemisphere
Maya	Second century C.E. to present	Central America, extended into Yucatán Peninsula	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stone pyramids, palaces, temples • Developed calendar system
Unknown (often called Teotihuacanos)	Second to seventh century C.E.	Teotihuacán Valley of Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carefully planned city • Constructed third largest pyramid in the world • City was religious and trading center
Aztec	Thirteenth century C.E. to present	Tenochtitlán Valley of Mexico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest empire ever in region • Complex city administration for political, military, and religious matters

the Spanish set up a small colony called Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic) on an island in the Caribbean and enslaved the indigenous population to work on farms and in gold mines. Santo Domingo not only provided Spain with resources and wealth, but also was a convenient location for them to further explore the region.

The Spanish initially explored the Mexican coast because of a labor shortage. Most of the Caribbean's indigenous population had died from European diseases. Diego Velázquez de Cuellos, governor of Santo Domingo, sent the first Spanish expedition to Mexico in 1517 to find more slaves. Landing along the Yucatán coastline, the Spanish glimpsed sophisticated cities and civilizations before the Mayas fiercely drove them away. The commander of the second trip, which sailed from Cuba in 1518, traveled further up the coastline. This was the first time the Aztecs had direct contact with the Spanish. When the Aztec emperor Moctezuma heard about the Spanish, he and his advisors decided to wait and see what the Spanish would do before taking any action.

What advantages did the Spanish have over the Aztecs?

Hernán Cortés led a third expedition to Mexico in early 1519. From the beginning, Cortés set his sights on the Aztec Empire, the most powerful empire in all of Mexico and Central America. One of the greatest advantages the Spanish had in Mexico was that they had some idea of what to expect upon arrival. Cortés himself had fifteen years of experience with indigenous Americans by the time he sailed to Mexico. The Aztecs and their emperor Moctezuma, on the other hand, were unsure what to make of the large ships, horses, body armor, and European weapons of the Spanish and for many months did not know what Cortés and his men intended to do.

Aztec rule over conquered groups was based on demonstrations of power, such as human sacrifice, and on demanding tribute by force, rather than ruling over city-states directly. Aside from paying tribute, these

city-states generally ruled themselves independently. The arrival of the Spanish altered the balance of power within the empire and called into question the supremacy of the emperor, Moctezuma. Many of the conquered groups had been unhappy with Aztec power and, through a combination of coercion and force, Cortés convinced many to join him against the Aztec Empire. At the same time, Cortés maintained a weak alliance with the Aztecs in order to delay fighting until he was ready.

What happened in the fight for Tenochtitlán?

The Spanish and their allies entered the city of Tenochtitlán for the first time in November 1519. The Spanish were awestruck by Tenochtitlán's size and grandeur. Most of them had never seen a city this large, not only in the region, but in Europe as well.

“[W]hen we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level Causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed.... And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream.”

—Bernal Díaz del Castillo,
one of Cortés' soldiers, 1566

Moctezuma, still unsure of Spanish intentions, welcomed Cortés and his men into the city. Tenochtitlán was an island city, connected to the mainland by three removable bridges. Cortés, fearing a possible trap, captured Moctezuma. For the next eight months, the Spanish directed Moctezuma's rule and demanded large gifts of Aztec gold. Historians are not sure why Moctezuma allowed this to happen, but some believe he may have been worried about losing support if he admitted he had made a mistake in allowing the Spanish to enter the city.

Spanish rule in Tenochtitlán abruptly ended in 1520 after the Spanish brutally massacred between eight and ten thousand Aztec nobles during a religious festival. The Aztec

Photograph by Kov88 (CC BY-SA 3.0).



Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's interpretation of the Spanish Conquest.

populace rose up in anger, and the Spanish, suffering many casualties, were forced to flee the city.

This was a major Aztec victory and significantly undermined support for the Spanish among other indigenous city-states. The Spanish spent the next year re-forming alliances with these groups, making plans to surround Tenochtitlán and squeeze it from the outside. At the same time, the cohesion of the Aztec empire continued to unravel after the death of Moctezuma, who was killed during the uprising. Also during this period, a smallpox outbreak killed nearly 40 percent of the indigenous population in less than a year.

The Spanish and their allies returned to Tenochtitlán in 1521. They blocked the city's three bridges and used ships to try to cut the city's supply of food and water. A massive battle for Tenochtitlán lasted three months. The Aztecs were militarily superior and had huge numbers of troops. The Spanish would have been brutally defeated had it not been for their indigenous allies who gave supplies and tens of thousands of troops to fight the Aztecs. (There were more than two hundred indigenous warriors for each Spanish fighter.)

The blockade of supplies and troop reinforcements eventually wore down Aztec resistance, and in August 1521, Tenochtitlán fell to the Spanish and their allies.

Colonial Mexico

After the fall of Tenochtitlán, the remainder of the Aztec Empire quickly collapsed. The Spanish destroyed the city and built Mexico City upon its ruins. Fueled mainly by desires for riches and further exploration, the Spanish extended their rule throughout the region. But although

Spain officially established its colony—New Spain—in 1535, frontier wars and indigenous resistance slowed Spanish expansion throughout the colonial period. Nevertheless, by the 1670s, New Spain was the richest and most populous Spanish colony. Of all of Spain's colonies, including much of North America, South America, and the Caribbean, Mexico was the jewel in the Spanish crown.

How did colonization change Mexican society?

A new society was created from the mix of diverse cultures in colonial Mexico. European customs blended with indigenous practices and the traditions of enslaved Africans who were brought to Mexico from Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. This created new musical styles, dances, and cultural and religious practices. People's daily lives also changed. For instance, many indigenous people who lost their land moved to the city and adopted Spanish customs. Similarly, large landowners, isolated in rural areas, often adopted some indigenous practices. Intermarriages and unions between people of different backgrounds created new racial categories. Collectively called

mestizos, these groups quickly outnumbered the white population.

The population also changed in other, more tragic ways. A series of plagues throughout the sixteenth century decimated the indigenous population. Numbering more than twelve million at the end of the fifteenth century, the indigenous population was less than one million by 1620.

Social and economic opportunities in New Spain were based on one's race and background. For example, although whites held a higher status than any other group, whites born in Spain, called *peninsulares*, generally had more opportunities than *criollos*, the whites born in the colony. Indigenous people and freed Africans, on the other hand, had very few opportunities for social or economic advancement. Slaves, of course, had no opportunities.

How did the Spanish treat indigenous groups?

The Spanish considered indigenous people legal minors and wards of the crown and Catholic church. Spanish authorities declared slavery of indigenous peoples illegal in 1542. Still, the colonial government often forced indigenous communities to pay a regular tribute or tax, usually of money and labor.

At the same time, the colonial government protected certain indigenous rights. Most significantly, the government preserved indigenous land ownership rights. Many times groups were forced off traditional lands, but this law allowed them to claim new lands on which to settle. Although the law was passed mainly to ensure that indigenous communities could afford to pay tribute, it allowed many communities to remain economically self-sufficient.

Spanish authority was strongest in the cities, which were mainly located in central and southern Mexico. In the rural areas, particularly to the north, indigenous groups remained more independent. Revolts in the north were successful in either slowing Spanish expansion or stopping it altogether for much of the

colonial period. Only the discovery of gold and silver mines led to more permanent Spanish settlements in the north.

What was the economy of New Spain based upon?

According to the Spanish crown, New Spain existed only for the economic benefit of Spain. The economy of New Spain was based on trade with Spain, exporting raw materials and importing European manufactured goods. With few navigable rivers, transportation in New Spain was expensive and slow. This meant that only the most profitable goods, such as gold, silver, and cacao, were exported. The colonial government discouraged other economic development in New Spain in order to protect producers in Spain.

Indigenous workers and African slaves provided the majority of labor in New Spain. The Spanish used these workers to excavate silver from mines in the north. Landowners also put them to work on their *haciendas*, large estates given to wealthy Spaniards by the Spanish crown. Early transportation in the colony was provided by indigenous porters who would physically carry goods and people to points of destination across the country. The forced labor of indigenous workers also built most of New Spain's cities and towns. The stone for many of the colony's finest churches and palaces came from indigenous temples and pyramids.

What was the role of the Catholic Church in New Spain?

The Catholic Church was the most influential institution in colonial Mexico. Many Spanish explorers justified their conquests by claiming they were spreading Christianity. The aim of conversion was to totally replace traditional religious practices with Catholicism. Although indigenous communities were often receptive to this new religion, Christianity was rarely accepted completely. Many indigenous groups combined religious practices, adopting parts of Catholicism into their traditional religions.

“They give worship to Christ and they serve their gods, they revere the Lord and they do not revere Him... they venerate Him, in short, only with the appearance of Christianity.”

—José de Acosta,
Spanish missionary,
1588

Although frustrating to Spanish missionaries, this blending of new and old helped preserve elements of indigenous cultures long after the colonial period ended. Today, almost 90 percent of Mexicans identify themselves as Catholic. At the same time, many Mexicans still practice indigenous customs. For example, traditional healers, using indigenous medicines and religious practices, still provide services in many communities.

The Catholic Church was also important in the social and economic life of New Spain. The church provided the only education in the colony, which was primarily geared toward white males. In the absence of banks, the church became a major lending institution for the wealthy in New Spain. Furthermore, thanks to large gifts of money from elite families, the church owned large portions of rural and urban land throughout the colony.

Mexican Independence

During the colonial period, most of New Spain's population, indigenous and European alike, sincerely accepted the rule of the Spanish monarch over the colony. Many had never even considered gaining independence from Spain.



A Catholic church built from the ruins of a Zapotec temple. The Zapotecs, an indigenous group dating back more than 2,500 years, still live in southern Mexico today.

Gengiskanhg (CC BY-SA 2.0).

How did events in Europe affect desires for Mexican independence?

At the start of the nineteenth century, events in Spain changed the thinking of many *criollo* elite. In 1808 France's Napoléon Bonaparte conquered Spain and put Spain's King Ferdinand VII in jail. The Spanish convened their national assembly, which had not operated for many years, to rule in the king's absence. The assembly drafted a new constitution that called for popular voting rights and a representative government, and it demanded increased revenue from the colonists in New Spain.

The *criollo* elite in New Spain, loyal to King Ferdinand, were fearful of a liberal constitution that would threaten their traditional privileges. They also felt squeezed financially by the economic demands of the new Spanish government. Resentment of the government in Spain was added to long-existing *criollo* resentment of *peninsulares*. Although the population of *peninsulares* in New Spain was quite small, competition between *criollos* and *peninsulares* for status and position was fierce. Talk of Mexican independence began in earnest among the *criollo* elite a few years after King Ferdinand was imprisoned.

How was the majority of New Spain's population involved in the independence movement?

Many in the *mestizo* and indigenous populations were frustrated with their limited opportunities and increasing poverty. At the same time, many were loyal to the Spanish monarch. They generally directed their frustration toward the local government in New Spain. Some *criollos* believed that the masses could be organized to fight against the authority of *peninsulares* and the authority of the Spanish government in the colony.

Miguel Hidalgo, a *criollo* parish priest, organized his largely *mestizo* and indigenous congregation in the first armed uprising against Spanish rule. On September 16, 1810, the date now celebrated as Mexico's Independence Day, he called on his congregation to regain their land and freedom from the Spanish. He spoke particularly about the land that had been stolen from indigenous communities by the *peninsulares*, an issue that was of central importance to most indigenous people. (In fact, most indigenous land had been confiscated by *criollo* landowners.)

Hidalgo organized an army of twenty thousand, mostly farmers armed with machetes and shovels, and led them to a nearby mining town to attack *peninsulares*. Hidalgo had little control over his followers, and the army went on a rampage, killing hundreds. Ironically, both *peninsulares* and *criollos* were targeted, as the poor rural masses found both groups equally arrogant. Lacking organization, the army dispersed after a few months, and Hidalgo was executed by the colonial authorities.

Many *criollos* became frightened at the peasant discontent that had been uncovered and lost their enthusiasm for independence. Fighting continued as small, independent guerrilla movements of indigenous and *mestizo* communities spread across the country, protesting their oppression. José María Morelos, a *mestizo* parish priest who had been one of Hidalgo's officers, continued the rebellion south of Mexico City. He organized an army, mostly of *mestizo* and indigenous peasants,

which won control of much of southern Mexico. In 1813, he convened a popular assembly that declared Mexico's independence from Spain. Before their new government could take effect, the colonial authorities crushed the movement and executed Morelos.

How did Mexico gain independence from Spain?

In 1814, Spanish guerrillas forced the French out of Spain and King Ferdinand returned to his throne. The elite of New Spain expected gratitude for their loyalty, but Ferdinand, fearful of losing control of the colony, sent troops to Mexico to reassert Spanish rule. Then, in 1820, a rebellion in Spain forced the king to accept the liberal constitution the Spanish assembly had drafted in his absence. Many Mexican conservatives feared that the reforms threatened to overturn the old social order. *Criollos* and *peninsulares* joined together and developed an independence plan to preserve their privileges. The *Plan de Iguala* called for an independent Mexico ruled by a monarch, equality between *peninsulares* and *criollos*, and Roman Catholicism as the official religion. In 1821, after limited fighting between Mexican and Spanish forces, Spain officially recognized Mexican independence. In the end, conservative Mexico had won independence from a much more liberal Spain.

What happened in Mexico after independence?

Instability and hardship were characteristic features of newly independent Mexico. Disease had killed as many as six hundred thousand people during the insurgency. Mining, agriculture, and industry had all suffered. Many wealthy *peninsulares* and colonial administrators left the country after independence, taking their money and skills with them. The silver mines had flooded and machinery had been ruined. U.S. and European merchants took over most of Mexico's trade and therefore collected most of the profits. The country lacked infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and ports, and the new government did not have the money to build more. Unable



Mexico's boundaries in 1832, before the Mexican-American War.

to collect taxes due to their weak control of the country, Mexico's leaders resorted to borrowing from foreign countries and soon amassed a huge foreign debt.

Mexico's leaders also struggled to maintain political control after independence. For the first fifty years of independence, most Mexican leaders were in power for less than a year. According to the constitution passed in 1824, the Mexican Congress, with two representatives from each state, would elect the president. In practice, most leaders came to power through military coups. Antonio López de Santa Anna, the most powerful political figure of the era, was in power eleven times over the period. The government was dominated by elites, most of them wealthy landowners with their own private armies.

For the most part, elite struggles for power had little effect on the lives of the majority of Mexico's people. Most peasants continued to work for wealthy landowners or on communal land in indigenous communities. The Mexican public had little contact with the ruling elite.

Some indigenous communities did rebel against the new government. The Caste War of the Yucatán was a Maya rebellion lasting from 1847 to 1854. During this rebellion, the Mayas in the Yucatán Peninsula temporarily separated from the rest of Mexico. Although eventually defeated, this rebellion underscored the weakness of the central government during the period.

What happened in Texas?

Mexico paid a high price for its instability in the northern territories. The weak central government could not control Mexico's frontier, the land that today comprises the U.S. states of Arizona,

California, New Mexico, and Texas. The region was sparsely settled, and Mexico's leaders, hoping to populate the area and protect it from hostile indigenous groups, encouraged the immigration of U.S. citizens. As settlers streamed into Texas, they increasingly clashed with Mexican authorities over land rights, slavery, and tax issues.

In 1836, Texan settlers declared independence from Mexico. Santa Anna personally led a six-thousand-man army into Texas to defend the territory, but after a few short battles, he was defeated. Nevertheless, Mexico refused to recognize Texan independence. But the United States government did recognize an independent Texas, and in 1845, the region was annexed into the United States. Wanting more land, the United States put pressure on the Mexican government to agree to extending the border of Texas and to the sale of California and New Mexico. When the Mexican government refused, the United States declared war.