

I. The Country

History

In the 12th century A.D., the Aztecs from northern Mexico settled in the Valley of Mexico, where they encountered an advanced civilization that contrasted with their warlike and nomadic ways. Initially, the Aztecs were subservient to other tribes in the area, but by 1325, their city of Tenochtitlan began to dominate the valley. Through wars, alliances and marriages, the Aztecs soon extended their empire over a large part of present-day Mexico.

Within two years after the arrival of the Spanish adventurer Hernan Cortés and his soldiers in 1519, the Aztec empire ended. Initially, the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma greeted Cortés as the returning god Quetzalcoatl, whom legend held to be fair-skinned and bearded. The Spaniards were aided in their conquest by some 500 000 Indian allies who strongly resented Aztec rule.

The Spanish colonial period lasted until 1810. Spain founded cities and developed agriculture, and profited greatly from Mexico's silver wealth. Spanish colonial policy also imposed constraints on the growth of New Spain. Manufacture of even the most basic products was forbidden to ensure a captive market for Spanish goods. The agricultural sector, although it consisted of large land holdings, never became an export-oriented plantation economy. Further, only Spaniards born in Spain could hold positions in the colonial government and this was greatly resented by Spaniards born in New Spain (Creoles).

When Spain fell to Napoleon early in the 19th century, the ties with Spain were temporarily broken and resentment among the Creoles, now numbering two million, began to surface. Led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, civil war broke out on September 15, 1810. After the execution of Hidalgo, this protracted war was consecutively led by José María Morelos y Pavon and Vicente Guerrero.

Mexico gained its independence in September 1821. However, the civil war had left the economy in ruin and the political system highly unstable. A series of military rulers followed who were conservative in orientation and interested primarily in personal gain.