

New Spain and Independence

Alfredo Ávila*



Old and New Spain at the hands of Religion to avenge Fernando VII.

In the early nineteenth century, in the lands that are now Mexico, a society was growing dominated by the Spanish monarchy. Strictly speaking, New Spain had no borders. The sovereignty of the Catholic kings and queens reached as far as their Spanish, indigenous, and mestizo subjects lived. The faculties of Mexico's viceroy included ad-

ministering justice, governing, making war, and collecting taxes. The Audiencias of Mexico City and Guadalajara were the highest tribunals in the land. The intendentes headed the governments in each of the provinces, aided by their lieutenants. The dioceses of Mérida, Oaxaca, Puebla, Michoacán, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Durango, together with the archdiocese of Mexico City, were charged with the spiritual guidance of a little over six million Catholics.

*Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Historical Research.



Seals used by the caudillos of Independence, Don José María Morelos and Don Ignacio López Rayón. Don J. E. Hernández Dávalos Collection.

Numerous corporations provided their members with privileges in a society with no guarantee of equality before the law. The king bestowed privileges on all his subjects to protect them in exchange for their loyalty. In practice, many of these privileges ended by hurting those involved. The indigenous peoples (called the “Indian Republics”)¹ made up more than half of the population. More than 4,000 towns with their own governments were exempt from taxes, paying tribute instead; they had control over their natural resources, but were subordinated to the lieutenants. Those with the most privileges were the whites, called Spaniards regardless of whether they had been born in the Iberian Peninsula or in the Americas, as only a few had been born in Spain. They came to about 16 percent of the population. The rest was mestizo, many descended from Africans, who had no privileges at all.

The economy of New Spain was very diverse. Thousands of towns lived only from agricultural production as they had been doing since before the Spanish arrived. Large *tianguis* (open-air markets) and fairs were hubs for regional trade networks. Major mining centers like Taxco, Real del Monte, Bolaños, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato generated enormous riches that stimulated the economy of regions like the Bajío or Guadalajara. Large mine-owners and some merchants took advantage of this prosperity to accumulate fabulous fortunes. At the same time, however, as Alexander von Humboldt ob-

Strictly speaking, New Spain had no borders. The sovereignty of the Catholic kings and queens reached as far as their Spanish, indigenous, and mestizo subjects lived.

served, millions of people were mired in poverty. The bishop of Michoacán, Antonio de San Miguel, and his most important followers, like Manuel Abad y Queipo or Miguel Hidalgo, suggested reforms to solve these problems: freeing up commerce and production and giving rights to everyone regardless of race.

The Spanish crown also took advantage of New Spain's prosperity. Wars between Great Britain and France had forced Spain to take sides, and it needed increasing amounts of money to cover its military expenditures. In 1803, the Spanish government forced its American colonies' treasuries to pay their foreign creditors. A year later, it decreed that the resources of the ecclesiastic tribunals would be sent to the crown to cover debts. Many people realized that this would be disastrous for New Spain's economy, since the ecclesiastic tribunals gave credit to landowners, merchants, and mine owners. The 1804 decree caused many people to lose their properties, in addition to cutting off fresh loans. Nevertheless, neither the social nor the economic crisis explains the fall of the Spanish government in North America. Generally speaking, the population was loyal to the monarchy and its institutions. A political crisis was necessary for this to change.

In 1808, the conflicts in the Spanish royal family threatened Napoleon's plans in Europe. The French emperor forced King Carlos IV and his son, Prince Fernando de Borbón, to renounce the Spanish throne in exchange for privileges, properties, and pensions. Joseph Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned king of Spain. Many Spaniards accepted this change since the new monarch was enlightened and a reformer. He even offered Spain a constitution. However, Spain was losing its independence to the French empire. For this reason, many did not recognize the Bourbon abdications. Throughout Spain, government councils or “juntas” were formed that fought to keep the kingdom independent.



The same thing happened in some cities in the Americas like Caracas or Buenos Aires. In New Spain, the Mexico City government also rejected the abdications and asked the viceroy to disobey any new government set up in Spain. In July and August 1808, several meetings were organized by Viceroy José de Iturrigaray. Some people proposed setting up a council of authorities to govern the kingdom in the absence of the king. Others favored recognizing one of the government councils that had been established in Spain.

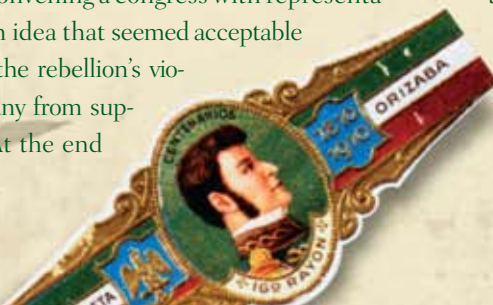
These proposals were discussed from Campeche to Chihuahua. Everyone declared themselves against Bonaparte and for Prince Fernando, but no one could agree on the most urgent matter: who should govern New Spain. None of the governments set up in Spain had the right to govern the Americas, but the main corporations opposed forming their own government.

In September, a group of merchants violently deposed Viceroy Iturrigaray and set up a government that threw its allegiance to the Seville Council. Protests broke out immediately. The merchants had deposed an official appointed by the king, and there was no reason to obey the government established in Seville. To keep order, the new viceroy dispersed the criollo troops billeted in the province of Veracruz. Conspiracies spread throughout the viceroyalty. In February 1809, a newssheet was published proclaiming independence. In December a conspiracy in Michoacán was uncovered. In early 1810, Manuel Abad y Queipo warned that social conditions, the political crisis, and the lack of reform would bring about an insurrection that would lead to independence, which the new Viceroy Francisco Xavier Venegas could not avert. In September, the authorities discovered another conspiracy, this time in Querétaro. The participants decided to stage an insurrection to avoid being taken prisoner. Parish priest Miguel Hidalgo and criollo Captain Ignacio Allende headed a rebellion that spread in a few weeks through Guanajuato, the viceroyalty's most prosperous region. A severe agricultural crisis spurred many people to rise up in arms. In a short time, dozens of towns or *villas* had joined the insurrection. Criollo governments were set up in the provinces of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Guadalajara, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. Miguel Hidalgo proposed convening a congress with representatives of the *villas*, an idea that seemed acceptable to many. However, the rebellion's violence dissuaded many from supporting the rebels. At the end



of September, the city of Guanajuato witnessed a horrible slaughter, which would be repeated even in cities that had opened their doors to the insurgents, like Guadalajara.

Thousands of criollos, mestizos, and indigenous supported the insurrection, but thousands of others also readied themselves to oppose it. Both Spanish and Americas-born members of the clergy preached against Miguel Hidalgo. Merchants, mine owners, and landowners refused to participate in such a violent undertaking. The viceregal army, headed by Félix Calleja, was made up of ranchers, peons, and agricultural day laborers just like Miguel Hidalgo's forces, but had a different strategy. In January 1811, Calleja's disciplined troops defeated the insurgents outside Guadalajara. Calleja readied himself to form armed groups of men in each villa and city to sustain the viceregal government. Hidalgo, Allende, and their followers fled to the North, where they would be caught, judged, and executed by firing squad.



Neither the social nor the economic crisis explains the fall of the Spanish government in North America. The population was fairly loyal to the monarchy and its institutions. A political crisis was necessary for this to change.

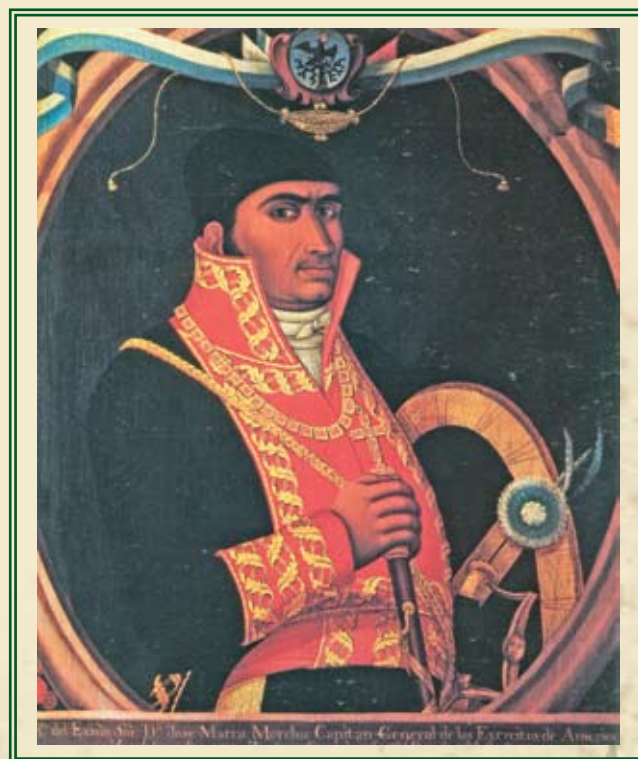
The criollos who wanted to govern their provinces saw an opportunity in the Spanish government itself. In 1809, a Central Council had been set up in Spain, which ordered the meeting of a parliament known as the “Cortes.” While in principle, only Spanish deputies had been convened, it soon became clear that this government would only be viable if they included representatives of the American dominions. Naturally, the Spaniards were not willing to give the criollos the number of deputies that would have been proportional to their population, but only called for one deputy for each province in the Americas. Nevertheless, the criollos were willing to accept this offer in order to participate. Elections were held in 1810. Soon, deputies from almost all the provinces of New Spain left for Cádiz. Some of them, like Miguel Ramos Arizpe, promoted local self-governing institutions. Others, like Manuel Beye de Cisneros and José Miguel Guridi, fought for equality of Spaniards and those born in the Americas. The participation of the criollos was very important in this parliament, contributing to the writing of the 1812 Constitution and the new liberal institutions.

Spain’s 1812 Constitution brought unprecedented changes in the political culture of New Spain. The indigenous and the Spaniards would have the same civil rights. More than 1,000 elected city councils would be set up in old *villas* and indigenous towns. Elections were held to choose provincial deputies and deputies for the Cortes. Freedom of press allowed newspapers to be published and public debate to begin. However, the Spanish authorities obstructed these measures. Venegas suppressed freedom of the press and delayed the elections. In many places, the Constitution was not applied because of the war. As if that were not enough, the Spanish deputies to the Cortes were not willing to accept that there should be the same number of representatives from the Americas as from Spain. Arbitrarily, they decided that anyone of African descent would not be given rights or counted as part of the population, which was what determined the number of deputies for each province. Since in certain parts of the Americas, people of African descent were very

numerous, the number of deputies that these provinces could elect was reduced.

For these reasons, some criollos who had considered the 1812 Constitution acceptable decided to throw their support to the insurgents. In 1811, Ignacio Rayón tried to create an independent government, the National American Council. A short time later, José María Morelos decided to carry out a more ambitious plan: he created a Congress with deputies from the provinces of New Spain, which declared independence and promoted a Constitution of its own. This Congress was inspired in the 1812 Constitution, but organized the country as a republic. Thus, the insurgents’ main ideologues, like José María Cos and Carlos María de Bustamante, tried to turn the civil war into a war between two nations: Spain and the Mexican part of the Americas.

In 1814, King Fernando VII abolished the Constitution and reestablished absolutism. This allowed the viceregal authorities to act more expeditiously against the insurgents. The numerous deaths caused by “mysterious fevers” in 1813 also limited the insurgents military capabilities. After José María Morelos was captured and executed by firing squad, the rebellion waned. The new viceroy, Juan Ruiz de Apodaca, managed to defeat the expedition of the young Spanish



José María Morelos y Pavón.



Vicente Guerrero and Agustín de Iturbide join forces.

Taken from *La Bandera de México* (Mexico City: Nacional Financiera, 1985), p. 117.

In early 1810, Manuel Abad y Queipo warned that social conditions, the political crisis, and the lack of reform would bring about an insurrection that would lead to independence.

mented in Spain, but also the liberals, because it offered them a constitutional government. Similarly, it won the support of Vicente Guerrero, the most important insurgent leader. The offer that all Americans, regardless of ethnic origin, would have political rights was very attractive. Many commanders, governors, ayuntamientos, and deputies began to accept Iturbide's proposal. In September 1821, a government council wrote the declaration of independence. Mexico had been born. **MM**

commander Xavier Mina, who opposed absolutism. The authorities offered pardons, which were accepted by many insurgents. In 1820, the viceregal government was no longer threatened by war. However, in the provinces, royalist commanders had been strengthened. In Monterrey, Joaquín Arredondo had the luxury of disobeying government orders. In Guadalajara, José de la Cruz was very powerful. It was no easy task to reestablish order after a decade of war.

In 1820, Spain restored the Constitution. Many inhabitants of New Spain thought equality of Spaniards and American residents should be demanded. A group of deputies, headed by Mariano Michelena, Lucas Alamán, and Lorenzo de Zavala, proposed that three parliaments be established in the Americas, headed by Spanish princes, to maintain the unity of the Spanish monarchy and give the Americans self-government. Their proposal was rejected, and they decided to return to Mexico.

For his part, a young coronel, Agustín de Iturbide—who had participated in the hunt for the insurgents—made a similar proposal: set up a congress in Mexico and crown the king of Spain emperor. Iturbide's Independence Plan satisfied privileged sectors who feared the reforms being imple-

NOTES

¹ The term “republic” here is taken from the Latin *res publica*, or “public matter,” and refers to a political body of a territory or community, and is not used in the modern sense of the word “republic.” [Translator's Note.]

BASIC READING

- Alamán, Lucas, *Historia de Méjico*, 5 vols. (Mexico City: Imprenta de J. M. Lara, 1848-1852).
- Ávila, Alfredo, Juan Ortiz Escamilla, and José Antonio Serrano, *Actores y escenarios de la independencia. Guerra, pensamiento e instituciones 1808-1825*, Enrique Florescano, coordinator (Mexico City: FCE, 2010).
- Bustamante, Carlos María de, *Cuadro histórico de la revolución mexicana*, 5 vols. (Mexico City: Imprenta de J. M. Lara, 1843).
- Guedea, Virginia, *La independencia de México y el proceso autonomista novohispano* (Mexico City: UNAM/Instituto Mora, 2001).
- Ortiz Escamilla, Juan, *Guerra y gobierno. Los pueblos y la independencia de México* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla /Instituto Mora, 1997).
- Portillo Valdés, José María, *Crisis atlántica. Autonomía e independencia en la crisis de la monarquía hispánica* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2006).
- Rojas, Rafael, *La escritura de la independencia. El surgimiento de la opinión pública en México* (Mexico City: Taurus/CIDE, 2003).
- Torre Villar, Ernesto de la, *La Constitución de Apatzingán y los creadores del Estado Mexicano* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1978).
- Villoro, Luis, *El proceso ideológico de la revolución de independencia* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1977).