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| [**¡2010 - Mexico Celebrates Its Bicentennial!**](http://www.mexonline.com/bicentenario.htm) |

**Mexican Independence Day** celebrates the events and people that eventually resulted in independence from Spain, the country that had control over the territory of New Spain, as it was also known then. Fueled by three centuries of oppression and sparked by a call to revolt by the respected Catholic priest Hidalgo, the first call to arms was made in the village of Dolores, in the state of Guanajuato. The uprising pitted the poor indigenous Indians and mixed Mestizo groups against the privileged classes of Spanish descent, and pushed them into a violent and bloody battle for freedom from Spain.

Setting The Stage

Shortly before dawn on September 16, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla made a momentous decision that revolutionized the course of Mexican history. Within hours, Hidalgo, a Catholic priest in the village of Dolores, ordered the arrest of Dolores' native Spaniards. Then Hidalgo rang the church bell as he customarily did to call the Indians to mass. The message that Hidalgo gave to the Indians and Mestizos called them to retaliate against the hated Gachupines, or native Spaniards, who had exploited and oppressed Mexicans for ten generations.

Although a movement toward Mexican independence had already been in progress since Napoleon's conquest of Spain, Hidalgo's passionate declaration was a swift, unpremeditated decision on his part. "Mexicanos, Viva México!", (Mexicans, long live Mexico!) is what Hidalgo told the Mexicans (Indians) who were the members of New Spain's lowest social class. Groups of Criollos or Mexican-born Spaniards, across Mexico had been plotting to overthrow the authority of Gachupines who, because of their Spanish birth, had legal and social priority over the Mexican born Criollos. When Napoleon’s brother, Joseph Bonaparte replaced King Ferdinand as the leader of Spain, the Criollos recognized a prime opportunity to gain sovereignty for Mexico.

The Criollos’ plan for revolution did not originally focus on the manpower of the Mexicans. Instead, the Criollos sought to avoid military confrontation by convincing Criollo army officers to sever their allegiance to the Gachupines. By claiming loyalty to the defeated King Ferdinand, the Criollos aimed to establish Mexico as an independent nation within King Ferdinand's Spanish empire. The Gachupines who claimed authority under Bonaparte's rule would be driven out of Mexico.

Miguel Hidalgo was sympathetic to the Indians, which was unusual amongst Mexican clergymen. Against Gachupin law, Hidalgo taught Indians to plant olives, mulberries and grapevines and to manufacture pottery and leather. His actions irritated the Spanish viceroy who, as a punitive measure, cut down Hidalgo's trees and vines.

A Decision Is Made

Gachupines were alerted to the Criollos independence movement by Criollo officers who had refused to join the revolutionary movement, and by a priest who had learned of the plot through a confessional. The Criollos had not gained enough military alliance to forfeit the Gachupines rule. Hidalgo was thus targeted for arrest on September 13, 1810. Ignacio Allende learned of the news, and immediately departed to inform Hidalgo.

Allende arrived in Dolores in the early morning hours of September 16. His message forced Hidalgo to make the most significant decision of his life, a decision which marked the first struggle for Mexican independence and that would distinguish Hidalgo as the national hero of the revolution. Hidalgo had three possible options. He could await arrest, flee Dolores or call on the Indian and Mestizo forces. His decision to call the exploited groups to revolution completely changed the character of the revolution, and the movement became a bloody class struggle instead of political maneuver.

The Revolution Erupts

When Hidalgo called the Indians to action, he tapped into powerful forces that had been simmering for over three hundred years. With clubs, slings, axes, knives, machetes and intense hatred, the Indians took on the challenge of the Spanish artillery.    He urged the exploited and embittered Mexicans to recover the lands that were stolen from their forefathers. That he was calling these people to revolution was a radical change from the original revolution plot devised by the Criollos.

When the Indian and Mestizos forces, led by Hidalgo and Allende, reached the next village en route to Mexico City, they acquired a picture of the [**Virgin of Guadalupe**](http://www.mexonline.com/virginofguadalupe.htm), the patron saint whose image was of a woman of color. The Virgin of Guadalupe, who was indigenous to Mexico, became the banner of the revolutionary forces as Hidalgo and Allende led the path toward Mexico City and the expulsion of the Gachupines.

Hidalgo later regretted the bloodbath he had incited with his fateful "Cry of Dolores." When he made his hasty decision in the pre-dawn hours of September 16, he had not foreseen the mass slaughter of Spaniards. Before the revolutionary troops descended upon Mexico City, Hidalgo retreated with only a few associates to Dolores, where he would be executed by the Gachupines only a year later. Despite his uncertainty toward the violent class struggle that was the Mexican revolution, Hidalgo is still revered as the father of Mexican independence.

Eleven years of war, decades of despotic Mexican rulers and political unrest proceeded Hidalgo's cry of Dolores. Yet throughout the years of turmoil, El Grito de Dolores, "Mexicanos, viva México," has persevered. Every year at midnight on September 15, Mexicans led by the president of Mexico shout the Grito, honoring the crucial and impulsive action that was the catalyst for the country's bloody struggle for independence from Spain. [Text updated April, 2007]  [edited Sept 2010 by Barile]

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