



## History of Mexico

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Mexico is a country rich in history, tradition, and culture. It is home to more than 100 million people and is the largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world. The people of Mexico represent a rich blend of Indian and Spanish cultures.

Mexico's history can be divided into two major time periods: the period before the arrival of the Europeans, and the period that followed it. Reminders of Mexico's past are found in the ruins that still exist throughout Mexico.

### Early Mexico

#### *The Olmecs*

The Olmec people made up Mexico's first known society. These early people flourished from 1200 to 900 BC. Giant head sculptures carved by these ancient people still remain.

#### *The Mayan People*

From 250 AD to around 900 AD the Mayan civilization flourished in Mexico. It is estimated that during this time period the Mayan population averaged about 8 million. The ancient Mayan city of Chichen Itza, located in southeastern Mexico, reveals clues to the Mayans' marvelous past. Mayan people are noted for their early understanding of astronomy and for creating a sophisticated language. At Chichen Itza you can view monuments, temples, and ball courts built in this early time period. While their ancient civilization lies in ruins, the Mayans are still living and surviving. More than 6 million Mayans live throughout Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala.



*A temple at the Mayan city,  
Chichen Itza.*

#### *The Toltec People*

In 900 AD, the Toltec people began to transform the small farming community of Tula into a thriving capital city, which would become a home to an estimated 30,000 people. Toltec architecture and ritual influences can be found at the Mayan city, Chichen Itza.

## *The Aztecs*

The Aztecs were originally a nomadic tribe based in northern Mexico, who later built their great capital city, Tenochtitlan, in the Valley of Mexico. The name Tenochtitlan means *City of the Gods*. This city, founded in 1325 AD, was made up of pyramids, some of which are still standing today. The Aztecs had a sophisticated agricultural system that included cultivation and irrigation, which allowed them to grow crops of corn, beans, squashes, tomatoes, and avocados. They supported themselves by fishing and hunting, and had a powerful military. By the 1500s the Aztecs ruled over up to 500 small states, governing 5 to 6 million people.

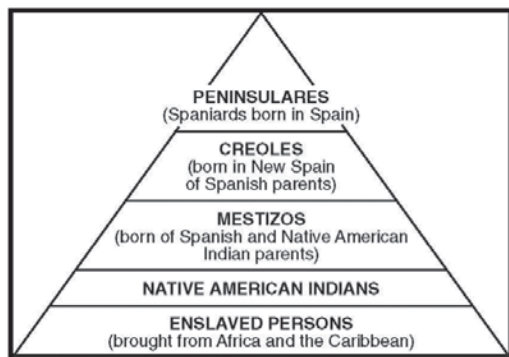


*A pyramid at the Aztec capital.*

## **The Spanish Conquest**

In 1519, Spaniard Hernan Cortes sailed from Cuba to Mexico's Gulf coast and marched inland to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Cortes formed many allies on his way to the capital city. In 1521, Cortes and his allies attacked and conquered the Aztec military. Spain colonized the area, calling it Nueva Espana (New Spain). By 1574, Spain had enslaved most of the indigenous population.

Spaniards who colonized Mexico replaced the Aztec pyramids with elaborate Catholic churches and cathedrals. The Spanish also sent missionaries to convert the indigenous people to the Catholic religion. Today, thousands of beautiful churches reflect the Spanish heritage and the influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico.



*The Spanish social system*

(source: bullisglobalhistoryspain.weebly.com)

## **The Spanish Social System**

Under Spanish rule, a rigid social system was enforced throughout Mexico. People in Spanish colonies were divided into four social classes: peninsulares, creoles, mestizos, and indigenous peoples.

### *Peninsulares*

The peninsulares were at the top of the social scale. Born in Spain, these people held the highest jobs in government and the Catholic Church. They owned large estates called *haciendas*. Some also owned gold and silver mines.

### *Creoles*

Below the peninsulares were the creoles, people born in Mexico to Spanish parents. Many creoles were wealthy and well educated. They owned ranches, taught at universities, and practiced law.

## *Mestizos*

Below the creoles were people of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood. People in this group were known as mestizos. Few mestizos owned land; instead, they worked on farms and ranches owned by peninsulares and creoles. If they lived in the cities, they worked as carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and bakers.

## *Indigenous Peoples (Native American Indians)*

The lowest social class in the colonies comprised the indigenous peoples. Under New Spain's strict social system, indigenous people were kept in poverty. Some indigenous people worked on estates for wages so low, they were not much better off than slaves. Others worked as vaqueros (cowboys) on ranches, overseeing horses, cattle, and other animals.

## **Revolution**

By the 1800s, Mexicans were tired of the rigid social system. With the leadership of a Catholic priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, many Mexicans launched a rebellion against Spain in 1810. In 1824, a constitution was adopted that gave more power to the nation's states than to the central government. But before long, dictators seized power again and threw out the new constitution.

In 1861, Mexicans regained control under President Benito Juarez, a Zapotec Indian. Juarez encouraged land reform and fought to aid poor people in rural areas. In 1877, when Porfirio Diaz took control of Mexico, he largely ignored these reforms.

Anger against the unfair social system in Mexico continued to mount, leading to the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from 1910 to 1920. Key leaders of the revolution included Francisco Madero, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata. Revolutionaries attacked rich landowners and gave their land to the poor. They also fought to remove powerful officials from office and implement the radical new Constitution of 1917. By the time the revolution had ended, 1.5 million Mexicans had died, and another million had left the country. Over time, many of the haciendas were broken up and given to the peasants.



*Benito Juarez was president of Mexico from 1861 to 1872.*

## **Mexico Today**

Mexicans now celebrate their culture that blends old and new world traditions. Modern Mexicans include some of the world's greatest writers, painters, sculptors, and muralists. National holidays celebrate Mexico's revolutionary leaders, victories, and religious beliefs.

Mexico has not yet achieved widespread prosperity, and its government has not been consistently strong. The Mexican people are still fighting for basic human rights—the right to own land, attend better schools, receive health care, and self-govern. Many still live in poverty—an American worker earns nearly as much in an hour as a Mexican worker doing the same task earns in a day. But the goals, fought for in the revolution, are within reach.

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