



Cinco de Mayo: A Victory Worth Remembering

The Battle of Puebla

The date was May 5, 1862. The place was Puebla, Mexico, where defensive positions around the forts of Loreto and Guadalupe guarded the approach to the city. A French invasion force commanded by General Charles de Lorencez faced the Mexican army under General Ignacio Zaragoza.

The French expected victory. Instead, the Mexican defenders held their ground and repelled the attack, giving their country an enduring source of national pride. Cinco de Mayo—Spanish for “the fifth of May”—commemorates that achievement.

Lorencez had badly underestimated his opponents. Confident that his roughly 6,000 soldiers could overcome Mexican resistance, he committed his forces to an assault on the fortified positions. Zaragoza’s army proved that French confidence was no substitute for a successful battle plan.

Why France Invaded Mexico

The intervention began with a dispute over debt. After years of internal conflict, Mexico’s government was struggling financially. President Benito Juárez suspended payments on foreign debts in 1861, prompting Britain, Spain, and France to send forces to Mexico.

Britain and Spain eventually withdrew, but French emperor Napoleon III had ambitions beyond collecting money. He sought to establish a monarchy in Mexico that would extend French influence in the Americas.

The American Civil War complicated the situation. With the United States consumed by its own conflict, its government pursued a cautious policy toward France while opposing European intervention in Mexico.

Independence Came Earlier

Cinco de Mayo is often mistaken for Mexico's Independence Day. The two commemorate different events.

Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821, following a struggle that began in 1810. Independence Day, celebrated on September 16, marks the beginning of that movement.

The newly independent country initially became an empire. Agustín de Iturbide ruled as Emperor Agustín I from 1822 to 1823, before his abdication and the eventual establishment of a republic. By the time French troops attacked Puebla, Mexico had been independent for more than forty years.

The French Return

The victory at Puebla did not end the invasion. In 1863, the French returned with a much larger army. This time, they besieged Puebla and captured it after approximately two months of resistance. They then advanced to Mexico City, entering the capital in June.

In 1864, Austrian archduke Maximilian of Habsburg arrived to rule as emperor, backed by France and Mexican monarchists. Juárez and the republican forces continued their resistance.

After the American Civil War ended, the United States increased its support for Juárez and its pressure on France. Mexican resistance, the financial burden of the expedition, and diplomatic pressure helped bring about the French withdrawal.

Maximilian remained in Mexico after losing French military protection. Republican forces captured him at Querétaro, and a military court sentenced him to death. On June 19, 1867, he was executed alongside Generals Miguel Miramón and Tomás Mejía, bringing the Second Mexican Empire to an end.

Puebla and the Meaning of Cinco de Mayo

Today, Puebla is the capital of the state that shares its name and an important industrial center. The area is also home to Volkswagen's major automobile manufacturing plant.

The city remains closely associated with its historic victory. Although Cinco de Mayo is commemorated in Mexico, it is not a nationwide mandatory day off under the Federal Labor Law.

For many people of Mexican heritage in the United States, Cinco de Mayo also offers an occasion to celebrate culture, community, and shared history through music, dancing, parades, and gatherings.

At its heart is the memory of Puebla: a day when Mexican defenders stood against a powerful invading army and prevailed.

¡Viva México!