



Mexico: A History of Struggle

From the mid-nineteenth century through the 1920s, Mexico faced repeated struggles over territory, political power, land, and religion. Three themes stand out: foreign intervention, revolution, and conflict between the Catholic Church and the state.

These struggles often overlapped. Foreign powers exploited internal divisions, political movements challenged established authority, and competing visions of Mexico's future sometimes led to war.

Foreign Intervention: Sovereignty Under Pressure

Few events changed Mexico's boundaries more dramatically than the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848. The United States annexed Texas in 1845, despite Mexico's continuing claim to the territory. Disputes over annexation and the border helped bring the two countries into conflict.

The war ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Mexico relinquished its claims to Texas and ceded an enormous expanse of territory that included present-day California and much of the American Southwest. Together with Texas, these losses amounted to roughly half of Mexico's former territory.

Another intervention followed in 1861, when Britain, Spain, and France moved to collect debts owed by Mexico. Britain and Spain eventually withdrew, but France pursued a larger ambition: establishing a monarchy friendly to French interests. French forces occupied Mexico City, and Maximilian of Habsburg arrived in 1864 to rule as emperor. Republican resistance continued until the empire collapsed in 1867.

During the Mexican Revolution, the United States again intervened militarily. American forces occupied Veracruz in 1914. In 1916, following Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico,

an expedition commanded by General John J. Pershing entered Mexico in pursuit of Villa. It withdrew in 1917 without capturing him. These operations added international tensions to an already divided country.

Revolution: Competing Visions of Mexico

Internal conflict was another recurring force in Mexican history. Political factions and military leaders—often called *caudillos*, or strongmen—competed for power and disagreed over how the country should be governed.

Porfirio Díaz's long dominance, beginning in 1876 and ending in 1911, brought greater political continuity, though he did not hold the presidency throughout that entire period. His government promoted economic development while restricting political opposition. Unequal access to land and the benefits of growth helped fuel demands for change.

The revolution that began in 1910 eventually fractured into competing movements. Pancho Villa became a major military force in the north, while Emiliano Zapata championed village land rights in the south. Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón led the Constitutionalist movement, which ultimately gained the upper hand.

These leaders fought for more than personal power. Their disagreements concerned land ownership, regional autonomy, political authority, and the meaning of revolutionary reform. Their shifting alliances nevertheless prolonged the fighting and deepened the country's suffering.

The Constitution of 1917 provided a new legal foundation, including provisions addressing land, labor, education, and religion. Although Carranza convened the constitutional congress, its delegates adopted reforms that went beyond his own proposals. The constitution marked a major turning point, but it did not immediately end the violence.

Church and State: A Struggle Over Authority

The Catholic Church had long played a central role in Mexican religious, social, and political life. Its property and legal privileges also made it a focus of conflict between conservatives and liberal reformers.

The **Ley Juárez of 1855** restricted special judicial privileges enjoyed by the clergy and military. The **Ley Lerdo of 1856** required the sale of many properties held by religious and civil corporations. Its reach extended beyond the Church to communal landholding arrangements, including those of Indigenous communities.

Conflict intensified again under President Plutarco Elías Calles in the 1920s. His enforcement of restrictions on religious institutions and clergy, strengthened by the 1926 Calles Law, provoked widespread opposition. Catholic authorities suspended public worship, while some religious observances continued clandestinely.

Armed resistance developed into the **Cristero War of 1926–1929**. Fighting under the cry “*¡Viva Cristo Rey!*”—“Long live Christ the King!”—Catholic rebels battled government forces. The conflict brought severe violence and hardship, particularly to rural communities. Negotiations in 1929 allowed public worship to resume and brought the principal uprising to an end.

One of the period’s most consequential acts of political violence was the assassination of President-elect Álvaro Obregón in July 1928 by José de León Toral, a Catholic militant who opposed the government’s religious policies.

The Cost—and the Consequences—of Struggle

Foreign intervention, revolutionary conflict, and disputes between Church and state repeatedly disrupted Mexican life. They also shaped the country’s borders, institutions, land policies, and understanding of national sovereignty.

To view this history only as a succession of upheavals, however, would overlook what people sought through those struggles: independence, political representation, land, religious freedom, and a more secure future. Mexico’s history reflects both the heavy costs of conflict and the continuing effort to build a nation capable of reconciling those competing demands.