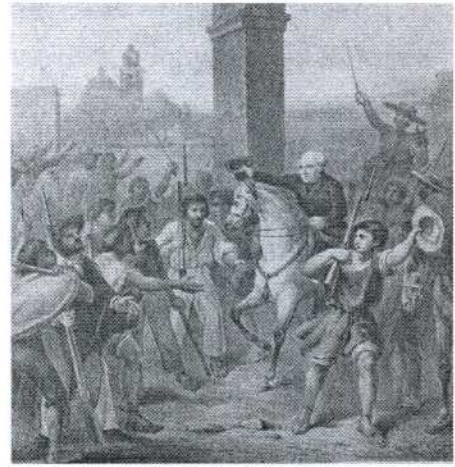


A History of Mexico 1821-1924
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Monday-Wednesday, 5-6:20 p.m.
Center Hall 113
Ev Meade, Department of History
Office Hours: Mondays, 2:30-4:00 p.m.,
H&SS 6044 (858) 534-7001
emeade@ucsd.edu

Teaching Assistant:
James Shrader, Department of History
Office Hours: Thursdays, 3-5:00 p.m.
H&SS 6017 (858) 822-5272
jshrader@ucsd.edu



A History of Mexico, 1821-1924

Culture and Ideology, History and Memory

The future was black, like the night shadows over the abyss.

The torch was lit, and its reddish light shone over a sea of bayonets, and over this sea of bayonets floated the banner of Spain, and the standard of the *Santo Oficio*.

On the other side was liberty.

The old man and the young nation did not vacillate.

To cross that ocean of dangers, the nation needed only to have faith and constancy; sooner or later, their triumph was assured.

The man needed to be a hero, almost a god, for his sacrifice was inevitable.

The thought could only begin. In that enterprise, hope was but temerity.

To undertake it was the sublime suicide of the patriot.

The man who did such deserves to have altars—the Greeks would have located him among the constellations.

For this, among us, Hidalgo symbolizes glory and virtue.

Virtue knit his brows with the silver crown of age.

Glory surrounded him with his halo of gold.

Then, eternity received him in its arms.

– Vicente Riva Palacio, *El Libro Rojo* (1870).

On July 30, 1811, in an abandoned Jesuit Monastery in remote Chihuahua City, Padre Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla met his violent end. Lion of Mexican independence, herald of *El grito de Dolores*, leader of the people's rebellion, doyen of national liberation, Padre Hidalgo waded through a "sea of bayonets," shimmering in the early-morning torchlight, and faced the same firing squad that had dispatched so many of his colleagues over the preceding weeks. The Inquisition condemned him as a heretic; a military tribunal declared him a traitor. Despite the pleas of some of the very churchmen who had denounced him and his own expressions of repentance, the desolate wall awaited. Worn but resilient after four months of incarceration and trial, the fifty-eight-year-old priest strode into the courtyard and offered candies and kind words to the embarrassed soldiers.

The officer in charge, Pedro Armendáriz, snapped everyone to order and back to the grim reality of the proceedings. The rebel priest stiffened; he stood with his back to the wall and a crucifix in his hand. As historian Hugh Hamill notes, "because he was priest, he was given the consideration of a private execution and the right to be shot in the chest instead of the back, subtle privileges which had been denied Allende and his secular colleagues." Three lines of infantrymen each fired, but failed to hit him square. Armendáriz approached and ordered two trembling soldiers to press their muskets to the dying man's chest. After the execution, Royal soldiers decapitated the cadavers of Hidalgo and his slain comrades – Ignacio Allende, Juan Aldama, and José Mariano Jiménez – and transported them to Guanajuato. Rotting in iron cages slung from the four corners of the Alhóndiga de Granitas, where rebel rioters had massacred cowering civilians in March and earned the ire of the urban elite throughout the kingdom, the severed heads remained on display for ten long years, until Mexico achieved independence from Spain.

Hidalgo's execution was an act of desecration – he was a priest; it aroused the sting of foreign tyranny – he was executed by Spaniards; the spectacle at the Alhóndiga was infamous – the decomposing heads of heroes were placed on public display; and it became an international symbol of Mexico during the Age of Revolution – the story of the killing of the rebel priest circulated widely in post-Revolutionary France, the newly-independent United States, and elsewhere, and Mexicans knew that this wider world was watching. All of these elements of Hidalgo's execution quickly congealed into a defining trope in the new nationalist repertoire, a pattern of remembering patriotic sacrifice through which new generations could imagine a shared past despite endemic civil conflict.

Hidalgo's execution wasn't an isolated event, even excepting the struggle for Independence. He wasn't nor would he become a Mexican Nathan Hale. Over the next half century, a seemingly unending string of national leaders faced execution at the hands of their political enemies, usually other Mexicans. The underlying political instability that these executions represent made it incredibly difficult to craft a coherent national history for succeeding generations after Mexican Independence. How could one narrate the history of what seemed to be a nation of enemies? What does it tell us about what we call "History" that this task seems so onerous?

Sixty years later (1870), Liberal chroniclers Manuel Payno and Vicente Riva Palacio used Hidalgo's death as a way of imagining an organic national sovereignty that transcended internal political divisions and bloodletting. In *El libro rojo* [The Red Book], they crafted a pantheon of national martyrs that ran from the Spanish Conquest (1520) to the Mexico's triumph over the French Intervention (1867). In high Romantic fashion, they included plagues, murders, and other tragedies along with formal executions in their "red book," helping the authors to primordialize the struggle for national sovereignty – to make it appear to be something inevitable, natural, set in stone, a triumph over evil, injustice, and even nature itself. And they did so with pictures, including illustrations that ranged from plague-ridden Indians covered with lesions, to the severed heads of rebellious slaves on pikes, and a murdered Mexico City merchant, hung bleeding from a hook in his cellar, to more conventional portraits of fallen heroes on the battlefield or before the firing squad. Although pictures can be received very differently by different observers, the idea that a single illustration could capture some common essence among those who died for the nation was implicitly reductive, the spectacle of their sacrifice designed to stick out, and, perhaps, even to overshadow the particular contexts in which they died. From the section dedicated to the death of Hidalgo forward, *El libro rojo* recounts executions exclusively. It tells a history the Mexican Republic through ritualized, premeditated death. In addition to Hidalgo, Allende, Jiménez, and Aldama, the next generation of independence leaders, including Matamoros, Morelos, Iturbide, Mina, and Guerrero, all faced the firing squad (or at least died at the hands of their political enemies) and found their glory on the pages of *El libro rojo*, as did fallen state-builders Ocampo, Valle, Degollado, Comonfort, Romero, Arteaga, and Salazar, along with emperor Maximilian von Habsburg and his two Mexican collaborators, Mejía and Miramón.

The celebration of Hidalgo's execution and the sad parade of national leaders who mirrored his march to the scaffold over the next half-century in *El libro rojo* illuminate a central problem facing statesmen and reformers fifty years after Mexico achieved independence from Spain: many potential national heroes were bitter enemies; the pantheon of fallen national figures included many who had fought, condemned, and tried to kill one another. While virtually all attempts to narrate national histories deal with such conflict – think about the Civil War in the U.S. – the crisis of legitimacy in the central government persisted longer and at a higher intensity in Mexico than in any major Western counterpart, and it happened in a place that a century earlier had been of one the wealthiest and most powerful Christian kingdoms in the world, and the center of the Hispanic world.

After a prolonged struggle for independence from Spain, after a catastrophic race war, after the secession of two sizable states, after two major foreign invasions, after the loss of more than half of the national territory, and after enduring thirty national governments in fifty years, most of which fell in coups and revolts, after all of this national turmoil, the only thing uniting Mexico's repertoire of slain national leaders in 1870 was *death itself*. Indeed, fifty years later, when the cultural avatars of the Mexican Revolution sought to create a new national identity which would unite Mexicans across lines of race, class, religion, region, they turned to death as the great metaphor, celebrating it, as Claudio Lomnitz illustrates, as a "national totem."

Thanks to political instability at the national level, persistent misinterpretations of the use of national symbols, like death, and the imposition of the contemporary baggage of the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico onto the past, the nineteenth century is often labeled "the century of chaos" where "the rule of law" remained elusive. In the absence of "the rule of law," sounds the common refrain, "the law of the knife," or "Herod's Law" sanctions official corruption, impunity, and political violence. Under its all-encompassing yellow hue in Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic*, officials are bribed, suspects tortured, and witnesses and informants murdered on the Mexican side of the border. The symbols of state authority – flags, uniforms, and police badges – melt into mafia icons. Every detail of Mexican life with an historical tinge becomes an exhibit in the case against Mexican modernity, evidence of the persistence of nineteenth-century chaos, *desmadre*, and even death. The image of primeval Mexican corruption and lawlessness, however, is far from the exclusive preserve of popular culture and political rhetoric.

In historical scholarship, the primordial *caudillo* (strongman) and his magnetic personality supplant constitutional articles; socioeconomic 'realities' render legal rights irrelevant; archaic religiosity subverts secular authority; and family networks and *camarillas* (cliques) undermine 'principled' politics. The net result is the absence of the "rule of law," the predominance of corruption, and the retardation of democracy in Mexico. So constructed, the 'rule of law' does not specify the content of the legal regime that it seeks to impose – the particular laws to be enshrined or rights to be protected. Nor are "corruption" or "democracy" defined with any specificity, only by their absence. Governance itself, the paradigm implies, is the route to the protection of people – the transformation of human beings into citizens the vehicle to democratic expression. Historical scholarship on modern Mexico has more often than not fallen into the clutches of the rule of law polemic and its assumption of the primacy of governance in the foundation of democracy, and the lack of both in Mexican history.

The process of modern state-building in Mexico has produced what Claudio Lomnitz labels a fundamental "fissure between culture and ideology" in modern Mexico. That is to say, the modern ideologies of the state – models for governments, constitutions, and public morality (many of which came from outside of Mexico) – have often been at odds with predominant social practices and beliefs, even those of the individuals within the state itself. As Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo illustrates, often the moral beliefs, priorities, and social commitments of Mexican politicians and ideologues have prevented them from implementing and/or obeying the very political principles and ideological positions to which they have dedicated their careers. The "citizens" about whom state-builders have discoursed so eloquently, have often been "imaginary," ideal types whom their orators never intended to represent the actual mass of Mexican people. And yet, historical assessments of this imaginary quality of citizenship, and the apparent fissure between culture and ideology that it represents, have assumed an essential antipathy between that which is quintessentially Mexican and modern democratic practices and ideals, leading to a failure or immaturity narrative of Mexican History.

Perhaps the most eloquent exposition of the failure narrative of Mexican history is Nobel laureate Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1949). For Paz, a chronic sense of failure derives from the imposition of European interpretive and organizational forms on Mexican realities. The false application of modern foreign forms (ideology) on traditional Mexican realities (culture), conflates that which is considered quintessentially Mexican with the imperfect achievement of ideological ideals and vice-versa. The archetypal Mexican is left trapped in a perpetual "labyrinth of solitude," alienated equally from the modern world and from his authentic self (the metaphor is male); Mexico is stuck in pathological adolescence. For Paz, then the question is one of colonialism and its inescapable legacy of perpetual comparison with the modern metropolis.

Historian François Xavier Guerra frames the problem differently. Like Paz and other commentators, Guerra acknowledges that political life in Spanish America has often been "very far from reflecting not only constitutional clauses but even certain rules generally accepted in Western democracies."

