

The Story of Hidalgo's Call for Mexican Independence (adapted from www.mexonline.com)



Shortly before dawn on September 15, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla made a momentous decision that revolutionized the course of Mexican history. 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. Hidalgo called the Indians and mestizos to retaliate against the hated gachopines, 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, unplanned decision. "Mexicanos, Viva México!" Hidalgo told the Mexicans who were the members of New Spain's lowest caste. He urged the exploited Mexicans to recover the lands stolen from their forefathers. Hidalgo's call to revolution was a radical contrast to the original revolutionary plot devised by the criollos (Mexican-born Spaniards).

Groups of criollos across Mexico had been plotting to overthrow the authority of gachopines who, because of their Spanish nativity, had legal and social priority over the criollos. When Joseph Bonaparte replaced King Ferdinand as the leader of Spain, the criollos recognized a prime opportunity for Mexican sovereignty. The nucleus of this movement was a group of intellectuals in Querétaro led by the corregidor of Querétaro, his wife and a group of army officers distinguished by the adventurous Ignacio Allende.

Gachopines 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. Hidalgo was among the central figures targeted for arrest on September 13, 1810. The Querétaro corregidor's wife informed the criollos of the gachopines plan. Allende immediately departed from Querétaro 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. 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, and machetes, the Indians took on the challenge of the Spanish artillery.

When the Indian and mestizo forces, led by Hidalgo and Allende, reached the next village en route to Mexico City, they acquired a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, 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 gachopines.

Eleven years of war, decades of despotic Mexican rulers and political unrest preceded 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 shout the grito, honoring the crucial, impulsive action that was the catalyst for the country's bloody struggle for independence from Spain.