

5 de Mayo

Battle of Puebla

In 1861, recently elected President Benito Juarez declared a temporary moratorium on foreign debts as the country was in financial ruin and rampant with instability having just come out of the country's first civil war. Upon the news, the Spanish, British, and French, sent naval armadas to Veracruz to force payment on debts incurred by Mexico. Juarez was able to negotiate with the Spanish and the British, but the French remained. Seeing an opportunity to establish a monarchy in the Mexican territory, the French invaded Mexico with the hopes of creating their North American empire.

On May 5th, 1862, the French attacked outside of the city of Puebla with an army of 6,000 highly trained men. Defended by only 2,000 poorly trained indigenous fighters sent by Juarez, the city incredibly defends itself after a day-long battle where after the French ultimately retreated to the coast. The defense was a victory.

Beyond the Battle

The French did ultimately install their emperor and created their most significant intervention in Mexico (1861-1867). Napoleon III declared that it was to ensure trade between Europe and the Americas, and that their monarchy would bridge the two regions. Mexico's near full rejection of the European power would most certainly have continued past 1867 had the United States not come to the aid of its southern neighbor. 1865 marked the end of the American Civil War, and the US was in a greater position to send military aid as well as impose political pressure on France. Eventually, the French were removed from power in 1867, and in that same year, Benito Juarez captured and executed the Austrian Emperor Maximilian who was imposed as Monarch by the French. Thereby ending the French occupation of Mexico.

The Battle's Significance

Even though the French did eventually settle in Mexico after the Battle of Puebla, the event became a powerful symbol of Mexican resistance to foreign dominance. Zaragoza's victory was repeatedly harnessed to instill pride and energy in the movement against the French, and in future times of foreign interference.

Benito Juarez, President of Mexico

1861-1872

Liberal Mexican President who held power during the French occupation while in exile.

General Ignacio Zaragoza

Mexican Commander at the Battle of Puebla, and former Secretary of War under Juarez. Helped remove Santa Anna from power, and install a Liberal government. Died of Typhoid Fever, at the age of 33, just a few months after his victory at the Battle of Puebla against the French.

Mexican Civil War

1857-1860

Just prior to the Battle of Puebla, and also known as the War of Reform, the civil war put Liberals against Conservatives as they fought to separate Church and State by reducing the privileges, property, and powers of the Catholic Church, as well as decrease the influence of the Mexican Army. The civil war left Mexico in financial ruin and lead to the temporary moratorium on payments of foreign debt.

Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico

1864-1867

Imposed as the French Monarch of Mexico by Napoleon III and the Conservatives within Mexico wishing to end Liberal power in the country. Executed by Juarez in 1867 near Queretaro.

General Charles Latrille de Lorencez

French Commander at the Battle of Puebla. Relative of Empress Carlota, wife of Emperor Maximilian. Left Mexico in December 1862.

Today in the World

Cinco de Mayo today serves as an international day of recognition of Mexican heritage and culture. In Mexico, it is more profoundly celebrated in Puebla, but it continues to be a national day which symbolizes the country's resistance to those efforts which compromise its sovereignty and independence.

Édouard Manet

Created a series of important works called The Execution of Emperor Maximilian, which include 3 Oil paintings, and several scetches. One painting hangs in Boston, another in London, and a third in Mannheim, Germany.

*La Batalla
de Puebla*