

Though the rebellion he led failed, Father Miguel Hidalgo is still considered the father of Mexican independence. The anniversary of his famous “cry” for revolution is celebrated as Independence Day in Mexico. ♦ *As you read, think about conditions in the Latin American colonies in the early 1800s. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811)

Miguel Hidalgo’s professors at the Jesuit college in Valladolid, Mexico, expected great things of this brilliant young student from a wealthy creole family. Finishing his studies, he was called El Zorro—“the Fox”—for his cleverness. He was ordained a priest, began to teach theology at the college of San Nicolas Obispo, and soon was rector of the school.

But scholarship and success did not satisfy Hidalgo. His father had encouraged him, as a boy, to teach the native Mexican workers on their hacienda, and he had always vowed to help them. From his education and experience, and his admiration for French culture, Hidalgo came to believe in Enlightenment ideas about equality and liberty.

When Hidalgo became the parish priest in Dolores in 1802, he worked to improve conditions for the local peasants. He encouraged new ways of farming, such as planting grapevines, and helped them start small handicraft industries. Spanish authorities were suspicious of these activities.

Napoleon’s conquest of Spain in 1808 divided Mexicans. Some accepted the new king, Napoleon’s brother; some wanted to restore the former king. Still others, including Hidalgo and other creoles,



worked secretly to gain Mexico’s independence from Spain. In September 1810, their plans were betrayed to Spanish authorities, and some members were arrested, but instead of fleeing, Hidalgo decided it was time to act.

Ringling the church bell on the morning of September 16, he called the townspeople to rebel: *el Grito de Dolores*. Thousands of mestizos and Indians soon joined the cause, following the silver-haired priest as he carried a banner showing the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron. They soon captured Guanajuato and other towns west of Mexico City from Spanish forces. Hidalgo stopped short of capturing Mexico City, which was a mistake.

In November, Hidalgo tried to form an independent government based in Guadalajara, but there were disagreements inside the movement about his reform plans. Many Mexicans also were frightened by the idea of a peasant rebellion. After a defeat in battle in January 1811, Hidalgo tried to escape north to the United States, but he was captured and shot by a firing squad as a rebel. It would take ten more years for Mexico to gain independence.

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Questions to Think About

1. What were Miguel Hidalgo’s education and background?
2. Who were the main supporters of Hidalgo’s call for independence and revolution?
3. Recognizing Ideologies What beliefs lay behind Hidalgo’s actions in Dolores?