

# Cinco de Mayo and France's Colonial Empire in Mexico

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Some people devalue Cinco de Mayo, saying that it is much less important than September 16, Mexican Independence Day. This is not correct. Both holidays are important, and Cinco de Mayo is possibly more significant than September 16.

## Spain, a Declining Colonial Power. France, a Rising Colonial Power.

When Spain conquered Mexico in 1521, it was on its way to becoming the dominant European and colonial power. Spain gained an early foothold in the colonies, quickly becoming the most powerful European power in the New World. But when Mexico declared its independence from Spain on September 16, 1810, Spain was weak, had been weak for two centuries, and was experiencing its greatest territorial losses as its colonies in the Americas, which it had held for almost 300 years, were fighting and winning their wars of independence. Moreover, the Spanish throne did not even control Spain. Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain in 1808, removed King Ferdinand, and put his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne.

In contrast, **when the French invaded Mexico in 1861 with plans to add Mexico to its colonial empire**, it was a powerful nation, and its army, which had not been defeated for almost 50 years, was considered **“the premier**

**army of the world.”** Moreover, while Spain was an early colonial power that was losing its colonies in the Americas in the early 1800s, France was just getting going as a major colonial power in Africa and later Asia. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the French colonial empire was the second largest colonial empire in the world only behind the British Empire; it extended over 13,500,000 km<sup>2</sup> (5,200,000 sq mi) of land at its height in the 1920s and 1930s.

Unlike Spain which accepted the independence of its former colonies in the Americas in the early 1800s, France was still fighting to keep its colonies in Asia in the 1950s (e.g., Vietnam) and in Africa in the 1960s (e.g., Algeria).

### **France’s Colonial Empire in Africa**

France had a presence in Africa since the 17th century, but its colonial occupation of Africa began in earnest with its invasion and conquest of Algeria (1830 -1847). France then proceeded to make colonies of other African countries, including Senegal, Gambia, Chad, Mali, Benin Republic, Sudan, Gabon, Tunisia, Niger, Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Cote d'Ivoire. France and England were “winners” in the “Scramble for Africa.” The French and British colonized more than 95% of the African continent; **France colonized 20 African states** and Britain colonized 22 African states. France exercised direct rule over its African colonies until the early 1960's.

## **France, the Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference (1884–1885)**

The Scramble for Africa, also called the Partition of Africa, the Conquest of Africa or the Rape of Africa, was the invasion, annexation, division, and colonization of most of Africa by seven Western European powers during an era known as New Imperialism (between 1833 and 1914). The Partition of Africa was formalized by the Berlin Conference (1884–1885). **France and England were the winners at the Berlin Conference: France took much of western Africa, from Mauritania to Chad (French West Africa) and Gabon and the Republic of Congo (French Equatorial Africa).**

When the conference opened in Berlin on November 15, 1884, 14 countries – Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway (unified from 1814-1905), Turkey and the USA – were represented by a plethora of ambassadors and envoys. **No African nations were invited to the Berlin Conference** and no African nations took part in deciding how their continent would be “carved up.” In 1870, only 10 percent of Africa was under European control; by 1914 it had increased to 90 percent of the continent.

## **The French Language in Africa, France’s Colonial legacy**

Even though France did not acquire its African colonies until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century or later (e.g., Cameroon, 1901), the French language became the dominant language in numerous African countries. French is the official

language of 21 countries in Africa: French is the sole official language in eleven African countries and is the second official language in ten.

### **France's Colonial Empire in Asia**

France's involvement with Vietnam may have started as early as the 17th century with missionary voyages. But French colonialism in Southeast Asia really took off in 1887 when the French took power in the area and established a federation called French Indochina which was made up of Cochin-China, Annam, Cambodia, Tonkin, Kwangchow, and Laos. (Today, the same region is divided into the nations of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.)

### **France, Late in the Colonial Grab**

Note that 1887 was late in the colonial grab to be conquering colonies. In contrast, Spain conquered Mexico in 1521, 366 years earlier, and formally recognized the independence of Mexico in 1836. Note also that the United States was a colony of England from 1607 to 1783, the final year of the American Revolutionary War. So, France was launching its colonial empire in Southeast Asia more than 100 years after the United States won its independence from England.

### **French Exploitation of Southeast Asia ("colonie d'exploitation")**

"France designated the area as a "colonie d'exploitation," or in the more

polite English translation, a "colony of economic interests." High taxes on local consumption of goods like salt, opium, and rice alcohol filled the coffers of the French colonial government, with just those three items comprising 44% of the government's budget by 1920.

“With the local population's wealth almost tapped out, the French began in the 1930s to turn to exploiting the area's natural resources instead. What is now Vietnam became a rich source of zinc, tin, and coal as well as cash crops such as rice, rubber, coffee, and tea. Cambodia supplied pepper, rubber, and rice. Laos, however, had no valuable mines and was used only for low-level timber harvesting.

“The availability of plentiful, high-quality rubber led to the establishment of famous French tire companies such as Michelin. France even invested in industrialization in Vietnam, building factories to produce cigarettes, alcohol, and textiles for export.”

### **World Wars I and II and the Japanese Occupation of French Indochina.**

France was greatly weakened by World War I which lasted for four years, from 1914-1918, and much of which was fought in France (the Western Front). Regardless of being a diminished European world power after WWI, France wanted to hang onto its colonial empire. Next, France was devastated by World War II. The Germany army overran France and the low countries in six weeks, and Germany occupied France for four years. The Japanese Empire invaded French Indochina in 1941, and the Nazi-allied

French Vichy government handed over French Indochina to Japan. After D-day and the Allied invasion of Normandy, France on June 6, 1944, fierce battles were fought against the defending Germans on French soil, leaving the French infrastructure and economy wrecked.

### **France Wanted its Colonial Empire in Indochina Back.**

Despite its devastated condition after World War II, France still saw itself as a great colonial power. So, when the Second World War ended, France expected the other Allied Powers to return its Indochinese colonies to its control. But the people of Indochina had different ideas. They expected to be granted independence, but France opposed this, leading to the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War. In 1954, the Vietnamese under Ho Chi Minh defeated the French at the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and the French gave up their claims to the former French Indochina through the Geneva Accord of 1954. Note that when France's colonial empire in Indochina finally came to an end in 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower was President of the United States.

### **France Wanted its Colony in Algeria Back.**

After World II, Algeria was controlled by the Americans and the British who had waged the North African campaign to defeat the Germans (Vichy). Because Washington was concerned about the Arab nationalist movement in Algeria, it acquiesced in the return of French colonialism in Algeria.

France got its colony in Algeria back, but Algeria wanted its independence from France, just as the Vietnamese did in 1954. So, the Algerian War ensued (1954-1962). The war was marked by fierce fighting. French forces (which increased to 500,000 troops) managed to regain control but only through brutal measures, and the ferocity of the fighting sapped the political will of the French to continue the conflict. An agreement was reached which recognized the right of Algerians to determine their own future, and it was signed in 1962, ending the Algerian War and France's colonialization of Algeria.

It is noteworthy that in 1962 when France finally gave up its colony in Algeria, John F. Kennedy was President of the United States. It is also noteworthy that Algeria won its independence from France 141 years after Mexico won its independence from Spain (1821).

### **France's Colonial Empire in Mexico**

In the 1860s, France, led by Emperor Napoleon III (the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte), wanted **to expand its colonial empire into Mexico**. Late in 1861, a well-armed French fleet attacked Veracruz, landing a large French force and driving President Juárez and his government into retreat.

Napoleon III ordered his army to move on from Veracruz to Mexico City to overthrow Mexico's democratically elected President Benito Juárez and to install Maximilian I as the new emperor of France's colonial empire in Mexico.

### **France had the “Premier Army of the World.”**

The French invading force had about 6,000 well-equipped troops armed with modern, advanced weapons. In this era, the French army was considered to be “**the premier army of the world**” and had not been defeated for almost 50 years. Moreover, its ranks included skilled, battle-hardened troops from the French Foreign Legion (which had a reputation as the world’s premier mercenary corps).

### **The Mexican Army Was Outnumbered and Poorly Equipped.**

To counter the French advance, President Benito Juarez assembled a ragged group of faithful soldiers at his new base of operations in the north and dispatched them to Puebla. Estimates of the size of the Mexican force vary widely, from as low as 500 troops, to as many as 4,500, with the estimate of about 2,000 showing up a lot. Regardless, the Mexican Army was outnumbered by the French who numbered approximately 6,000 and were much better armed and equipped than the Mexicans.

### **The French Attack at Puebla**

As the French advanced toward Mexico City, they encountered heavy resistance from the Mexicans, close to Puebla, at the Mexican forts of Loreto and Guadalupe. The 6,000-strong French army attacked the much



smaller and poorly equipped Mexican army of 2,000. Yet on May 5, 1862, the Mexicans managed to decisively crush the French army, then considered to be “the premier army of the world.”

### **“The premier army of the world” Was Not Invincible.**

Mexico’s unexpected defeat of a crack French army (with its veterans of the French Foreign Legion) at the Battle of Puebla showed Mexicans that French colonial rule of Mexico was not inevitable. Mexicans did not have to submissively accept the rule of their new colonial masters. They could fight back – even against overwhelming odds – and beat the French. This confidence that Mexicans gained from their unlikely victory at the Battle of Puebla would serve them well when French returned to Mexico with 30,000 troops (5 times the 6,000 troops they employed at the Battle of Puebla) to solidify their colonial empire in Mexico.

### **France Captures Mexico City, the Capital of Its Mexican Colonial Empire.**

A year after the French defeat at the Battle of Puebla, Napoleon III sent 30,000 French troops to Mexico to secure his Mexican Colonial Empire. The French Army was able to defeat the Mexican Army, capture Mexico City, and install Emperor Maximilian I as ruler of France’s Mexican Colonial Empire in 1864.

### **Inspired by the Battle of Puebla, Mexicans Fight On.**

However, French colonial rule by a puppet monarch was not what the vast majority of Mexicans wanted; they wanted an independent Mexico, free of monarchy. And Mexicans had learned from their victory at the Battle of Puebla that they did not have to accept French rule and that they could beat “the premier army of the world.” So, Mexico unleashed unrelenting and effective guerilla resistance against their French colonial masters. After three years of increasingly effective Mexican guerilla resistance to French rule, Napoleon III and “the premier army of the world” retreated from Mexico and returned to France in 1867.

Mexico’s unlikely defeat of the French on May 5, 1862 had given Mexicans the confidence that they could effectively resist French rule and defeat “the premier army of the world.” The French retreat from Mexico was influenced by other factors such as the threat that the United States might enter the Mexican-French war on the side of Mexico and the threat of war with Prussia. But France did **not** face American soldiers during its 1864-1867 war in Mexico. It faced Mexicans from all classes who knew from the Battle of Puebla that the French army was not invincible.

### **The End of European Colonialism in Mexico**

If Mexicans had not been inspired by their victory at the Battle of Puebla to relentlessly and effectively resist French colonial rule and to prevent France

from securing its hold on its Mexican Colonial Empire, Mexico may not have been free from French colonialism until

- 1954 as in Vietnam (when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president) or until
- 1962 as in Algeria (when John F. Kennedy was president.

and Mexico may have been speaking French (as in 21 former French colonies in Africa).

### **Why Is Cinco de Mayo Celebrated**

#### **More in the United States Than in Mexico?**

Many people say that Cinco de Mayo is celebrated more in the United States than in Mexico. Apparently, this is true today, but it was not always the case. On May 9, 1862, President Benito Juárez declared that the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla would be a national holiday regarded as "Battle of Puebla Day" or "Battle of Cinco de Mayo." The former Forts of Guadalupe and Loreto now house a museum.

### **Porfirio Díaz and Cinco de Mayo**

The national celebration of the Cinco de Mayo peaked in Mexico during the Porfiriato, the long rule of President/dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876 to 1911) who had fought in the Battle of Puebla as a young officer. Díaz

"strategically turned the Cinco de Mayo Festival or celebration into a celebration of his power and his reign" and made it something that was celebrated across Mexico and in Mexican communities in the United States. After Díaz was deposed in the Mexican Revolution, Cinco de Mayo celebrations declined in much of Mexico because of their association with the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.

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