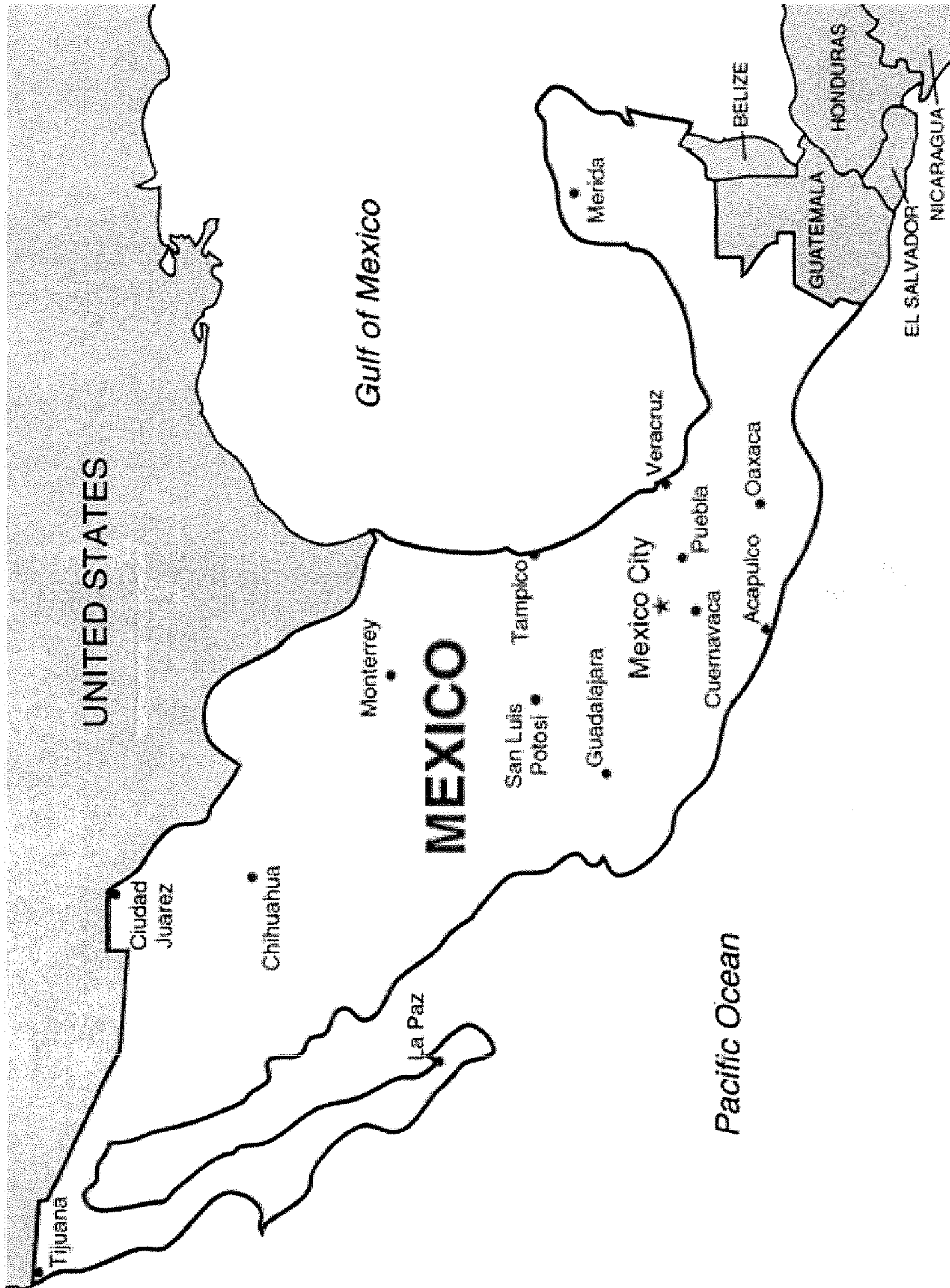

UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Pacific Ocean
Tijuana
Ciudad Juarez
Chihuahua
La Paz
Monterrey
San Luis Potosi
Guadalajara
Tampico
Mexico City
Cuernavaca
Puebla
Acapulco
Oaxaca
Veracruz
Merida
BELIZE
GUATEMALA
HONDURAS
EL SALVADOR
NICARAGUA

Introduction: Mexico's Transformation

On December 1, 2000, Mexico took a dramatic step toward a new era. On that day, Mexico inaugurated a new president and completed its first peaceful transfer of political power to an opposition party following an election. For many Mexicans, the end of the seventy-one-year dominance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) signalled an important political transformation for Mexico.

In recent years, economic events have also contributed to change in Mexico. A dramatic economic transformation began in the 1980s and accelerated in 1994, when Mexico joined the United States and Canada in forming the world's largest trading bloc, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Politically and economically Mexico has made progress towards breaking into the ranks of the wealthy, developed nations. Foreign investment is coming into Mexico, the Mexican stock market is strong, and Mexico has been admitted to the exclusive club of developed nations that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Yet even as policymakers in Mexico City and international financial analysts hail Mexico's breakthroughs, another Mexico rumbles. In the remote and rural southern state of Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has led a rebellion against poverty and injustice. Hundreds of peasant soldiers, their faces covered by black ski masks or red bandanas, operate in the countryside. Although most carry weapons dating back to World War II, they occupy several key towns and have attacked a regional military base.

International observers, as well as some Mexicans, are taken aback by the paradox. The Mexico they know is dominated by the gleaming skyscrapers of Mexico City and the high-tech factories of Monterrey. In contrast, the images of turmoil and poverty that shine forth from the jungles of Chiapas cast Mexico's progress in a different light.

For most Mexicans, these events serve only to affirm their country's deep-seated contradictions. Gleaming corporate headquarters in Mexico City tower above shantytowns where millions live without running water in their homes. Workers in Monterrey's factories typically earn less than $2 an hour. At the same time, the guerrillas of Chiapas rely on the Internet and cellular telephones to maintain a sophisticated communications network.

In recent years political change and uncertainty, economic crises, rising crime, and corruption scandals have shaken confidence in Mexico's development. Many Mexicans who believed that their country was entering a new era have been disillusioned by cycles of false hope and disappointment. Today, however, in a climate of economic and political change many find reasons for optimism.

How has Mexico changed since the 1980s?

Since the mid-1980s, Mexico has undergone a striking economic transformation. Mexico's leaders have opened their country's economy to the outside world. In a sharp break with the past, they have lowered trade barriers and encouraged foreign investment. NAFTA has prompted Mexican manufacturers and farmers to focus on exports. At the same time, the agreement has raised fears that Mexican culture and independence will be crushed under the weight of U.S. influence.

Politically, Mexico has also been transformed. The growing pressure for democracy ended the long-standing rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) with the elections of 2000. Anger against government corruption and fraudulent elections fueled the growth of opposition political parties and grassroots movements. Not since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 have expectations for change been so high.

The contradictions woven into the fabric of Mexican society pull the country in different directions. As one Mexico enters the global marketplace, another Mexico seems on the edge of chaos and economic desperation.

A new generation of Mexican business executives jets from continent to continent, while a new class of urban slum-dwellers is caught in a widening web of crime and drug trafficking. Millions of Mexicans have raced into the twenty-first century, yet millions more live in a world of centuries past.

How do the divisions within Mexican society contribute to uncertainty about the future?

Mexico is a country of many faces: Indian and Spanish, rich and poor, city and countryside, north and south. The divisions of Mexican society explain in part the uncertainty of Mexico's future direction. Americans are a diverse people too, but political ideals and economic opportunity have provided the United States with a unifying bond. The shared values of democracy, the rule of law, and liberty have held Americans together as a nation.

In contrast, the identity of Mexicans stems from a common land and history. Mexico and the Mexican identity were born from a violent collision of cultures. The Spanish conquered what is today Mexico in the early 1500s, toppling the highly advanced Aztec empire and overwhelming the civilization of the indigenous peoples, or Indians.

The Spanish succeeded in imposing their culture on Mexico. Spanish became the dominant language and Catholicism was practiced throughout the country. The Spanish also gained economic control of Mexico, seizing vast tracts of land and drawing on the labor of local Indians. Many of the Spanish soldiers who led the conquest formed Mexico's landowning elite and took wives from the Aztec nobility.

Over the centuries, the intermingling of peoples and cultures produced a new nation that blended Spanish and Indian elements. The great majority of Mexicans today identify themselves as people of mixed, or *mestizo*, ancestry.

Nonetheless, the old divisions persist. The descendents of the Spanish conquistadors continue to control much of Mexico's land and wealth. At the opposite extreme, millions of Indians who have not entered *mestizo* society, such as those in the state of Chiapas, are among the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere. For members of Mexico's *mestizo* majority, the divisions are more complex. Within each lives both conquered and conqueror.

Today Mexico's citizens are torn by questions involving Mexico's future course. Mexicans are drawn both to the Western countries of North America and Europe, and to Mexico's own Indian past. The economic model of the United States offers promise, but Mexicans cling to their beliefs and traditions. Democracy is widely embraced, yet Mexicans fear that their country's divisions could explode in another cycle of violence.

What questions are Mexicans now debating?

In this unit, you will be asked to step into the shoes of Mexicans and consider Mexico's future. You will be confronted with the same questions that the people of Mexico are now debating: What principles should guide the development of Mexico's economy? How should Mexicans address their country's inequality and poverty? How should Mexico define its relationship with the rest of the world, especially with the United States?

To prepare for the challenge ahead, you will begin with a brief survey of Mexican history up to the early 1980s. Mexicans remain closely connected to their nation's past. History is seen not only as a central element of their identity, but as a critical force in shaping Mexico's future. As you read the first part of the background reading, look for historical lessons that might offer guidance for Mexicans today.

The second part of the background reading examines the transformation that began in Mexico after the 1982 economic crisis. Special attention is given to the economic reforms that have brought Mexico into the global marketplace and rocked the foundations of Mexico's political system. Finally, the third part of the background reading explores the major issues currently facing Mexico.

Part I: Understanding Mexican History

In the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Mexico City, a plaque in front of a sixteenth-century church contains the following inscription: "On August 12, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtemoc, Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernan Cortes. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat: it was the painful birth of the *mestizo* nation that is Mexico today."

The inscription reflects the mixed feelings that Mexicans have toward their country's origins. To a greater extent than any other country in the Western Hemisphere, Mexico celebrates its Indian past. The advanced civilizations that arose in the region centuries before Cortes hold a prominent place in Mexican history books.

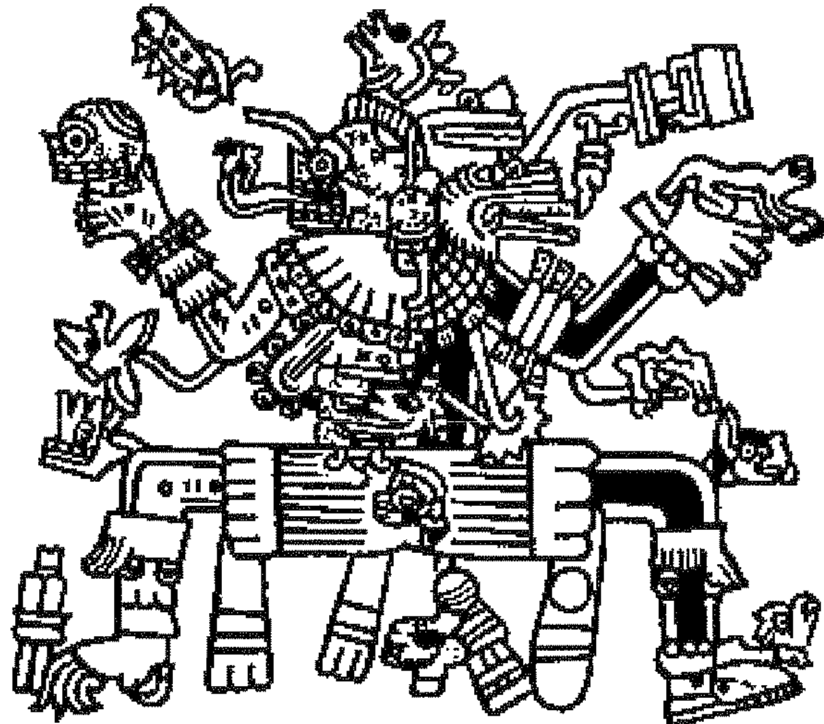
The Olmecs, remembered mostly for their finely crafted jewelry and pottery, were the first noteworthy people, emerging around 1200 B.C. More significant were the Mayas, whose first city-states were built around 150 A.D. in what is today Guatemala. In the following centuries, the center of Mayan civilization extended north to the Yucatan Peninsula.

The rise of the Mayas occurred alongside the development of the first highland civilization based in the Valley of Mexico (the location of Mexico City). The construction of Teotihuacan, a city of two hundred thousand inhabitants, and several huge pyramids was the crowning achievement of what is considered the classical era of the region. The period, however, came to a mysterious end after 900, possibly due to drought.

The decline in central Mexico made way for the invasion of warrior tribes from the north. The Toltecs and later the Aztecs restored the Valley of Mexico as an imperial center. Tenochtitlan, located on an island in Lake Texcoco, came to rival the earlier wealth and glory of Teotihuacan. At the time Christopher Columbus landed in the New World in 1492, the Aztec empire stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, reached as far south as present-day El Salvador, and contained 7 to 15 million people.

What role did Cortes play in the Spanish conquest?

Cortes had no idea what awaited him when he sailed west from Cuba in 1519 with five hundred men and sixteen horses. News of the expedition, however, soon reached Moctezuma (or Montezuma), the Aztec emperor. Many historians believe that Moctezuma feared Cortes was Quetzalcoatl, a legendary Toltec king of the tenth century who the Aztecs believed would eventually return to reclaim his throne.



An Aztec carving of Quetzalcoatl and Mictlatecuhtil, the god of death.

Reproduced from *A History of Mexican Mural Painting.*

To honor the presumed "god-king," Moctezuma sent a mission bearing gifts of gold, silver, jade, and embroidered cloth to greet the Spanish. Cortes immediately realized that he had stumbled on a rich civilization and insisted on meeting the Aztec emperor in person.

The Spaniards marched toward the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, overwhelming resistance along the way. Cortes' cannons terrified his foes. More important were his horses—animals unknown in the New World. Cavalry gave Cortes the advantage of speed and maneuverability in open areas.

The rulers of one of the city-states that had clashed with the Spanish, Tlaxcala, allied themselves with Cortes. Cortes was also aided by a young woman, Malinche, given to him by a local chieftain. Malinche quickly learned Spanish and served as Cortes' interpreter. She later bore him a son.

The Spanish and Tlaxcalans entered Tenochtitlan without opposition. Cortes was awed by the splendor of the Aztec court, and for several weeks he was hosted lavishly by Moctezuma. Cortes, however, feared a trap. Without warning, he arrested the Aztec emperor. Moctezuma, still uncertain of Cortes' identity and motives, did not resist. Instead, he opened his magnificent treasures of jewelry and art to the Spanish, hoping that they would take what they wanted and leave.

Meanwhile, the Spanish governor of Cuba learned that Cortes had disobeyed his orders and sent one thousand soldiers to arrest him. Cortes gathered a force of two hundred men and headed east to confront the governor's troops. After capturing the commander of the expedition, Cortes persuaded the troops to join him in conquering Tenochtitlan.

In the Aztec capital, however, the uprising that Cortes feared had taken place. The rebellion had been sparked when the Spanish force in Tenochtitlan massacred thousands of participants in an Aztec religious festival. Cortes re-entered the city to find his troops besieged by a hostile mob. He ordered Moctezuma to bring a halt to the uprising. The outrage of the Aztecs, however, could not be quelled, even by the emperor. Moctezuma was struck in the head by a stone thrown from the crowd.

What was the result of Aztec resistance?

For the first time, the Aztecs earnestly fought back. In close quarters, the Spanish cavalry and cannons proved ineffective. Cortes was forced to abandon the island city of Tenochtitlan, losing half his army in the retreat across the water.

Cortes fought his way back to the territory of his allies, the Tlaxcalans. There, he regrouped his army. New Spanish expeditions from Cuba and other Spanish bases in the Caribbean supplied him with fresh troops and weapons. Cortes also built new alliances with local city-states resentful of Aztec rule.

At the same time, Tenochtitlan was still reeling from its first encounter with the Spanish. Moctezuma had died from his head injury and was replaced with Cuauhtemoc, a young, inexperienced noble. More significant, the Aztec capital was devastated by a plague of smallpox brought by the Spanish.

The final defeat of Tenochtitlan was among the fiercest battles in the European conquest of the New World. In May 1521, Cortes ringed the shores of Lake Texcoco with his troops. Spanish and Indian soldiers surged along the causeways toward Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs repulsed most of Cortes' attacks, but the invaders managed to gain a toehold on the island. The arrival of thirteen Spanish warships, transported overland piece by piece, allowed Cortes to pound the Aztec defenses with heavy cannons.

Slowly, Cortes extended his control over Tenochtitlan in bloody, house-to-house fighting. In the end, more Aztecs died from hunger and disease than Spanish weaponry. In August 1521, with most Aztec nobles dead, Cuauhtemoc surrendered.

What did the battle of Tenochtitlan represent for the Aztecs?

The battle of Tenochtitlan represented much more than a military defeat for the Aztecs. The Spanish imposed their religion and

Reproduced from *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*.

Muralist Diego Rivera's interpretation of the Spanish Conquest.

culture on the empire. Tenochtitlan was demolished and Mexico City was founded on its ruins. Cuauhtemoc was hanged under Cortes' orders. Even Cortes' Indian allies eventually fell under Spanish rule.

The Spanish conquest was extended beyond the Aztec capital largely by the Catholic Church and Spanish landowners. In 1542, the Spanish authorities decreed that the Indians could not be held as slaves. Legally, however, they were regarded as minors who required the spiritual guidance of Catholic clergymen. Spanish missionaries converted entire villages and set up new communities centered around Catholic churches. The Indians supplied the labor and artistry to build Mexico City and other important settlements of what was known as New Spain. The stone for many of the colony's finest churches and palaces came from Indian temples and pyramids.

What was the hacienda system?

The Indian work force was also the economic basis for Mexico's haciendas—huge grants of land given mostly to officers in the Spanish army. In some cases, the Indians leased land from the Spanish landowners, turning over a portion of their crops as rent. In other cases, Indians from nearby villages worked the hacienda fields during the planting and harvest seasons. The spread of the hacienda system exposed more Indians to the diseases of the Old World. Without a natural immunity to protect them, up to two-thirds of Mexico's Indians died in the sixteenth century.

Mexico was Spain's richest colony in the New World during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its wealth, however, was derived almost entirely from silver, gold, and crops grown for export. Otherwise, the Spanish did not encourage economic development. Manufacturing and independent trade were officially prohibited. Moreover, the royal court in Madrid was suspicious of the new political ideas that were circulating in the United States and France in the late 1700s.

From New Spain to Mexico

Despite Madrid's tight control, the colony of New Spain had begun to set its own direction by the early 1800s. Mexico City had become a sophisticated city of one hundred thousand people. Overall, Mexico's population had increased to 6 million people from a low of 2 million in the sixteenth century. Local industries sprang up in defiance of Spain's ban on manufacturing. Increasingly, Mexico's native-born elite, known as *criollos*, came to resent the power of Spain.

The success of the North American colonists in winning independence from Britain and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 served as models for many *criollo* intellectuals. Their opportunity to break away from Madrid came in 1808, when France's Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Spain.