BACKGROUND BOOKS

MEXICO

The civilization of the Aztecs, which reached its zenith in the period from 1420 to 1530, was a strange combination of high culture and violence. Compulsory education, medical knowledge on a par with Europe's, and a sense of *noblesse oblige* coexisted with human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism. The society was puritanical in some respects; there were daily religious observances, and the death penalty was often imposed for lying or theft. But Aztec leaders were not monastic. Emperor Montezuma II (1480?–1520) had 1000 wives and concubines, of whom as many as 150 were pregnant at the same time.

In **The Course of Mexican History** (Oxford, 1979), Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman begin their chronicle with prehistoric times. They note that it was not until A.D. 1100 that the Aztecs first appeared on the scene when they left the Caribbean island of Aztlán off the coast of the present state of Nayarit. As the authors see it, the Aztecs were committed to a policy of war and the enslavement of less powerful neighbors even as they developed an orderly society, great cities, and remarkable art. In 1502, the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán (Mexico City)—which boasted elaborate palaces, gardens, canals, and even a zoo—had a population of some 80,000. At that time, only four European cities had populations of 100,000 or more.

Led by Hernando Cortés, Spanish *conquistadores* invaded Mexico in 1519. Cortés and his men, mostly of humble origin, preached Christianity, hunted for gold, and converted or killed the natives. The Aztec civilization succumbed in less than a decade, the crucial blow coming when Cortés, with a force of 900 men, captured Tenochtitlán in 1521.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1498–1593) was a foot soldier who rose to serve as an aide to Cortés and later became a government official in New Spain. In **True History of the Conquest of Mexico** (Octagon reprint, 1970), he chronicles his comrades' exploits and shares their belief in their divine mission.

In addition to providing Mexico with Catholicism and an enduring cultural tradition, the Spaniards implanted a philosophy of government aptly summed up by Antonio de Mendoza, first viceroy of New Spain: "Do little and do it slowly."

Anthropologist Eric R. Wolf writes in **Sons of the Shaking Earth** (Univ. of Chicago, 1959, cloth and paper) that, during the ensuing 300 years of Spanish rule, Mexico developed a rigid class system based mainly on racial distinctions brought about by frequent intermarriage among the Indians, the Spaniards, and Africans brought to Mexico as slaves.

In **The Mexican Political System** (Houghton Mifflin 1966; 2nd ed., 1976, cloth and paper), L. Vincent Padgett contends that Mexico's 20-year struggle for independence (won in 1821) was, in reality, a civil war, with the upper-class conservatives *(criollos)* at first siding with Spanish authorities against the peasants (Indians and *mestizos*). Padgett de-

scribes the conflict in terms of key personalities, and he divides them into heroes (Fathers Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and Jose María Morelos, peasant leaders) and villains (Colonel Agustín de Iturbide; General Antonio López de Santa Anna).

Santa Anna (1794–1876) served as President of independent Mexico 11 times, fought the Yankees, and once had his amputated leg paraded through the streets of the capital. He was so cruel and corrupt that many scholars consider him a forerunner of the worst of the modern-day Latin dictators.

One contemporary observer, however, was favorably impressed. Madame "Fanny" Calderón de la Barca was of Scottish and New England origin. As the wife of the Spanish envoy, she traveled extensively throughout Mexico during the middle of the 19th century. In **Life in Mexico** (1843; AMS Press reprint, 1976), she tells us that Santa Anna was "a gentlemanly, good-looking, quietly-dressed, rather melancholy-looking person," and she adds, "it was only now and then that the expression of his eyes was startling, especially when he spoke of his leg. . . . He speaks of it frequently."

Most Americans have no trouble recalling Santa Anna's successful siege of the Alamo (1836), but the ensuing Mexican-American War (1846–48) is less vivid. In **Many Mexicos** (Univ. of Calif., 1941; 4th rev. ed., 1966, cloth and paper), Lesley Byrd Simpson notes that at the start of the fighting, Mexico had 20,000 enlisted men in its army—and 24,000 officers.

The war left Mexico resentful and humiliated but did little to unite its people. In **A Concise History of Mexico: From Hidalgo to Cardenas, 1805–1940** (Cambridge, 1977, cloth and paper), Jan Bazant describes recurring class conflict throughout the 19th and 20th centuries: "the struggle for land on the part of those who do not possess it . . . the striving for land and status on the part of merchants and politicians; and the striving on the part of land-owning families to preserve their position."

Soon after the war, the presidency (1855–72) of Benito Juárez, an Oaxaca Indian dubbed by posterity "the father of the nation," was disrupted by civil strife (1857–60) over new laws separating church and state. Juárez attempted to redistribute the land by taking it away from the Church and making it available to the poor, to establish freedom of religion, to improve educational opportunities.

The inevitable upper-class reaction came with the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1830–1915). The reaction to the *Porfiriato* was a peasant revolution; during its violent phase (1910–20), some 1 million people lost their lives.

John Womack, Jr.'s **Zapata and the Mexican Revolution** (Knopf, 1969, cloth; Vintage, 1970, paper) is readable and exhaustive. Eschewing social and political analysis, Womack recounts how the poor cheered Emiliano Zapata (1880–1919), a peasant leader who helped Pancho Villa seize Mexico City in 1914. Zapata's Plan of Ayala, which demanded "land and liberty" for the poor, became one of the staples of Mexico's modern revolutionary tradition (and rhetoric). However, Zapata and Villa never succeeded in organizing their followers and exploiting success, and both men were eventually assassinated.

A more analytical companion to Womack's book is anthropologist Paul Friedrich's **Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village** (Prentice-Hall,

1970; Univ. of Chicago, 1977).

Two valuable studies of Mexico's politics and economy since the Revolution are Pablo González Casanova's **Democracy in Mexico** (Oxford, 1970, cloth; 1972, paper) and Clark N. Reynolds' **The Mexican Economy: Twentieth Century Structure and Growth** (Yale, 1970).

Reynolds suggests that the government's distribution of land to the peasants since the 1920s has brought a measure of social justice and rising economic productivity. The outcome has been balanced growth in the rural and urban sectors. He sees this balance as bringing about a widening of national markets, fairer income distribution, and one of the highest rates of capital formation in the Western hemisphere.

Highly respected Mexican historian González Casanova's **Democracy in Mexico** (Oxford, 1970, cloth; 1972, paper) is a left-of-center critique that faults the Revolution, even in its reform phase (1920–40), for not realizing democratic ideals.

The books of anthropologist Oscar Lewis are based on extensive interviews with scores of Mexicans, mostly the poor and the powerless. Among them are *Life in a Mexican Village, Five Families,* and *The Children of Sánchez.* Perhaps his best work is **Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family** (Random, 1964, cloth; Vintage, 1964, paper), which shows rural society as seen through the experiences of one man, his wife, and oldest son in a small highland village 60 miles south of Mexico City. Suspicious of foreigners, shrewd, but idealistic, Martinez fought alongside Zapata in the Revolution. His endless struggle to survive wears him down, yet he remains his own man. At age 42, he shocked his neighbors by converting to Seventh Day Adventism.

The contradictory Mexican psyche has been explored by many of Mexico's contemporary creative writers. Two representative anthologies are **Anthology of Mexican Poetry** (Ind. Univ., 1958, cloth and paper), compiled by Octavio Paz and translated by Samuel Beckett, and **The Muse in Mexico: A Mid-Century Miscellany** (Univ. of Texas, 1959), edited by Thomas Mabry Cranfill.

Novelist-critic Carlos Fuentes probes Mexican life in the 20th century in **The Death of Artemio Cruz** (Farrar, 1964, cloth; Noonday, 1964, paper). Among other things, he sensitively describes the plight of Mexico's Indians, demonstrates the destructive results of *macho* behavior, and evokes the Mexican peasant's passion for the land.

Octavio Paz has written a critical yet affectionate analysis of Mexican culture in **The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico** (Grove, 1961, cloth; 1962, paper). Better than anyone else writing today, Paz tells what it means to be Mexican: "We oscillate between intimacy and withdrawal, between a shout and a silence, between a fiesta and a wake, without ever truly surrendering ourselves. Our indifference hides life behind a death mask; our wild shout rips off this mask and shoots into the sky, where it swells, explodes, and falls back in silence and defeat. Either way, the Mexican shuts himself off from the world: from life and from death."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Suggestions for this essay came from Richard Fagen and from Alexander W. Wilde, a Research Associate with the Wilson Center's Latin American Program.*