Events leading to Cinco de Mayo

Cinco de Mayo has its roots in the French occupation of Mexico, which took place in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, the Mexican Civil War of 1858, and the 1860 Reform Wars. These wars left the Mexican Treasury nearly bankrupt. On July 17, 1861, Mexican President Benito Juárez issued a moratorium in which all foreign debt payments would be suspended for two years.[13][14] In response, France, Britain, and Spain sent naval forces to Veracruz to demand reimbursement. Britain and Spain negotiated with Mexico and withdrew, but France, at the time ruled by Napoleon III, decided to use the opportunity to establish a Latin empire in Mexico that would favor French interests, the Second Mexican Empire.

French invasion

Late in 1861, a well-armed French fleet stormed Veracruz, landing a large French force and driving President Juárez and his government into retreat.[15] Moving on from Veracruz towards Mexico City, the French army encountered heavy resistance from the Mexicans near Puebla, at the Mexican forts of Loreto and Guadalupe.[16] The 8,000-strong[17] French army[18][note 2] attacked the much smaller[19] and poorly equipped Mexican army of 4,500.[20][note 3] Yet, on May 5, 1862,[21] the Mexicans managed to decisively crush the French army, then considered "the premier army in the world."[22][23][24]

Mexican victory

The victory represented a significant morale boost to the Mexican army and the Mexican people at large. In the description of The History Channel, "Although not a major strategic win in the overall war against the French, Zaragoza's success at Puebla represented a great symbolic victory for the Mexican government and bolstered the resistance movement."[25] The description of *Time* magazine was: "The Puebla victory came to symbolize unity and pride for what seemed like a Mexican David defeating a French Goliath."[26] It helped establish a much-needed sense of national unity and patriotism.[16]

Events after the battle

The Mexican victory, however, was short-lived. Thirty thousand troops and a full year later, the French were able to defeat the Mexican army, capture Mexico City, and instate Emperor Maximilian I as ruler of Mexico.[2] However, the French victory was also short-lived, lasting only 3 years, from 1864 to 1867.[2] By 1865, "with the American Civil War now over, the U.S. began to provide more political and military assistance to Mexico to expel the French".[2] Upon the conclusion of the U.S. Civil War, Napoleon III, facing a persistently tenacious Mexican guerilla resistance, its ongoing war with Prussia, and "the prospect of a serious scrap with the United States", retreated from Mexico starting in 1866.[27] The Mexicans recaptured Mexico City, and Maximilian I was apprehended and executed, along with his Mexican generals Miramón and Mejía, in the Cerro de las Campanas, Querétaro.[2][14] "On June 5, 1867, Benito Juarez finally entered Mexico City where he installed a legitimate government and reorganized his administration."[14]

Significance

The Battle of Puebla was important for at least two reasons. Firstly, although considerably outnumbered, the Mexicans defeated a much better-equipped French army. "This battle was significant in that the 4,000 Mexican soldiers were greatly outnumbered by the well-equipped French army of 8,000 that had not been defeated for almost 50 years." [28][29] [note 4] Secondly, it was significant in that, since the Battle of Puebla, no country in the Americas has subsequently been invaded by any other European military force.[30] [note 5]

Consequences to the United States

Some historians have argued that France's real goal was to help break up the American Union, at the time in the midst of a civil war, by helping the southern Confederacy:[31] "The Mexicans had won a great victory that kept Napoleon III from supplying the confederate rebels for another year, allowing the United States to build a powerful army. This grand army smashed the Confederates at Vicksburg and Gettysburg just 14 months after the battle of Puebla, essentially ending the Civil War." The consequence of Cinco de Mayo to the United States has been thus recognized: "The defeat of the French army had consequences for America as well...the French defeat denied Napoleon III the opportunity to resupply the Confederate rebels for another year."[32]

Donald W. Miles adds, "At the time, there were fears in the United States that the French would use Mexico as a base to back the Confederacy, so President Lincoln and his Secretary of State went out of their way to appear 'neutral' in the Mexican situation. They did not want to take on the French and the Confederates at the same time".[33] Dr. Miles goes on to explain that "Napoleon III had hesitated to take on the United States directly, but now the news of the Civil War changed everything".[34] It meant that the Americans would be occupied with their conflict between North and South for some time. Upon hearing the Spaniards and the British had sailed off to grab the customs house in Veracruz to start collecting their duties, Napoleon decided he would not only send the French navy, but would also start looking for someone to place as emperor in Mexico. He would then use Mexico as a base to help the Confederates win their war against the United States. Napoleon saw this as an opportunity not to be missed.[34]

Historian Justo Sierra has written in his *Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, that had Mexico not defeated the French in Puebla on May 5, 1862, France would have gone to the aid of the South in the U.S. Civil War and the United States' destiny could have been very different.[35][36]

Ignacio Gonzalez wrote, "Some scholars, including José Antonio Burciaga, believe that had the French defeated México at Puebla, France would have aided the South in the American Civil War in order to free Southern ports of the Union Blockade. During this time, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was enjoying success, and French intervention could have had an impact on the Civil War."[22]