The Founding of New Spain
In 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico to claim land for Spain. The Aztec king, Montezuma II, welcomed Cortés to the capital, Tenochtitlán. Cortés made Montezuma II his prisoner. Other Aztec leaders drove the Spanish from the city. During the fighting, Montezuma II was killed. Some Native Americans wanted freedom from Aztec rule. They helped the Spanish regain control of Tenochtitlán. The Spanish had advanced weapons, which helped them defeat the Aztec.

The fall of Tenochtitlán in 1521 marked the end of the Aztec Empire and the start of Spanish rule in Mexico. The Spanish called their empire “New Spain.” They built their capital, Mexico City, on the site of Tenochtitlán.

Changes in Mexico
New Spain was made up of different society layers, or classes. The ruling class of New Spain was made up of government officials called peninsulares. A second class was made up of the criollos. The third class was made up of mestizos, who were of Spanish and Native American ancestry. A fourth class was made up of enslaved Africans brought to New Spain. Native Americans were the largest population group in New Spain. However, they had no power. Under the encomienda system, Spanish men controlled Native American villages.

Many Mexican leaders were influenced by the writings of earlier Europeans and Americans. They thought that people should be free to choose their own government. In 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo gave a speech called the Grito de Dolores urging people to throw off Spanish rule. He led his followers to Mexico City. They were defeated, and Father Hidalgo was executed. New leaders joined the fight for independence. In 1821 Mexico became independent. Texas gained independence from Mexico in 1836. The United States and Mexico could not agree where the border of Texas should be. They went to war. Mexico had to sign a treaty, which gave part of its land to the United States.