

Caste War of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico (1847-1915)

What caused the fierceness of this Mayan uprising which lasted over half a century, and killed 250,000 people? There were a few causes: changing the status of public lands which the Maya used for farming, and breaking agreements made with the Maya. Added to this was the arming of the Maya to help fight in wars against the central Mexican authorities, as well as in civil conflicts in the Yucatan itself. This period was the first time that the Maya were allowed to own guns.

Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, but by 1839, the Yucatecan elites revolted against the new government, enlisting the services of the Maya, who were promised land and freedom from taxes. A few years later, the new Yucatan government made sweeping changes, adopting new land and property rights, which included a clause allowing former public lands to be cultivated and sold. Over the next seven years, several hundred thousand acres of land once used by Mayan peasants was transferred to creole elites, who felt the uncultivated lands were barely used by the Maya. So not only were ancient lands stolen from the Maya but the promise of deeded land for combat duty was reneged on and never awarded them. At the same time, water rights protection was removed and cenotes (limestone sinkholes that served as reservoirs to the dry, often bleak landscape) which had supplied an area's water for centuries suddenly became private property. The Yucatecos had new uses for these lands. In the early 1800s, Yucatecos began growing more henequen, raised for fiber to make ropes, and sugar. In 1833, the first commercial henequen plantation was founded. Local landowners slowly converted their rural farms to suit this new crop, called green gold. By 1845, henequen became the major export crop of the Yucatan.

At the time of Mexico's independence, the Maya were declared free, but hacendados decided that the custom of the land would continue, meaning the Mayan would remain in servitude to his master. The ancient hacendados had grown accustomed to a class of native serfs; they came with the property and could not leave nor marry without the master's consent. And by creating a 'company store' debt system, the Maya could never repay the hacendado, meaning he would stay on indefinitely in serfdom. This well-suited the need for intensive labor in the sugar cane and henequen fields.

Yucatecos (creoles from the Yucatan) only joined the Mexican nation in the 1820s on condition that it remain a federated republic, which was explicitly stated in the 1825 state constitution. After the centralist coup in 1835, Yucatecos fought not only against the national Mexican forces brought into the Yucatan by Santa Anna (in 1842), but also against each other (some Yucatecos were in favor of remaining within the Mexican nation). And to aid them in their quest, they armed Mayans from the Yucatan and used them in their armies---the same Maya who had been forbidden to bear arms throughout the Spanish period.

The Maya in the 1840s began to gather together to discuss their grievances. Legal papers from the 1840s record an increasing number of complaints filed by Mayan villages against the larger towns in the Yucatan (dominated by creole landowners), as well as complaints about the misuse of taxes collected from the Maya. In 1847, after hearing of the death by firing squad to one of their leaders, Maya troops marched on Valladolid, and macheted 85 creoles. Mutilated bodies were carried triumphantly through the streets. With this news, a wave of dread hit Merida. The Mayan tribes then drove the entire creole population of the Yucatan to Merida, burning towns and pillaging as they went. But just as the Maya approached Merida, sure of victory, fate intervened when rainclouds appeared in the sky. With this first sign of coming rain, the Maya knew it was time to begin planting. They laid down their machetes and headed for home and their corn fields, in spite of pressure from their chiefs. In 1848, the Yucatecans staged a comeback, killed Mayan leaders. But the Maya kept fighting. They attacked Yucatecan villages, burned huts, and murdered any white man they encountered.

The fighting continued. In 1858, the Maya rebels massacred the inhabitants of Bacalar and captured Fort San Felipe. They held it for years before destroying and ransacking it. The conflict heated up once more. The booty obtained from the sacking of the towns which fell to the Maya, was exchanged for arms, gunpowder and other supplies provided by British merchants along the Hondo River. The relationship between the Maya and Belize (a British colony) became close to such a degree that in 1887 the Maya asked that the Yucatan be annexed to the British colony Belize, although the proposal was declined.

Mexican President Porfirio Diaz decided to settle the long-disputed boundary between Mexico and British Honduras. The Spencer-Mariscal Treaty, in 1893, established the Rio Hondo as the boundary, even though Yucatecos claimed that this treaty gave away some of their land. Mexico resolved some outstanding debt problems, and the British agreed to suppress the arms trade.

In 1898, federal authorities established a military station and customs post at the mouth of the Rio Hondo. Although the Maya outnumbered the Mexican-Yucatecan army, they found their dry stone walls were no match for artillery fire. The old guns and machetes of the Maya were ineffective against modern weapons. They were so short on ammunition for their guns that they resorted to using bits of telegraph wires they had taken down and cut up. The Mexican army continued to push into the Yucatan, eventually occupying major towns and locations there. Finally, with gunships and artillery aimed at the Maya, their capital was occupied in 1901, and the fighting ended.

Fighting was sporadic until 1915, with the Mexican Revolution. In September 1915, the final decree ending the caste war came, which canceled all 'debt labor,' that freed 60,000 Maya and their families, after 350 years of slavery. The Revolution had arrived, and with it, the caste war of the Yucatan ended after 60 years of fighting.