

Letter of Victor Hugo to the People of Puebla

The famed French writer Victor Hugo (author of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables*) wrote a Letter to Puebla, in response to a message that the people of Puebla had broadcast to the French soldiers attacking them: "What are you? The soldiers of a tyrant. The best of France is with us. You have a Napoleon III and we have a Victor Hugo." Hugo himself was active in politics, being elected to the National Assembly of France in 1849, but openly opposing the rise of Napoleon III as emperor. Hugo went into exile (where he lived the last 19 years of his life) first to Belgium, and then to Guernsey (a British island off the coast of France).

People Of Puebla: You are right to believe that I am with you. The war is not being waged on you by France, but by the empire. I am with you, you and I fight against the empire, you in your homeland, me in exile. Struggle, fight, be terrible and, if you think my name can be of any use to you, take advantage of it, aim at that man's head with the bullet of liberty.... I hear the shout you direct to me, I would like to get in between our soldiers and yours, but what am I? A shadow. Oh! Our soldiers are not to blame for this war; they put up with it as you put up with it, and they are condemned to the horror of waging it while detesting it. The law of history is to dishonor generals and absolve weapons. Weapons are blind glories; they are forces from which conscience has been taken; these invaders are the ones in chains, and the first slave the soldier makes is himself.... Courageous men of Mexico, resist! The Republic is with you and makes the French flag with its rainbow and the American flag with its stars flutter over your heads. Wait. Your heroic resistance is supported by the law and has in its favor the certainty of Justice. The attempt against the Mexican Republic continues the attempt against the French Republic. One ambush completes the other. The empire will fail in that infamous attempt, so I believe, and you will win. But whether you win or whether you are beaten, France will continue to be your sister, in your glory or your misfortune, and I, since you appeal to my name, I repeat that I am with you; if you are winners, I offer you my fraternity as a citizen; if you are beaten, by fraternity as an exile.

Victor Hugo

Hugo did have a point—that failure in war would lead to the downfall of the French empire, although it required one more war, against a very tough Prussia (the most powerful German state) a few years after the failed mission in Mexico. Napoleon III surrendered to the Germans on 2 September 1870, and the French Third Republic was declared on 4 September 1870.