The French intervention in Mexico from 1862 to 1867 proved to be the beginning of the end for the Second Empire. The project was in fact a twisting road to hell paved, if not with the best intentions, then at least with a solid underlayer of missionary zeal and sincere “white man’s burden.” That there were base influences involved is also beyond doubt. The Duc de Morny, Louis Napoleon’s illegitimate half-brother and eminence grise of the regime, had a stake in the financial dealings of the Swiss banker Jean Baptiste Jecker, whose earlier loans to Mexico the French military occupation was supposed to protect.

At the same time, though, it’s also undeniable there was a large measure of idealism in the plans of Napoleon III and his Spanish-born wife Eugenie. They hoped to create a Catholic empire in Latin America that could face on an equal footing the belligerent Protestant colossus of the United States, challenging its galling Monroe Doctrine. In so doing, they also hoped to fully reestablish the respect and authority of the Holy Church in Mexican society while likewise bringing the blessings of liberal monarchy to a people they saw as wallowing in corruption and anarchy.

So much for the means and motives. The opportunity was furnished in 1860 when, almost simultaneously, the Indio jurist Benito Juarez and the backwoods lawyer Abraham Lincoln took control of their respective governments. In Mexico there was a short civil war in which Juarez’s Liberals defeated the Conservatives, the party of the Church and great landowners. The defeated were scattered into exile, many of them raising howls of protest from European capitals. Juarez found an empty treasury; he promptly declared a moratorium on foreign loan payments while confiscating Church property to help pay off Mexico’s enormous debts.

In the US, secession split the country in two, and the Monroe Doctrine, at least for a time, became unenforceable. When Spain and Britain made threats of military intervention to collect their bankers’ interest, Napoleon leaped at the chance to join them. He was savvy enough to know how valuable accomplices were in such enterprises, and though his partners in the forming coalition made clear they had no designs on Mexican territory, Napoleon and Eugenie had their own ideas. Of course, that such a project should ultimately redound to the greater glory and prosperity of Napoleon’s chronically insecure reign seemed only right to them. It would be, after all, French blood and treasure that would retrieve the situation.

When therefore, in January 1862, warships of Britain, France and Spain descended on the Mexican Gulf port of Vera Cruz, it was with the ostensible understanding the enterprise was to have a purely commercial object, the type of routine debt collection European fleets and armies often performed around the world. However, Dubois de Saligny, Napoleon’s diplomatic representative with the expedition, had been given private written instructions of a different nature by France’s foreign minister.
It may be that the presence on Mexican soil of the allied forces will encourage those elements of the population which are weary of anarchy and eager for peace and order, to attempt the establishment of a government offering firm guarantees of stability. Should they do so you are not to refuse them your encouragement nor withhold the moral support of France.

As a major holder of Jecker's bonds and a sworn enemy of the Juárez government, de Saligny needed no further prompting to follow such a course of action.

**Vera Cruz**

Vera Cruz was secured without a fight, and the allied landing force made up of 700 British Royal Marines, 6,000 Spanish and 2,500 French troops, including a battalion of Zouaves and a half-regiment of naval infantry, occupied the customs house. Almost immediately, the Europeans began to fall victim to the dreaded yellow fever, the scourge of the tierra caliente lowlands.

The Spanish commander, Gen. Don Juan Prim, then took a step of major significance. He negotiated the Convention of Soledad with Mexico's Foreign Minister Manuel Doblado, allowing for the peaceful transfer of the European troops to the more healthful inland highlands. Aside from deepening the geographic depth of the intervention, however, the Convention was a victory for the Mexicans: prior to it, the Europeans had branded their government as nothing more than a group of usurpers and embezzlers, the international equivalent of outlaws. Prim's agreement gave the Juárez administration certification as an officially recognized government; thereafter if European troops fought Juárez's soldiers they would do so as invaders, not as policemen.

The negotiations with the Juárez government did not sit well with Napoleon. He would have preferred his allies fall in completely with his ambitious designs, at least for the time being. But if they would not, he was prepared to undermine their positions. Already at the first meeting of the allied representatives in Vera Cruz to discuss financial claims, de Saligny had shocked his colleagues by advancing the then incredible sum of US $12 million as France's share, a figure that included the redemption of all the Jecker bonds at several times their issued value.

Soon thereafter Gen. Charles Ferdinand Latrille, Count of Lorencez, was dispatched at the head of a full brigade, 4,000 strong, to reinforce the French contingent. With him went Juan Nepomuceno Almonte, one of the Conservative émigrés who'd been hovering around Paris, exercising ever growing influence over Eugenie and, through her, on her husband. Almonte's arrival in Vera Cruz was an affront to the Juárez government, which had earlier declared him a traitor, and also to the governments of Britain and Spain, both of which had pledged not to interfere in Mexican politics.

Regardless, Almonte wasted no time issuing a bombastic proclamation calling for the restoration of "firm government." Since he was under the protection of the tricolor, in practice that could mean only one thing: a new Mexican government underpinned by French bayonets. On orders from Latrille, issued without consulting the Juaristas, French troops began moving out of their bivouacs in the highlands.

Things came to a head at a stormy meeting of the allied representatives in the town of Orizaba on 9 April. The row ended with the Spanish and English renouncing the whole project. The British marines were sent back to Bermuda, and the Spanish began to reembark for Havana. The next day de Saligny sent a note to Juárez: in response to "repeated Mexican depredations" it was the duty of the French military to begin hostilities.

Adm. Jean Jurien de la Graviere, up to that point the commander of the French forces, and who had
wholeheartedly welcomed the Convention of Soledad as a start toward a diplomatic solution, was replaced by Latrille. Soon French infantry were tramping west toward the city of Puebla, the gateway to Mexico City. On the 19th, near the village of Fortin, a troop of Chasseurs d'Afrique came across a dozen Juarista soldiers trying to barricade the road, and shooting began. Juarez issued a proclamation declaring a state of siege in the occupied areas and authorizing the raising of guerrilla bands. From Washington came a grim warning from Secretary of State William Seward the United States would not tolerate a European monarchy in the western hemisphere imposed by force. Both statements were ignored in Paris.

**Toward Puebla**

Puebla was the second largest city in Mexico. It had fallen to the Americans in 1848 without a fight and was then used by them as base for their advance into the interior. As the French approached, it was known to be guarded by a large number of Juaristas, but Almonte assured Latrille the people of Puebla, a center of the Catholic Church in Mexico, would welcome the French with flowers and song.

The advancing French force was in reality small and growing smaller due to disease and desertion. It consisted only of the 1st Battalion of the Chasseurs a Pied, the 99th Regiment of the Line, the 2nd Regiment of Zouaves, a regiment of naval infantry, a battalion of armed sailors and a squadron of the Chasseurs d'Afrique. There were also several batteries of artillery, including mountain guns, and a company of sappers, for a total of 6,000 effective. With them Latrille intended to follow in the footsteps of Cortes and Scott.

Indeed, the campaign began promisingly enough for the French. At Acultzingo the road from Vera Cruz passed through a steep canyon in the Cumbres Mountains. There Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza, with 4,000 infantry, three batteries of mountain guns, and 200 cavalry, took up a strong position across the road and into the heights north and south. On the afternoon of 28 April, when the advance guard of the Zouaves came under fire, Latrille launched an immediate attack.

Soon the Chasseurs were clambering over the rocks toward the Mexican cannon dug in on the right of the road while, on the left, more Chasseurs supported by the Zouaves charged toward defenders holding the ruins of an old presidio. After a fierce three-hour struggle, some of it hand-to-hand, the Mexicans were dislodged. Zaragoza's force, split in two, withdrew from the Cumbres, and the route to Puebla lay open.

The advance then led across the Anahuac Plateau, Mexico's breadbasket, a fruitful, well watered land of mild temperatures. The daily thunderstorms, rather than slowing the march, helped progress by eliminating dust on the road. At the village of Amozoc, the French found a local engineer with knowledge of Puebla's defenses, and Latrille interrogated him.

The best way to assault the town, the Mexican claimed, was from the south, as had been done during the recent civil war. To the northeast the city was dominated by a hill called Cerro de Guadalupe, the summit of which was crowned with a large convent and a stout stone structure called Fort Loreto. The artillery of that place would be useless, he claimed, against a force moving on the opposite side of the town. But Latrille's engineers disagreed: Zaragoza had close to 12,000 troops in Puebla; the churches, monasteries and ancient homes, laid out in neat square blocks, some with walls several yards thick, were ready made fortresses, and the defenders had connected many of them with entrenchments. To go against such a position with only 6,000 men would be madness; it would be far less costly to simply cut off the city, seize the high ground and bombard the place at leisure until Zaragoza was obliged to withdraw, they advised.

Latrille agreed with his officers, and the next morning, as the French column came within sight of
Puebla, he made his dispositions for the storming of Cerro de Guadalupe. The date was 5 May 1862.

**Cinco de Mayo**

The assault force was composed of two battalions of Zouaves with 10 field guns. They moved off toward the right of Cerro de Guadalupe and began to scale its heights, covered on their right by some of the sailors with a few mountain guns. On the French left, the Chasseurs à Pied faced west toward the city to hold off any enemy sorties. The naval infantry was held in reserve, to the rear, the 99th protected the supply train, and the Chasseurs d’Afrique stood ready to pursue and exploit any enemy retreat.

The French artillery opened fire early in the afternoon at 2,000 meters, bombarding the convent for over an hour. But their fire was uphill, and the fort’s massive walls simply absorbed the shells. Finally Latrielle lost patience and gave the signal for a general assault. Several companies of Chasseurs, attempting a diversion against the front of the enemy position, were held up by a deep ditch where they were cut down in droves by musketry and grapeshot. A few managed to get to the walls and bravely tried to maintain a position there, but were shot down almost to a man.

On the right the Zouaves ran into the fire of five massed infantry battalions supported by the batteries firing from the Loreto. Latrielle committed the naval infantry as reinforcements, but they merely added more casualties to the slaughter.

At that moment Zaragoza sorted his cavalry from the city against the French left, anchored at this point by only the two remaining companies of Chasseurs. Suddenly surrounded by what seemed a surging sea of horsemen, they formed square. Their well aimed volleys sent the Mexicans dashing back to cover, probably also saving Latrielle’s entire force from routing.

Just as the last companies of Zouaves were about to go forward in another hopeless charge, nature aided the French when a terrific thunderstorm suddenly blew in, covering the hill with hailstones and turning the slopes into sheets of ice. The ice made a renewed attack impossible, while the deluge itself covered the inevitable French retreat. Over 800 of Latrielle’s men were dead or wounded; Mexican casualties were only 83 killed, 132 wounded and 12 missing.

The French moved back in slow and painful stages along the road to Vera Cruz, shadowed by Zaragoza’s troops. Reaching Orizaba, Latrielle wrote to the minister of war, asking for siege guns and blaming the fiasco on Almonte and de Saligny.

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**Col. Dupin and the Contreguerillas**

Like the forces of Napoleon I earlier in Spain, those of Napoleon III in Mexico found themselves embroiled in a guerilla war in which bands of armed civilians staged hit and run raids and ambushes against troop columns, supply convoys and garrisons. As the sketches of Goya attest, along with much of military history since then, this type of conflict brings out the worst in participants on both sides.

The French were quick to field a counter to Juárez’s guerrillas: the Contreguerilla raiders. In 1862 they recruited a troop of cavalry, mostly from Mexico’s bandit population, to track down and arrest or execute suspected Juaristas. US Gen. Winfield Scott in 1848 had raised a similar unit, calling it his “Mexican Spy Company,” but the French force took on a larger kind of search and destroy mission, rather than one of simple intelligence gathering. Soon after being organized, the Contreguerillas were put under the command of Col. Charles Dupin.

Dupin had had a checkered career in the French army. He was a decorated veteran of the Crimea and Italy, but he'd also been cashiered after the China expedition of 1860 when he was caught trying to sell stolen artifacts he'd looted from the summer palace in Peking. Arriving in Mexico as part of de Saligny's entourage, he saw at once command of the Contreguerillas was exactly the opportunity he was looking for.

Taking charge, he filled out the unit's ranks with kindred spirits drawn from the riffraff of the Vera Cruz waterfront. In addition to Mexican adventurers and bandits, there were ex-slave traders, buffalo hunters, escaped French convicts, gunmen from the American west, and a Dutch clergyman who'd been defrocked for corrupting a minor.

With merciless discipline, Dupin forged them into a reasonably effective strike force that grew to include not only the original band of horsemen, but a battalion of infantry officered by a former Foreign Legionnaire.

The original area of operations of the Contreguerillas was the Puebla to Vera Cruz road and the nearby countryside. After the fall of Puebla, they remained in that area to guard the railway the French were constructing to Mexico City. Later they were sent north to support the allied Mexican Gen. Tomas Mejia.

So systematized did the Contreguerillas' terror become, Dupin even formulated a standard proclamation of pacification that he would shout when first leading his men into a Mexican town or village: "I am Col. Du Pin! Obey or you are dead! All resistance is futile. I protect the good but have no mercy for evil men! I kill men; I rape women; I murder children! I exterminate the enemy by fire, by steel and by blood: remember my words!"

Wherever they went, Dupin's men were the terror of the Juaristas and general populace alike. By the end of the intervention they had gained the worst reputation for brutality among all in French pay. Some of the widows of the men he'd killed formed an association that put a bounty on his head.

It's a matter of debate whether Dupin's activities ultimately hurt or helped the French cause. Dupin himself stayed on in Mexico until the final collapse of Maximilian's regime, then returned to France where he died soon after — some claim from poisoning by a vengeful Mexican.
In France the shock and anger following the news of Puebla were unprecedented. Whatever lingering doubts Napoleon may have harbored about the Mexican enterprise were set aside now that the prestige of his army was at stake. The Corps Legislatif voted the necessary funds, and soon a new expeditionary force 30,000 strong was being gathered under command of Gen. Elie Frederic Forey. They would cross the sea to wipe out the stain of Puebla.

Meanwhile, the fortunes of the French already in Mexico were at their ebb. Back on the coast, Latrille's men were dying like flies from yellow fever. Only a few ill-equipped and undisciplined bands of Mexicans, really just the private armies of Almonte's friends, had joined the invaders' cause. Juarista guerrillas were attacking supply convoys almost daily with savage efficiency, leaving the scattered garrisons of Zouaves and Chasseurs to hang on desperately to their posts in the hills. But on 21 September Forey debarked at Vera Cruz, and by the 24th he was installed at the Orizaba headquarters. Soon Latrille was on his way back to France, and a new chapter in the intervention was about to unfold.

**Return to Puebla**

Forey's army comprised two full infantry divisions and a brigade of cavalry, along with four batteries of light guns and a large artillery train, including siege pieces. In addition, there were staff and support units and the remnants of Latrille's command still in the country. There were also several hundred Creole sailors recruited from the French islands of the Caribbean for duty in the tierra calliente, and 400 Sudanese infantry, a gift from the Khedive of Egypt to Napoleon, intended for garrisoning Vera Cruz.

It had taken some weeks for the troops to be transported across the Atlantic, with a short stopover at Martinique to acclimate the men to the tropical heat. But Forey didn't intend to waste more time: shortly after landing, Gen. Alexie Bertier was sent along the northern road from the coast toward Jalapa and Perote, following Scott's route of 14 years before. Bertier's mixed force of infantry, cavalry and some mountain guns captured Jalapa on 7 Novem-

ber, after only a short skirmish. At the same time, Gen. Francois-Achille Bazaine, commanding 1st Division, was ordered to secure the southern road to Orizaba by dispersing the guerrillas threatening the line of supply and communication between there and Vera Cruz.

An amphibious operation led by Adm. de la Graviere succeeded in occupying the port of Tampico for a few days, were some badly needed pack mules were seized. Elsewhere French raiding parties swept across the countryside along the coast, rounding up every available head of livestock and wheeled vehicle, while purchasing agents were also at work getting more animals and wagons in New York City.

Simultaneously with Bertier's advance along the northern route, Gen. Felix Douay was sent out from Forey's headquarters at Orizaba on the southern road. Retracing Latrille's approach of eight months earlier, Douay got his 5,700 men through the Cumbres without incident during the first week of December.

Later that month Bazaine took his division out after Bertier on the northern road together with a small force of Mexican allies led by Leonardo Marquez. Bazaine's men had a hard time: the terrible condition of the road through the mountains, torrential rain and cold, as well as ambushes and rear-guard skirmishes with the Juaristas, slowed the march. Leaving Jalapa on 16 December, the column reached Perote in three days, but then needed over two weeks to reorganize. Not until the end of February 1863 was the town of Huamantla occupied and communications opened from there back to Forey. Nevertheless, the French were firmly back on the Anahuac Plateau, where the troops were better able to live off the land since there was plenty of beef on the hoof, and corn meal, though not to the taste of French palates, could be used for bread without recourse to supply caravans from the coast.

By 9 March, Douay's column was in Amozoc, only a day's march from Puebla, and Bazaine's scouts were pushing down the road from Huamantla. On the 19th, Bazaine's infantry moved past Amozoc, taking up positions in the haciendas and villages surrounding Puebla. The general himself made a personal reconnaissance of the city's defenses, sending back his impressions to Forey.

Inside Puebla, Gen. Jesus Gonzalez Ortega was now in command with a force over 15,000 strong. He ordered a scorched earth policy for the surrounding countryside, then expelled the priests and nuns from their monasteries, turning those buildings into hospitals and magazines. Pres. Juarez made a brief visit from Mexico City to review the troops and distribute some back pay. A state of siege had been declared on 10 March, and as the brigades of French infantry moved to the outskirts of Puebla, streams of refugees filled the roads to the west.

The task confronting Forey was, if anything, more difficult than that of Latrille the previous year. For one thing, the Mexicans had not been idle during the
months since Cinco de Mayo; Puebla had been even more heavily fortified and strongly garrisoned. On the northeast the Guadalupe convent and Loreto fortress stood almost unscathed. Blocking the Amozoc road directly east of town was Fort Zaragoza. To the south, on either side of the Rio San Francisco, were Forts Totomehuacan and Carmen, while Fort Santa Anita guarded the northern approaches. Overlooking the main highway running northwest to Mexico City stood the Cerro de San Juan, topped by Fort San Javier and a huge building once used as a penitentiary. All those strongpoints bristled with cannon and were flanked by earthworks and redans.

If Forey was personally inclined to caution, the long letter of instruction sent to him from France was enough to make him reconsider. In it the emperor hinted he wanted a dramatic and stirring victory to redeem the honor of French arms: clouds of cannon smoke, flashing bayonets, waving flags and the air filled with bugle calls would be just the thing to revive the sagging esprit of the crowds on the boulevards of Paris. In short, Forey was encouraged to take Puebla by storm rather than by cautious and dreary siege.

By 19 March the city was completely surrounded; Bazaine's division on the south and Douay's on the north spread out in two wide arcs. With only the limited men and munitions on hand, however, Forey could not risk a general assault along the whole perimeter. Instead, one of the strongpoints would have to be taken and then used as an entrance into the city proper. He decided to focus his attention on the Cerro de San Juan, and soon his sappers were inching forward with pick and shovel.

On 25 March their parallels were within 330 meters of San Javier. The next morning the French artillery opened up, knocking down parapets, blasting holes in the walls and destroying all but two of the Mexicans' cannon. Two more days of digging brought the trenches to within 70 meters of the enemy fortifications, and it was judged the time was right for the assault.

The next morning at five o'clock, Gen. Bazaine gave the signal sending the French infantry over the top. The mission of storming the Hill of San Juan had been assigned to the 1st Battalion of the Chasseurs a Pied and the 2nd Battalion of the Zouaves, the same units that had been decimated at Guadalupe. What those men thought of the honor bestowed on them by their commanding general was not recorded, but their casualties were.

The Mexicans, far from having been demoralized by the earlier French barrage, proved full of fight and resisted fiercely from the cover provided by the rub-

**General Forey's Expeditionary Corps**

- 1st, Commanded by Bazaine
  - 1st, General Neige
    - 18th Chasseurs a pied
    - 1st Zouaves
    - 81st Line
  - 2nd, General de Castagny
    - 20th Chasseurs a pied
    - 3rd Zouaves
    - 95th Line
  - Tirailleurs Algeriens
    - 4 pounds
    - manned by sailors

- 2nd, Commanded by Douay
  - 1st, Colonel L'Herissier
    - 1st Chasseurs a pied
    - 2nd Zouaves
    - 2nd Line
  - 2nd, General Bertier
    - 7th Chasseurs a pied
    - 51st Line
    - 62nd Line

**Note:** Tirailleurs and Chasseur battalions had 6 companies, line battalions had seven, and Zouaves had eight.

**On 9 March 1863, after counting losses from sickness, battle, and desertion, and garrisons left behind in route,** Bazaine had under his command:

- 16,000 infantry
- 1,400 cavalry
- 2,150 artillerymen
- 450 engineers
- 2,300 administrative personnel
- 2,000 Mexican auxiliaries

**26,300 total, with 56 guns**

**Republic of Mexico**

- x 25 State Auxiliary Forces
- x 10 Garrison Artillery
- x 7 Garrison Artillery
- Invalids
- "Rurales" = 2,200
- Mexico City Federal District Auxiliary
- x 8 Sedentary

**Added 1266: "American Legion of Honor" = 60 (About 3,000 Americans, total, served throughout the Republic of Mexico armed forces as volunteers).**

**Sedentary**
ble of San Javier and among hastily thrown up barricades. As soon as the Chasseurs and Zouaves came into view, they were met with a terrific fusillade of bullets and grape-shot. It was Cinco de Mayo again, but this time the French kept on; they broke into the penitentiary, fighting room to room throughout the day and into the night. Finally, around 8:00 p.m., the fire died away; Cerro de San Juan was in French hands along with 200 prisoners. But the cost of avenging the Fifth of May was high: 13 officers wounded and three killed, 26 soldiers dead and 189 wounded.

The War of Squares

If Forey thought his success on the 29th would lead to Puebla's capitulation, he was soon disillusioned. The Mexicans withdrew to the outskirts of the city, only a few dozen yards to the east, and then began a month-long nightmare of house-to-house fighting. Ortega's troops stubbornly defended every block of buildings, while Forey's men just as stubbornly pressed in toward the city center.

The meticulous French engineers made a quick survey, dividing the city into over 150 cadres, or squares, and one after another those sections were laboriously attacked by artillery, then taken by infantry. Time and again storming parties entered some ancient residence to find themselves trapped in its central courtyard, where they were pinned or cut down by massed volleys directed from the surrounding balconies and doorways. Not even explosive charges could blow open some of the huge old doors on the larger buildings, and the numerous street barricades provided perfect settings for ambushes by enemy snipers firing from the crenelated rooftops.

The street fighting climaxed on 5 April with the attack on square 34. From the Church of San Marcos a battery of French 12-pounders blasted a hole in the adjoining structure. Near dusk a small advance guard of 30 Zouaves and some sappers rushed through the opening. The rest of the assault column tried to follow but was caught in a deadly crossfire; the captain in charge were killed, his two junior officers wounded, and the rest of the men then refused to move out of the cover of the church. During the night the small advance party was cut off and forced to surrender.

At a council of war soon after, both Douay and Bazaine castigated Forey for conducting such a "war of squares." They urged bypassing Puebla in favor of a forced march directly to Mexico City. But Forey refused to give in. For the French army to march away from Puebla now, he maintained, would be a mortal blow to morale and would only harden the resistance of the Juaristas. He did, however, call a short respite in offensive operations to bring up supplies and ammunition from the coast.

On 14 April the street fighting resumed with full fury. As the bloody work of block clearing went on, the Mexicans retreated from one defensive line to the next, leaving only piles of rubble and scores of corpses in their wake. Nor did they restrict themselves to a passive defense. From the Church of St. Baltazar, a column of 1,500 infantry and 700 cavalry made a sortie against Bazaine's positions in front of Fort Carmen on 15 April. Elsewhere inside the city some blocks held by the French were completely surrounded by counterattacking parties of Gen. Ortega's men.

On the 25th, Douay launched an assault on square 52 at the Santa Ines convent, an anchor of the Mexican defense line, defended by 2,000 riflemen from behind stone parapets, an iron fence and a row of abatis. When the push ended in repulse, 160 Zouaves lay dead or wounded and 130 more were prisoners.

Despite such successes, however, Ortega and his staff knew Puebla could not be defended much longer. Supplies and reinforcements were coming up
Along the road from Vera Cruz to Puebla, about 20 kilometers east of the village of Paso del Macho, there was at one time a burial mound indicating a common grave with a simple tombstone on which was inscribed an epitaph in Latin. Translated, it read in English, "They stood here, fewer than 60 against an entire army. Its mass crushed them. Life rather than courage deserted these French soldiers..."

The legend of Camerone, for that's what it became, began on 2 May 1863, when a column of the French Foreign Legion, commanded by Col. Pierre Jeanningros, approached the ruins of an abandoned hacienda near the village of Camerone. The settlement itself was familiar as a stopover for supply convoys from the coast.

The Legion contingent, two battalions under Jeanningros, about 2,000 men, had arrived only a month earlier. Quickly leaving Vera Cruz behind, Jeanningros marched his command to Chiquihuite, on the edge of the tierra caliente. There he established his headquarters for the completion of the Legion's mission, the onerous task of escorting supply trains from Vera Cruz to Forey's forces battling for Puebla. In that area the water was bad, the temperature stifling and yellow fever rampant. But Forey believed the Legion would be perfect for such a job. "I had to leave foreigners rather than Frenchmen," he'd written the minister of war, "in a position where there was more sickness than glory to conquer."

On 29 April, Jeanningros was informed an important supply train was on its way west; it contained badly needed artillery pieces and 4 million in gold francs. From Soledad to Chiquihuite the convoy would be escorted by two companies of the Legion, while Col. Dupin's Contre-guerillas swept the area on either side of the highway. Still, Jeanningros thought it would be wise to send out a small patrol of his own to the east to make sure there were no Juaristas lurking in ambush.

According to Jeanningros' rotation schedule, it was the turn of the 3rd Company for duty, even though it was undermanned. There were only 62 men fit for duty out of 100, and both officers were down with fever. Capt. Jean Danjou, the one-armed adjutant of the 1st Battalion, volunteered to lead the patrol, and about 11:30 p.m. that night the 3rd Company moved out of Chiquihuite on what seemed to be a routine task.

Early on the morning of 1 May an Indian runner arrived at Jeanningros' headquarters telling of a terrific fight on the road to the east. The colonel left at once, picking up reinforcements along the way and marching through the night. At dawn the next day his men neared the old hacienda called La Trinidad, just as a bloody figure crawled from out of the brush. The man was identified as the 3rd's drummer. Stabbed seven times, shot twice, and suffering from exhaustion and dehydration, he was at first incoherent, but was soon revived enough to stammer out the amazing story of Danjou's command.

The previous morning the 3rd Company had passed the hacienda, halting their march at a field to the east called Palo Verde. Just as the coffee was starting to boil, a lookout spotted horsemen to the north. The coffee pots were kicked over, weapons taken up and cocked, and Danjou led his men after the now-retreating riders. They were, the captain believed, only a roving group of guerrillas or bandits looking for easy prey.

But Danjou was wrong. Actually he was taking his men straight into a what amounted to a small army of Mexican regulars. Lt. Col. Francesca de Paula Milan had learned of the gold convoy and was lying in wait with 800 lancers and 1,000 infantry. The Legionnaires' unexpected intrusion had spoiled the surprise, but Milan determined to wipe out the patrol before the wagons arrived.

Realizing his error in judgement, Danjou ordered his men back to the hacienda. The Legionnaires formed square twice to repel Milan's lancers, inflicting heavy losses, then barricaded themselves behind the crumbling adobe walls of La Trinidad. Throughout the rest of the day, under a broiling sun, a fierce battle raged. The Legionnaires fought the attackers outside the walls, as well as a party of Mexican snipers who infiltrated inside the hacienda itself.

Danjou went down early in the fight, but not before he made his men promise to hold out to the last cartridge. That they did; at six o'clock in the evening, with the hacienda burning around them and Mexican infantry pouring over the walls, the last five men standing threw themselves on their attackers. Two were mortally wounded, the other three taken prisoner.

A little mathematics demonstrates the effectiveness of the Legionnaires' marksmanship. The mules carrying the extra ammunition had stampeded early on, leaving each of Danjou's men with 60 rounds, for a total of 3,720 on hand. At least 300 of Milan's troops were rendered hors de combat by French bullets, for an average of one enemy downed for every dozen shots. That accuracy exceeds the average from any later wars, even though those were fought with much more deadly weapons. At any rate, Milan was impressed; he headed north immediately rather than wait for the supply train.

Capt. Danjou's wooden arm, obtained in trade by some Austrian soldiers serving in Mexico two years after the battle, was returned to France and has since become the most treasured relic of the French Foreign Legion.
Yellow Fever

The soldiers of most 19th century armies had more to fear from disease than from the bullets of their adversaries. In the swamps of the *tierra caliente* around Vera Cruz, the most terrifying danger was yellow fever, the vomito negro. Many of the strategic decisions made during the first months of the French intervention, including the Convention of Soledad and the rapid march on Puebla, were made under pressure of the threat posed by this disease, the major onset of which could be expected during the warm months.

Winfield Scott's US army had confronted the same problem in 1848. Scott quickly marched his entire force inland after capturing Vera Cruz, virtually cutting them off from the coast and thus minimizing his losses from sickness. But the French in the 1860s, whose initial intention was to conquer all of Mexico and occupy it more or less permanently, could not afford to follow that option. Consequently, with large numbers of their troops stationed in the *tierra caliente* throughout the intervention, their losses from yellow fever and other tropical diseases were high. When Latrille started inland for Puebla, fewer than 6,000 of his 7,000 men were fit to march.

The first symptoms of the disease are headaches, nausea, chills and fever, followed, by mental disorientation and prostration. The skin turns yellowish, and there is often a black vomit. Some patients recover after the seventh day, though there may be permanent damage to the liver and kidneys. One attack confers immunity, but among the French in Mexico the death rate was high because of fatigue and the ravages of other diseases like dysentery.

At the turn of the century, US Army doctors, first in Cuba, then in Panama, pinpointed the transmitter of yellow fever: the *aedes aegypti* mosquito, and not unhealthy swamp air as was thought earlier. Swamp clearing and mosquito eradication have since mostly eliminated this disease. It wasn't until 1932, however, that an effective vaccine was developed.

the road to Forey's army; soon Bazaine's cannon would reduce Fort Carmen, and his brigades would then link up with Douay's in the center of the city. The last hope lay with the three corps of Gen. Ignacio Comonfort that were operating between Puebla and Mexico City. But Comonfort, a former president of the republic, had so far made only half-hearted efforts to reach Puebla. It took a visit to his headquarters by Juarez himself to stiffen his resolve. He gathered a large supply convoy and began the march on 5 May.

**San Lorenzo**

In the French camp there was uncertainty as to Comonfort's exact whereabouts. Some Indian scouts had been sent out, returning with news a Mexican relief force had reached the town of San Lorenzo, west of Puebla, but had then withdrawn. In his younger days Bazaine had been head of the Arab Bureau in Algeria. He'd gained extensive experience in interrogating natives, which gave him the insight to know when he was being lied to. He took the Indians aside and soon got them to admit they had not gone near San Lorenzo.

Going to the top of Cerro de San Juan, Forey and Bazaine trained their field glasses on the region to the west. Bazaine claimed to see a cloud of dust on the horizon, indicating large troop movements, but Forey could see nothing. Still, the French commander gave Bazaine permission to lead a reconnaissance in force toward San Lorenzo.

Bazaine chose four battalions of infantry, one each from the 3rd Zouaves, the 51st and 81st Regiments and the *Tirailleurs Algeriens*. He also took three squadrons of French cavalry and one of allied Mexicans, the artillery battery of the *Imperial Guard*, another battery of mountain guns and some engineers. The force moved out of its encampments shortly after midnight on 8 May, marching first up the Mexico City road, then striking out cross-country.

Bazaine's Mexicans got the column past Comonfort's outposts without raising an alarm. The engineers got the artillery across some hills after constructing ramps. By 5:00 a.m. San Lorenzo was in view. The town was situated on a rise, the eastern slopes of which, cut by numerous ravines, led down to the right bank of the Atoyac River. The western slopes, more gradual than the eastern, were covered with patches of cacti and trees. To the south, in front of the Church of San Lorenzo, the Mexicans had dug a line of gun emplacements to guard against frontal assault. When the Juarista pickets were driven in, they ran back into the village spreading the alarm. The Mexican guns opened fire at 1,200 meters.

The *Guards Artillery* galloped ahead and unlimbered to begin a covering barrage while Bazaine made his dispositions for the attack. The infantry battalions were ordered to form en echelon, with the left flank leading and the right refused. The French cavalry was ordered to make a sweep around the western slopes of the hill to cut off any Mexican retreat. At 800 meters the French drummers beat the charge, and the orderly ranks moved in toward San Lorenzo. Heavy rifle and cannon fire failed to slow their advance, and the echelon formation effectively kept the pressure on the defenders all along the line as the French battalions struck their right flank.

The town and its church were at first defended tenaciously; the Mexican infantry numbered between 6,000 and 7,000 and, as usual, they made good use of cover. But French bayonet charges broke their resistance, and within two hours the Mexicans were running. Part of the French cavalry fell on the retreating infantry, while another part pursued Comonfort's horsemen toward the west. By 9:30 a.m., two corps of Comonfort's army had been nearly wiped out, and the third was fleeing north into the state of Tlaxcala, from where it could no longer threaten the French operations at Puebla. In what turned out to have been the decisive battle of the campaign, the Mexicans lost 800 killed and wounded, 1,000 prisoners, eight guns, and the entire supply convoy. French losses were only 11 killed and 89 wounded.

**The Fall of Puebla**

Just to the south of Puebla proper, French sappers were now digging their parallels within cannon range of Fort Totimehuacan. At dawn on 16 May the French batteries commenced firing and the Mexicans responded with a tremendous cannonade of their own, but in so doing used up most of their remaining ammunition. Soon the walls of the fort were levelled, with only one defending gun still firing. At noon the fire from other French batteries began the final reduction of Fort Carmen. The pounding went on through the night as sappers brought the trenches to within 250 meters of the forward Mexican positions. Around 9:00 a.m. the next morning there were sounds of marching from within the city; shortly thereafter massive explosions shook the ground and lit the horizon.

Ortega had enough: he'd ordered the remaining munitions blown up, the guns spiked and the army
troops, Napoleon III set about putting the second phase of his plans into effect. Incorporating so large and long independent a country directly into France's empire would have been too audacious even for a Bonaparte. So Louis Napoleon did the next best thing: he handpicked Mexico's new emperor.

Who Napoleon needed was someone with the cunning and ruthlessness of Cortes and Pizarro, combined with the adroitness of Clive. Who he got was the Archduke Maximilian of Austria. A younger brother of Emperor Franz Josef, Maximilian was residing in his Adriatic palace of Miramar when he was approached with the offer of the "Cactus Throne."

There's speculation among historians Napoleon made the choice to curry favor with Franz Josef, in hopes of getting future control of Venice, then still part of Hapsburg domains. Whatever the French ruler's motives, he gradually won over the Archduke to his scheme. Maximilian was in fact bored, and his clever, ambitious wife wanted better things too. So after much intrigue and negotiation, including back and forth trips by representatives of France, Austria and the Mexican emigre gang, the deal was struck.

There had to be the formality of a plebiscite in Mexico. This was no real election, to be sure — Austria's ambassador to France had made it clear no Hapsburg would ever stand for that — but a pro-forma ratification from the dependable elements of the population under the watchful eyes of the French army. The Juaristas and the Indians, making up more than 90 percent of the populace, were of course not enfranchised, but Maximilian was satisfied.

At the last minute, he almost balked when he read the fine print on the document authorizing French sponsorship of his reign. The slippery Napoleon had tried to sneak in a clause that would have given France outright control of the northern state of Sonora, with its large gold and silver mines. The offending article was quickly excised with embarrassed apologies, and the new monarch and his empress departed in May 1864 aboard an Austrian warship. Before he left, Maximilian was forced to sign another document renouncing all claims on his potential Hapsburg

**Enter Maximilian**

On 7 June 1863, Bazaine's division led the French entry into Mexico City, while Benito Juarez and his cabinet fled north to San Luis Potosi. With the Mexican capital under the control of his disbanded. A few groups managed to break through the French lines, but most were taken prisoner. On the 19th a battalion of *Chasseurs a Pied* occupied Totomehuacan, and the tricolor was raised over the cathedral there where Forey attended mass.

Twenty-six Mexican generals, 1,482 officers and 11,000 soldiers, along with 150 guns, fell into French captivity. De Saligny wanted the officers deported to Devil's Island, but Forey arranged transportation to a more honorable captivity in France. (On their way to Vera Cruz, most escaped and made it into the countryside where they joined the guerrillas.)

The 62 days of street fighting had cost 185 French lives. That was a bargain as far as Louis Napoleon was concerned, for it had retrieved his army's reputation. "I deplore bitterly the probable loss of so many of the brave," he wrote Forey. "But I have the consoling thought that their deaths have not been in vain for the interests nor the honor of France, nor for civilization."

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**COMMAND MAGAZINE**

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**XXX**

At its peak, around January 1867, about 30,000

**Mexican Imperial Army**

**Imperial Mexican Corps of Austrian and Belgian Volunteers**

- Formed 12/64, disbanded 12/66

**"Austrian Legion"**

- 6,800

**"Belgian Legion"**

- 1,500

**"Emperor Maximilian Hussars"**

- Palace Guard

**"Contreguerilla Corps"**

- 850

**"Gendarmerie"**

- About 12,000 men scattered around the country in small units

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**XXX**

**"Supers"**

- 8

**"Cuirassiers"**

- 4

**"Cazadores"**

- 18

**"Hussars"**

- Guard Emperor Doggeon

**Mexico City Municipal Guards**

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**XXX**

**"Jagers"**

- 9

**"Pioneers"**

- Gendarmerie

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**"Maximilian Hussars" and "Ulanes" (Lancers)**

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**"Emperor Otto Gendarmerie"**

- 850
The Battle of Cerro de Majoma

An incident typical of the small-unit battles fought by the French and Mexicans in the latter stages of the intervention took place at Cerro de Majoma, south of the city of Durango, on 24 September 1864. There a column led by Lt. Col. Martin, made up of six companies of infantry, a squadron of the Chasseurs d’Afrique, a battery of mountain howitzers and a small body of allied Mexican cavalry, had been sent southeast in search of Juarista formations reported to be concentrating for an attack. Nine miles from the hacienda of Estanzuela, Martin was warned by some passing shepherds about the presence of a large Juarista force nearby.

The Chasseurs d’Afrique galloped ahead to chase the Juarista horsemens from the hacienda. Then Martin occupied the buildings, placing his pack mules within the walls, guarded by the mule skinners and a company of Chasseurs a Pied. The commander then moved out with his French cavalry, a company of infantry in advance and the other four spread out in line, with the artillery in the center. They followed the road out from the hacienda that, a short distance away, turned right to skirt the foot of a 30 meter high rise called Cerro de Majoma. It was atop and behind that elevation Martin found a Juarista army corps drawn up and waiting, a total of 4,000 men with 20 cannon.

Martin saw he was badly outnumbered, but fearing a retreat might turn into a disaster he ordered an immediate assault by four companies of Zouaves against the north face of the Cerro. The men advanced, taking advantage of the abundant cover on the slopes. But near the crest the French were greeted by a volley of cannon fire that killed Martin. The command devolved on Maj. Japy of the 2nd Zouaves, who continued to press the attack.

Despite four officers and a large number of men being wounded, the batteries atop the Cerro were taken with the bayonet. The Zouaves then formed square to repel Mexican attempts to retake the summit, while Japy ordered his French cavalry to drive into the enemy infantry. The Chasseurs a Pied then overran a Mexican battery that had just moved onto the road, turning the captured guns against the Juaristas. The entire Mexican force was soon retreating in disorder.

Pursuit proved impossible, though, because of the falling darkness and the fatigue of the French soldiers. The victory was complete nevertheless: the Juaristas had suffered heavy casualties, including three generals, 21 wounded, 152 prisoners and 20 guns lost. The French loses were 20 dead, including Martin, and 50 wounded. Japy led the column back to Durango, where it arrived safely on 26 September.

Luis Potosí, surrounded by what was now called the Liberal Army, estimated at around 20,000 men, along with uncounted numbers of guerrillas. Bazaine was ordered to corner Juarez, bring his forces to battle, and thus end the Mexican republic once and for all.

Bazaine’s Northern Campaign

On 8 November 1863, Bazaine’s columns marched out of Mexico City heading north. One column, commanded by Gen. Armand Castagny, was composed of the 7th and 20th Battalions of Chasseurs, some companies from the 3rd Zouaves, the 51st and 95th Regiments, and two squadrons of cavalry, along with the allied Mexican division of Marquez. This force followed the route leading northwest through Toluca, Acambaro, Morelia, and finally on to Guadalajara. It was a rough trail mostly through desert.

The second column, under Douay, with the 1st Battalion of Chasseurs, the Tirailleurs Algeriens, one battalion each of the 62nd, 99th and 2nd Zouave Regiments, three squadrons of cavalry and the small allied Mexican division of Tomas Mejia, followed the main highway north through Queretaro, then west through Leon and Lagos to Guadalajara.

Bazaine himself left Mexico City on the 17th, at the head of his personal command, the Avant-Garde: six cavalry squadrons, some battalions of the 3rd Zouaves, a battery of mountain guns and the horse artillery of the Guard. During the campaign that followed, spectacularly successful for the French from a purely military standpoint, Bazaine drew on his experience in Algeria with mobile field forces covering long distances. He shuttled back and forth between his two main columns, escorted by his Avant-Garde, appearing at the right times and places to provide direct leadership at critical moments.

It was a risky strategy, but one that paid large dividends. The Juarista generals were kept off balance by the rapid advance, and were compelled to fight mostly just rearguard skirmishes as they retreated from stronghold to stronghold. For the most part, the campaign was a series of nearly bloodless French triumphs, with the Europeans arriving to occupy a town a day or so after the departure of the Juaristas.

The two pitched battles fought during the campaign were also pleasant surprises from the French point of view in that they were won for them almost entirely by their Mexican allies. Prior to that time, the small force of Conservative troops attached to the French army had been a source of disgust and ridicule to Bazaine’s officers. The French for the most part considered their Mexican allies’ soldiers to be disorderly, criminal cowards, and their officers arrogant, corrupt and treacherous. But after Puebla there was mounting pressure from Paris to increase the effectiveness of those units.

Napoleon was already looking for an easy exit from the Mexican imbroglio, and he accordingly wanted a functioning and dependable Imperial Mexican Army to replace French soldiers within a year or two. Consequently he ordered great effort be made to upgrade weapons, training, equipment and pay for the Conservative troops and for them to be reorganized along French army lines. Also, in Gens. Tomas Mejia and Leonardo Marquez the Conservatives had brought forth two leaders who, despite whatever personal faults they had, possessed an abundance of charisma and bravery.

Morelia was occupied by Douay’s column on 30 November. The French pushed on, leaving Marquez’s division of 4,700 men to occupy the town. On 18
December the Juarista Gen. Jose Lopez Uranga, with 12,000 men and 36 guns, suddenly attacked, thinking he would easily overrun the place. Marquez’s men were driven back into the central plaza, but instead of surrendering they fought on desperately. Marquez himself was seriously wounded in the face but continued to direct the defense with such energy the Juaristas were forced to break off, leaving behind 600 of their dead.

Along the other route of advance, San Luis Potosi was taken by Mejia’s division on Christmas day. On the 27th, his 2,500 men were also assaulted by double their number of Juaristas led by Miguel Negrette, but Mejia’s horsemen repulsed them, taking 850 prisoners.

By the first week of January 1864, Guadalupe was under French occupation and the Liberal forces were retreating in several directions. The Juarez government, reduced to a pathetic little caravan, was running north toward the Rio Grande, and the invaders were masters of three-fourths of Mexico’s territory, including Tampico and several Pacific ports. This was in fact the high water mark for the French in Mexico. On the eve of Maximilian’s arrival, Bazaine could write the French minister of war without too much hyperbole: “I am full of confidence in the imminent peaceful solution of the Mexican question, and I have enough troops to end things soon. One no longer speaks of Juarez or his travelling government, and I do not know, at present, where they are.”

On 17 May there was a final offensive by the remnants of the Liberal Army. Gen. Manuel Dobladlo led 6,000 men with 18 cannon against the town of Matehuala, which was defended by Mejia. While the latter’s infantry took cover behind the town’s stone walls to hold off the Juaristas, a relief column under Col. Alphonse-Edouard Aymard of the 62nd Regiment arrived. Aymard, with four companies of French infantry, fell on the Juaristas’ left flank; a squadron of the Chasseurs d’Afrique routed their cavalry, and Mejia’s frontal counterattack then drove their infantry from the field. Twelve-hundred prisoners and all the Liberals’ guns were taken by the allies. Soon afterward Dobladlo went into exile in the United States while Uranga defected to the French.

1864-65

Throughout the rest of 1864 and 1865, Bazaine’s forces, divided into small flying columns, patrolled the jungles, mountains and arid plains from the Yucatan to the Rio Grande and from Vera Cruz to Acapulco, trying to bring down the various surviving Juarista bands. Often the French succeeded, but sometimes there were reversals, as when a punitive expedition of Foreign Legionnaires was ambushed and nearly wiped out at the hacienda of Santa Isabel.

In Mexico City the hapless Maximilian struggled to establish an empire on quicksand. He might have made a reasonably good ruler for Luxembourg or Bavaria, but he was completely lost in a country like Mexico, with its indifferent or hostile populace, a rapacious upper class, treacherous politicians and a chronic lack of treasury. Only French cannon kept him in power, and it was increasingly evident those guns would soon be leaving.

As the Confederacy collapsed, US Secretary of State Seward made clear to Napoleon that Washington would recognize only one government in Mexico, that of Benito Juarez. He also promised the US would take an increasingly active role in seeing that government reinstated. No sooner had the guns fallen silent at Appomattox than a veteran force of 50,000 bluecoats, under the command of the bellicose Gen. Phil Sheridan, began assembling as an expeditionary force in Texas. (When the Union armies were canvassed for potential volunteers, 109,000 offered to go.) At the same time, crates of new Springfield rifles and ammunition found their way across the Rio Grande, while American emissaries began to meet with Juarez’s representatives to discuss how the Yankees might best help expel the French.

Louis Napoleon was ultimately a realist. He knew it was one thing to ask Bazaine and his 30,000 men to beat the rag-tag Juaristas, but that it was quite another to ask them to face an American army on land and a fleet of ironclads along the coast. Besides, war clouds were gathering in Europe; Bismarck’s Prussia was on the move, gearing for a fight with Austria. France might be dragged in, in which case every soldier would be needed closer to home.

In Mexico itself, the facade of French invincibility was beginning to show cracks. Boredom from out-post duty began to generate an increasingly alarming desertion rate, especially among the units near the US border. Fatigue from long marches across the harsh Mexican terrain filled the hospitals with sick. Undisciplined behavior and duelling became rampant.

Discreetly, Bazaine was given new orders. On 22 June 1866, Napoleon III declared victory before the Corps Legislatif and announced a gradual withdrawal of the French army from Mexico. Over the next year, in three stages, the evacuation was accomplished. Early in 1867, Bazaine led the last contingent from Mexico City back down the road to Vera Cruz.

Maximilian, supported by only a handful among the entire populace of the nation he’d promised to rule, was left to his fate. Less than six months after the French departure, with the brave Mejia at his side, he faced a firing squad, while Benito Juarez once again became president of the Republic of Mexico.

Sources


Special thanks to Andrew Preziosi for the Mexican orders of the fight at Puebla. Anyone wanting information on the complete line of pre-WW2 orders of battle he has available should contact him at: 11017 SW 125th Ave., Miami, FL 33186.