

What happened at the Alamo?

Perspectives on the Battle of the Alamo

The Texan View

Provisions were scanty, ammunition was scarce, and help was nowhere in sight when 185 Texans, barricaded inside an old mission, fought a 4,000-man Mexican army. During the 12 days of siege prior to the final battle, the gallant Americans reinforced the walls, dug trenches, and mounted their 18 cannon while being harassed around the clock by Mexican rifle and artillery fire and scouting parties.

"I feel confident that the determined valor and desperate courage heretofore evinced by my men will not fail them in the last struggle; and although they may be sacrificed to the vengeance of a Gothic enemy, the victory will cost so dear that it will be worse for him than defeat. God and Texas! Victory or death!" So ended the final plea for assistance from the Alamo's commander, Col. William Travis.

After rejecting the Mexican demand for unconditional surrender, Travis assembled his men (including the legendary Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett) and offered them the choice of fighting to certain death or leaving the fort. All chose to stay except one man, who managed to escape through the tightening Mexican encirclement. No other defender would remain alive.

On March 6, 1836, the Mexican army, commanded by Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, attacked the fort from three sides. Twice the Texans repulsed them with bullets and cannon, but sheer numbers finally permitted the Mexicans to gain the walls and pour into the fort. The Texans, out of ammunition, used their rifle butts for clubs as they fought hand to hand. Those who survived the assault on the walls retreated slowly, desperately fighting from room to room in the barracks.

Although certain Mexican officers requested clemency for the last surviving Americans, Santa Anna ordered them massacred. Mexican soldiers tossed the Texans' bodies on their bayonets as if they were bales of hay. As a final insult, the Mexicans stripped and burned the corpses.

Although outnumbered 20 to 1, the Alamo defenders indeed made Mexico pay a heavy price. At least 1,500 Mexicans were killed or wounded, and Santa Anna's advance into Texas was delayed for two weeks, which gave Texas enough time to gather the army that defeated Mexico two months later. Thirteen months after the Alamo fell, Texas declared its independence from Mexico's repressive, dictatorial rule, which not only had denied Texas such rights as statehood, trial by jury, public education, and religious freedom but also had proscribed slavery.

The Mexican View

Mexico generously opened Texan lands to American settlers who, corrupted by their greed for land and the precious metals it contained, ignored the 1824 Mexican constitution which they had sworn to obey and took advantage of Mexico's internal problems to revolt. The Texans demanded legalization of their despicable practice of slavery, formed unauthorized governing bodies that collected taxes but did not return any of this revenue to the state, continually demanded more and more land, and insisted on rights granted only to sovereign nations.

This bold infringement on the honor and property of Mexico could not be permitted. "The colonists established in Texas," declared a circular distributed by the minister of relations, "have recently given the most unequivocal evidence of the extremity to which perfidy, ingratitude, and the restless spirit that animates them can go, since -- forgetting what they owe to the supreme government of the nation which so generously admitted them to its bosom, gave them fertile lands to cultivate, and allowed them all the means to live in comfort and abundance -- they have risen against that same government, taking arms against it... [while] concealing their criminal purpose of dismembering the territory of the Republic."

General Santa Anna, who had taken control of the government three years earlier, declared that he would "strike in defense of the independence, honor, and rights of my nation." Fired with patriotism, he formed an army and gave this order: "The foreigners who are making war on the Mexican nation in violation of every rule of law are entitled to no consideration whatever, and in consequence no quarter is to be given them."

The enemy took refuge in the Alamo when they saw the Mexican army approaching. After a 12-day siege, four columns of soldiers and reserves quietly positioned themselves on four sides of the fort in the predawn darkness. They were thrust into battle by the ancient Spanish bugle call that signaled "fire and death."

The revolutionaries' barrage of cannon and rifle fire stopped the initial charge and killed valiant officers and soldiers who had won the honor of being among the first to attack. When a second attempt was likewise repulsed, Santa Anna ordered in the reserves. Soon the army surged over the north wall, where wooden planking allowed a foothold, and overran the defenders.

As the Texans retreated to the barracks behind sandbag barriers and trenches Mexican soldiers followed. Fierce fighting ensued, but the Americans fell quickly, especially when their cannon were turned against them. The wrath of the army abated only after all the foreigners were killed. The number of Mexicans lost in the battle was appalling, but they died for a just and honorable cause.

A Mexican Eyewitness Account

Jose Enrique de la Peña, a lieutenant colonel in Santa Anna's army, wrote: "The columns [of soldiers], bravely storming the fort in the midst of a terrible shower of bullets and cannon fire, had reached the base of the walls... Our soldiers, some stimulated by courage and others by fury, burst into the quarters where the enemy had entrenched themselves, from which issued an infernal fire. Behind these came others who, nearing the doors and blind with fury and smoke, fired their shots against friends and enemies alike, and in this way our losses were most grievous. On the other hand, they turned the enemy's own cannon to bring down the doors to the rooms or the rooms themselves; a horrible carnage took place, and some were trampled to death. The tumult was great, the disorder frightful; it seemed as if the furies had descended upon us."

De la Peña's testimony gave the lie to a favorite myth: that Davy Crockett died in the baptistery of the Alamo and was found there, according to a plaque at the site, "with dead Mexicans piled around him, whom he had slain before giving up his life." On the contrary, according to De la Peña (and other soldiers backed his story): "Some seven men had survived the general carnage and... they were brought before Santa Anna. Among them... was the naturalist Davy Crockett... Santa Anna... ordered his execution... Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers."

Additional selected sources:

The Alamo Reader: A Study in History
Todd Hansen, Editor (Stackpole Books)
ISBN 0-8117-0060-7

See Resources file