

## **Latin America Wars for Independence**

In the century following Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492 Spanish soldiers conquered most of Central and South America. The only exception was Brazil, which was occupied by Portugal.

By 1800 the Spanish colonies were divided into administrative entities called viceroalties:

- The viceroyalty of New Spain, its capital at Mexico City, included all of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.
- The viceroyalty of Peru, its capital at Lima, initially extended across all of South America, excluding Brazil.
- The viceroyalty of New Granada, its capital at Bogota, was created in 1739.
- The viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, its capital at Buenos Aires, was founded in 1776.

By the late eighteenth century, there was unrest against Spanish rule in each viceroyalty. (Some Brazilians also resented Portuguese rule.) However, this unrest did not lead to a major move for independence until 1810.

The Spanish American population nearly tripled in the course of the eighteenth century. By 1800 the total population stood at some 12.6 million. Whites were the top of Spanish America's pyramid of wealth, power and influence. Whites were far from a homogeneous class. They included American-born Creoles and (far fewer) peninsulares (people born in Spain) and ranged from great land- and office-owning aristocrats to artisans and service personnel. The proportion of whites varied from area to area. By 1800 whites made up only 12 per cent of Peru's population. In contrast, the Río de la Plata's population was 75 per cent white.

The number of mixed Spanish and Amerindian people – mestizos – was increasing. Most were the offspring not of two individuals of a particular ethnic identity but rather of parents who were already of mixed origins. By 1800 in Mexico – mestizos made up 22 percent of the population, against 18 and 60 percent respectively for whites and Amerindians.

Amerindians outnumbered whites and mestizos in much of Spanish America. Their numbers increased considerably from the mid seventeenth century thanks to improved resistance to European diseases that had been so devastating in the sixteenth century.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas of the Enlightenment and the new political ideals stemming from the successful revolution in North America were beginning to influence the creole elites (descendants of Europeans who became permanent inhabitants of Latin America). The principles of the equality of all people in the eyes of the law, free trade, and a free press proved very attractive. Sons of creoles, such as Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, who became leaders of the independence movement, even went to European universities, where they imbibed the ideas of the Enlightenment. These Latin American elites, joined by a growing class of merchants, especially resented the domination of their trade by Spain and Portugal.

The creole elites soon began to use their new ideas to denounce the rule of the Iberian monarchs and the peninsulars (Spanish and Portuguese officials who resided in Latin America for political and economic gain). However, the French Revolution and the example of Haiti brought home to white colonial elites the value of the Crown as a guarantor of law and order within their own racially divided societies. There was thus no compelling force from within the colonies that would necessarily have led to a breakdown of imperial authority. It was a series of events in Europe that precipitated a crisis of colonial rule in Latin America.

### **The Role of Napoleon**

In March 1808 a palace revolution forced Spanish king Charles IV to abdicate in favor of his son Ferdinand. Charles' switching of alliances between Britain and France and economic troubles caused the monarch to decline in prestige among the population. Ferdinand, however, was distrusted by Napoleon. French forces then occupied Madrid and Napoleon induced Charles and Ferdinand to travel to Bayonne for discussions. There, in May, he forced both of them to abdicate, detaining both men indefinitely in France. Napoleon proceeded to proclaim his brother Joseph Bonaparte king of Spain and the Indies.

In May 1808 the people of Madrid rose in rebellion against the French. This uprising sparked revolts across Spain. Juntas (governing councils) assumed local power. In September these juntas placed themselves under the authority of a Supreme Junta at Seville. This body asserted itself as the legitimate source of Spanish and imperial government in defiance of the French regime. It did not last long. In 1810 French forces advanced into Andalusia, Seville fell, and only Cadiz in the South held out. The incompetent Supreme Junta was replaced by an incompetent Regency Council. It seemed that it would only be a matter of time before Napoleon clinched total victory. All that prevented him was Cadiz (protected by Spanish and British ships), Spanish guerrillas, and an Anglo-Portuguese army, commanded by Lord (later the Duke of) Wellington.

Falling under the influence of liberals, the Regency Council declared the equality of all the realms of the Empire and summoned delegates from Spain and the Empire to a constituent assembly. In 1812 a liberal Constitution was proclaimed at Cadiz. It provided for the establishment of a limited monarchy in which royal power would be accountable to an elected Cortes (the Spanish Parliament) and a wide range of individual rights would be guaranteed. It was a progressive document, an inspiration for much of liberal Europe and Latin America.

However, the Cadiz government's liberalism had its limits when it came to dealing with the Empire. It rejected a proposal from Latin American delegates for a union of autonomous constitutional kingdoms under one monarch. Spanish liberals were no more prepared than Spanish kings to surrender political control over the American colonies.

The situation in Spain had major effects in Spanish America. Authority came traditionally from the king: laws were obeyed because they were the king's laws. Now there was no king to obey. Virtually no colonist accepted the authority of Joseph Bonaparte. This brought into question the structure of power and its distribution between imperial officials and local Creoles. Where did legitimate authority now lay? Did it belong to the American viceroys or the Regency Council or Cortes in Spain? Or did it lay with the Creoles who might set up juntas following the Spanish example and assume provisional sovereignty in Ferdinand's absence? If the last course was adopted, it would have revolutionary implications: for the first time the Creoles would exercise power in America without being disloyal to the king. Naturally this was the option favored by those Creoles who wanted to see Latin America move towards some form of autonomy. However, the issue of legitimate authority divided Creole from Creole and Creole from Spaniard. Moreover responses varied from region to region.

As news of the French advance in Andalusia reached America in 1810 it sparked action among Creoles. To many conservative Creoles and peninsulares alike, the Supreme Junta, the Regency Council and (later) the Cortes, seemed not only suspect in claiming to be Spain's supreme governing entities but also dangerously radical in the manner of their formation. If popular representation were to be admitted as the basis for legitimacy in Spain, might not mestizos, on the same principle, insist on participating in Latin American government? Many Creoles decided the best option was to reject Spanish authority and set up juntas of their own in Ferdinand's name. They believed that they themselves were better guarantors of the existing social structure than were Spanish liberals. By no means all those who supported the seizure of local power at this stage were necessarily pursuing outright independence. But all were seeking at the very least home rule within a far less controlling colonial system.

Thus, after 1810 Spanish authority was under threat. While that authority was divided between liberal parliamentarians in Cadiz and conservative administrators in the colonies, the political situation would remain fluid.

When Napoleon Bonaparte toppled the monarchies of Spain and Portugal, the authority of the Spaniards and Portuguese in their colonial empires weakened, and between 1807 and 1825, a series of revolts enabled most of Latin America to become independent.

These independence movements began more than 30 years after the U.S. Revolution but had much deeper roots; the creoles' social and economic resentments against the Spanish and peninsulares sought change. Likewise mestizos and mulattos that resented their secondary status saw an opportunity to press for equality. These wars, therefore, were mired not just in the drive for political independence but also the

desire for social equality. The resulting wars were long, bloody affairs that often created further tensions rather than allaying them.

Spanish Americans were encouraged and inspired by both the U.S. and French revolutions. Equally, they were terrified by the results of the Haitian revolution and their own wars of independence were informed as much by a desire to prevent such an uprising as to create new, independent republics. Taking into account the local situation, they sought to create political structures that were workable; this meant the creation of a number of new countries out of the viceroyalties; rather than unification, there was balkanization.

The struggle for independence fell into three rather well defined periods: the initial thrust and expansion of the movement between 1810 and 1814, the faltering of the patriotic armies and the resurgence of royalist domination from 1814 to 1816, and the consummation of independence between 1817 and 1826. The struggle for independence also had four main centers. In Spanish South America there were two principal theatres of military operations, one in the north, and another in the south. One stream of liberation flowed southward from Venezuela; another ran northward from Argentina. In Peru, the last Spanish bastion on the continent, these two currents joined. Brazil achieved its own swift, relatively peaceful separation from Portugal. Finally, Mexico had to travel a very difficult, circuitous road before gaining its independence. While the uprisings happened concurrently, the nature of the independence wars varied from place to place. Each area had its own leaders with their own philosophies and agendas.

## Mexico

The viceroyalty of New Spain had the largest population and was one of the most ethnically diverse colonies. The first real hero of Mexican independence was Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a parish priest in a small village about 100 miles from Mexico City. Hidalgo, who had studied the French Revolution, roused the local Indians and mestizos to free themselves from the Spanish. In his *Grito de Dolores*, he asked, “My children, this day comes to us as a new dispensation. Are you ready to receive it? Will you be free? Will you make the effort to recover from the hated Spaniards the lands stolen from your forefathers three hundred years ago?” It was September 16, 1810, and a crowd of Indians and mestizos, armed with clubs, machetes, and a few guns quickly formed a mob army to attack the Spaniards. The peasantry’s reaction was explosive for the region around Dolores had suffered from famine for the previous two years. Amerindians and mestizos rose up and began looting, killing whites in the process. Within a week the rebels had entered the provincial capital, Guanajuato. Here they stormed the *Alhóndiga* – the fortified municipal granary in which Creoles and Spaniards had taken refuge. A bloody massacre followed. Thereafter, Hidalgo’s revolt was seen not as a rebellion against Spanish oppression but as a race war directed against all whites. Those Creoles who wanted to see an independent Mexico were forced into the Spanish camp in order to resist the rebellion. The army, predominantly Creole and mestizo in composition, remained loyal to Spain. Hidalgo’s forces were soon crushed in January 1811. A military court sentenced Hidalgo to death and his severed head was mounted on the wall of the granary at Guanajuato as a clear warning to others, however, his memory lived on. In fact, September 16, the first day of the uprising, is celebrated as Mexico’s Independence Day.

In southern Mexico, another priest became the leader of the revolutionary movement. Father José María Morelos fought against the royal army. Like Hidalgo, Morelos was captured and executed, but his ideas helped keep the wars of independence going. Mexico faced years of guerrilla warfare where there were no decisive or clear battles but instead a prolonged war of attrition.

The participation of Indians and mestizos in Mexico’s revolt against Spanish control frightened both creoles and peninsulars. Fearful of the masses, they cooperated in defeating the popular revolutionary forces. The conservative elites – creoles, peninsulares, and the Catholic hierarchy – then decided to overthrow Spanish rule as a way of preserving their own power. They selected a creole military leader, Agustín de Iturbide (who had fought against Hidalgo and Morelos), as their leader and the first emperor of Mexico in 1821. Despite promises made to the lower classes in the Plan of Iguala which included the promise to abolish class distinctions and that all subjects would enjoy equality before the law, Iturbide advocated neither social nor economic changes. He sought to preserve or enhance the privileges of the

conservative elites. The only innovation was political: a creole emperor replaced the Spanish king, which was symbolic of the wider replacement of the peninsulars by the creoles in government. The events harmonized little with the concepts of Hidalgo and Morelos but suited creoles desires. The Mexican struggle for independence began as a major social, economic, and political revolution but ended as a conservative coup d'état. The only immediate victors were the creole elite.

### Brazil

In 1807 the French Emperor, Napoleon, put pressure on Portugal to close its ports to British ships. When it did not comply, a French army invaded the country. In November 1807, João, the prince regent, and his entire court (some 15,000 people) sailed to Brazil under British escort. Rio de Janeiro suddenly became the capital of the Portuguese Empire at a time when royal authority had been destroyed in the mother country.

This situation helped preserve – indeed reinforced – the legitimacy of imperial authority in Brazil. Rio became a far more imposing center of government than it had been as a mere viceregal capital. Its population rose from 50,000 in 1808 to 100,000 in 1821. Its status as imperial capital warranted new institutions – a Bank of Brazil, a military and naval academy, and Brazil's first newspaper. Moreover, with Portugal under French occupation, the prince regent had little option but to end the Portuguese trade monopoly and allow free trade with other nations – to Britain's but also to Brazil's advantage. In 1815 João declared that Brazil was no longer a colony but a kingdom in its own right – the constitutional equal of Portugal. Thus, from 1807–20, Brazil was to know order and continuity under the Crown.

In 1820 a series of revolts by liberals in Portugal led to the establishment of a government committed to constitutional monarchy. In the parliament that met in January 1821 Brazil was allocated over a third of the 200 seats. But no Brazilian representatives arrived before August 1821. Hence crucial decisions were taken without Brazilian participation. One was that King João should return to Lisbon.

João was torn, fearing he might lose Brazil if he did return, or Portugal if he did not. Finally he decided to go back in April 1821, leaving his son Dom Pedro as prince regent in Brazil. Meanwhile, the Portuguese parliament pressed for the reversal of most of the king's Brazilian's decrees, intending to restore Brazil to its former colonial status.

When the Lisbon government recalled the prince regent in October 1821, Brazilians urged him to ignore the order. On September 7, 1822, convinced of the strength of Brazilian nationalism, Prince Pedro declared the independence of Latin America's largest nation on the banks of the River Ipiranga near São Paulo. Ripping the Portuguese colors off his uniform, he drew his sword and shouted, "The hour is now! Independence or death!" Several months later in a splendid ceremony he was crowned "Constitutional Emperor and Perpetual Defender of Brazil."

Portuguese garrisons in the north-east put up some resistance to Brazilian independence. Thomas Cochrane, a British naval officer who had served the cause of Chilean and Peruvian independence, commanded a Brazilian fleet which put pressure on the Portuguese. While his force was far inferior to the Portuguese fleet, Cochrane's reputation made up the difference in strength. In July 1823, 5,000 Portuguese troops sailed away from their main base in Bahia under the escort of Portuguese warships. Pursuing the Portuguese fleet as far as the Canary Islands, Cochrane captured three-quarters of the ships. Returning to Brazil, he then "persuaded" the other Portuguese garrisons to surrender. Portugal, under pressure from Britain, recognized Brazil's independence in 1825. The evolutionary course upon which Brazil embarked provided a stability and unity that no other viceroyalty of the New World could boast. However, similar to that of Spanish America, Brazilian independence affected and benefited only the elite.

### Effects of Independence

By 1825 Spain and Portugal were no longer in control of their former colonies in continental America. South American Creoles were predominantly loyal to their regions and it was in those regions, not America as a whole, that they found their national home. Their new countries were defined by their history,

administrative boundaries, economic aspirations, social composition and physical environment which marked them off not only from Europe but also from each other. Quite remarkable was the almost complete detachment of the independence process in Mexico from that in South America. There was next to no contact between the insurgents in the two regions, much less any mutual support.

Several factors contributed to patriot military success: waging war across the Atlantic was a major problem and American conditions did not help. Most of the 40,000 Spanish troops sent to America between 1811 and 1818 died of tropical diseases; British assistance, both in terms of supplies and mercenaries, helped the patriot cause; the patriots produced a number of able generals, especially Simon Bolívar and José de San Martín.

The Latin American struggle for independence suggests comparison with the American Revolution. Some obvious parallels exist between the two upheavals. Both sought to throw off the rule of a mother country whose mercantilist system hindered the further development of a rapidly growing colonial economy. Both were led by well-educated elites who drew their slogans and ideas from the ideological arsenal of the Enlightenment. Both were civil wars in which large elements of the population sided with the mother country. Both owed their final success in part to foreign assistance although the North American rebels received far more help from their French ally than came to Latin America from outside sources. While individual North Americans provided assistance to Spanish American patriots, and U.S. public sympathy was clearly on their side, there was no official recognition or assistance from the United States government. There was, however, help from foreign volunteers. Fighting under Bolívar's command were the British Legion units composed of volunteers that consisted mainly Napoleonic War veterans as well as some German veterans.

The differences between the two revolutions are no less impressive, however. Unlike the American Revolution, the Latin American struggle for independence did not have a unified direction or strategy, due not only to vast distances and other geographical obstacles to unity but to the economic and cultural isolation of the various Latin American regions from each other. Moreover, the Latin American movement for independence lacked the strong popular base provided by the more democratic and fluid society of the English colonies. The creole elite, itself part of an exploitative white minority, feared the oppressed Indians, blacks, and half-castes, and as a rule sought to keep their intervention in the struggle to a minimum. This lack of unity of regions and classes helps explain why Latin America had to struggle so long against a power like Spain, weak and beset by many internal and external problems.

After more than a decade of war, accompanied by immense loss of life and property, most of Latin America had won its political independence. The Creole upper class was the main beneficiary of independence. After liberation, this elite dominated all aspects of life – political, economic and social. Given the departure of the peninsulares, there were better opportunities for careers in government and politics. While a few humbly born leaders rose up the social scale, obtaining huge landed estates for their military services, there was no major change in the structure of society. The confiscation of peninsulares and loyalist Creole property had relatively little impact. Confiscated estates were usually kept intact and sold (or given) to already prosperous patriot landowners.

Under Spanish rule, people of mixed ethnicities suffered from legal and social restrictions in education and government employment and paid a special tax. These discriminatory laws were repealed in most of the new republics. Some individuals, largely on the basis of their military ability, rose to political prominence. However, Creoles still valued 'purity of blood' and were loath to share power. Discrimination continued in most countries and in most aspects of life. Many agencies of social mobility (notably University entrance) remained closed to people of mixed ethnicities. Most mestizos wanted more than equality before the law: they wanted economic and political power. They did not get it.

Amerindians technically stood to benefit from the wars because patriot leaders, committed to equality before the law, elevated them to full citizenship within the new nations. Well-meaning liberals freed Amerindians of ancient shackles such as the tribute, and hoped to break up the Amerindian communal lands, allowing families to possess their own plots of land.

However, Amerindians did not necessarily welcome these changes. Many saw the payment of tribute as proof of their entitlement to their communal lands and they feared the consequences of splitting up the communal lands. Relatively little was done before 1850 to split up the communal lands. But when it did happen, Amerindians were usually despoiled of their lands by unscrupulous Creoles. Most were then forced to work as peons on haciendas. Consequently, Amerindians did not benefit from the wars. Nor did liberal policy succeed in integrating them into the nation. In some states, particularly Mexico, Amerindian unrest led to a wave of rebellions in the three decades after 1820.

The wars dealt a serious blow to slavery. The confusion of wartime offered increased opportunities to runaway slaves. Abolition of the African slave trade by all the Spanish American republics had a major impact. Slaves, recruited for military service, fought for the promise of freedom. By the mid 1820s everywhere except Paraguay and Brazil had accepted the principle of free birth. Some countries abolished slavery outright, for example, Chile (1823) and Mexico (1829). Nevertheless, the law of free birth was rarely implemented effectively and slavery lingered on in many countries until the 1850s.

It has been claimed that slavery in Latin America was less severe than slavery in the USA. However, recent research suggests that slavery was pretty much the same institution across the Americas. Although Latin American slaves appear to have had more in the way of legal rights, this meant very little in reality. Material conditions were probably harsher in Latin America than in the USA: certainly the death rate among slaves was higher.

Arguably the lot of most blacks did not greatly improve with emancipation. Most became part of the rural proletariat, often tied to the land by laws against vagrancy. However, the crucial point is that they were no longer slaves. They could not be punished or sold at their owner's whim. Emancipation was thus the most important social reform of the independence period.

Instead of broadening the base of landownership in Latin America, the revolutions actually helped to narrow it. After liberation 90 percent of the Latin American population continued to work on the land. Creoles owned most of the land while Amerindians, mestizos and blacks did most of the work. Society was thus marked by great economic, social and racial inequality. There was little in the way of social mobility. This resulted in an undercurrent of tension between 'haves' and 'have nots'. "Latin America still awaited those further changes in social structure and economic organization without which its independence remained incomplete and its needs unfulfilled," writes historian John Lynch. Since no structural economic change took place, aristocratic values continued to dominate Latin American society, despite an elaborate façade of republican constitutions and law codes.

In general, independence had meant long, bloody, costly wars for these new countries and in addition to creating new governments and writing constitutions they would be plagued by war debt that would inevitable lead to conflicts in the new states. There were also unresolved social issues in all of the new countries that would need to be addressed. Often the elites tried to ignore these hoping to allay the problems. The issues of the day – emancipation, suffrage, taxation – remained and intensified until future generations had to confront them, often with equally terrible results.

Inevitably, Latin American independence was characterized by continuity more than by change. The creole elites expanded their already dominant position in Latin American society. Although they had courted the masses, they had no intention of sharing wealth and power with them. For the majority, there was little difference between colonialism and early nationhood.

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