**Latin American Wars of Independence**

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The Latin American wars of independence were a series of early nineteenth-century conflicts in the areas of the Western Hemisphere governed by France, Spain, and Portugal. Although there were some linkages among them, it is helpful to analyze separately the independence wars of Haiti, of Mexico and Central America, of Spanish South America, and of Brazil. At the conclusion of these wars, only a few French Caribbean islands, Spanish Cuba, and Puerto Rico remained colonies of the Latin nations of Europe. From 1861 to 1865, Santo Domingo, for a time under Haitian rule and for a time independent, came briefly under Spanish rule again before peacefully regaining independence.

The military aspects of the wars can be described generally as struggles for independence fought between masses of Indian and mestizo (mixed Spanish-Indian) troops led on the one hand by small numbers of Spanish military professionals, and on the other by criollos, first- or second-generation Spaniards born in the colonies. The most noteworthy campaigns were those carried out by the Venezuelan Simón Bolívar and the Argentine José de San Martín, both of whom made epic crossings of the Andes Mountains to take the Spaniards by surprise.

The overall pattern of the Spanish American wars of independence was an initial period of political confusion stemming from Napoleon's occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808, followed by declarations of independence first from Napoleon's puppet government in Madrid, and then from Spain as the mother country. These declarations were buttressed by a string of early patriot victories. But, after Spain threw off the Napoleonic yoke, she reconquered many of her American possessions, and this led to an extended period of conflict between Spaniards and rebels until the rebels gained final victory and independence in the early and mid-1820s.

**Background of the Latin American Wars of Independence**

**General Causes**

The general causes of the wars of independence lie in French, Spanish, and Portuguese neglect of their American colonies, their economic exploitation of them, and their feeling that the criollos in the colonies were politically, economically, and culturally inferior to their cousins on the Iberian Peninsula. Serious rebellions had been put down brutally in the late eighteenth century, and memories of these outbreaks were still fresh when winds of change began blowing in the Americas, fueled by the American and French revolutions, British-Spanish rivalry, and the ideas of the Enlightenment brought in by Freemasons and liberals.

**The Independence of the Island of Hispaniola**

The first American colony to achieve independence after the United States was the black republic of Haiti on the island of Hispaniola, although the special circumstances of that event held little precedent for the other colonies in the hemisphere. The French Revolution had abolished slavery, and in Haiti, in the 1790s, this led to a civil war involving black former slaves (led by François Toussaint L'Ouverture), mulattoes, and French settlers. Napoleon's expeditionary force under General Leclerc managed to capture Toussaint, but it was eventually exhausted by disease and the firm resistance of the former slaves. It was only after a decade of bloodshed that Haiti's independence was achieved in 1804 on the western half of the island of Hispaniola. Santo Domingo, on the eastern half of the island, was to be under the intermittent control of Haiti, France, and Spain for another 40 years before achieving independence as the Dominican Republic in 1865.

**The Impact of Napoleon's Invasion of Iberia**

The spark that set off the process of independence for the rest of Latin America was Napoleon's invasion of Spain and Portugal in 1808. In Portugal, the ruling Braganzas were able to escape the French armies and make their way to their colony of Brazil under the protection of British warships. From Brazil, they continued their rule and eventually returned to Portugal, thus avoiding the sharp splits that characterized the Spanish-American independence process. In Madrid, King Charles IV was forced to abdicate. His son Ferdinand was imprisoned by Napoleon, who placed his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne (1808-13). Spanish resistance to Napoleon was strong in the south of the peninsula, where a junta ruled in the name of Ferdinand. This political division provided Spain's American colonies with the opportunity to form their own local juntas and declare themselves independent from Napoleonic Spain. Many of the backers of this process expected that this would lead to full independence, which it eventually did after fifteen years of bitter struggle.

**Mexico and Central America**

The Viceroyalty of New Spain included what is today Mexico, Central America, and large portions of the southwestern United States. In 1808, the viceroy declared himself independent of Napoleon and established a government in the name of Ferdinand VII. This, however, was not good enough for the criollos, who had been conspiring for greater autonomy. On 16 September 1810, the priest Miguel Hidalgo launched the Mexican war of independence by ringing the bells of his parish church and uttering the "Cry of Dolores" against the Spaniards in the name of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe. Father Hidalgo organized a government in Guadalajara and led masses of Indians in battles against the Spanish authorities in Mexico City. Unfortunately, he proved to be a more effective spiritual and political leader than a military campaigner, and he was defeated by the viceroy's forces and captured early in 1811. He was condemned and excommunicated by the Inquisition. Shortly afterward he was tried and shot by the civil government. A fellow rebel priest, José Morelos, took up Hidalgo's banner and convened a congress that adopted a constitution and declared independence (November 1813). But Morelos, too, was defeated in battle and then executed by the Spaniards. It was left to the former Spanish professional soldier Augustín de Iturbide, who joined the patriot cause in 1820, to defeat the Spaniards, which he did in 1821, and consolidate the independence of a sovereign Mexican nation.

In Central America, there were several local independence movements in the period from 1811 to 1814, but these were crushed by the Spaniards. Central America finally achieved independence from Spain as a result of the victories of Iturbide, who invited the peoples of the old Capitancy-General of Guatemala (today's Central America) to join his Mexican Empire. But when Iturbide was overthrown in 1823, the Central Americans seceded from Mexico and established a federation of the "United Provinces of Central America," which lasted for a decade before splitting up into today's five independent Central American nations.

**Spanish South America**

The military struggle for independence by Spanish South America was essentially a strategic pincer movement focusing ultimately on the Spanish stronghold of Peru and led from the north by the Venezuelan Simón Bolívar and from the River Plate area in the south by the Argentine José de San Martín. Both campaigns came after the 1810 declarations of rebellion against Napoleonic Spain and were characterized by initial victories that were followed by defeats as Spain temporarily regained her colonies, and then final independence in the mid-1820s.

**Southern South America**

The criollos of Buenos Aires had considerable confidence in their ability to make good their independence because they had defeated British invasions in 1806 and 1807, when the Spanish authorities abandoned the criollos to their fate. As a result, when news of Napoleon's invasion of Spain and of the incarceration of Ferdinand VII reached Buenos Aires, there was a firm determination to use the events in Madrid as the basis first to declare a break from Napoleonic Spain (25 May 1810) and then to effect a complete break from the mother country (9 July 1816). Gen. Manuel Belgrano was a key figure in this early period, but he suffered military reverses after Ferdinand VII was restored to the throne. This was also the period when Paraguay split off in its own independence movement, when the Uruguayan general José Gervasio Artigas was struggling against encroachments from both Argentina and Brazil, and when the Chilean patriot Gen. Bernardo O'Higgins was decisively defeated by the Spanish and had to retreat across the Andes Mountains into Argentina.

After 1812, military leadership of the southern South American independence movement passed into the able hands of José de San Martín. His strategic concept was to establish himself in western Argentina, then cross the Andes and strike the Spanish forces in Chile by surprise. From there he would head north to the center of Spanish authority in Peru, while Bolivar similarly headed south from his base in Venezuela. In early 1817, San Martín's forces, working with the Chilean patriots under General O'Higgins, crossed the Andes in an unprecedented feat and caught the Spaniards off guard, defeating them at Chacabuco (12 February 1817). A year later, at the Battle of Maipú (5 April 1818), he and O'Higgins consolidated the independence of Chile and began the campaign against the Spaniards in Peru. A fleet was organized with the help of Englishman Lord Thomas Cochrane. In July 1821, after victories on land and sea, San Martín entered Lima and proclaimed its independence. Important Spanish garrisons, however, remained in control of large sections of the region now encompassing Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In July 1822, San Martín and Bolívar met privately for two days at Guayaquil, Ecuador, to plan the final campaign against the Spaniards. There is much mystery surrounding these meetings between the two liberators, but when the conversations ended San Martín withdrew from the scene and went into European exile, leaving to Bolívar the direction of the final stages of the wars of independence.

**Northern South America**

The criollos of Caracas, like those of Buenos Aires, had declared their independence of Napoleonic Spain in 1810, and Simón Bolívar, the son of wealthy landowners, had led Venezuelan forces in a series of early victories against the Spanish. His War to the Death against the Spanish general José Boves was particularly bloody, and when the resurgent Spanish captured Caracas in 1814, Bolivar was forced to flee first to Bogotá (Colombia) and later to the island of Jamaica. Left behind to fight in the plains of the Orinoco Basin was Gen. José Antonio Páez, who led his irregular cavalry forces in a series of running battles against the Spanish.

Bolívar returned to Venezuela early in 1817 and began the second phase of the struggle against the Spanish. By late 1818, his forces, allied with those of Páez, were in control of most of the Orinoco Valley. This permitted the patriots to declare independence formally at Angostura (20 November 1818) and to begin the campaign against the Spanish forces still holding Caracas. The final defeat of the Spanish in Venezuela was assisted by substantial numbers of foreign volunteers, mainly British. With Venezuela in his hands, Bolívar, like San Martín, planned a hazardous crossing of the Andes and a surprise attack on the Spanish garrison in what is today Colombia. He achieved this at the critical Battle of Boyacá (7 August 1819), finally expelling the last Spanish forces from northern South America at the Battle of Carabobo, on 25 June 1821. The following year, one of Bolívar's lieutenants, Gen. Antonio José de Sucre, obtained the independence of Ecuador at the Battle of Pichincha, 22 May 1822, fought on the slopes of a volcano just outside the capital city of Quito.

After the fateful meeting between San Martín and Bolívar in Guayaquil, Bolívar was left as supreme military commander of patriot armies in South America. Scattered Spanish forces held on, however, until decisively defeated by Bolívar and his generals first at the Battle of Junín (6 August 1824) and then at Ayacucho (9 December 1824).