

Latin American Independence Movements

The European colonies in Latin America were inspired by the success of the American Revolution and the ideas of the French Revolution. In the early nineteenth century Latin America finally received a chance to gain its independence. Europe was in chaos with the rise and fall of Napoleon. This distracted Europe from its overseas colonies, and gave Latin American colonies the opportunity to rebel.

Haiti

The first successful Latin American revolt took place in Haiti, a French colony in the Caribbean. The French exported coffee, sugar, cocoa and indigo from Haiti to Europe. French colonists owned large plantations and hundreds of thousands of slaves, who grew and harvested these crops under horrible conditions. By 1800, 90% of the Haitian population was slaves and worked on the plantations.

In 1801, Pierre Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, led a violent and successful slave revolt. Enraged by this, Napoleon sent 20,000 troops to put down the revolt, but the Haitians were capable fighters. They also had another weapon on their side—yellow fever—that claimed many French lives. The French did capture L'Ouverture and imprisoned him in France, but by then they could not turn back the revolutionary tide. Toussaint's Lieutenant Jean-Jacques Dessalines, also a former slave took over. The French and the Haitians both resorted to atrocities. Leclerc, the leader of the French army decided to execute blacks whenever and wherever he found them. Dessalines responded and ordered the execution of all Europeans that opposed the new revolutionary government. During this time, Napoleon's government did little to help the French troops. The French surrendered and Dessalines proclaimed Haiti a free republic in 1804 and named himself governor-general for life. Haiti became the first independent state in Latin America.

1. Why was there a revolution in Haiti?
2. Who was L'Ouverture? Who was Dessalines?

South America

In 1808, when Napoleon invaded Spain, he appointed his brother Joseph Bonaparte to the Spanish throne. Spanish colonies were in disarray because they did not know which government to acknowledge. The colonies remained loyal to Spain and did not recognize the rule of Joseph Bonaparte.

In Venezuela, the colonists removed the French governor in favor of Simon Bolívar. Bolívar used this opportunity to push for independence. In 1811 Bolívar helped establish a national congress, which declared independence from Spain. Royalists that lived in Venezuela that were loyal to Spain declared a civil war. Bolívar asked for aid from other rebelling countries and received assistance from New Granada. In 1813 he invaded Venezuela. He was proclaimed "Liberator" by the people. On June 8 Bolívar proclaimed the second Venezuelan republic.

By 1819, Bolívar was gaining much support for independence. Bolívar created the Angostura Congress which founded Gran Colombia (a federation of present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador) which named Bolívar president. Royalist opposition was eliminated and Bolívar prepared to march with his army across the Andes and liberate Peru.

On July 26, 1822, Bolívar met with José de San Martín, another revolutionary leader, to discuss the strategy for the liberation of Peru. José de San Martín was an America-born Spaniard or Creole who used his military experience to help lead the Argentinean armies. Martín teamed up with Bernardo O'Higgins of Chile to free not only Chile and Argentina, but also Peru. This is where he joined Forces with Bolivar and helped eliminate Spain's presence in South America.

1. How did Bolivar come to power? Why is called the “liberator” of South America?
2. Who is José de San Martín?

Brazil

Brazil was a Portuguese colony, and when Napoleon was invading Portugal in the early part of the 1800s the king fled to his colony. In 1807 King John VI set up his new royal court in exile. But by 1821, Napoleon had been defeated and King John VI returned to Portugal but left his son Pedro in Charge. Pedro I was only 23 years-old when he took over and considered Brazil to be his true home, not Portugal. After one year in control Pedro I declared Brazilian independence and named himself emperor. A few years later Brazil had its own constitution.

In 1831 after violent protests in Brazil against his careless handling of internal affairs, Pedro I abdicated his throne to his son Pedro II, who ruled for many years. He reformed Brazilian society in many ways and turned it into a major exporter of coffee. The period saw the beginnings of industrialization, the first paved roads, the first steam-engine railway, the telegraph, and the introduction of the telephone. The greatest accomplishment of his reign was the abolition of slavery in 1888. This upset the land-owning class and caused a revolt. In 1889 the monarchy fell and a republic was established in Brazil.

1. List the reforms of Pedro II.

Mexico

In Mexico revolutionary actions were rising. In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo, a Creole priest, led a revolt against Spanish rule. He told his followers that the time had come to expel the Spaniards who had misgoverned Mexico for so long. His speech, known as the “Cry of Dolores,” set off the Mexican War of Independence, which resulted in Mexico's becoming an independent country.

The rebel army set forth, armed with machetes, swords, knives, axes, and a few muskets. As they passed through each town they opened the local jails and recruited the prisoners for their cause. Eventually their numbers grew to sixty thousand. After six months of fighting, Hidalgo was captured. He was subjected to a lengthy hearing by the Inquisition, after which he was found guilty of heresy and treason, and, on July 30, 1811, executed by a firing squad. His head, along with those of three other revolutionary leaders, was cut off and it was put on a pole and displayed for a decade.

After Hidalgo's death, the revolutionary movement continued under Jose Morelos. He led the revolutionaries to further successes. But the land-owning class turned against him when he stated that he intended to redistribute the lands to the peasants. He was executed in 1815. It was not until 1821, that Mexico finally became an independent nation. The Treaty of Cordoba forced Spain to recognize that their rule in Mexico was over.

In Mexico, Hidalgo is credited with arousing the spirit of rebellion against the Spanish oppression. Because of his patriotism, his championing of human rights and his personal courage, he is considered by Mexicans to be the father of their nation and the symbol of Mexican independence. Each year on September 15, Independence Day is celebrated throughout Mexico, with parades, fireworks, and the cry of “Mexicanos, Viva Mexico!”

1. Who was Miguel Hidalgo?
2. What was the Treaty of Cordoba?

Miguel Hidalgo: The Cry for Dolores

During the early years of the nineteenth century many independence movements began to appear in Latin America. Men like Simon Bolívar, Jose de San Martín, Bernardo Higgins, Jose Morelos, Pedro I and Pedro II of Brazil and Miguel Hidalgo are all important figures in these independence movements.

All of these men were inspirational to their countries, but one of the more popular heroes of his country is Miguel Hidalgo of Mexico. Hidalgo was a priest who rejected the abuses of the Spanish on the Mexicans and demanded change. Hidalgo lived in a small city known as Dolores. September 16, 1810, marked the date of first face to face struggle with the Spanish oppressors. Hidalgo rang the church bells at Dolores and said to the people:

“My friends and countrymen neither the king nor tributes exist for us any longer. We have borne this shameful tax, which only suits slaves, for three centuries as a sign of tyranny and servitude: [a] terrible stain which we shall know now to was away with our efforts. The moment of our freedom has arrived, the hour of our liberty has struck; and if you recognized its great value, you will help me defend it from ambitious grasp of the tyrants. Only a few hours remain before you see me a head of men who take pride in being free. I invite you to fulfill this obligation. And so without a patria nor liberty we shall always be at a great distance from true happiness. It has been imperative to take this step as you know, and to begin this has been necessary. The cause is holy and god will protect it. The arrangements are hastily being made and for that reason I will not have satisfaction of talking to you any longer. Long lives, then, the Virgin of Guadeloupe! Long live America for which we are going to fight.”

Miguel Hidalgo

1. What is the speech arguing against?
2. What is the purpose of this speech?
3. Why is Hidalgo seen as the “father of Mexico?”