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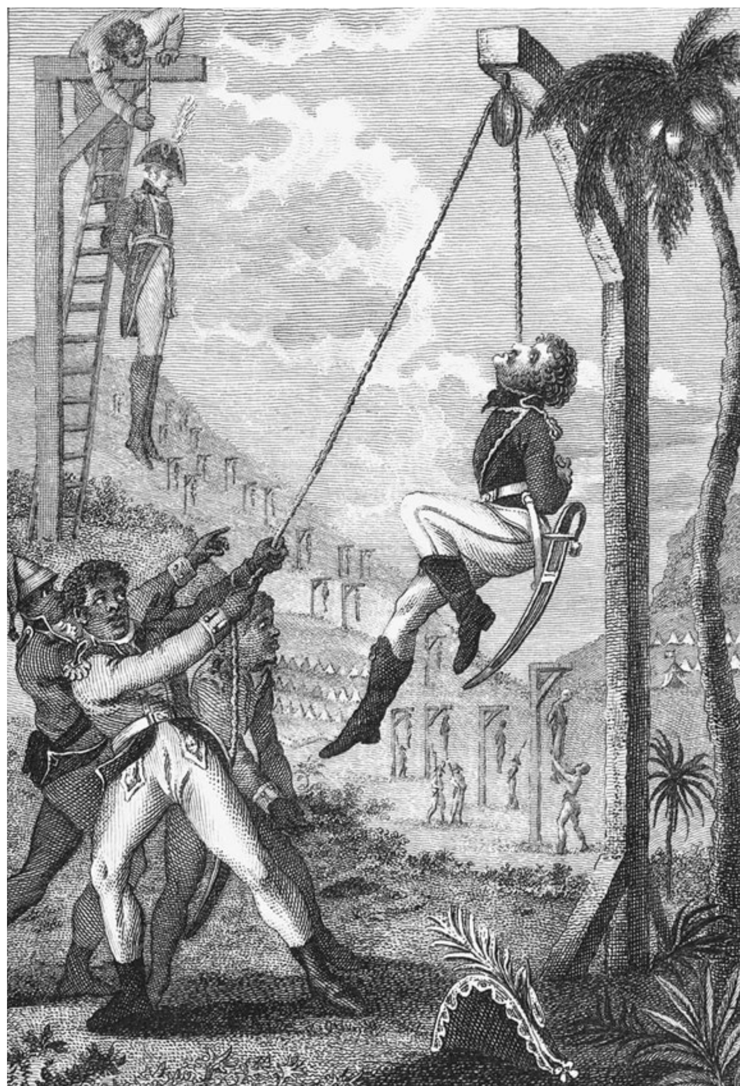
INDEPENDENCE

Latin American struggles for independence erupted suddenly and unexpectedly. There had been a few ominous tremors before 1800, but the most remarkable thing about colonial rule continued to be its overall stability. Therefore, nobody saw an imperial collapse coming, and when it came, everybody improvised. One might expect those at the bottom to rise up when European control slipped; that did happen in some places, notably Haiti, where slaves literally took over. But the outcome in Spanish America and Brazil was more conservative. In general, the white people at the top of the social hierarchy stayed there, while blacks and indigenous people stayed at the bottom. On the other hand, Latin American independence created a dozen of the world's first constitutional republics. The fighting dealt the caste system a deathblow and brought new status to many people of mixed race.

The fighting itself changed much in Latin America. Many men of color became honored war heroes because of their bravery in combat.



THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION. The great slave uprising that began in the French colony of Haiti in 1791 crushed the master class, defeated several French armies sent to repress it, and created a vivid worst-case scenario for a generation of Latin American slave owners. *Schomburg Center/Art Resource, New York*.

But winning the wars of independence required more than blood; it also required a sense of belonging and shared purpose. The modern nations of Latin America did not yet exist, even as a pipe dream, when the wars began. What did an African slave, a Quechua-speaking villager, a landowner of pure Spanish blood, and a mestizo artisan have in common just because all had been born (for example) in the viceroyalty of Peru? Not much, obviously, aside from being subjects of the Spanish Crown, which treated them almost as different subspecies of human being. So patriot leaders faced a great challenge. They had to imagine new nations and get other people with little in common to imagine those nations, too. The image had to be so vivid that people would betray their king, kill, and risk death for it. The patriotic vision of the wars of independence introduced elements of the two big ideas, liberalism and nationalism, that have animated Latin American political life ever since.

To understand people's actions during the crisis years of 1808–25, to see how independence came so unexpectedly, then so quickly, how it changed so much and yet so little, we must observe how violent events in Europe suddenly destabilized colonial rule. Then we will see how Latin Americans reacted—a story with several different threads. Core areas like Mexico and Peru followed one pattern, fringe areas like Venezuela and Argentina another. Brazil followed its own quite distinctive path to independence. These winding roads can get a bit complicated, but understanding them is worthwhile, because the wars of independence cast a long shadow on the history of Latin America.

REVOLUTION AND WAR IN EUROPE

Spanish Americans experienced a grueling couple of decades after 1788 under the calamitous rule of an incompetent king, Carlos IV, who shirked his royal responsibilities and left governing to a hated minister widely known to be the queen's lover. Misrule had combined with a series of costly wars to bankrupt the Spanish state during the 1700s. The bankruptcy of the Crown led to higher taxes, as well as to other irritating practices like the sale of high office, which put incompetent people in positions of command, and highly unpopular government foreclosure of long-term loans. Worse, war with England,

beginning in 1796 and lasting off and on for the next decade, meant confronting the world's most powerful navy, for these were years when "Britannia ruled the waves." The Spanish navy was overwhelmed, and the number of Atlantic sailings dropped drastically, strangling colonial trade. Spanish Americans watched all this with dismay but without seeing it as a cue to rebel. After all, foreign wars often evoke feelings of loyalty to king and country, and the English were hereditary enemies who frequently attacked Spanish American ships and ports. Neither Spain nor Portugal could escape the widening repercussions of the French Revolution (1789–99) and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815) that eventually engulfed all of Europe. In practical terms, Spanish American independence began to exist de facto in 1808, when the Spanish king was imprisoned by Napoleon.

In Brazil, things worked out differently. Portugal had maintained a friendly relationship with England since the 1300s, a relationship described in the 1386 Treaty of Windsor as "an inviolable, eternal, solid, perpetual, and true league of friendship"—a relationship that England dominated. England would prove a valuable but demanding ally. But, English ally or no, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars started the process of independence in Brazil as well.

French revolutionaries of the 1790s had challenged the idea of monarchy based on divine right, even executing the French king and queen, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. These revolutionaries took inspiration from the intellectual awakening called the Enlightenment. They proclaimed "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," questioned traditional authority, and remade the political order. They sneered at idiot kings who, thanks to their royal bloodlines, possessed power they did not deserve. Instead, the revolutionaries argued for *popular sovereignty*, meaning that the people of each nation (not yet including women, however) had the right to determine who would rule them according to a written constitution. French revolutionaries set out to overthrow other European kings and establish republics. Somewhat perversely, the revolutionary creed became an ideology to justify military aggression, as French armies led by General, then First Consul, and finally Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte began "liberating" other countries into French control. Spain and Portugal were two of these.

The new political ideology of liberty and liberation—liberalism, in a word—was almost as much English as French in origin. England's own civil war and revolution in the 1600s had enshrined the principle of popular sovereignty in the unwritten English constitution. England preserved its monarchy, as it does to this day, but it is a limited monarchy, subordinate to an elected legislature, the House of Commons, which liberals regarded as the voice of "the people." England opposed the radicalism of the French Revolution and led the fight against Napoleonic expansionism. That aligned England with anti-Napoleonic Spanish and Portuguese patriots during Latin America's independence period, as we will see. In sum, liberalism, whether coming from France or England, inspired all sides in the Napoleonic Wars. It was the impact of those wars, and their aftermath, in turn, that triggered Latin American independence—all under the ideological banner of popular sovereignty.

In late 1807, when the Portuguese refused to close their ports and declare war on their old ally, England, Napoleon invaded Portugal. The Portuguese royal family fled, accompanied by a glittering entourage of nobles and government officials, swarms of servants and courtiers—over ten thousand people, as well as the royal treasury—sailing from Lisbon only hours before Napoleon's troops arrived in the Portuguese capital. British warships were on hand to escort the royal flotilla and, most especially, Prince João (who exercised power in the name of the queen, his demented mother) to Brazil. For more than a decade, João made his court in Rio de Janeiro, safely outside the reach of Napoleon. Meanwhile, both the Spanish king, Carlos IV, and his heir, Prince Fernando, had fallen into Napoleon's hands and, under pressure, both abdicated their claims to the Spanish throne. Napoleon then had his own brother Joseph crowned king of Spain, a move that most Spaniards and Spanish Americans refused to accept.

One aspect of colonial hegemony had been the gradual acceptance of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs as rightful rulers by almost everyone in the colonies. The Crown had strong *legitimacy*: authority that inspires obedience. By 1810, a startling contrast existed. The Portuguese Crown was closer than ever to Brazil. The Spanish Crown, usurped by a foreigner, was further than ever from Spanish America. Brazilian history shows how much difference the king's presence could make.

João's royal court in Rio de Janeiro had become the political center of the Portuguese-speaking world, and the people of Rio, always fond of glamour, were delighted to have it there. Thousands of rich European courtiers flooded the city, sparking a boom in building and profitable services, from livery stables to hairdressing. The presence of the royal court also favored the Brazilian elite, for the opportunity to speak a few words directly into the king's ear is valuable indeed. The end of colonial trade monopolies favored Brazil as a whole. Before, Brazilian trade had all been channeled to Portugal, but now João allowed Brazilians to trade with everybody (chiefly the British, who had pressed strongly for this trade opening), and imported goods became less expensive. João liked Rio and enjoyed placid naps in his botanical garden as ships from Europe and Spanish America brought news of one distant upheaval after another.

Back in Portugal, an anti-Napoleonic patriot uprising began in 1808 soon after João's departure, and fighting in the Iberian peninsula dragged on for years as Portuguese and Spanish guerrillas, supported by British troops, fought hit-and-run actions against the French. In Spanish America, chronic fighting broke out as well. Independence was declared here and there. Meanwhile, Rio bustled and Brazil remained peaceful. Whatever social and economic pressures had built up during the colonial period, whatever rivalries existed between Portuguese and Brazilians, they did not explode now. So content was João in Rio that even after Napoleon met ultimate defeat in the battle of Waterloo (1815), the Portuguese king conspicuously failed to hurry back to Lisbon.

Events in Spanish America between 1808 and 1815 contrasted totally with the picture in Brazil. Spanish Americans were shocked at the eclipse of the legitimate monarchy. The Spanish government had not vanished entirely, because provincial resistance movements in Spain sent representatives to a national resistance committee, called the Central *Junta*. The Central Junta expected Spanish American support, but Spanish Americans had other ideas. The Central Junta had been chosen entirely in Spain. It therefore represented the Spanish people, but not the Spanish *American* people, and they rejected its dictates. In the wake of the Napoleonic takeover of Spain, most Spanish Americans professed fervent loyalty to their legitimate king,

Fernando VII, but in so doing, they also rejected the idea that Mexico or Peru or New Granada were colonies. Instead, they reaffirmed the old idea that the Spanish king's throne had two pillars of support: his European kingdoms in Iberia, and his American kingdoms in the New World. They argued that, although loyal to Fernando, the American kingdoms were equal to the European ones and not subservient to them. In other words, paradoxically, the Napoleonic crisis led Spanish American patriots to invoke the principle of popular sovereignty against Spain itself. Soon, they began to form their own juntas to rule locally in Fernando's name. These "caretaker" juntas were often created at an open meeting of the town council, a *cabildo abierto*.

By 1810, the Spanish resistance to the French occupation had been pushed to the southern port city of Cádiz, where it continued to function under British naval protection. The Spanish liberals who led the resistance now called for a constitution to be written by elected representatives from both Spain and Spanish America. The Constitution of Cádiz was a truly liberal document and, if implemented, would have profoundly altered the Spanish empire. But it was never fully implemented. By the time it was completed, patriot rebels had already raised the cry of anti-Spanish rebellion in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, and elsewhere.

THE SPANISH AMERICAN REBELLIONS BEGIN, 1810–15

But who were these patriot rebels? In most cases, the initiatives for independence came from native-born whites, called Creoles to distinguish them from Spaniards born on the Iberian Peninsula. Iberian-born Spaniards were now called Peninsulars or, often, nastier things that do not translate well. We should backtrack a bit to explain what the Creoles were after.

By the late 1700s, Spanish American Creoles had grown quite resentful of the Peninsulars, with whom they competed socially. Spanish birth made Peninsulars the preferred agents of imperial rule. Peninsular Spaniards normally got the best ecclesiastical and government offices, the key positions on boards of trade, and so on, gaining

privileged access to wealth and power over their American-born Creole cousins. But this rivalry existed only at the top of Spanish American society. The other three-quarters or four-fifths of the population—people of indigenous, African, or mixed descent—had little at stake in the Creole-versus-Peninsular contest, because the caste system put them out of the competition altogether. Sometimes they disliked the Creoles more than they disliked the Peninsulars, because the Creoles were the masters and overlords who annoyed them in daily life. Creoles generally owned the land, and much of the Spanish American population lived under the thumb of landowners. In the towns, it was Creoles, not Peninsulars, who feared the social climbing of prosperous people of mixed race and fought to keep them "in their place." In other words, the majority of Spanish Americans had plenty of reason to revolt—but not particularly against the Peninsulars.

Mexican independence shows these dynamics at work. Mexico was by far the Spanish Crown's brightest imperial jewel by the early 1800s, vastly the most profitable colony, and home to four out of ten Spanish Americans. Peninsulars numbered only a fraction of 1 percent, but Creole resentment against them ran high, so the Creole-dominated cabildo of Mexico City seized the 1808 crisis in Spain as a chance to gain ground against their privileged European cousins. Affirming their continued loyalty to the imprisoned Fernando VII, the Creoles convinced the viceroy to call a representative assembly to provide legitimacy while the king was out of the picture. The colony's powerful Peninsulars would have none of it, however. They actually unseated the viceroy to forestall such an assembly. Creole anger smoldered.

Then, in 1810, Spanish America's political upheavals began in earnest. A Creole conspiracy in Mexico's northern mining region sparked a massive rebellion of indigenous and mestizo peasants. The man who let the genie out of the bottle was a Creole priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo. A reader of banned French books who also studied indigenous languages and defied the Catholic rule of sexual abstinence for clergy, Hidalgo was an impulsive nonconformist, and the Inquisition already had a file on him. Informed that the Spanish authorities would soon arrest him for his part in the conspiracy, Hidalgo hurried to his parish church and rang the bell. He then spoke to the gathering

crowd using religious language that his audience well understood—not about independence, but about the need to defend Mexico against the Peninsular usurpers of legitimate authority and the enemies of Fernando VII. Hidalgo presented the rivalry between Creoles and Peninsulars as a unanimous Spanish American revolt against Spain. He spoke of how Spanish conquerors had stolen Indian lands. In point of fact, it was the Creoles, and not the Peninsulars of 1810, who descended from those conquerors. In truth, Hidalgo had more in common with most Peninsulars, his social peers, than with his indigenous parishioners. But his rhetoric constructed a simple dichotomy: Americans versus Europeans. His battle cry was "Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe, and death to the Spaniards!" The appeal worked.

Poor rural people flocked by the thousands to the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, now a potent symbol of Mexican identity. The throngs included men, women, and children, whole families, burros, and cattle. Their weapons were mostly farming tools rather than firearms. A recent famine in the mining zone had left many humble Mexicans with little to lose. When terrified Peninsulars in the important mining center of Guanajuato saw twenty thousand angry indigenous peasants coming at them, they hurriedly barricaded themselves in the largest, strongest building in town, the massive granary—but to no avail. Peninsulars died by the hundreds in Guanajuato and then all along the route of this rampaging ragtag army. And not only Peninsulars: Creoles died, too. Hidalgo's patriotic rhetoric had theoretically drawn the line between the Peninsulars and everyone else, but Creoles and Peninsulars resembled one another. Many Peninsulars had Creole wives and children. Furthermore, Peninsulars cornered by the rebels commonly claimed to be Creoles. The downtrodden indigenous and mestizo peasants who followed Hidalgo lacked military discipline, and to them, Creoles and Peninsulars seemed equally arrogant. As Hidalgo's multitude reached sixty, seventy, eighty thousand, it began to look to many Creoles like their own worst nightmare.

Few Mexican Creoles, or town dwellers of any description, joined Hidalgo, and his unruly followers dispersed after only a few months. Hidalgo himself was captured, forced to repent publicly, and then executed. As an exemplary lesson, Hidalgo's head was dangled in

a metal cage on a corner of the Guanajuato granary where so many Spaniards had died. But the revolutionary genie would not go back into the bottle. In southern Mexico, where indigenous communities retained village identities and lands from before the conquest, one of Hidalgo's officers still raised the torch of rebellion. He, too, was a priest, but a modest and practical one, very unlike the grandiose visionary Hidalgo.

Father José María Morelos was not a Creole at all, but a mestizo, and a more able leader in every way. His army was well organized and his main goals were clear: an end to slavery, to the caste system, and to the tribute paid by indigenous people. Morelos prohibited the use of caste classifications. All born in Mexico were simply "Americanos." In 1813, he declared outright independence. His movement still did not attract many Creoles, but it had staying power—at least until Father Morelos was caught and executed in 1815. By then, small bands of patriot guerrillas had been fighting for years in several regions of Mexico, and with Morelos gone, they continued to defy the government, causing heavy military expenses, living off the land like bandits, and gradually gnawing away at the fabric of colonial rule.