

PATRIOT VICTORIES IN SPANISH AMERICA, 1815–25

Meanwhile, Spanish American nationalists regained momentum after 1815. By that time, Napoleon had met defeat at the battle of Waterloo. Fernando VII had recovered his throne, renounced the liberal constitution of Cádiz, and set out to crush patriot rebels in America. Spanish recalcitrance left the rebels nowhere to go but forward. In South America, Spanish royalist forces held the Peruvian Andes until ultimately defeated—in a great, continental “pincer” maneuver—by patriot armies that had originated on the distant plains frontiers of Venezuela and Argentina. In Mexico, Creoles entered an alliance with the heirs of the Morelos movement and backed reluctantly into independence.

The guerrilla followers of Father Morelos had remained strong in the rugged country south of Mexico City after their leader’s death in 1815, continuing their stubborn fight but unable to defeat the royalists. Then European events intruded once again when Spain had its own liberal revolution in 1820. Spanish liberals forced the tyrannical Fernando VII to restore the constitution. The mystique of the monarchy suffered, and many formerly royalist Mexican Creoles felt betrayed. Within months, a Creole army commander named Agustín de Iturbide began to parlay with the guerrillas. His contact on the patriot side was Vicente Guerrero, a mestizo (partly, it seems, of African descent) and man of the people. When Iturbide and Guerrero joined forces, the independence of Mexico was at hand.

Iturbide and Guerrero rallied a winning coalition with guarantees of an independent, constitutional Mexican monarchy that preserved traditional religious and military privileges and offered social “union” (vaguely implying the equality of all *Americanos* with Peninsular Spaniards). According to the traditional social hierarchy, Iturbide and not Guerrero was the natural candidate for monarch. In 1821, a triumphant Iturbide entered Mexico City, where enthusiastic crowds called for his coronation the next year as Agustín I. But the monarchical solution did not work in Mexico. Crowned or not, Iturbide was a Creole like the rest, without a drop of royal blood, and years of patriot struggle had generated political convictions and animosities not easily soothed by a make-believe monarch. When, after a short year in power, Iturbide closed the newly formed congress, composed of representatives of the sovereign people, military leaders ejected him and ushered in a republic.

Meanwhile, patriot armies from Venezuela and Argentina, former fringe areas of Spanish America, were converging on the second great core area of the Spanish colonization, Peru.

Despite many previous failures, the tenacious man who became the single most important leader of Spanish American independence, Simón Bolívar, “the Liberator,” began his string of triumphs in 1817. Bolívar had participated in the Venezuelan independence struggle from the start. The early defeat of patriot forces by the royalist *llaneros* had been Bolívar’s personal defeat. He learned from it and planned to get the *llaneros* on the patriot side. Setting up his base in the Orinoco plains, far from Caracas, Bolívar used feats of physical prowess and *Americano* nativism to attract *llaneros*. When the *llaneros* switched sides, the momentum moved to the patriot cause. In August 1819, Bolívar’s army of *llaneros* crossed the Orinoco plains unexpectedly during the floods of the rainy season, then climbed the Andes and attacked Spanish forces from behind. The viceregal capital of Bogotá fell to Bolívar in a sudden, shattering triumph. By late 1822, Bolívar’s forces also captured both Caracas and Quito, now controlling all of northern South America.

Far to the south, during those years, the brilliant general José de San Martín had trained a combined Argentine-Chilean patriot



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army in western Argentina, then crossed the Andes unexpectedly, in a surprise attack similar to Bolívar's, and decisively defeated Chilean royalists. San Martín met a hero's welcome in the Chilean capital, where his movement gathered strength for three years before launching an expedition northward against Lima. The viceroy of Peru withdrew from Lima into the Peruvian highlands. Then San Martín's frustrations began. A year after capturing Lima and declaring Peruvian independence, his army had bogged down, unable to finish the job. At this point, Bolívar invited San Martín to a personal meeting in the port city of Guayaquil. What passed between the two patriot generals at their Guayaquil meeting was confidential, but whatever was said, San Martín immediately returned to Chile, then to Argentina, and eventually to Europe, leaving Bolívar to lead the final assault on Spanish power in South America.

It took Bolívar two years to equip an army equal to the task, but resounding victories in 1824 made Bolívar the liberator of two more countries, one of which, Bolivia, even took his name. In the second of these battles, Ayacucho, fought at an exhausting altitude of over ten thousand feet, the patriots captured the last Spanish viceroy in America. Everything after the battle of Ayacucho was essentially a mop-up operation. The long and bloody Spanish American wars for independence were finally over. Only Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spanish control, where they would stay for the rest of the 1800s.

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Flags waved, cheering crowds lined the streets, and victorious patriot armies paraded throughout Latin America, but independence meant less than met the eye. The broad contours of colonial Latin American culture and society underwent no profound, sudden change. After all, liberal ideas had never been the popular driving force of independence movements that derived more energy from what we might call identity politics. And for all the talk of "America for the Americans," the old hierarchy of status and race created by colonization, with native Americans and Africans at the bottom, remained substantially



CHINGANAS. The music and dance of the common people enjoyed a patriotic vogue in the wake of national independence struggles. In 1820s Chile, soldiers and people of various social classes mingled at open-air venues called *chinganas* to dance the *cueca*, the new national dance. *Album/Oronoz/Superstock.*

unaltered. The language and laws of the Iberian colonizers became those of the new nations, and the Creole descendants of the conquerors continued to profit from the ill-paid labor of the conquered and the enslaved. In that sense, independence did not undo colonialism in Latin American nations. Rather, it made them postcolonial—now self-governing, but still shaped by a colonial heritage.

Many things changed hardly at all. Latin American women, for example, would find the new republics nearly as patriarchal as the old colonies, even though women had fought hard for independence and often died for it. Patriot women became powerful symbols. Andean women had led the way back in the 1780s. Imagine Manuela Beltrán, a poor woman, stepping up to a royal edict announcing new taxes, pulling it down, and trampling it as an angry crowd roared its approval.