

Causation of Spanish American Independence

Following approximately three centuries of peace, the Spanish colonies in the Americas underwent a drastic upheaval and rebellion from imperial rule. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, nearly all of Spain's colonies throughout the Americas renounced their allegiance to the Spanish Empire and established their own independent nations. By 1825, nearly every Spanish American colony was its own independent nation. After King Ferdinand VII died in 1833, Cuba and Puerto Rico remained as the only two Spanish colonies in the Americas. Spanish rule would continue there until the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Traditionally, scholars cite a number of causal factors that precipitated the Spanish American Wars of Independence. One major factor stemmed from the impact of the philosophical principles espoused during the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the independence movements that the Enlightenment fostered, including the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions. Values such as liberty, freedom, and equality sparked the desire for social reform throughout Western Europe and its American colonies.

Another important issue that is often used to explain the causes of the Spanish American independence movements involves Spain's Imperial Crisis and the resulting French invasion of Spain. These events resulted from the growing financial difficulties that Spain faced in trying to support its colonies. Underlying all of these events was an increasingly frustrated and strained relationship between the creole population (Spanish-born in the colonies) and those living in Spain (peninsulars). Today, scholarship today generally considers the complexities of all of these issues combined when determining what caused the Spanish American Wars of Independence.

Eighteenth Century Bourbon Reforms

Dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, the Bourbons introduced a series of reforms that drastically altered the relationship between the Spanish crown and its American colonies. The reforms were intended to streamline the imperial administration of the colonies and to promote the state's commercial growth with the hope that it would help Spain's faltering economy. More importantly, for its relationship to the colonies, the reforms were meant to curb the power of creoles in the colonies and to reassert Spanish imperial power and domination. The crown achieved this by reinstating an old custom of appointing peninsulars, or men born in Spain, to high-level royal offices throughout Spanish America. This led to resentment and anger among many creoles who lost the local power that they had accumulated over the previous 150 years. At times the Crown's unpopular policies in Spanish America led to revolts such as those that occurred in New Granada and Peru. Although the Spanish American independence movements did not take place for several decades after the Bourbon Reforms were implemented, they played a significant role in setting the stage for revolution.

The Imperial Crisis

Spain's Imperial Crisis was one of the most important and obvious episodes that led to the Spanish American independence movements in the early nineteenth century. The problems that began throughout the Spanish Empire in 1808 had a direct relationship to the independence movements that occurred in the proceeding years. The Imperial Crisis refers to a constitutional crisis that occurred as a result of the collapse of Spain's governmental structure and the abdication of two Spanish monarchs who were replaced by Napoleon's brother, Joseph. In many ways, external forces coming from France roused the Crisis and sparked the Peninsular War (1808-1814). A series of abdications by Spanish kings, referred to as the abdications of Bayonne, left the Spanish government weak and fragmented as well as left it vulnerable to Napoleon. A popular uprising in March 1808 in Spain forced King Charles IV to abdicate the throne to his son and rival Ferdinand VII. Not even two months later, Napoleon forced Ferdinand VII to abdicate the throne. Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte replaced Ferdinand VII as King of Spain. This sparked a constitutional crisis in Spain, as the people were unsure whom to obey as the legitimate ruler of Spain.

After Bonaparte was placed on the throne, French troops occupied substantial portions of Spain. This was very unpopular among the Spanish people who refused to accept the legitimacy of French authority. Throughout Spain a number of small guerrilla wars sprung up to resist the French. Politically, many Spanish leaders resisted the French and established contesting assemblies and administrations that they believed were fit to run the kingdom in the king's absence. Joseph Bonaparte's appointment by Napoleon as King of Spain and the resulting backlash from the Spanish people was the spark that set off the Peninsular War between Spain, Portugal, and Great Britain on one side and Napoleon's French Empire on the other side. The Imperial Crisis was one of the major leading factors that led to the Spanish American independence movements. The turmoil and chaos that resulted from the Peninsula War and the civil wars that broke out in the New World as an extension of the warring in Europe provided Spanish American colonists with the opportunity to gain control over the colonial governments.

French Invasion of Spain and the Peninsular War

Scholars often cite the French invasion of Spain during the Napoleonic Wars as one of the major causes of the Spanish American Wars of Independence. After King Ferdinand VII was imprisoned by the French during the Peninsular War (1808-1814), Napoleon replaced him with Joseph Bonaparte. However, in the eyes of Spanish resistors, the kingdom was left without a legitimate successor. As a result, in Spain and the Spanish colonies, several juntas (local administrative governing bodies) formed and employed the principle of self-government. Because the legitimate Spanish king was absent, the American juntas received the same right to govern themselves as the juntas in Spain had to govern themselves. The juntas in Spain eventually realized that they needed to centralize their power in order to become stronger and created a Supreme Central Junta of Seville. However, many of the juntas that formed in Spanish America refused to recognize the authority of the Supreme Central Junta. The Spanish

American juntas continued to govern themselves and some even started to call for congresses to convene and establish permanent governments in the colonies.

Initially, many Spanish Americans did not view independence from Spain as an absolute necessity or desire. The majority of those who supported the establishment of new governments perceived it as a way to fight off French rule. The political instability that spread following the restoration of King Ferdinand VII in March 1814, after the collapse of the First French Empire, altered the minds of many in the Americas and made them seek independence from Spain. After Ferdinand was restored to the crown, he started to revoke many of the advances that had been made during his absence, such as the Cadiz Cortes and the Spanish Constitution of 1812. The Cadiz Cortes was a series of sessions of the national legislative assembly in Spain (referred to as the Cortes) that met in Cadiz during French occupation. The Cadiz Cortes enacted several progressive reforms and created the Spanish Constitution of 1812, which was one of the most liberal constitutions of its time.

Lesson Summary:

- Throughout the first several decades of the nineteenth century, the Spanish Empire experienced a series of colonial rebellions in its American colonies that resulted in the Spanish American Wars of Independence.
- The Spanish American Wars of Independence erupted as a result of both internal and external political, economic, and social factors. These included colonial resentment from the Spanish Bourbon reforms, Spain's Imperial Crisis, and the Peninsular War.
- The success of the American Revolution and the ideological principles of the Enlightenment acted as two other substantial factors in the Spanish American Wars of Independence.
- By 1833, nearly all of Spain's American colonies had broken ties with the Spanish Empire and had founded independent nations.