

Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín

During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the Spanish Empire experienced a crisis both on the continent and throughout its many colonies in the Americas. In Europe, Spain faced a French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars, which led to the abdication of two Spanish monarchs, King Charles IV and King Ferdinand VII in 1808. Napoleon appointed his brother Joseph Bonaparte to the Spanish throne; however, many of the Spanish people in Spain and in Spanish America refused to acknowledge his legitimacy.

As a result, a power vacuum emerged and was filled by the establishment of provincial juntas that employed the principle of self-government in the absence of a ruling monarch. The juntas throughout Spanish America in particular latched onto the notion of self-government. In 1810, in order to gain more power, the smaller regional juntas in Spain joined together and established a Supreme Central Junta. Many of the colonial juntas refused to join, because they feared that they would not receive the same representation and rights as the Spanish members. Prior to French occupation, there had already been rising tensions between the creole population (Spaniards born in the colonies) and the peninsulars (Spaniards born in Spain). Although most colonial juntas resisted French rule, following the restoration of King Ferdinand VII in 1814, many colonial juntas sought to retain their power of self-governance and fought for independence.

By 1825 nearly all of the Spanish American colonies had gained their independence, with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Two leading figures who shaped the revolutionary movements emerged during the wars of independence: Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín. These two revolutionaries became iconic figures for the Spanish American Wars of Independence. Bolívar was regarded throughout Latin America as a hero and liberator. He helped lead the states of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia to independence and was credited with helping to lay the groundwork for democracy in Latin America. San Martín was recognized as a national hero of Argentina and, along with Simón Bolívar, was regarded as one of the liberators in the Spanish American Wars of Independence.

Simón Bolívar

Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) was born in Venezuela, where his family had been established since the sixteenth century. His first South American ancestor was a prominent local figure who received privileged status that he was able to pass down to his descendants. The Bolívar family was granted estates and *encomiendas* (tracts of land with native laborers assigned to live and work on them). The family also received high positions in local politics. The family accrued most of its wealth through their ownership of their estates, including a lucrative sugar plantation. The Bolívar family also owned several silver, gold, and copper mines, which added to their personal wealth. The Bolívar family became particularly wealthy as a result of the multiple copper mines that they owned throughout the Caracas region. During Simón Bolívar's

lifetime, he used a substantial portion of his family's wealth to aid in the independence movements.

Throughout his career, Bolívar was a prominent military and political leader. When the Venezuelan independence movement broke out in 1810, Bolívar was a young officer. In April 1810, there was a conspiracy headed by a local junta that succeeded in driving out the Spanish governor from the province of Venezuela. In July 1811, seven out of the ten provinces of Venezuela declared their independence from Spanish rule in a national assembly in Caracas. However, their independence from Spain was not achieved right away. The First Republic of Venezuela was lost the following year after Spanish authorities were able to regain control of the entire province. After the fall of the First Republic, Bolívar escaped to the safe haven of Cartagena in nearby Colombia. There, he drafted a stirring political treatise entitled the *Manifiesto de Cartagena*, which called for all citizens of New Granada (encompassing parts of modern day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela) to unite together to defeat the Spaniards.

The following year in 1813, Bolívar led a military campaign into Venezuela that successfully defeated the Spanish in six consecutive military engagements. He returned to his hometown as a hero and liberator. He reclaimed political control of Venezuela in the name of the rebel forces and established the Second Republic of Venezuela. However, the Second Republic did not last very long either, as it fell to a Spanish royalist reconquest in 1814. Bolívar fled to exile in Jamaica and Haiti and finally returned to Caracas in 1817 to build a new liberation army.

Gran Colombia

As Bolívar considered his options while building an army in Venezuela, he chose to pursue an extremely bold and risky strategy. Instead of trying to free Caracas as he had done before, Bolívar decided to conduct a surprise attack on the capital city of New Granada using a treacherous route over the Andes. From 1819-1820, Bolívar launched his campaign to liberate New Granada with merely 2,500 men. It was Bolívar's victory that effectively secured independence for the northern region of South America. Most military historians consider Bolívar's military attack on New Granada to be one of the most daring campaigns in history.

In 1819, following Bolívar's campaign to liberate New Granada, the first union of independent nations—referred to as Gran Colombia—was founded. Gran Colombia was established in 1819 as a republic, which united the newly independent nations of modern day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, northern Peru, and northwestern Brazil. The republic of Gran Colombia lasted from 1819-1831. Bolívar was president of Gran Colombia from 1819 until his death in 1830. Bolívar continued to help lead the Spanish American colonies to independence even after the creation of Gran Colombia. At times this led him into conflict with other revolutionaries such as José de San Martín, who was also fighting for the liberation of Argentina.

José de San Martín

José de San Martín (1778-1850) was an Argentine general and the primary revolutionary leader of the southern portion of the Spanish American Wars of Independence. San Martín was born in Argentina but spent the majority of his youth living and studying in Spain. In 1808, San Martín fought in the Peninsular War against the French occupation. During this time, San Martín made contact with Spanish American supporters of independence. In 1812, San Martín decided to join the independence movements in South America, traveled back to Buenos Aires, and joined the fight on behalf of the United Provinces of South America. Thanks in part to the leadership of San Martín, Argentina successfully achieved its independence in July 1816.

After liberating Argentina, San Martín continued to try and reach his larger goal, which was to defeat the Spanish forces in upper Peru, where the royalist strength was strongest. He believed that the independence of Peru was the key to the liberation of all of Spanish America. To achieve his plans to liberate Peru, San Martín first decided to invade Chile. He established an army in Argentina of 5,000 men that crossed the Andes into Chile. In 1818, he successfully liberated Chile from the Spanish royalists.

Invading and liberating Chile was the first step in San Martín's plan to liberate Peru. Following Chile's independence, San Martín helped to establish a Chilean navy, which transported San Martín's men up the coast near Lima, Peru. San Martín decided to wait for the Spanish forces to withdrawal from Lima instead of directly invading and attacking the city itself. In July 1821, royal forces finally began to retreat, San Martín's army seized partial control of Lima, and San Martín was appointed the Protector of Peru.

The Guayaquil Conference

The next phase in Peru's independence movement altered the course of Latin American history along with the careers of both San Martín and Bolívar. In 1821, as San Martín was securing his position as Protector in Peru, Bolívar was still engaged in his conquest of New Granada and was moving south through Ecuador. The harbor of Guayaquil in Ecuador was the main piece of territory between the locations of the two liberators and both wanted it for their own states.

In July 1822, San Martín and Bolívar met in a private closed-door meeting in the town of Guayaquil. Both leaders had the same goal to liberate South America from the Spanish. However, both men were incredibly ambitious and wanted to lead Peru to independence. Ostensibly the purpose of the meeting was for the two leaders to discuss the proper form of government that would take over in an independent Peru. San Martín wanted to bring a European prince to South America to rule Peru. Bolívar preferred to maintain the principles and values of the independence movements and set up Peru as a republic.

Today, historians are still unsure as to the exact discussion that took place at Guayaquil. After the meeting, San Martín abruptly left the country, resigned command

of his army, and later moved to France in 1824. Bolívar finished what San Martín had begun and fully liberated Peru.

Lesson Summary:

- The early nineteenth century was a time of chaos and crisis for the Spanish Empire. The empire fought a war with France on the European continent and faced colonial rebellions throughout its American colonies.
- As Spain waged war against Napoleon and the French Empire, it created a power vacuum in Spain's American colonies. Many local colonial juntas that cropped up resented imperial rule and sought political and social authority over their own peoples.
- Echoing the American Revolution, the Spanish American revolutionaries were inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment and wanted to create independent nations free from European rule.
- Famous revolutionaries, such as Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, emerged as leaders for the cause of Spanish American independence. These leaders championed the cause of independence and led several of the revolutionary armies that successfully defeated the Spanish royalists.
- Bolívar played an instrumental role in the creation of several South American nations. Along with San Martín, Bolívar continues to be revered throughout Latin America as a heroic leader who symbolized freedom and liberty.