

Independence in Latin America  
AP World History  
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As late as 1808, Spain's New World Empire stretched from parts of the present-day US west to the tip of South America, from the Caribbean to the Pacific. By 1825, it was all gone except for a handful of islands in the Caribbean. What happened? How could Spain's New World Empire fall apart so quickly and completely? The answer is long and complicated, but here are some of the essential points.

### **No Respect for the Creoles**

By the late eighteenth century, the Spanish colonies had a thriving class of creoles: men and women of European ancestry born in the New World. Simon Bolivar is a good example: his family had come from Spain generations before. Spain nevertheless appointed mostly native-born Spaniards called *peninsulares* to important positions in the colonial administration. This irritated the influential creoles who correctly felt that they were being ignored. An important point needs to be made, however. Many of the creoles were not interested in a popular election that would give power to the people of the colonies, they were simply interested in supplanting the *peninsulares* as the leaders of Latin American colonies.

### **No Free Trade**

The vast Spanish New World Empire produced many goods, including coffee, cacao, textiles, wine, minerals and more. But the colonies were only allowed to trade with Spain, and at rates advantageous for Spanish merchants. Many took to selling their goods illegally to British and American merchants. Spain was eventually forced to loosen some trade restrictions, but the move was too little, too late as those who produced these goods demanded a fair price for them.

### **Other Revolutions**

By 1810, Spanish America could look to other nations to see revolutions and their results. Some were a positive influence: the American Revolution was seen by many in South America as a good example of colonies throwing off European rule and replacing it with a more fair and democratic society (later, some constitutions of new republics borrowed heavily from the US Constitution). Other revolutions were negative: the Haitian Revolution terrified landowners in the Caribbean and northern South America, and as the situation worsened in Spain, many feared that Spain could not protect them from a similar uprising.

### **Spain Weakened**

In 1788, Charles III of Spain, a competent ruler, died and his son Charles IV took over. Charles IV was weak and indecisive and mostly occupied himself with hunting, allowing his ministers to run the Empire. Spain joined with Napoleonic France and began fighting the British. With a weak ruler and the Spanish military tied up, Spain's presence in the New World decreased markedly and the creoles felt more ignored than ever. After Spanish and French naval forces were crushed at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Spain's ability to control the colonies lessened even more. When Great Britain attacked Buenos Aires in 1808, Spain could not defend the city: a local militia had to suffice.

### **Americans, not Spaniards**

There was a growing sense in the colonies of being different from Spain: these differences were cultural and often took the form of great pride in the region that any particular creole belonged to. By the end of the eighteenth century, the visiting scientist Alexander Von Humboldt noted that the locals preferred to be called Americans and not Spaniards. Meanwhile, Spanish officials and newcomers consistently treated creoles with disdain, further widening the social gap between them.

While Spain was racially "pure" in the sense that the Moors, Jews, gypsies and other ethnic groups had been kicked out centuries before, the New World populations were a mixture of Europeans, Indians and blacks brought in as slaves. The highly racist colonial society was extremely sensitive to minute percentages of black or Indian blood: your status in society could be determined by how many 64ths of Spanish heritage you had. Spanish law allowed wealthy people of mixed heritage to "buy" whiteness and thus rise in a society which did not want to see their status change. This caused resentment with the privileged classes: the "dark side" of the revolutions was that they were fought, in part, to maintain a racist status quo in the colonies free of Spanish liberalism.

### **Napoleon Invades Spain: 1808**

Tired of the waffling of Charles IV and Spain's inconsistency as an ally, Napoleon invaded in 1808 and quickly conquered not only Spain but Portugal as well. He replaced Charles IV with his own brother, Joseph Bonaparte. A Spain ruled by France was an outrage even for New World loyalists: many men and women who would have otherwise supported the royalist side now joined the insurgents. Those Spaniards who resisted Napoleon begged the colonials for help but refused to promise to reduce trade restrictions if they won.

### **Rebellion**

The chaos in Spain made the perfect excuse to rebel and yet not commit treason: many said they were loyal to Spain, not Napoleon. In places like Argentina, colonies "sort of" declared independence: they claimed that they would only rule themselves until such a time as Charles IV or his son Ferdinand were put back on the Spanish throne. This half-measure was much more palatable to some who did not want to declare independence outright. Of course, there was no real going back from such a step and Argentina formally declared independence in 1816. The independence of Latin America from Spain was a foregone conclusion as soon as the creoles began thinking of themselves as Americans and the Spaniards as something different from them. By that time, Spain was between a rock and a hard place: the creoles clamored for positions of influence in the colonial bureaucracy and for freer trade. Spain granted neither, which caused great resentment and helped lead to independence. But had they agreed to these changes, they would have created a more powerful, wealthy colonial elite with experience in administering their home regions - a road that also would have led directly to independence. Some Spanish officials must have realized this and the decision was taken to squeeze the utmost out of the colonial system before it collapsed.

Of all of the factors listed above, the most important is probably Napoleon's invasion of Spain. Not only did it provide a massive distraction and tie up Spanish troops and ships, it pushed many undecided creoles over the edge in favor of independence. By the time Spain was beginning to stabilize - Ferdinand reclaimed the throne in 1813 - colonies in Mexico, Argentina and northern South America were in revolt.

## **Revolution in Mexico**

The Mexican revolution against Spain had its beginnings in 1810. The revolution began September 16, 1810 and was led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. Hidalgo was captured and executed and the initial revolt was unsuccessful as a result, but Mexicans still see September 16, 1810 as the beginning of the revolution, much the same way Americans see July 4, 1776 as the beginning of independence. Mexico succeeded in declaring a republic in 1823. Initially, Mexico joined an alliance of former Spanish colonies including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, so that they could collectively defend themselves against Spain. This so called Central American Federation lasted from 1823 to 1838. The federation was disbanded in 1838 and its members became independent countries.

## **South American Independence**

In Spanish South America revolutionary movements were started by Simon Bolivar in 1811. Bolivar, who was from Caracas, Venezuela, was an intellectual schooled in Enlightenment philosophy. Under the idea that South Americans should have popular sovereignty (the right to rule one's own country) he led creoles to victory over Spain. Bolivar envisioned uniting states of South America into one country (like the U.S.) but the union that he called Gran Colombia never emerged due to internal differences of the member countries.

Brazil earned its independence under unusual circumstances. When Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1807 the Portuguese royal court fled to Brazil and set up a government in exile. The royal family returned to Portugal in 1821 after Napoleon was defeated and left their son Pedro to rule Brazil. Pedro, like Simon Bolivar, was an enlightened scholar and did not feel his parents should rule the colony of Brazil. He declared the colony independent 1822 soon after his parents left. Pedro decided to keep control of the new country until it stabilized enough to form a republic. Brazil became a republic in 1889 under the rule of Pedro I's son, Pedro II.

## **Maroon Societies**

The Haitian Revolution led to an increase in slave rebellion and slave independence. Escaped slaves, often called maroons, formed communities apart from those of the rest of society. For more than four centuries, the communities formed by such escaped slaves dotted the fringes of plantation America, from Brazil to the southeastern United States, from Peru to the American Southwest. These new societies ranged from tiny bands that survived less than a year to powerful states encompassing thousands of members that survived for generations and even centuries. Today their descendants still form semi-independent enclaves in several parts of the hemisphere - for example, in Suriname, French Guiana, Jamaica, Colombia and Belize--fiercely proud of their maroon origins and, in some cases at least, faithful to unique cultural traditions that were forged during the earliest days of African-American history. To be viable, maroon communities had to be inaccessible, and villages were typically located in remote, inhospitable areas. In the southern United States, isolated swamps were a favorite setting.