Revolutions in Latin America (Overview)

New Spain. New Granada. Río de la Plata. Those names no longer have any bearing in the modern world. However, just 200 years ago, they conjured up images of huge Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires.

The Stage for Revolution

In Latin America. In the Spanish colonies, there was a class of people called Creoles. They were people born in South America of Spanish parentage. As landowners, mine owners, and merchants, the Creoles made up a certain class of elite who benefited from Spain’s commercial dealings with its colonies. At the same time, Creoles were not treated like peninsular Spaniards. They were not allowed to hold certain government or church posts.

In Spain. A series of events led up to political changes in Spain that permanently affected its ability to maintain its South American colonies. First, Spain allied with France in 1796. As Napoleon I gained power, he reduced the effectiveness of Spain’s throne. He also used Spain’s weakness to get at Portugal. The Portuguese royal family escaped to Brazil. The Spanish king Carlos IV abdicated, and his son, Ferdinand VII, was also removed from power. Napoleon’s brother, Joseph Bonaparte, then became king of Spain. Resistance to the French occupation led to the formation of a Cortes, or parliament. Barely able to hold its own against the French presence, the Cortes was certainly unable to control the Spanish colonies. The Creoles, eager to take their rightful place as leaders instead of as commercial tools for the peninsular Spaniards, sought to take advantage of the Cortes’ instability.

Independence—One Step at a Time

Northern South America. In 1811, a newly established Creole-dominated government proclaimed Venezuela’s independence. It was short-lived, though, as royalists—Spaniards and colonists still loyal to Spain's dominance over its South American colonies—regained control within a year. Then followed a decade of strife as patriots—the revolutionaries—and royalists fought to control one area after another. It wasn’t until June 1821 that the patriot leader Simón Bolívar and his troops put down the final stronghold of Spanish resistance in the North. Not long after, the provinces that would become Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama emerged as independent republics.

Southern South America. In 1810 in Buenos Aires, a junta was formed. The Creole-dominated junta set about to secure control of the entire region. The Creoles in one region were able to win domination quite quickly. As a result, the independent republic of Paraguay was formed in 1811. It took several years to flush Spanish loyalists out of the interior regions of Argentina. That republic claimed its independence in 1816.

The junta’s greatest challenge was to secure the mountainous regions of what would become Chile and Peru. Brilliant strategic moves by several patriot military leaders, including José de San Martín, subdued Spanish resistance in the mountains as well as on the western coast. Chile gained its independence in 1818 and Peru in 1821.

Brazil. By contrast, Brazil’s path from colony to independent republic was a very smooth road. Brazil was not a Spanish colony but a Portuguese one. In 1808, when the Portuguese royal family fled to Rio de Janeiro, the colony benefited from their presence. The prince regent João VI established trade with friendly nations and encouraged
local industries. The Creoles were pleased at the status they gained from the royal family's proximity. At the same time, they resented the thousands of Portuguese who flocked to Brazil to share that status.

A revolution in Portugal in 1820 sparked Brazil's move for independence. The revolutionary government took actions that made the Creoles feel that they were being "demoted" to colonial status—back to where they had been before 1808—both socially and economically. João returned to Portugal at the new government's behest. He left behind his son and heir, Pedro I. The Brazilians' fears were realized, so they urged Pedro to resist the Portuguese government's demands (to return to Portugal) and to become Brazil's leader instead. December 1822 saw Pedro as the constitutional emperor of Brazil.

**Mexico.** Mexico's bid for independence is marked by a significant difference from the South American movements. In Mexico, Creoles, Indians, and mixed-blood peoples all joined in the revolution, making it as much a social as a political effort.

Taking advantage of the 1820 revolution in Spain, certain factions organized under the Creole officer Augustín de Iturbide. Diplomatically, Iturbide reconciled with rebel leader Vicente Guerrero. He suggested independence from Spain and forming a Mexican monarchy along with the religious supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church. The united forces squelched royalist holdouts and proclaimed Mexican independence on September 28, 1821.

**Central America.** The new "state" included the captaincy general of Guatemala, which comprised the modern nations of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Iturbide could not maintain his power base, however, and fled the country. The captaincy general of Guatemala declared its own independence and formed the United Provinces of Central America in 1823. Lacking a central government, industry, and a military structure, that organization soon dematerialized. By 1837-1838, the United Provinces had dissolved and left five independent nations in its place.

**The Independent Nations**

Whether the revolution took a decade, as in Venezuela, or closer to a year, as in Brazil, the results were no less significant to the Latin American states and to their former ruling nations. What is perhaps most striking is that though different groups were acting independently, almost the entire continent attained its independence within a decade.

Select Citation Style: **MLA**

MLA


<http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/>

back to top Entry ID: 1185768