

Latin American independence

BACKGROUND

At the start of the 19th century, Spain ruled most of Latin America. However, as we saw on page 10, the *Criollos* were particularly unhappy with Spanish rule. The American Revolution and the spread of Enlightenment ideas also inspired liberals to dream of establishing democratic republics, independent from the "mother country".

THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

The Napoleonic Wars caused two important changes:

- After the Battle of Trafalgar, the **Spanish navy was unable to protect the colonies**. The colonies therefore formed militias to protect themselves.
- The colonies refused to accept Joseph I as King of Spain, and formed **juntas** to govern themselves.

Some people wanted the *juntas* to be loyal to Ferdinand VII or the *Cádiz Cortes*, while others wanted complete independence. These disagreements led to various rebellions and civil wars in the colonies. There was no Spanish army in the colonies to stop these rebellions.

THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Ferdinand VII's restoration of the absolute monarchy in Spain increased support for independence, and led to rebellions across Spanish America, led by soldiers like **Simón Bolívar** (see box) and **José de San Martín**.

The wars continued for many years, but eventually most of Latin America gained independence: by 1829 Cuba and Puerto Rico were the only remaining Spanish colonies in the Americas.

Independence created new problems:

- The *Criollos*, who had led the struggle for independence, wanted to control the independent states, which led to conflicts with other groups.
- **Liberals** and **conservatives** had very different political visions for the new states.

These social and political divisions led to civil wars and wars between states. The wars also made the military very powerful, while the state institutions were still weak. As a result, generals frequently took power in coups, supported by either liberals or conservatives. These generals are often called **caudillos**.

Questions

24. How did the Napoleonic Wars change the situation of the Spanish colonies in the Indies?
25. Write down five Latin American countries that gained independence from Spain.
26. Why were there conflicts between the *Criollos* and other groups of society after independence?

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR (1783-1830)

Simón Bolívar came from a very wealthy family in Caracas. He was a **leading general** in the fight for independence. People called him "**The Liberator**" after his many victories in 1813.

In 1819 he led his army across the Andes in winter, which people had thought was impossible. Many of his men died on the journey, but he surprised and defeated the royalists in Colombia. He was made the **first president of Gran Colombia** (what is now Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and Colombia). Bolívar hoped that the former colonies would support each other, and tried to unite them in a league of republics. However, his dream of a united, strong Latin America was never achieved. Instead, even Gran Colombia split up into several states after Bolívar died.



CONSERVATIVES

Conservatives believed in conserving a traditional society, based on religious values. They thought that sudden changes were dangerous. They supported monarchy, and opposed democracy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBw35Ze3bg8>