

The Onset of the Wars for Independence

By 1800, the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas had been in place for three centuries—and were straining to survive. Latecomers to empire-building in the Americas, the French and English had carved out their own colonies largely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The English “creoles” on the coast of the North American mainland, dissatisfied and disillusioned with British rule, had successfully rebelled in the 1770s, and the United States became the first American colony to achieve independence. African and African-American slaves on the Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue would rise up in the 1790s and seize their independence from the French. In 1804, Haiti became the second independent nation in the New World. The Spanish and Portuguese colonies moved more slowly and cautiously toward their break with the Iberian monarchies. In Spanish America, the revolts were many and varied, and in some cases, unsuccessful. In Portuguese America, the revolt could hardly be called a “war,” given its brevity and lack of bloodshed. When surveying the wars for independence in Latin America, however, one should always keep in mind that these wars formed part of a larger series of rebellions leading to the independence of some twenty new nations across all of the Americas between 1776 and 1836—and the failure of other colonies and regions to achieve their independence.

CREOLES AND PENINSULARES

In Spanish America, a growing division had emerged among those at the top of the social hierarchy, between creoles and *peninsulares*. In the words

of the great scientist Alexander von Humboldt, who traveled throughout Spanish America in the early nineteenth century, "The lowest, least educated and uncultivated European believes himself superior to the white born in the New World." A sense of creole identity had begun to emerge in Spanish America by the mid-seventeenth century (and to a lesser extent the same process was emerging more slowly in late eighteenth-century Brazil). Much like their English counterparts in North America, the creoles increasingly saw themselves as the best judges of how to rule the colonies. After centuries of experience and deep knowledge of local conditions, they resented the condescending cultural and social attitudes of *peninsulares* who (fresh off the boat) wanted to tell them what was best for their homeland. By 1800, the term "we Americans" and "our America" became frequent among the creole leadership. By the end of the eighteenth century, these creoles began to challenge the Spanish Empire just as the English "creoles" had challenged Great Britain.

Already in the mid-seventeenth century, vibrant regional elites had emerged, especially in Mexico and Peru, and they modeled the viceregal courts and social life to imitate the royal court in Madrid. Although the literature, art, and theater in these centers imitated that of Spain, they had already begun to take on an American flavor. A small group of white European elites living in a sea of indigenous, African, and racially-mixed peoples produced a high culture that was an increasingly American—a creole—version of Iberian culture. The blatant disdain *peninsulares* often showed for creoles, and the discrimination creoles suffered at the hands of the *peninsulares*, reinforced a growing sense of local pride. By 1800, these Americans had begun to produce literature and history that reveled in the unique features of their "country" or *patria*, as they often called their locale or region. Some historians would argue that a new sense of Americanism played a greater role in the move to independence than the ideas of the Enlightenment. By 1800, many of the Spanish in the New World had begun to see themselves as Mexicans, or Peruvians, or Chileans. (A similar process was taking place, but much more slowly, in Brazil.)

The Spanish American empire was older, richer, and more populous than the empires of the Portuguese, British, French, or Dutch. Columbus had arrived in the Caribbean in the 1490s, and by the 1530s the Spanish had conquered Mexico and Peru. By the 1570s, Spain had imposed imperial structures in the core regions: central Mexico, Peru, and the Caribbean. In Brazil, the core region around Bahia on the northeastern coast did not emerge until about 1600, and the core region in the southeast (Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro) would not emerge until the mid-1700s. The Spanish core colonies had been evolving for about a century before the English established a foothold on the eastern coast of North America and a half-century before the Portuguese in Brazil. Spanish America was also

far more populous than British North America. In 1500, there may have been some 75 to 80 million people in the Americas, about the size of the population of all of Europe. Even after the demographic catastrophe caused by conquest and disease, the indigenous population of Spanish and Portuguese America in 1800 was probably about 14 to 15 million (the population of Spain was about 12 million). Nearly half of the Spanish Americans lived in Mexico (or, more precisely, New Spain). After centuries of the slave trade, some 1 to 2 million people of African descent lived and worked in the Spanish colonies. About 3 to 4 million people were classified as racially mixed, known generically as *castas* or castes. "Whites" or Europeans probably numbered about 3 million and only about 40,000 of them were *peninsulares*. These numbers and percentages varied from region to region. In Mexico, Central America, and the Andes, Indians formed a large majority of the population. Blacks and mulattoes were the single largest group in the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil.

The Spanish American colonies were also the richest in the Americas, and would remain so for nearly 300 years. The silver mines of northern Mexico and what is now Bolivia (Upper Peru) supplied most of the precious metals in Europe, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The colonies were also rich exporters of sugar, tobacco, chocolate, dyes, leather, and other goods to Europe. Imagine the tobacco wealth of Virginia and multiply it, while adding in silver and a much larger traffic in slaves, and you have a sense of the wealth of colonial Spanish America. (The gold and diamond boom in eighteenth-century Brazil made it the engine of the Portuguese global empire, and also a hugely rich colony.) Spain's and Portugal's colonies in the Americas were the core of their global empires while the Thirteen Colonies were a less significant and smaller piece of Britain's truly global empire. While the English scrambled in the 1760s to find ways to tax the Americans to pay for the costs of their empire, Spain and Portugal extracted enormous profits from their American colonies. In Mexico alone, royal income rose by a factor of five in the eighteenth century, and nearly half this income was pure profit, after paying the costs of administration and defense.

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

The first successful war for independence in Latin America took place not in Spanish or Portuguese colonies, but in the tiny French possession of Saint-Domingue. The Haitian Revolution was the bloodiest struggle in the "age of revolution" in the Americas, and it was the only successful slave rebellion in the history of the New World. As a social revolution in a Franco-American colony, the Haitian Revolution is unlike any of the other independence movements. As a precursor to the Ibero-American revolts,

it became a polarizing symbol for those who might contemplate colonial rebellion. It demonstrated to would-be rebels that colonial uprisings against the European metropolis could succeed, while also confirming the darkest nightmares of those would-be rebels about the dangers of unleashing the wrath of the lower classes. For creole leaders throughout Latin America, the Haitian uprising served as a cautionary tale. A war of creole elites against peninsular elites could easily lead to race or class warfare that might consume the creoles in the process. To use the imagery preferred by Bolívar, the creolés would be riding a tiger, and they could not afford to fall off. As would be the case in Spanish and Portuguese America in 1807–8, it was events in Europe, and more specifically, the French Revolution, that triggered war in Saint-Domingue and, eventually, led to the independence of France's most profitable overseas colony.

Haiti today occupies the western third of the island of Hispaniola, the original staging ground for the Spanish conquest in Latin America. Columbus himself had founded Santo Domingo on the eastern end of the island in 1493, but the Spanish had neglected the western end of Hispaniola. In the seventeenth century, French buccaneers (*boucaniers*) began to operate from coastal enclaves and by the end of the century (1697), Louis XIV had compelled Spain to recognize French control of what became known as Saint-Domingue. Hispaniola, like many other islands in the Caribbean, was drawn into the booming sugar plantation economy in the seventeenth century. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Barbados and Jamaica (now under English control) had become major sugar plantation centers. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue had eclipsed all the colonies in the Caribbean to become the world's great sugar plantation center, exporting more than 100 million pounds of sugar to Europe each year.

As with all the other great plantation colonies in the Americas, the French sugar plantations swallowed up tens of thousands of African slaves. In the late eighteenth century, more than 30,000 African slaves flowed into Saint-Domingue every year, making the colony one of the most Africanized societies in all the Americas. In the late 1780s, the colony's population consisted of about 25,000 whites (mainly French), about 20,000 mulattoes (*gens de couleur*), and more than 400,000 slaves, most of them African or the children of Africans. Slaves formed not only a majority of the colony's population, they accounted for 90 percent of Saint-Domingue's inhabitants! Most of the slaves came from Angola or Congo and while they worked primarily on sugar plantations, the colony also produced cotton, coffee, and indigo for export. Saint-Domingue alone accounted for one-third of all of France's foreign trade. By the late 1780s, Saint-Domingue was a plantation society built on the brutal repression of hundreds of thousands of slaves by less than 50,000 whites and mulattoes, a repression that produced enormous profits for the white planters and French traders.

The enormous concentration of Africans, and the seemingly ceaseless influx of new African slaves, created a powerful blending of African cultures with French Catholic touches. A new language (Creole) spoken by the masses emerged that blended African and French linguistic patterns. By the eighteenth century, vodun had emerged as a potent underground religion among the slaves. A mix of rites and symbols that originated in Africa, it was an animistic religion (like *candomblé* in Brazil) built around the invocation of a series of deities. The faithful attempted to influence the course of events through appeals to these deities. Some of the most serious resistance to the slave regime came from vodun priests. Runaway slaves (known as *maroons* in English) established communities deep in the hills and forests of the interior of the island. In 1758, a substantial rebellion led by François Macandal (a charismatic maroon leader) failed and he was brutally executed, although adherents of vodun believed that he turned himself into a flying bug and escaped the executioner at the last minute. (The legendary Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, recreates this episode in his evocative novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*), 1949.)

As in Spanish America, it would be divisions among the elites that opened up the possibility of lower-class uprisings and unleashed the masses. Social and ethnic gradations divided the white and mulatto populations in Saint-Domingue. Among the whites, the French-born looked down on the whites born in the Americas (much like the creole-*peninsular* split in Spanish America). The so-called *grand blancs* dominated the island society and the *petits blancs* powerfully resented their treatment by their French-born compatriots. Much of the mulatto population aspired to success in French society, learning the language, adopting Catholicism, and assimilating to French customs and dress. They often became the intermediaries between white and slave society, serving as the agents of repression, yet the whites looked down upon the *gens de couleur*.

When the revolution broke out in France in 1789, and French revolutionaries published the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, it did not take long for the *gens de couleur* in Saint-Domingue to assert their rights to full citizenship. (Virtually no one, of course, considered slaves as worthy of the rights of citizenship.) When the *gens de couleur* read the classic phrase from the Declaration that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights," they took these powerful words to heart. The new National Assembly in France created positions for six representatives from Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique, making France the first European colonial power to extend representation to colonials. As factionalism and civil war convulsed France, so in the island colony, various factions of the free population began to fight for control of Saint-Domingue. Most wanted some form of autonomy from France, and wanted to maintain the slave system. Most whites refused to accept the mulattoes as equal citizens

and, in fact, whites were angered by moves in France to enfranchise some mulattoes. Disillusioned mulattoes planned an uprising that was uncovered in 1790. The leaders were quickly executed.

Amidst this increasingly bloody infighting among the 50,000 free inhabitants of the colony, the slave population did not sit idly by; indeed, they plotted an uprising of their own for months. Led by the vodun high priest (*papaloi*) Boukman, thousands of slaves rose up simultaneously around Le Cap Français, sweeping across the North Plain burning plantations, killing whites, and plundering. Boukman would soon die in the revolt, but it spread like wildfire through the colony as tens of thousands of slaves joined the rebellion and thousands of whites died at their hands. The lucky ones fled to neighboring colonies and to the United States.

Over the next decade, Saint-Domingue became one of the bloodiest battlegrounds in the history of the Americas. French, English, and Spanish armies invaded and occupied on multiple occasions as the island became a theater for struggles among European powers. Tens of thousands of European troops died, mostly of malaria and yellow fever, an ironic reversal of the demographic catastrophe that ravaged Native Americans on the island in the sixteenth century. In June 1793, the French revolutionary commission led by Léger Sonthonax abolished slavery in Saint-Domingue (the first decree to abolish slavery anywhere in the Americas). Meanwhile, the fighting spread to the surrounding French and British islands in the Caribbean as slave rebellions and invading European armies moved from colony to colony.

Out of the midst of shifting alliances and loyalties among different groups arose one of the greatest figures of the age of revolution in the Americas: François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture (eventually known simply as Toussaint Louverture), born in 1743. An American-born slave, he eventually became a slave steward, a key position in the plantation hierarchy. Literate in French and conversant with Catholicism, he was very similar to the *gens de couleur* whose ranks he joined when freed by his master. Toussaint was a complex figure. He brilliantly shifted alliances and loyalties for several years among many groups that fought for control of the revolution and the island, and rather than fighting for independence from France, he sought to become the governor of the French colony of former slaves. Bloody struggles ensued between rival black military leaders and their followers. With the help of his two key lieutenants, Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758–1806) and Henri Christophe (1767–1820), Toussaint took control of the colony and in 1801 invaded Spanish Santo Domingo on the eastern side of the island. They hoped to guarantee their work by controlling the entire island.

In the words of the great West Indian historian, C. L. R. James, "For nearly ten years the population, corrupt enough before, had been trained

in bloodshed and soaked in violence. Bands of marauders roamed the countryside. The only disciplined force was the army, and Toussaint instituted a military dictatorship." To revive the shattered economy, Toussaint failed in an attempt to reinstitute the old plantation system. Although a former slave himself, he failed to see that other former slaves no more wanted to work in the sugar fields as forced laborers than they did as slaves. During an interlude in warfare on the European continent, the new French Emperor Napoléon decided to regain control of the once-rich sugar colony, sending troops to the island in early 1802 under the command of his brother-in-law General Charles Leclerc. Within months, Leclerc reasserted French control, defeating Christophe and Dessalines, and then Toussaint. Leclerc then invited Toussaint to dinner, seized and shackled him, and sent him off to a French prison where he died in April 1803.

The ferocity of the French tactics (executing entire brigades of black troops, for example) forged an uneasy alliance between blacks and mulattoes. In what became a war of near total extermination, the French would fail to hold the island. Yellow fever (which killed General Leclerc), renewed war with the British across the Atlantic world, and the tenacity of the black and mulatto armies finally forced the French to withdraw in late 1803. On January 1, 1804, after nearly fifteen years of savage and bloody fighting, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his fellow generals declared the independence of the new nation of Haiti (from an indigenous name for the island meaning "land of the mountains"). Ravaged, burned, and bloodied, the Haitians had succeeded in liberating more than 400,000 slaves, a third of whom had probably died in the conflict. Few whites remained on the island. Tragically, the Haitians would now face decades of dictatorship and repression under a series of leaders (black and mulatto) who fought among themselves for supreme control of the first independent nation in Latin America.