

Historical Background of the Latin American Wars of Independence

During the early nineteenth century, Latin America was shaken to its foundations by social and political upheaval, war and revolution. From Guanajuato (in today's Mexico) to Buenos Aires (in today's Argentina), insurgent forces who opposed Spanish rule participated in a series of bloody and protracted Wars of Independence against the Spanish imperial authorities which spanned the period between 1810 and 1833.

The immediate trigger of the conflict was Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) in 1807 and 1808, but its roots also lay in the growing discontent of creole elites (people of Spanish ancestry who had been born in Latin America) with the restrictions imposed by Spanish imperial rule. This disenchantment was sometimes (but not always) shared by indigenous and mixed race populations, but from very different perspectives and social positions.

Those who opposed imperial rule came to be known broadly as the 'Patriots' as the conflict unfolded (as opposed to their enemies, the 'Royalists' or 'Loyalists'). The Patriots were influenced by the political and intellectual climate generated by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (a series of philosophical and political debates characterised by a critique of established institutions such as the Monarchy and the Church, arguments for change based on historical, sociological and scientific grounds rather than on religion, and a belief in the power of human reason). The French and North American revolutions of the late eighteenth century, which profoundly influenced Independence movements in Latin America, were underpinned by these ideas.

The immediate cause of the Wars, however, was the fact that the King of Spain, Ferdinand VII, was captured in France by Napoleon who then invaded the Peninsula. This was the sudden unexpected removal of the central imperial authority and many creoles feared Napoleon's incursions into the Americas. For this reason they were almost forced to take control of their own towns, regions and communities. The conflict was a series of civil wars lasting almost 25 years which developed into the Wars for Independence.

In patriarchal societies which restricted the opportunities available to women, the protagonists of the struggle for Independence were, in their majority, men. However, women did play a vital role in the Wars. They assumed supporting, non-combative roles such as raising funds and caring for the sick and wounded, but they also donned military uniforms and fought bravely on the battlefield and as part of guerrilla campaigns. Micaela Bastidas, who led the unsuccessful Tupac Amaru rebellion against Spanish rule in Peru in 1780 alongside her husband, and Policarpa Salavarrieta, who offered logistical support to the Patriots in Colombia, are just two examples of stereotype-shattering women who helped to change the course of history.