# Revolutions of Liberty: Independence Movements in Latin America

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## Introduction

This book examines how a sprawling set of empires unraveled and how a mosaic of new nations emerged across Spanish and Portuguese America during the early nineteenth century. The process was neither inevitable nor uniform. Local crises of authority, the shockwaves of European wars, and the mobilization of ordinary people

combined to produce revolutions that were at once political, military, and social. By tracing leaders and grassroots actors side by side, we explore the interplay between high strategy and local initiative that made independence both possible and unpredictable.

The story begins with a crisis of sovereignty. Napoleon’s invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, the abdications of Spanish monarchs, and the relocation of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro shattered old certainties and opened new constitutional horizons. Creole elites formed juntas claiming to act in the name of a captive king or an abstract people, while artisans, enslaved and free Afro-descendants, indigenous communities, llaneros, and gauchos pressed their own claims on the unfolding revolution. From the first proclamations to the hard-fought campaigns, independence advanced through experiments in authority that continually tested the boundaries of loyalty and legitimacy.

Ideas mattered as much as armies. Enlightenment languages of natural rights and representation mingled with Catholic political thought and older scholastic notions of the common good. The Haitian Revolution loomed as inspiration and warning, shaping anxieties about race, slavery, and social hierarchy. Across the continent, patriots and royalists alike asserted moral vocabularies of order and justice, while newspapers, sermons, and pamphlets taught people to imagine communities larger than town or province yet more intimate than empire.

Foreign influences coursed through every theater of war. British merchants and diplomats sought markets and recognition; privateers and blockades redrew maritime power; the United States watched, debated, and eventually recognized new republics whose futures would test hemispheric doctrines. Credit flowed across the Atlantic, underwriting armies and administrations while binding fledgling states to volatile financial circuits. International recognition, loans, and the movement of officers and ideas turned local revolts into continental transformations.

Independence demanded not only victory but also institutions. Constitutions were drafted and redrafted; congresses argued over federalism and centralism; executives rose and fell amid civil wars and regional rivalries. In these laboratories of sovereignty, new definitions of citizenship took shape—sometimes expansive, sometimes exclusionary. Property, literacy, race, and gender marked the thresholds of belonging, even as many sought to widen the democratic promise inscribed in revolutionary rhetoric.

This book evaluates how the legacies of war and revolution structured social order in the decades that followed. The abolition of corporate privileges, the persistence or reform of indigenous tribute, debates over slavery and gradual emancipation, and the reorganization of the Church and military all remade daily life. Veterans demanded pensions, communities defended communal lands, and caudillos converted wartime

networks into peacetime power. The constitutions and codes that emerged were not mere texts; they were blueprints contested in streets, courts, and plazas.

Our approach is comparative and connected. By moving from Mexico to the Río de la Plata, from the Andes to Brazil, we place iconic leaders—Hidalgo, Morelos, San Martín, Bolívar, O’Higgins, Sucre, Iturbide, Pedro I—alongside women organizers, enslaved petitioners, indigenous authorities, and rank-and-file soldiers. We read correspondence and proclamations against the grain of muster rolls, fiscal accounts, and local petitions to reconstruct how states were built from the ground up, often in the shadow of scarcity and uncertainty.

Revolutions of Liberty argues that independence was not a single rupture but a prolonged process of redefining power, rights, and community. The chapters that follow track the entangled histories of politics, warfare, and nation building, showing how constitutional design and citizenship emerged from conflict as much as from consensus. In doing so, they illuminate the enduring contradictions—between equality and hierarchy, sovereignty and fragmentation—that shaped the nineteenth century and continue to echo across the Americas today.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Imperial Reforms and Atlantic Upheaval, 1760s–1808

The late eighteenth century did not announce itself with trumpets across Spanish and Portuguese America but with ledgers, inspectors, and irritated magistrates. From Lima to Mexico City, from the silver flats of Potosí to the sugar coasts of Bahia, colonial administrators sharpened their pencils and redrew the boundaries between what belonged to the crown and what had long passed for local custom. Revolutions of Liberty begins here not with banners unfurled but with fiscal schedules, tariff tables, and the uneasy conviction that distant kings and ministers now wanted more than prayers and loyalty. The reforms that rippled outward after the 1760s rearranged the architecture of rule, pressed hard on commercial habits, and nudged creoles—American-born descendants of Europeans—into positions they had not asked for and did not entirely trust.

In the Spanish monarchy, the agenda bore the marks of enlightened ministers who had looked at a sprawling empire and decided it needed tightening. José de Gálvez and others who wandered the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru carried instructions to streamline revenue, curb smuggling, and make administration resemble something closer to a modern state than a family estate gone continental. They reorganized intendancies to shorten lines of command, pressed for audits that smelled of

suspicion, and prodded local tribunals to enforce rules that had long enjoyed the breezy status of suggestions. In Portuguese America, the Marquês de Pombal sent less polished bureaucrats and more soldiers, tempered monopolies, and reorganized captaincies with an eye toward squeezing consistent profit from Brazil’s sugar, tobacco, and gold. The result was not rebellion but a sharpening of attention, a sense that the terms of belonging had quietly shifted.

Warfare, that faithful engine of fiscal invention, pushed reform along with unusual speed. The Seven Years’ War left Britain ascendant in North America and parts of the Caribbean, while Spain entered late and exited with pride bruised and coffers thinned. To pay for renewed guns, ships, and alliances, ministers in Madrid extended old taxes, authorized new ones, and leaned on colonial treasuries to deliver predictable silver. In Spanish America, the alcabala, a sales tax that crept into almost every exchange, found new life. Customs duties tightened their grip on Atlantic ports, and royal officers sniffed along inland routes where mules and bribes had once ensured a comfortable margin of discretion. Portuguese America, meanwhile, absorbed costs tied to border disputes with Spain and watched Lisbon tighten control over the production and shipment of gold, diamonds, and sugar with instruments that felt newly precise.

Customs houses and counting rooms became theaters of small dramas that would echo far beyond their walls. In Veracruz, Buenos Aires, and Cartagena, merchants accustomed to shading the truth now faced clerks with printed tables and no sense of humor. Smugglers who had treated imperial boundaries as seasonal nuisances discovered that the risk calculus had changed. Silver from Potosí and Zacatecas moved through more hands on its way to Cadiz, each taking a fee and adding a delay. In Brazil, the flow of gold from Minas Gerais and later Mato Grosso fed new anxieties in Lisbon about how to measure, store, and tax wealth that seemed to vanish into pockets before reaching royal coffers. The reforms did not impoverish everyone, but they made clear that the Atlantic had become a supervised lake, not a friendly expanse.

Commerce and law met messily in the question of who counted as a trader with a right to trade. Bourbon administrators in Spanish America nudged creoles toward roles as militia officers and consulados, the merchant guilds that spoke for propertied interests in matters of taxation and order. In Mexico City and Lima, this produced a creole elite comfortable with hierarchy yet restless at the short distance between their wealth and political influence. In the Río de la Plata, where Buenos Aires straddled a river empire of hides and salted beef, merchants and landowners found themselves arguing for freer river traffic and fewer restrictions that arrived from Spain without reference to local wind or water. In Brazil, merchants and landowners tied to sugar and tobacco chafed at Lisbon’s habit of granting favors to connected insiders while insisting that colonial producers accept whatever price the crown’s agents offered.

The Catholic Church, far from standing aloof, found itself drafted into the business of

reform. In Spanish America, regalist ministers pressed bishops to trim cathedral expenses and redirect funds toward useful projects like hospitals, roads, and seminaries where priests could be trained to preach obedience and modernity in equal measure. The expulsion of the Jesuits from Spanish domains in 1767 and from Portuguese lands a few years later sent shockwaves through colleges, missions, and estates. In Paraguay, among the Guaraní, their departure left communities accustomed to disciplined collective life to negotiate new masters with less patience for argument. In Mexico and the Andes, Jesuit colleges had long educated creoles in rhetoric, philosophy, and a sense of distinctiveness that did not fade when their teachers left. In Brazil, the removal of Jesuits from the Amazon and coastal plantations disrupted missions and schools, leaving gaps in authority that neither Lisbon nor local bishops filled with equal skill.

Population itself became a subject of reformist scrutiny, as officials sought to know who lived where and what they might owe. Censuses, though uneven and often resisted, began to sketch a portrait of societies far more mixed than neat racial categories suggested. In Mexico City, Lima, and Bogotá, notaries recorded casta designations with a creative flair that testified more to administrative anxiety than biological fact. In the Andean highlands, efforts to document indigenous tributaries collided with communal memories of land and labor that predated the Spanish monarchy by centuries. In Brazil, where slavery structured more of the economy, officials counted enslaved Africans and their descendants with a detail that sharpened the value of human property even as it exposed the violence of the system. Knowledge, once gathered, did not sit quietly in cabinets; it suggested new possibilities for rule and resistance.

The reforms also reached into the countryside, where boundaries and titles suddenly mattered with new urgency. In Mexico and the Andes, the crown’s desire for secure tenure and productive estates brought officials into conflict with communities that traced land rights to precolonial ancestors and to grants only loosely recorded on crumbling paper. Surveyors with chains and compasses appeared in places where memory had long served as the authoritative deed. Some indigenous communities hired lawyers, filed petitions, and learned to speak the language of laws to defend fields and water. Others watched their commons shrink, their labor obligations reframed, and their access to markets constricted by rules designed to make land behave like capital. In Brazil, the push to regularize land grants in the interior clashed with the sprawling autonomy of cattle ranchers and the ambitions of quilombola communities that had carved out spaces of relative autonomy.

By the 1780s, these pressures had produced not one rebellion but a sharpening of expectations and a widening of repertoires. In the Andes, Túpac Amaru II’s uprising reminded Lima and Madrid that the language of loyalty could be turned against the powerful, even if the rebellion ultimately failed to overturn the social order. In New Granada, Comunero protests over taxes and tobacco monopolies forced temporary

concessions and showed that petitions could turn into marches and marches into blockades. In Brazil, the Inconfidência Mineira reflected a creole discontent that was more whisper than shout, yet it revealed how easily economic grievance could be framed in constitutional language when the times invited it. These were not independence movements, but they were rehearsals in which people learned which arguments carried weight and which officials could be pushed.

Across the Atlantic, war once again tilted the board. Britain’s difficulties in North America after 1776 did not go unnoticed in Spanish and Portuguese America. The success of British colonists to the north suggested that empires were not eternal, even if most creoles found the example too radical to embrace and too Protestant to admire. The United States, born in revolution, became a reference point in pamphlets and conversations, sometimes as inspiration, sometimes as a cautionary tale about the dangers of fragmenting authority. France, meanwhile, sent officers, ideas, and debts that crossed the Atlantic with troubling ease. Lafayette and others who had fought in America returned with stories that made monarchy look more contingent and rights more portable than absolutists preferred.

In Spanish America, this circulation of ideas met a creole political culture already practiced in argument. Cabildos, the municipal councils that dotted colonial cities, served as schools of politics where notables learned to debate, allocate funds, and speak in the name of the community. These bodies were not democratic in any modern sense, but they provided a stage on which creoles could practice authority and press claims against royal officials. In the Río de la Plata, cabildos proved especially assertive, accustomed as they were to long distances from Madrid and to managing Indian frontiers with a pragmatic eye. In Mexico City and Lima, cabildos carried the weight of history and precedence, making them effective forums for defending local privileges even as reforms sought to elevate royal authority above them.

In Portuguese America, institutions were fewer and royal authority more concentrated after Pombal’s attentions. The presence of the viceroy in Salvador and later the viceroy in Rio, paired with Lisbon’s habit of appointing and dismissing governors, left less room for local initiative. Yet Brazil was not immune to the Atlantic currents that made monarchy seem less inevitable. Seminaries, newspapers, and the occasional pamphlet introduced idioms of rights and representation that circulated among a small but influential readership. The flow of gold and diamonds had created a class of merchants and landowners accustomed to wealth and to expecting that wealth to translate into influence, not merely obedience.

The Catholic Church, for its part, remained a source of legitimacy that no reform could ignore. Priests read royal decrees from pulpits, blessed taxes, and reminded listeners that order had divine origins. Yet the Church also harbored critics who resented regalist encroachments on ecclesiastical privileges and who found in canon law and

scholastic thought arguments for limits on arbitrary power. In dioceses across Spanish America, bishops and cathedral chapters fought with intendents over appointments, revenues, and the boundaries between spiritual and temporal authority. These disputes, though cloaked in theology, nurtured habits of legal contestation that would serve colonists well when the question of sovereignty itself came unglued.

All the while, cities grew and economies shifted in ways that reforms could not fully control. Mexico City, Lima, and Bogotá remained centers of bureaucratic gravity, but ports like Veracruz, Cartagena, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro pulsed with the rhythms of Atlantic commerce. Merchants, artisans, and free laborers lived in neighborhoods where news from Europe arrived with the ships, carried by sailors, traders, and occasional refugees. In these ports, the edges of empire felt porous. Smugglers and legitimate traders shared warehouses, and distinctions between legal and illegal often depended on who issued the paperwork. The reforms tried to draw bright lines, but the Atlantic kept blurring them.

In the countryside, the weight of empire rested on the backs of people who were neither creoles nor peninsulars, but whose labor made both empires possible. Indigenous communities in the Andes and Mexico navigated the demands of tribute and labor with strategies that ranged from litigation to migration, from feigned compliance to open resistance. In Brazil, enslaved Africans and their descendants worked under the lash, yet they also created communities, kinship networks, and cultural practices that survived attempts to erase them. On the edges of settlement, Jesuit reductions, missions, and militias had carved out spaces where authority was negotiated daily, not decreed from on high.

The reforms of the late eighteenth century did not produce a single trajectory toward independence. They did, however, set the terms of conflict for decades to come. By pressing harder on revenue, administration, and sovereignty, they forced creoles to clarify their relationship to empire and to each other. They made commerce a political act and local authority a potential alternative to royal power. They introduced new tools—intendancies, militias, censuses, and courts—that would be wielded by both royalists and patriots once the crisis of 1808 arrived. And they did something subtler: they taught people across Spanish and Portuguese America to think in terms of systems, of rights, and of interests that could be named, counted, and defended.

When Napoleon’s armies marched into Spain and Portugal a quarter-century later, they would find not passive colonies but societies rehearsed in the politics of claim and counterclaim. The juntas that sprang up in the name of captive kings would not be improvisations but the logical outcome of decades in which local authority had been cultivated, taxed, and argued over. The wars of independence that followed would be fought over more than flags and constitutions; they would decide who had the right to govern the remains of an imperial order that had been strained, reshaped, and sharpened long before the first shots were fired. Revolutions of Liberty begins with

these reforms because they made the unthinkable thinkable, and the impossible merely difficult. And in the world of empires, that was often the first step toward unraveling.

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