

Latin American Independence: Why Did the Creoles Lead the Fight?

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"I came to serve God, the King, and to get rich." These were the words of Spanish conquistador, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who along with thousands of other Spaniards came and conquered much of the Americas during the 15th and 16th centuries. At the time, Spain was the most powerful country in Europe. It created an empire that extended as far north as Colorado and as far south as the tip of Chile. This empire lasted for over 300 years, until the people of Latin America rose up in revolt in the early 1800s.

Under the Spanish colonial system, political leaders called **viceroy**s ruled over the colonies and reported to the king of Spain. These governors enforced the laws of the Spanish crown. Economically, Spain followed a philosophy called **mercantilism**, where the colonies were supposed to serve the mother country. Under this system, the Spanish government took the majority of the profits from resources they found in the Americas and enforced a **monopoly** over colonial trade.

In time, the Spanish colonizers gained control of the native Indian population. They also brought slaves from Africa to the colonies. A rigid social structure developed. At the top were Spanish-born **peninsularés**. Enjoying high, but slightly lower status, were the **Creoles**, born in the colonies but of pure Spanish blood. With the peninsularés, the Creoles controlled most of the land and power. Next in status, were **mestizos**, people of mixed European and Indian blood. Then came **mulattos** who were a blend of European and African ancestry. Beneath mulattos were free blacks, then Native Americans (Indians) and finally, at the bottom, African slaves.

By the 18th century, changes were taking place across the globe that challenged the Spanish colonial system. One change was the Enlightenment. People began to question old ideas, especially about individual rights and the

role of government. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote the *Declaration of Independence* and the United States was on the road to becoming independent from England. In 1789, revolution erupted in France which in turn sparked rebellion in French Saint Domingue, or Haiti. To some, the world seemed to be turning upside down. In fact, the Spanish Empire would be next. Between



1810 - 1821, one Spanish colony after another declared its independence from Spain, forming modern-day countries like Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina. It was amongst the Creole class that the ideas of the Enlightenment and American Revolution took hold. And it was this class that took the lead in the fight for independence from Spain.

As you read the following set of documents, consider the goals and concerns of the Creoles and address the question before us: *In the struggle for Latin American independence, why did the Creoles lead the fight?*

Background Essay Questions

1. Why did Spain create colonies in Latin America?
2. Name Spanish Latin American countries that became independent between 1800 and 1830.
3. Which countries on both sides of the Atlantic experienced revolutions during the late 18th and early 19th centuries?
4. How did Napoleon's invasion of Spain influence independence movements in Latin America?
5. How many racial groups existed in Latin America during the 18th century?
6. From which social class did most Latin American revolutionaries come?
7. Define these terms:

viceroys

mercantilism

monopoly

peninsularés

Creoles

mestizos

mulattos

Timeline

- 1492** – Italian Christopher Columbus, sailing for Spain, reaches the Americas.
- 1780** – Industrial Revolution begins in England.
- 1776** – North American colonies declare independence from England.
- 1789** – French revolution begins. King Louis XVI is executed in 1793.
- 1803** – Thomas Jefferson purchases Louisiana Territory from Napoleon Bonaparte.
- 1804** – Simón Bolívar attends Napoleon I's coronation in France.
Haiti becomes independent country from France.
- 1809 -1824** – Rebellions for independence rage throughout Latin America.