

CHAPTER

8

HISTORYMAKERS

Simón Bolívar
The Liberator

Section 1

"The bonds that united us to Spain have been severed."—Bolívar, The Letter from Jamaica (1814)

Simón Bolívar led his people's fight for independence from Spain. He envisioned the formation of a single country extending from present-day Venezuela to modern Bolivia. However, his plans clashed with those of his followers, and the grand nation he dreamed of creating fell apart.

Bolívar was born in 1783 to a wealthy family from the colony of Venezuela. His education included several years of study in Europe. While there, he married, but soon after the couple reached South America his wife died of yellow fever.

Bolívar then returned to Europe and met with several important thinkers and politicians. One of them told Bolívar that the Spanish-American colonies had vast resources that could make them powerful—if only they could become free of Spanish control. Bolívar returned to South America and joined the movement for independence.

In 1810, a group of rebels in Venezuela removed the Spanish governor from office and took control. The next year Venezuela declared itself independent. By 1813, Bolívar commanded the army. In 1814, however, the Spanish fought back and defeated his troops, forcing him to flee the country.

During Bolívar's exile, he called for all Spanish colonies to rise against European rule to "avenge three centuries of shame." In 1814, he wrote a famous call to arms, *The Letter from Jamaica*, which outlined a plan to create republics reaching from Mexico to Argentina and Chile. Unable to win British or American support, he turned to Haiti. With money and guns from this newly independent republic, he returned to Venezuela to face the largest army Spain had ever sent across the Atlantic.

From 1815 to 1817, neither side won any decisive battles. However, Bolívar began to build the foundation of victory. He declared the end of slavery to be one of his goals, thus winning wider support. He made alliances with two groups of guerrilla soldiers, who harassed the Spanish army. He also hired veteran European troops. Then in 1819, he devised a daring plan to cross the Andes Mountains and surprise the Spanish. His army of 2,000 first had to cross the hot jungles of the Orinoco River

and then the freezing mountain passes. Many died, but Bolívar's army was strong enough to defeat the Spanish in four different battles.

Bolívar returned to the city of Angostura, Venezuela, and joined a congress working on forming the new government. With his urging, members voted to create the republic of Gran Colombia, which would include modern Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. "The lessons of experience should not be lost on us," he said. Europe had too many countries that constantly fought each other. "A single government," he argued, "may use its great resources [to] lift us to the summit of power and prosperity." Bolívar was named president and military dictator of the new republic.

Bolívar won independence for Venezuela in 1821 and Ecuador in 1822. He freed Peru from Spain in 1824 and Upper Peru in 1825, which renamed itself Bolivia. He was president of Gran Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar hoped that these nations would unite and thus become stronger.

Others did not share this vision. Even Bolívar's closest allies in the fight for independence believed that there should be several countries, not one large one. By 1826, civil war had broken out. Two years later, Bolívar reacted to the crisis by declaring himself military dictator. Opponents attacked his palace and tried to assassinate him. The Liberator was now seen as an enemy of the state. Venezuela withdrew from Gran Colombia, and Ecuador followed. Finally, with his body wracked by tuberculosis and his heart sick over the conflict, Bolívar retired in 1830. He died later that year.

Questions

- yes, answer these!*
- 1. Perceiving Relationships** Was Bolívar a better military or political leader? Explain.
 - 2. Organizing Facts and Details** What lesson did Bolívar draw from European history? What did he suggest doing in South America to prevent this problem?
 - 3. Making Judgments** Would you say that Bolívar was a success or a failure? Explain.

Underline/indicate the source/support for your answer!

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PRIMARY SOURCE *from* **Proclamation of 1813**
by Simón Bolívar

Venezuela declared its independence from Spain in 1811. However, Spain regained control of the country by July of 1812. Simón Bolívar fled to New Granada—present-day Colombia—to continue the fight against Spain. Chosen to lead an army to drive the Spanish from Venezuela, Bolívar issued this proclamation in June 1813. He appealed to Venezuelans in the city of Trujillo for support in liberating Venezuela from Spanish rule. By August, Bolívar's army captured the capital, and Venezuela gave Bolívar the title of liberator. According to the proclamation, what was Bolívar's mission?

highlighted
"Nationalist"
language used
in the document?

Venezuelans: An army of your brothers, sent by the Sovereign Congress of New Granada has come to liberate you. Having expelled the oppressors from the provinces of Mérida and Trujillo, it is now among you.

We are sent to destroy the Spaniards, to protect the Americans, and to reestablish the republican governments that once formed the Confederation of Venezuela. The states defended by our arms are again governed by their former constitutions and tribunals, in full enjoyment of their liberty and independence, for our mission is designed only to break the chains of servitude which still shackle some of our towns, and not to impose laws or exercise acts of dominion to which the rules of war might entitle us.

Moved by your misfortunes, we have been unable to observe with indifference the afflictions you were forced to experience by the barbarous Spaniards, who have ravished you, plundered you, and brought you death and destruction. They have violated the sacred rights of nations. They have broken the most solemn agreements and treaties. In fact, they have committed every manner of crime, reducing the Republic of Venezuela to the most frightful desolation. Justice therefore demands vengeance, and necessity compels us to exact it. . . .

Despite our just resentment toward the iniquitous Spaniards, our magnanimous heart still commands us to open to them for the last time a path to reconciliation and friendship; they are invited to live peacefully among us, if they will abjure their crimes, honestly change their ways, and cooperate with us in destroying the intruding Spanish government and in the reestablishment of the Republic of Venezuela.

Any Spaniard who does not, by every active and effective means, work against tyranny in behalf of this just cause, will be considered an enemy and

punished; as a traitor to the nation, he will inevitably be shot by a firing squad. On the other hand, a general and absolute amnesty is granted to those who come over to our army. . . .

And you Americans who, by error or treachery, have been lured from the paths of justice, are informed that your brothers, deeply regretting the error of your ways, have pardoned you as we are profoundly convinced that you cannot be truly to blame, for only the blindness and ignorance in which you have been kept up to now by those responsible for your crimes could have induced you to commit them. Fear not the sword that comes to avenge you and to sever the ignoble ties with which your executioners have bound you to their own fate. You are hereby assured, with absolute impunity, of your honor, lives, and property. The single title, "Americans," shall be your safeguard and guarantee. Our arms have come to protect you, and they shall never be raised against a single one of you, our brothers. . . .

Spaniards and Canary Islanders, you will die, though you be neutral, unless you actively espouse the cause of America's liberation. Americans, you will live, even if you have trespassed.

from Vicente Lecuna and Harold A. Bierck, eds., *Selected Writings of Bolívar* (New York: Colonial Press, 1951), Vol. I, 31–32. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Documents in World History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 89–90.

Discussion Questions *yes, do these!*

Recognizing Facts and Details

1. What did Bolívar hope to accomplish?
2. According to the proclamation, why were Venezuelans justified in rebelling against Spain?
3. **Making Judgments** Do you think Bolívar's policies in dealing with the Spanish and the Americans were fair? Why or why not?