

The Decline and Fall of the Spanish Empire 1811-1825

In The Americas

“They say that great plans should be made with caution. Are not 300 years of caution enough, Do they want 300 more?”-Simon Bolivar, 3rd July 1811.

At the dawn of the 19th century, the Spanish Empire extended from Tierra del Fuego in Chile to Oregon in North America. Within the space of 15 years, all that was left of the Spanish Empire in the Americas were the Caribbean Islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Revolts against Spanish rule in the Americas were nothing new. Venezuela rebelled against Spanish rule in 1731 and, in 1780, a revolt in Peru was put down with savage cruelty. The leader of that Indian revolt and his wife and children were killed before his eyes in Cuzco's main square before he had his tongue pulled out, his body pulled apart by four horses and his head mounted on a spike.¹ Such revolts took on a new lease of life at the end of the 18th Century largely due to two factors. Firstly, the accession to the throne of Spain of a weak and witless leader, King Charles IV; the second factor was the rise of Enlightenment ideas which led to American independence in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789.

In 1797, two creole intellectuals tried to overthrow Spanish rule in Venezuela. Their plot was betrayed by an informer and, while Manuel Gual escaped, Jose Maria de Espana was publicly executed.²

General Francisco de Miranda was born in Caracas Venezuela in 1750. Inspired by the American revolution, he raised money and 180 men in the United States and sailed for South America with three ships in February 1806. Two of his ships sank, but six months later he landed in Coro. However, his revolt failed due to lack of popular support, so he fled to England.³

The ideas of republicanism and independence might never have taken root in South America if it had not been for the inept rule of King Charles IV who came to the throne in 1788. Charles married

¹Simon Bolivar- Denis Wepman, Burke Publishing Company Ltd, London, 1988- Page 22

²Ibid Page 23

³Ibid Page 41-3

his cousin, Louisa of Parma, who caused a global scandal by having an affair with her bodyguard, Manuel Godoy, whom she promoted to Duke of Alcudia, Prince of Peace, Generalissimo and virtual dictator of Spain⁴.

Under Godoy's influence, Spain renewed its traditional alliance with France in the Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1796. This led to the destruction of the French and Spanish fleets by the British at the Battle of Trafalgar near Cadiz in 1805. The Treaty of Fontainebleau of 1807 gave Napoleon's army permission to cross Spain to attack Britain's ally Portugal.⁵

The French invasion of Spain and associated economic difficulties infuriated the Spanish people and most of the blame was focused on Godoy. Opposition to Godoy's policies centered around the heir to the throne, Prince Ferdinand. Following an uprising in Aranjuez, in March 1807, Charles IV removed Godoy from power and abdicated in favour of Ferdinand VII who became King on 24th March 1807. On 2nd May 1807, a popular revolt broke out in Madrid against the occupying French troops and, on 3rd May, hundreds of Spanish civilians were lined up and shot by French troops.⁶

In Bayonne, France, Napoleon persuaded Ferdinand VII and Charles IV to abdicate in favour of Napoleon's brother Joseph. In reaction, the Spanish people set up revolutionary Juntas (local assemblies) in opposition to French rule. For the next seven years, until Napoleon's defeat in 1814, Spain was ravaged by civil war.⁷

In Spain's American colonies, the governing creoles were now receiving two sets of orders, one from their French rulers and one from King Ferdinand's loyalist rebels. As in Spain, revolutionary Juntas were springing up all over Spanish America. It was this chaotic situation that the Venezuelan patriot of Basque heritage, Simon Bolivar, sought to exploit in order to win independence for Spanish America.

Bolivar was a member of a secret 'Patriotic Society' and his associates approached the Spanish governor of Venezuela, Vincente de Emparan, on 19th April 1810; they ordered him to step down and, when he sought the support of the public, the Caracas crowd shouted "No". The same pattern repeated itself in other regional capitals like in Buenos Aires on 25th May, Bogata on 26th July and

⁴Great Dynasties-Arnoldo Mondadori (ed)- 1980, Windward, London. Page 227

⁵Ibid- page 229

⁶Bolivar- Page 44.

⁷Great Dynasties- page 229

in Chile and Ecuador in September. The new governments introduced liberal laws, abolished the monetary tribute from the Indians, ended the import of slaves and sought to establish more representative government and foreign recognition of their independence.

While head of Venezuela's diplomatic mission in London, Bolivar persuaded the veteran separatist Miranda to return home. On 19th April 1811, the statue of King Ferdinand VII was pulled down in Caracas and on 5th of July the Junta voted for the independence of Venezuela.⁸

However, this only marked the beginning, not the end, of Latin America's struggle for independence. The Spanish sent a ruthless naval officer, Jean Domingo Monteverde, to suppress the rebellion. Miranda was captured while trying to flee back to England on 11th of July 1812 and he spent the last four years of his life chained to the wall of his prison cell in Cadiz.⁹

By 1812 ,the Venezuelan Republic was crushed, Miranda jailed and Bolivar fled to Colombia, but by the end of that year Bolivar had staged an invasion of Venezuela. After brutal fighting, Caracas was again liberated in August 1813 and Monteverde was wounded and forced to retire. However, he was replaced by Jose Thomas Boves (the Beast) who led a wild group of Royalist plainsmen, the llaneros, known as the legion of hell because of their reputation for torture and atrocity.¹⁰

On 15th June 1814, the Second Republic was destroyed when Bolivar's army was defeated by Boves at the battle of La Puerta. In December 1814, Spain had a further victory at the battle of Urica after which they displayed the severed head of defeated General Ribas on a spike in Caracas. However, the royalist leader Boves was killed in this battle.

In April 1814, with the defeat of Napoleon, Ferdinand VII returned to the Spanish throne. He demanded the rebels' unconditional surrender and sent an army of 15,000 under General Pablo Morillo to crush the rebellion.¹¹

However, his cruelty in publicly hanging entire families and whole city councils turned creole public opinion against Spanish rule. Bolivar fled to Jamaica on 9th July 1815 and, in May 1816, Bogota fell to a Spanish army led by Juan Samana who publicly executed leading citizens and

⁸Bolivar- page46-57

⁹Ibid page 64

¹⁰Ibid page 73-75

¹¹Ibid page 82-83

seized their property. In return for a promise to abolish slavery, Bolivar received aid from the world's first independent black slave state, Haiti, and he reinvaded Venezuela. On the 18 February 1819, Bolivar proclaimed a constitution for Venezuela at the Congress of Angostura with Bolivar as President.¹² From February to August 1819, Bolivar, in alliance with the new llaneros leader Jose Antonio Paez, endured a harrowing physical trek across South America leading to the loss of a quarter of his army. However, Bogota fell to Bolivar's army after the battle of Boyaca in August 1819 and royalist leader Samana fled. Bolivar declared the Republic of Greater Colombia (Colombia and Venezuela) with Francisco de Paula Santander as Vice-President.¹³

The Spanish were forced to seek a six month truce in 1820 after a liberal coup, which lasted until 1823, restrained the absolutism of Ferdinand VII. Seizing this opportunity, Bolivar defeated the Spanish at the battle of Carabobo on 21st June 1821 and once again he captured Caracas.¹⁴ In May 1822, rebel General Antonio Jose de Sucre won the battle of Bombona adding Equador to the Republic.



Jose de san Martin

Chile had been liberated by General Bernardo O'Higgins in 1817, while Argentina was liberated by General Jose de San Martin in 1810.¹⁵ The defeat of the Spanish at the battle of Chacabuco in 1818 ensured the independence of Chile. On 26th July 1822, Bolivar met with General San Martin to discuss their joint conquest of the last remaining Royalist stronghold in Peru, but they could not reach an agreement and so San Martin retired to France.¹⁶

General Antonio de Sucre won the final major battle, which ended Spanish rule in Peru and all of South America, at Ayacucho on 9th December 1824.

¹²Ibid page87

¹³Ibid page 91-92

¹⁴Ibid page 94

¹⁵Ibid page 80

¹⁶Ibid Page 97-99

Mexico - The history of the liberation of Spanish North America, known as the Vice-Royalty of New Spain, took a different path. This vast area comprised modern day Mexico plus California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, Washington, Texas and Florida. To this, was added Spanish Louisiana, which France gave to Spain after the treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762. This area comprised most of the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Oklahoma, Kansas, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The region was sold back to France in 1801 who, in turn, sold it to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

In 1810, this vast area had a population of 6.5million people: 18% were Spanish, 22% were mestizo (mixed Spanish and Indians) and 60% were Indians. As in the South, Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 led to a failed coup in Mexico City and the establishment of revolutionary Juntas. The most famous was that established by radical Priest Fr Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla who, by ringing the church bell (the cry of Dolores), led many Indians to follow his banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe to start the Mexican revolution on 16th September 1810. He set negro slaves free and gave Indians back their lands and captured Celaya. However, some of his Indian followers took revenge on their Spanish masters; 500 were massacred at Guanajuato and more massacres followed until 3rd January 1811 when Costilla was captured stripped of his priestly vestments and publicly executed.¹⁷ The massacres cost the cause of independence many European allies, particularly in Britain. The rebellion was then taken over by Fr Jose Morales who fought a guerrilla war. The leadership of the rebellion then passed to Vincente Guerrero. A Liberal revolution in Spain in 1820 alienated the conservative royalists in Mexico led by Agustin de Iturbide. He formed an alliance with the rebel leader Vincente Guerrero. They joined the rebellion and won independence from Spain on 21st August 1821 in the Treaty of Cordoba where the position of the landowners and church were guaranteed and Iturbide became Mexico's first independent Emperor. Spain did not recognise this independence until 1836 and tried to reinvade Mexico at Isidro Barmada in 1829. Florida was given to the United states in 1819 and Mexico lost most of her northern territory to the US in the Mexican war of 1846-48, during which a band of Irish rebels the "San Patricios" fought alongside the Mexicans.

Irishmen also played a small but influential role in the struggle to end Spanish rule in South America. On 26th June 1819, the first contingent of the 'Irish Legion' left Liverpool on board the Charlotte Gambia. The 1729 men of the 'Irish legion' were raised by a former United Irishman,

¹⁷Our America, Jose Martin, 1977, Monthly Review Press, New York, page 95-97

General John Devereaux, who had led 2000 men at the battle of New Ross in 1798.¹⁸

The Irish Legion made up the largest contingent in the 7000 strong 'British Legion' of Napoleonic war veterans who fought for Bolivar either as mercenaries or idealists. These troops played a decisive role in some battles like that at Carabobo in 1821.

The Irish Legion landed at Margatita island in Columbia and suffered greatly from hunger and illness before capturing the town of Rion Hocha on 25th May 1820, raising the Green Harp flag of Ireland above the city. However, the starving men later mutinied and sacked the city leading them to be expelled to Jamaica. Other Irish troops, led by Kildare United Irishmen, William Aylmer and Cork Lt Colonel Francesco Burdeth O'Connor (a brother of Chartist leader Fergus O Connor MP), fought on beside Bolivar and helped to liberate Peru in the battle of Junin in August 1824. O'Connor later went on to be Bolivia's Minister for War. Other notable members of this 'Irish Legion' were Daniel O'Connell's son, Morgan O'Connell (later MP for Meath),¹⁹ Daniel Florence O'Leary, Thomas Murray, Joseph Boylan, Robert Lee, John Hand and Thomas Rooke.

Postscript:

Brazil-The history of the liberation of Brazil from Portuguese rule is a salutatory lesson in the superiority of republican over monarchical rule.

Maria I became queen of Portugal in 1777; mentally unstable and a religious fanatic, she married her paternal uncle, King Consort Peter III, who died in 1786. This loss exacerbated her insanity, until her son and heir Prince John became regent in 1791. He refused to back Napoleon's continental blockade of Britain, which led to the French invasion of Portugal in November 1807 forcing the royal family to flee to Brazil until 1821. When his mother died in 1816, the Regent became King John VI of Portugal. Following the defeat of Napoleon, King John VI returned to Portugal on 3rd July 1821, leaving his son Peter as Regent in Brazil. However, on 15th September 1822, Prince Peter declared Brazil independent and made himself Emperor.²⁰

When King John VI of Portugal died on 10 March 1826, this led to a constitutional crisis over the succession and a civil war. The Regency council, headed by the King's daughter, decided to offer Portugal's Crown to John's successionist son Peter, although he had split away to make himself

¹⁸United Irishmen, United States, David A Wilson, For Courts Press, 1998,- Page 61

¹⁹King of the Beggars, Sean O Faolain, Allen Figgis Ltd, Dublin, 1970,- Page 215

²⁰Great Dynasties- Page 217

Emperor of Brazil. However, a rival group claimed the crown in the name of King John VI's youngest son Michael; in this, they were backed by the deceased King's ambitious wife, Queen Carolin Joaquina, the mother of both rivals. In order to win him over to his side, Peter offered to marry his seven-year old daughter, Maria de Gloria, to his younger brother as well as awarding him the post of Lieutenant of the realm. At first, Michael agreed, but under the prompting of his ambitious mother and claiming the support of the nobility, church and people, he proclaimed himself King on 22nd February 1828. Emperor of Brazil Peter IV lost the support of the Brazilian people and, after several mass demonstrations, he abdicated as Emperor of Brazil in favour of his son Peter on 7th April 1831. The deposed Emperor Peter returned to Europe to win back the crown of Portugal from his brother. Backed by Portugal's exiled liberals, he landed with 7500 men and 50 ships near Oporto on 8th July 1832. King Michael's army was defeated and Michael was exiled and the peace agreement of Evora-Monte made Peter's son and Michael's ex-wife, Maria De Gloria, Queen Maria II after Peter' death in October 1834. Her marriage to her uncle, the deposed King Michael, was declared null and void on 1st December 1834.²¹

Paul McGuill, Bealtaine, 2020

²¹Ibid- Page 219-220