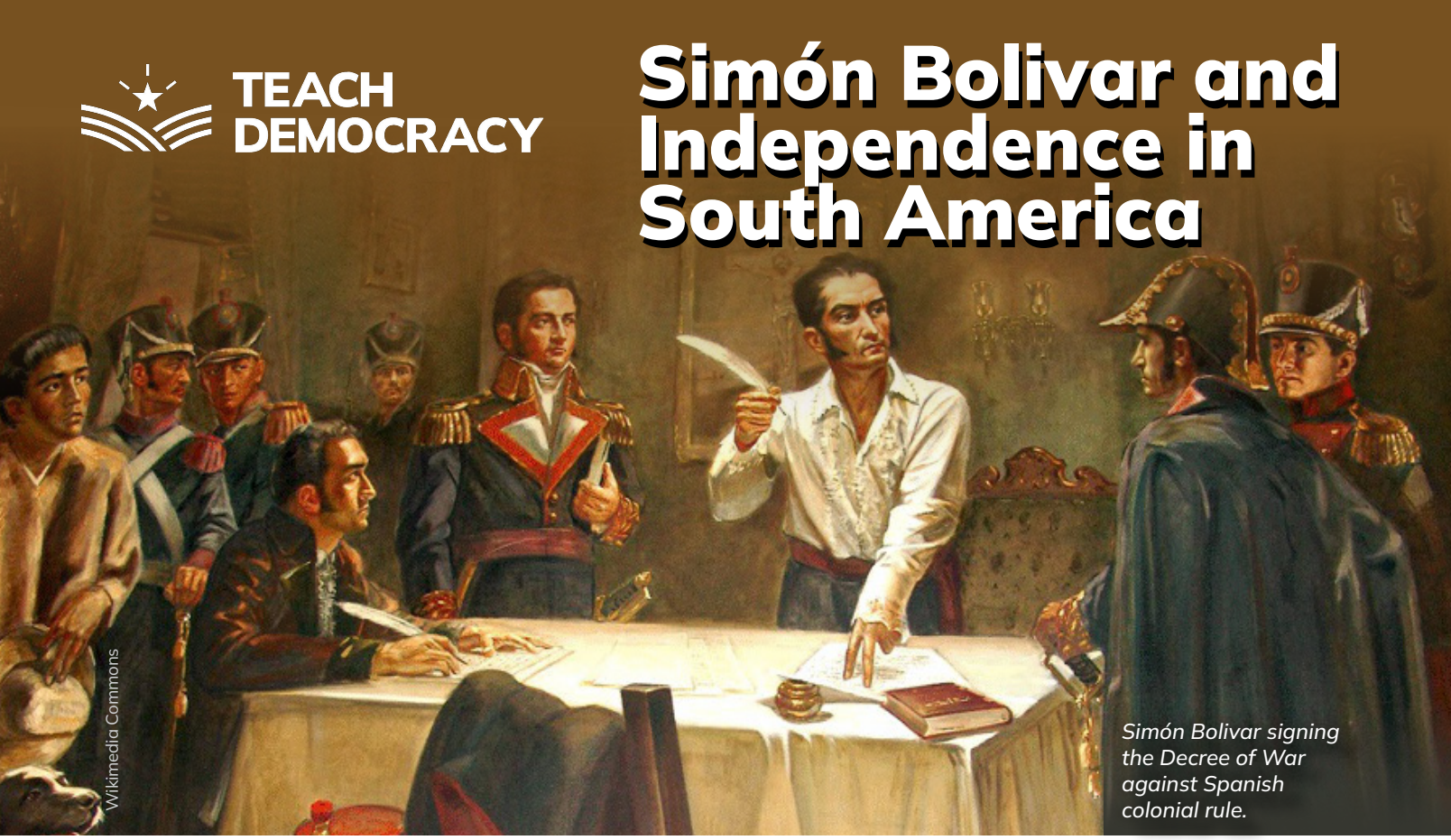
TEACH DEMOCRACY

Simón Bolivar and Independence in South America



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Simón Bolivar signing the Decree of War against Spanish colonial rule.

Simón Bolivar is best known as the liberator of most of Spanish South America. He was also a revolutionary thinker who tried to adapt democratic ideas and social reforms to the nations he liberated.

Simón Bolivar was born in 1783 in Caracas, Venezuela, then a Spanish colony. Bolivar was born into a wealthy, elite family. At the time, Venezuela's social and economic elite consisted of those born in Spain and creoles (people with Spanish parents, but who were born in the New World).

Important positions in the colonial government were reserved for the Spanish-born, and creoles resented being barred from holding them. The remainder of Venezuela's population consisted of free Black people, enslaved Africans, Indigenous people, and mixed-race groups.

Becoming a Revolutionary

In 1803, Bolivar left Venezuela for Paris and began studying Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. One lesson he learned was that each nation's laws should fit that nation's character. He also studied the revolutionary ideas of the American Thomas Paine about the necessity of national independence. Bolivar vowed to break the chains of Spanish rule in his homeland.

Bolivar returned home in 1807. The following year, Napoleon invaded Spain and sent King Ferdinand VII into exile. Resistance forces in Spain established their own government, called the Central Junta. A junta is a group that rules a country after taking power by force. Caracas creoles proclaimed a junta to govern Venezuela, and the junta idea of independence spread throughout Spanish South America.

On July 5, 1811, the Caracas Junta in Venezuela declared full independence from Spain, the first anywhere in Spanish South America to declare independence. The revolutionaries established a republic, which was strongly influenced by the idea of federalism in the U.S. Constitution.

In 1812, Spanish troops from Puerto Rico landed to crush the republic. Spanish soldiers and those loyal to Spain entered Caracas with little resistance. Supporters of the republic fled, Bolivar among them. The First Republic collapsed.

Revolutionary Thinker

Exiled to the port city of Cartagena in New Granada, Bolivar wrote a manifesto. In it, he argued that the biggest mistake of the republic was to adopt U.S. federalism. In practice, Bolivar explained, this allowed each province and city to rule itself and ignore national needs, including defense against the Spanish and royalists. "Our division, not the Spanish forces," he declared, is what defeated the republic.

DATE SOUTH AMERICAN NATIONS GAINED INDEPENDECE FROM SPAIN

Country	*Independence Date*
Argentina	July 9, 1816
Bolivia	August 6, 1825
Chile	September 18, 1810
Colombia	July 20, 1810
Ecuador	August 10, 1822
Paraguay	May 14, 1811
Peru	July 28, 1821
Uruguay	August 25, 1825 *
Venezuela	July 5, 1811

* From Spain and then from Brazil

With hardly any military background, Bolivar recruited an army in New Granada and led it eastward into Venezuela. He defeated the Spanish in one battle after another. His reputation grew, and more men joined him. But he was defeated in Caracas and exiled again in 1813, this time to the island of Jamaica.

He gathered yet another army, largely made up of creole exiles and Europeans from the nearby island nation of Haiti. Enslaved people in Haiti had fought their own war for freedom and won independence from France in 1804.

Re-entering Venezuela in 1816, Bolivar recruited enslaved people and others into his army. "Unity, unity, unity — that must be our motto," he cried. He argued for the liberation of the enslaved people, proclaiming that a nation "cannot be simultaneously free and enslaved."

Over the next few years, Bolivar mounted successful military campaigns against the Spanish in Venezuela and New Granada. Bolivar captured Caracas in June 1821, permanently ending Spanish rule there. A constitutional convention voted to unify Venezuela and New Granada into the Republic of Colombia.

The Liberators

The Republic of Colombia's Congress unanimously elected Bolivar as the new nation's first president for a four-year term. Bolivar accepted, but only if he could continue the unfinished independence of Spanish South America.

Jose de San Martin was another creole liberator who led a war for independence in his home country of Argentina in 1816. He then led an army to liberate Chile in 1818 and coastal Peru in 1820. Soon after, he agreed to have the republican Congress make Bolivar dictator of Peru. To the dismay of many Peruvian creoles, Bolivar decreed that land be distributed and schools set up for the Indigenous people, who made up a large majority of the population.

Bolivar's army general Antonio Jose de Sucre was a liberator himself. His army liberated Ecuador from Spain in 1822. On April 1, 1825, de Sucre's army defeated the Spanish in Upper Peru. It was the last battle of the liberation wars, ending 300 years of Spanish colonial rule in South America. On August 6, Upper Peru declared its independence as the new Republic of Bolivia.

The Bolivian Constitution

The newly created Republic of Bolivia asked Bolivar to write its constitution in 1826. The Bolivian Constitution reflected Bolivar's design for government he believed suitable for South American nations. In the constitution, Bolivar established:

- A representative democracy with the people holding ultimate political power.
- A three-house legislature that would divide the responsibility for certain areas of law-making.
- A judiciary to safeguard freedom, equality, and security.
- The abolition of slavery.
- The prohibition of torture.
- A bill of rights with guarantees for civil liberties, property, press freedom, and privacy in the home.

The Bolivian Constitutional Congress adopted most of what Bolivar proposed. But it delayed ending slavery, and it made Catholicism the official religion.

In 1830, Bolivar died at age 47. New leaders of Venezuela called him a tyrant and refused his burial in Caracas. He was buried in Colombia, abandoned by friends and hated by enemies. But in 1842, he was reburied in Caracas and is today remembered as a revolutionary hero throughout South America.

Author: Carlton Martz (1940-2025) was a retired high school teacher, librarian, and longtime contributing writer to BRIA and other Teach Democracy publications.

Writing & Discussion

1. Why did Bolivar reject the U.S. form of government for the liberated nations of Spanish South America? What did he propose, instead?
2. Was Bolivar a greater military or political leader for South America? Give reasons for your answer.

Standards Addressed

Simón Bolivar and Independence in South America

California History Social Science Standard 10.2: Students compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty. (1) Compare the major ideas of philosophers and their effects on the democratic revolutions in England, the United States, France, and Latin America (e.g., John Locke, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Jean- Jacques Rousseau, Simón Bolivar, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison).

California History Social Science Standard 12.9: Students analyze the origins, characteristics, and development of different political systems across time, with emphasis on the quest for political democracy, its advances, and its obstacles. (6) Identify the ideologies, causes, stages, and outcomes of major Mexican, Central American, and South American revolutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Common Core State Standards: SL.9-10.1, SL.9-10.3, RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.10, WHST.11-12.10; SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3, RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.3, RH.11-12.10, WHST.11-12.10.

C3 Framework Indicators: D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles; D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

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Sources

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