

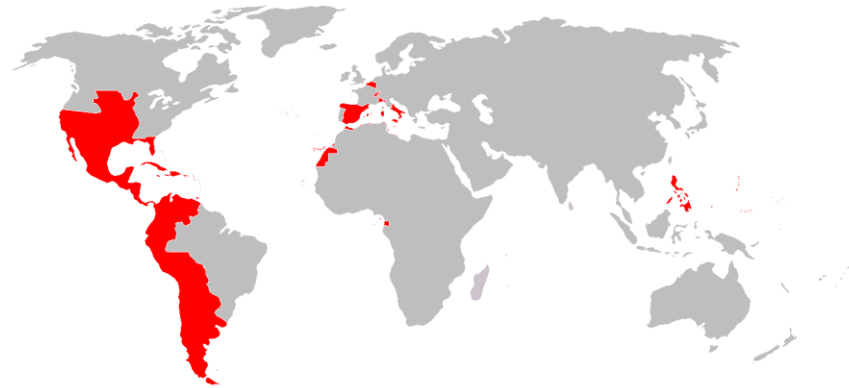
Why Latin America Wanted Independence from Spain

By ThoughtCo.com, adapted by Newsela staff 10/09/2017

As late as 1808, Spain's empire stretched from parts of the U.S. West to the southern tip of Chile, from the Caribbean to the Pacific. By 1825, it was all gone except for a handful of Caribbean islands.

How could Spain's empire fall apart so quickly and completely? The answer is long and complicated, but here are some of the essential points.

No respect for the Creoles



By the late 1700s, the Spanish colonies had a thriving class of Creoles: men and women who were born in the colonies but had European ancestors.

Spain nevertheless appointed mostly native-born Spaniards to important positions in the colonial government. For example, in the government of Caracas, no native Venezuelans were appointed from 1786 to 1810. This irritated the powerful Creoles, who correctly felt that they were being ignored.

No free trade

The vast Spanish Empire produced many goods, including coffee, cacao, textiles, wine and minerals. But the colonies were only allowed to trade with Spain, and at good rates for Spanish merchants. Many started selling their goods illegally to British and American merchants.

Spain was eventually forced to loosen up on trade, but the move was too little, too late. Those who produced these goods demanded a fair price for them.

Other revolutions

By 1810, Spanish America could look to other nations to see revolutions and their results. The American Revolution was seen by many in South America as a good example of colonies throwing off European rule, and replacing it with a more fair and democratic society. Other revolutions were negative: The Haitian Revolution terrified landowners in the Caribbean and northern South America. This revolution had been led by slaves, who freed themselves from their masters and took control of the country.

Spain weakened



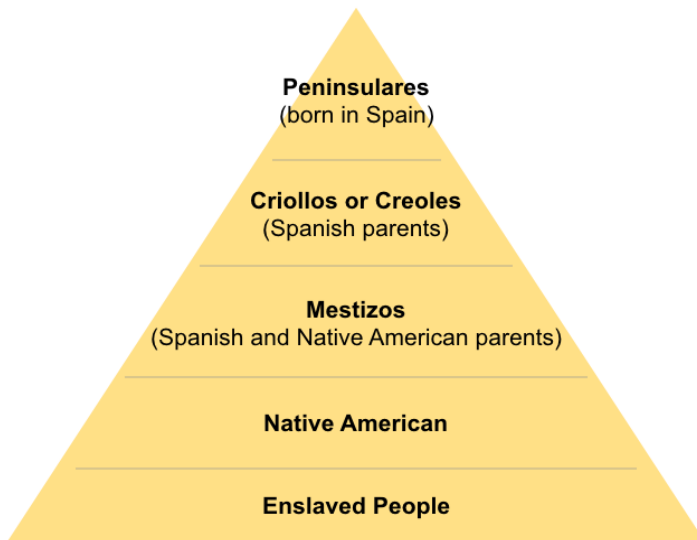
In 1788, Charles IV became king of Spain (left). He was a weak leader and spent most of his time hunting, allowing his ministers to run the empire.

Soon, Spain joined with Napoleon's France and began fighting the British. With a weak ruler and the Spanish military busy, Spain wasn't focused on people in the colonies, so the Creoles felt more ignored than ever.

Americans, not Spaniards

There was also a growing sense in the colonies that they were different from Spain. Creoles began to feel more pride in the colonial territories where they grew up. They preferred to be called Americans and not Spaniards. Meanwhile, Spanish officials kept disrespecting the Creoles, which just widened the gap between the groups.

Racism



Spain as a country had people of mostly European background. The non-Europeans like the Moors, Jews and Romani (who are often negatively called gypsies) had been kicked out centuries before.

But the populations in the colonies were a mixture of Europeans, native people and Africans who were brought in as slaves. In this racist society, people with pure Spanish heritage were the elite class. Anyone with the slightest bit of black or native blood was seen as a lower-class citizen.

Spanish law allowed wealthy people of mixed heritage to "buy" whiteness and rise in society. This angered the privileged elite classes. The "dark side" of the revolutions was that they were fought, in part, to keep the old racist system of classes.

Napoleon invades Spain

Tired of Spain not being an effective ally, Napoleon invaded in 1808 and quickly conquered not only Spain but Portugal as well. He replaced Charles IV with his own brother, Joseph Bonaparte.

A Spain ruled by France was an outrage for Spaniards living in the colonies. Many people who would have otherwise supported Spain now joined the rebels. Those Spaniards who resisted Napoleon begged the colonials for help but refused to change the laws on trade if they won.

Rebellion



The chaos in Spain was the perfect excuse for colonies to rebel and yet not betray the crown. Many said they were loyal to Spain, not Napoleon. But soon the Creoles began thinking of themselves as Americans, and the Spaniards as something different. At this point, the independence of Latin America from Spain was all but certain.

By that time, Spain was in a tough position. The Creoles badly wanted to become government officials and to have fewer restrictions on trade. Spain gave them neither, which caused great resentment and helped lead to independence. Yet, even if they had agreed to these changes, they would have created a more powerful, wealthy colonial elite with experience in governing their home regions. This would have led directly to independence. Some Spanish officials must have realized this and instead decided to squeeze as much as possible from the colonial system before it collapsed.

Of all of the factors listed above, the most important is probably Napoleon's invasion of Spain. It provided a massive distraction and tied up Spanish troops and ships. It also pushed many undecided Creoles to support independence. By the time Spain was beginning to stabilize — Ferdinand reclaimed the throne in 1813 — colonies in Mexico, Argentina and northern South America were in revolt led by Simon Bolivar (left).

Quiz

1. Why was the chaos happening in Spain important?

- A) It allowed many people to return to Europe without being noticed.
- B) It fixed a lot of the racism issues that people in South America were facing.
- C) It ended a lot of the payments people in the colonies were making.
- D) It gave the colonies an excuse to rebel and not betray the crown.

2. Which of the following MOST influenced the Spanish colonies' rebellion?

- A) King Charles IV's reign in Spain
- B) the American Revolution
- C) an alliance with the natives
- D) the laws in Spain

3. Which sentence from the article is BEST supported by the image in the section "Racism"?

- A) Spain as a country had people of mostly European background.
- B) The non-Europeans like the Moors, Jews and Romani (who are often negatively called gypsies) had been kicked out centuries before.
- C) In this racist society, people with pure Spanish heritage were the elite class.
- D) Spanish law allowed wealthy people of mixed heritage to "buy" whiteness and rise in society.

4. Examine the image in the section "No respect for the Creoles." How does this image contribute to the reader's understanding of Spain?

- A) It shows where the Spanish colonies were located.
- B) It describes the order in which Spanish colonies were founded.
- C) It highlights an alliance that was formed against Spain.
- D) It illustrates where Creoles could not hold government positions.