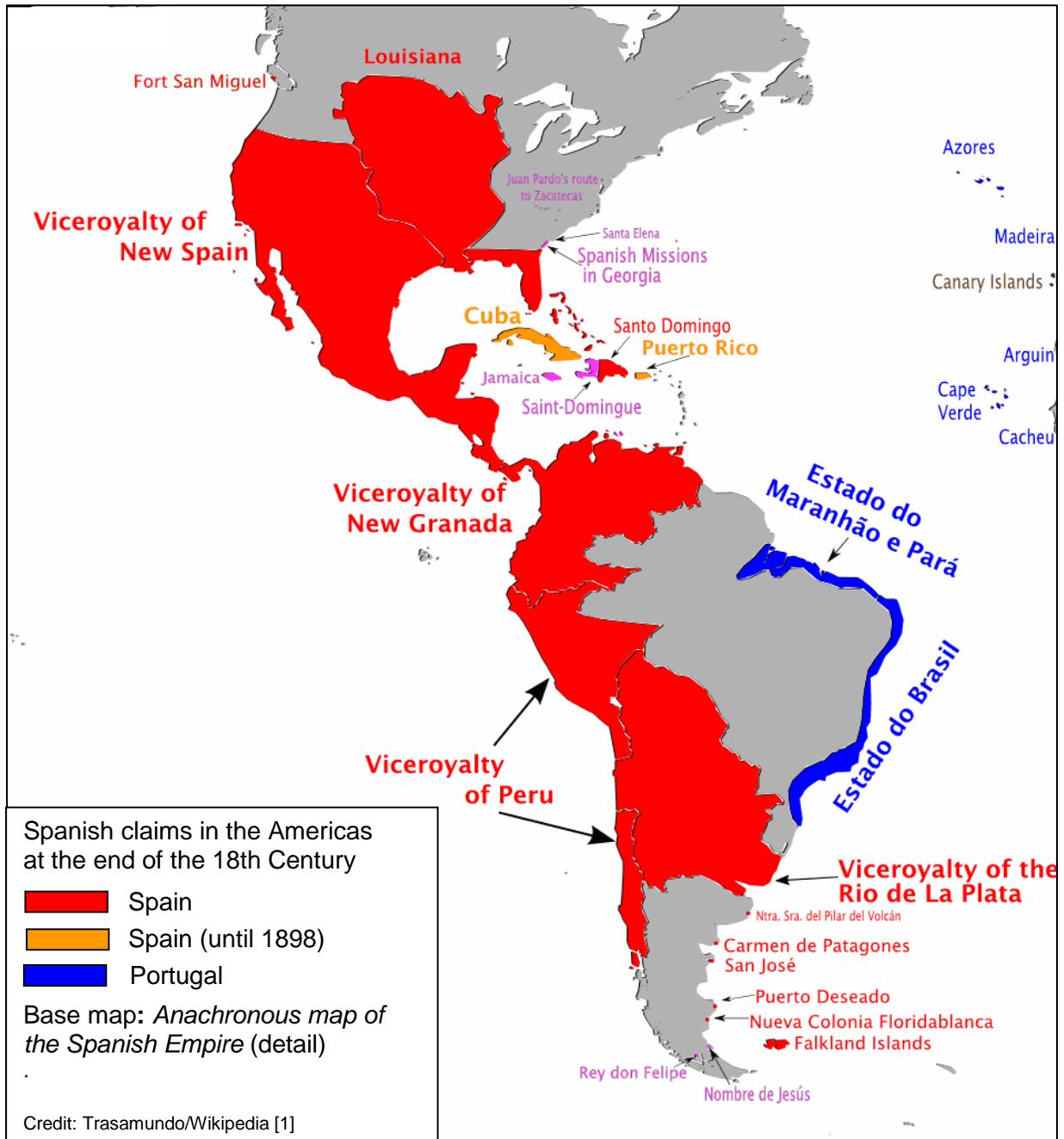


CULTURAL HISTORY

The Disintegration of Spain's American Empire

By Neal McLain

The story of Mexico's independence from Spain is part of a much larger story — the disintegration of Spain's empire in the Americas. At the end of the 18th Century, Spain's claims in North America included Central America, present-day Mexico, much of South America, most of the present-day United States, and even part of Canada.



Within half a century, Spain would lose virtually all of its claims in the Americas, largely as a result of two events centered in France — the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

Louisiana

Although Spain had acquired most of its American territories by conquest, Louisiana was an exception: it had begun as a French colony. In 1682, the French nobleman René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, reached the mouth of the Mississippi River and claimed its entire watershed in the name of France's Louis XIV.

France was defeated in the French and Indian War (1754-63), and was forced to cede Louisiana to Spain. Spain held it as a separate territory until the end of the 18th century.

In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte became *First Consul of France*, effectively its ruler. In 1800, he forced Spain to return Louisiana to France by the secret *Second Treaty of San Ildefonso*,^[2] a one-sided mutual-defense agreement that strongly favored France. Thus, Louisiana was the first of Spain's American territories to leave Spain's empire.

The secret treaty didn't remain secret for long. Hearing about the treaty, United States President Thomas Jefferson became concerned about U.S. trade on the Mississippi. He determined to protect American interests by offering to purchase New Orleans from France.

By 1803, France had established an uneasy peace with Great Britain, but hostilities seemed imminent. Bonaparte needed money and agreed to sell New Orleans. In the end, the United States purchased the entire Louisiana Territory, including New Orleans, for \$15 million.



Louisiana Territory in 1800
Credit: Trasmundo/Wikipedia [3]

At the time of the purchase, the extent of the territory was defined as the "Mississippi River watershed." But neither Spain nor the United States knew the exact location of the western boundary of the territory.

In 1812, the State of Louisiana was admitted to the United States even though its southwestern corner fell outside of the Mississippi River watershed, in lands still claimed by Spain.

The boundary line between the United States and New Spain was finally settled in 1819 by the *Adams-Onís Treaty*,^[4] a treaty between the United States and Spain. Among other things, this treaty established the Sabine River as the western boundary of Louisiana.



Map of the boundary line between the United States and the Viceroyalty of New Spain as established by the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819. Credit: Citynoise/ Wikipedia [5]

The French Revolutionary Wars

In the years following the French Revolution (1789-99), other monarchies of Europe became concerned about how the events in France — and how such notions as freedom and democracy — might affect their own subjects. Several wars between France and its neighbors followed. Wars between France and shifting coalitions of opponents continued on and off until 1815.

In 1794, French armies crossed the Pyrenees mountains and attacked Spain, capturing San Sebastián along Spain's northern border. But the following year, the French ended hostilities and retreated back to France. Although Spain emerged relatively unscathed, the incident foreshadowed far worse events to come.

During the next few years, Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in France. Bonaparte had led French armies in successful campaigns in Italy (1796) and Egypt (1798) and by 1799, had used his popularity and army support to claim the title *First Consul of France*, essentially becoming head of the French government. In 1804, he declared France an Empire and crowned himself Emperor.

In 1808-09, Bonaparte's armies — the *Grande Armée* — occupied Spain and Portugal, precipitating a lengthy war known as the *Peninsular War*. Bonaparte's armies proved to be vastly superior to Spanish and Portuguese forces, but the Spanish mounted a fierce resistance. While French armies were often victorious in battle, their communications and supply lines were frequently cut, harassed, or overwhelmed by resistance fighters.



El Tres de Mayo 1808
by Francisco de Goya, 1814 [7]

Countering Spanish resistance, the French were ruthless rulers. In May 1808, resistance fighters in Madrid rose up against the French and attempted to retake the city. French suppression was immediate and fierce.

Numerous fighters were executed by firing squad the following day, May 3, 1808 (*El Tres de Mayo*), an event immortalized in a famous painting by Goya.

In order to coordinate its resistance efforts, Spanish loyalists, aided by the British, formed the *Supreme Central Junta*, a sort of government-in-exile in southern Spain. But by 1810, Bonaparte had extended French rule into southern Spain, forcing the *Central Junta* to disband. Bonaparte controlled all of Spain.

As a result of a similar series of events in Portugal, Bonaparte also controlled Portugal. .



Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries Palace, Paris
by Jacques-Louis David, 1812 [6]

Spanish American Wars of Independence

By 1810, Bonaparte was at the height of his power. Virtually every country in Europe was under his direct control or held by countries defeated by his empire and under treaties favorable for France.

In 1812, Bonaparte made what was perhaps the dumbest decision of his career: he declared war on Russia. His army of 690,000 men, the largest army ever assembled in European history, crossed the Niemen River and marched toward Moscow. But after one indecisive battle, the Russian army retreated toward Moscow, forcing Bonaparte to follow. Then winter set in. As Adolph Hitler would learn a century later, the Russian winter is a far more formidable enemy than the Russian army. By the time the retreating French army finally crossed the Niemen, and out of Russian territory, only 20,000 men had survived.



Lord Arthur Wellesley
Duke of Wellington
by Thomas Lawrence [8]

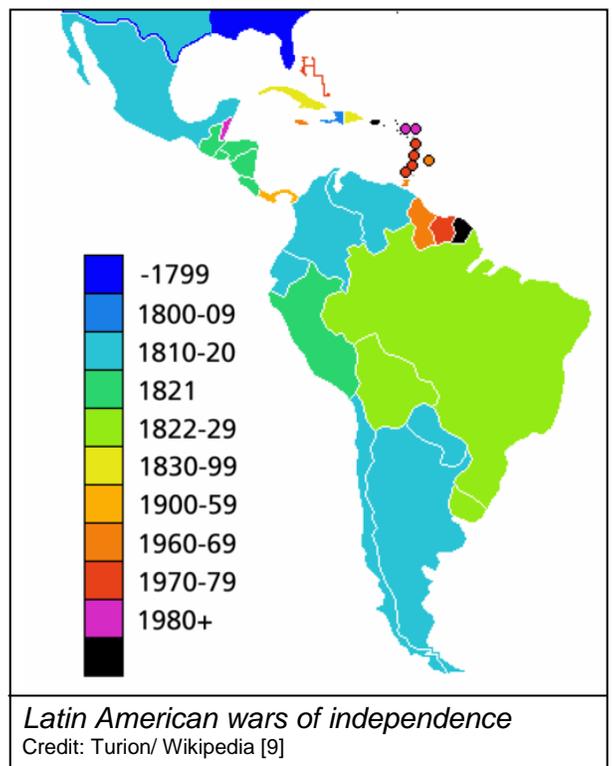
Sensing the weakened state of the *Grande Armée*, a coalition consisting of Austria, Prussia, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and several German States, together with rebels in Spain and Portugal, joined forces in what came to be known as the *War of the Sixth Coalition*. In 1813, coalition forces under the command of Englishman Lord Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, broke the French power in Spain and forced the French to retreat over the Pyrenees and back into France. Bonaparte was captured and banished to Elba, an island in the Mediterranean off the coast of Italy.

In 1815, Bonaparte managed to escape from Elba and attempted to return to power as Emperor of France. His old enemies responded quickly in a short war known as the *War of the Seventh Coalition*.

British and German forces, again under Wellington's command, defeated Bonaparte once and for all at the *Battle of Waterloo*, and forced Bonaparte to abdicate. This time he was banished to the remote island of St. Helena, where he died in 1821.

Spain and Portugal were at last free of French oppression. But both countries were devastated.

The weakened state of the Spanish government created an opening for Spain's American colonies to seek independence. Even before the collapse of the Central Junta in Spain, Bolivia and Ecuador had established their own governing Juntas. When the Central Junta fell, numerous new Juntas appeared all across the Americas, eventually resulting in a chain of newly independent countries stretching from Argentina and Chile in the south, to Mexico in the north. By 1833, only Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spanish rule (and Spain would lose them in 1898, in the wake of the Spanish-American War).



The War of Mexican Independence

At the start of the 19th Century, the territorial area of the Mexico was much larger than it is today. It included the entire geographic area of the Viceroyalty of New Spain north of Panama (which, at that time, was part of Colombia). Most of the countries of Central America were part of Mexico.

Mexico's war of independence began in 1810, immediately after Bonaparte's forces occupied Spain, but it was not until 1821 that Mexico finally won its independence.

During the Spanish colonial period, Mexican society was organized under a caste system based on race. One's position in the caste system determined a person's importance in society.

- *Peninsulares* (born in Spain of Spanish ancestry)
- *Criollos* (born in America of pure or mostly Spanish ancestry)
- Amerindians (indigenous American Indians)
- *Mestizos* (mixed race of Spanish and Amerindian ancestry)
- African negro slaves

The peninsulares, and, to a lesser extent, the criollos, were the ruling classes in Mexico, although some mestizos were able to achieve considerable wealth and social status. Legal racial classification often depended more on such factors as a person's social status, wealth, culture and language than on biological heritage. Nevertheless, the Spanish crown clearly supported the privileged status of the peninsulares, resulting in friction between peninsulares and other classes.

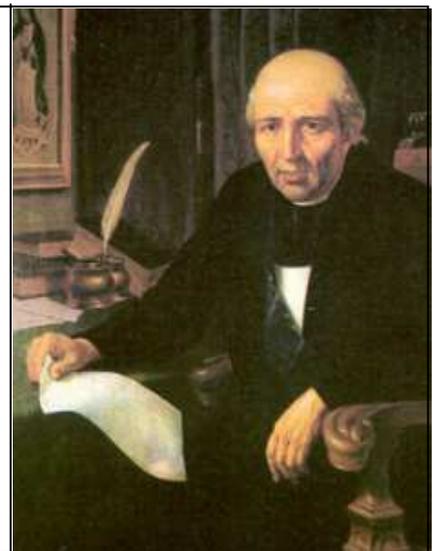
The first military action of what would become the revolution took place in 1810-11, when a band of Amerindians and mestizos led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla marched on Guanajuato, a major colonial mining center governed by peninsulares. Hidalgo was a Roman Catholic priest and a criollo who opposed the privileged status of the peninsulares and believed that revolution was the only way to achieve a fair society.



Hidalgo is a revered figure in Mexican history. He is remembered in numerous paintings, drawings, statues, coins, and even an airport: *Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla International Airport* at Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

Left: *Statue of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla at Church of the Light of the World, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.* Sculptor unknown. [10]

Right: *Painting of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla by Joaquin Ramirez, 1864 (detail)* [11]



Spanish military forces quickly defeated Hidalgo's army. Hidalgo and his remaining soldiers were captured, and Hidalgo was sentenced to death. His body was mutilated, and his head was displayed in Guanajuato as a warning to Mexican rebels.

That ended the revolutionary movement until 1815.



*Mexican Emperor
Agustín de Iturbide*
Attributed to Josephus Arias Huerta
Google Libros [14]

From 1815 to 1821, fighting continued in numerous skirmishes involving isolated guerrilla bands, criollos, peninsulares, mestizos, and the Spanish army. But the Spanish crown continued to favor the peninsulares. By the early 1800s, discrimination favoring the peninsulares led the criollos to rebel against the crown.

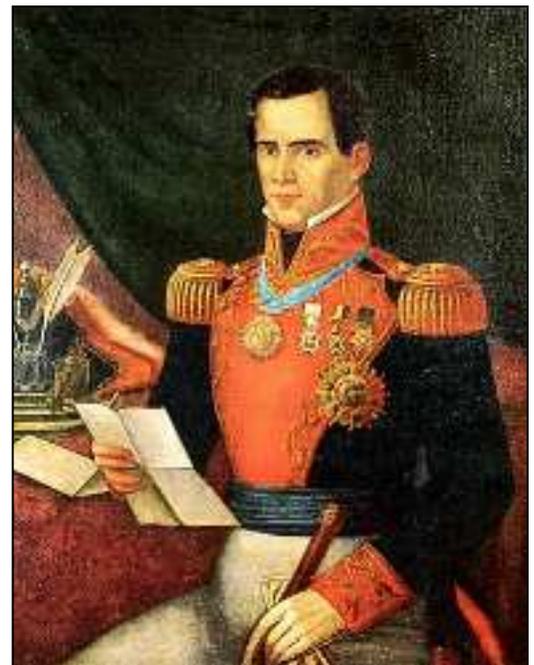
At this point, I will skip a long and complicated story and jump to August 24, 1821. On that date, representatives of the Spanish crown and rebel forces signed the *Treaty of Córdoba*,^[12] recognizing Mexican independence. Rebel forces had been led by a criollo officer, Colonel Agustín de Iturbide. In 1822, the newly-formed Mexican congress declared Mexico to be an empire, and named Iturbide Emperor of Mexico. For the full story, see Wikipedia's article *Mexican War of Independence*.^[13]

The new provisional government took a while to get organized, but it eventually drafted a constitution. But Iturbide, as Emperor, remained in charge.

Factions in the Congress began to criticize both Iturbide and his policies, whereupon Iturbide dissolved it. This action enraged the commander of the garrison at Veracruz, Antonio López de Santa Anna, who with his troops rose up against Iturbide and declared that Mexico would be a Republic, the *United Mexican States*.

Fearing for his life as the rebellion grew stronger, Iturbide ordered the dissolved Congress to reassemble in March 1823. He presented his abdication in a night-time session and fled to Italy shortly thereafter.

In April 1824 the Congress, having already declared Iturbide's administration void, declared him to be a traitor. When he returned to Mexico in July 1824 he was arrested on arrival and executed. The *United Mexican States* declared by Santa Anna would survive into the 1840s.



Antonio López de Santa Anna.
Artist unknown. Source: Wikipedia. [15]

We'll hear from Santa Anna again as this history proceeds. As commander of the Mexican army, he fought the Texian rebels during the Texan Revolution in 1835-36.

For the purpose of this narrative, the most significant act of the provisional government was the act reauthorizing the Empresario Grant that the Spanish Governor had previously granted to Moses Austin. As we have noted in an earlier article in this series, Moses Austin died in 1821 within months of Mexican independence, and his son, Stephen F. Austin, spent two years in Mexico City before he finally succeeded in getting the grant reauthorized. Returning to what is now Texas, he eventually settled 297 families, now known as the Old Three Hundred.

And that's a story I've related before. ^[16-18]

Endnotes

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