Latin American Independence: Why Did the Creoles Lead the Fight?

Overview: Between 1810 and 1826, revolutions broke out across Latin America. Many Latin Americans resented the control Spain had over its colonies in North and South America. The leaders above, Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, were two of the key Latin American leaders in the struggle for independence from Spain. Both men came from a class of people known as Creoles or Criollos. Like most leaders in the fight for independence, these two Creole men were born in the Americas but their ancestors were from Europe. The question you will answer in this Mini-Q is Latin American Independence: Why Did the Creoles Lead the Fight?

The Documents:

Document A: Complex National Identity
Document B: Rivalry Between Creoles and Peninsulares
Document C: Spanish Economic Policies
Document D: Economic Troubles in Mexico
Document E: Popular Revolution in Mexico
Document F: Creoles React to Social Tensions

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)
Hook Exercise: Ranking Social Groups

Directions: By the late 18th century, a rigid social hierarchy existed in colonial Latin America. Certain groups had more power and privilege than others, and there was little room for social advancement. Below are descriptions of the main social classes that made up colonial Spanish America. With a partner, read through the descriptions and then fill in the circle diagram and social pyramid below.

- **Mestizos** were people of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage who in 1800 made up about 7% of the total population. Most mestizos were small farmers, shopkeepers, artisans, and overseers in mines and on haciendas (ranches and plantations).

- **Peninsulares** were people born in Spain who migrated to the colonies. Peninsulares made up less than 1% of the colonial population. Some peninsulares were very wealthy, but not all. Peninsulares worked in high-ranking jobs in the government, military and church.

- **Indian peoples** made up well over 50% of the population of colonial Latin America. These were the people who lived in Latin America before the arrival of the Spanish. By law, Native villages were forced to provide labor in Spanish mines and farms.

- **Slaves** were of African descent, and many were born in Africa. Slaves were about 11% of the population. Under colonial law, slaves were considered property and could be bought and sold.

- **Mulattos and Free Blacks**: Mulattos were people of mixed African and Spanish blood. More so than in North America, blacks in Spanish America were able to buy their freedom. Together, free blacks and mulattos made up about 8% of the population.

- **Creoles** were people of pure Spanish blood who were born in America. Their ancestry went back to the original conquistadores — something they were very proud of. Creoles made up about 23% of the population. Creoles owned the largest and richest mines and haciendas. Despite their wealth, Creoles held few high-ranking jobs in the government, church, or trade. These jobs went to the peninsulares.

**Task One**: Create a pie chart that shows the names and percentages of the six social classes in colonial Latin America.

**Task Two**: Determine where you think each group falls in the social hierarchy. Write each social class name on the pyramid. Be prepared to defend your decisions.
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“We came to serve God and to get rich.” So said the conquistador, Bernabé Díaz del Castillo, about the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In their search for gold and souls to save, Spain created an empire that extended as far north as Colorado and as far south as Patagonia in Southern Chile. This empire lasted for over 300 years. Then, between the years 1811 and 1830 one Spanish colony after another – Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Mexico, Ecuador, the United Provinces of Central America, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, and Venezuela – declared their independence from Spain.

Why did Latin Americans become unhappy with Spanish rule? One major complaint was that the Spanish were unwilling to share political power. The Spanish crown appointed viceroys, or governors, who ruled the Spanish colonies. Even after several generations of colonial rule, viceroys and other government officials always came from Spain and rarely consulted with Latinos leaders who had always lived in the Americas.

Another annoyance was Spain’s economic policies. Spain believed the purpose of the colonies was to build the wealth of the mother country. Under the economic system called mercantilism, the Spanish officials took the majority of the profits from resources they found in the Americas. More of this story will be told by the documents.

Despite these political and economic grievances, we know from the historical record that as late as 1800 there was little revolutionary activity in Latin America. Then, however, something happened. In 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte’s French army invaded Spain, removed the Spanish king from the throne, and replaced him with Napoleon’s brother. Because Spain was up to its elbows in trouble, it could not pay proper attention to its colonies across the Atlantic Ocean.

This created an opening for Americanos like Simon Bolívar, Juan de San Martín, and Agustín de Iturbide. Wasn’t this the perfect time for Latin American colonies to remove Spanish authority and declare their independence?

A big question was what this independence would look like. Bolívar, San Martín, and Iturbide were all Creoles, born in America but of pure Spanish blood. As much as they wanted

[Map of Latin America showing independence states in 1830]

to be rid of the Spanish they were always uneasy about the racial mix of people who made up the rest of the Latin American population – slaves, free blacks, mulattos, mestizos, not to mention the Spanish-born pure-blooded peninsulares. With this mixed population, creating a new country with a stable government, a strong economy, and a sense of nationhood was a real challenge.

This Mini-Q dives into the excitement and the complexity of revolutionary Latin America. Examine the six documents that follow and answer the question before us: Latin American independence: Why did the Creoles lead the fight?
Background Essay Questions

1. Why did Spain create colonies in Latin America?

2. Name Spanish Latin American countries that became independent between 1800 and 1830.

3. Which countries on both sides of the Atlantic experienced revolutions during the late 18th and early 19th centuries?

4. How did Napoleon's invasion of Spain influence independence movements in Latin America?

5. How many racial groups existed in Latin America during the 18th century?

6. From which social class did most Latin American revolutionaries come?

7. Define these terms:
   - colonies
   - viceroys
   - Americanos
   - mercantilism
   - Creoles
   - mulattos
   - mestizos
   - peninsulares

Timeline

1492 – Italian Christopher Columbus, sailing for Spain, reaches the Americas
1789 – French revolution begins. King Louis XVI is executed in 1793.
1803 – Thomas Jefferson purchases Louisiana Territory from Napoleon Bonaparte.
1804 – Simon Bolivar attends Napoleon I's coronation in France. Haiti becomes independent country from France.
1809 - 1824 – Rebellions for independence rage throughout Latin America
Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?

2. What terms in the question need to be defined?

3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using any clues from the Mini-Q question, create analytical categories and label the buckets.
Document A

Source: Simón Bolívar, An Address of Bolivar at the Congress of Angostura. February 15, 1819.

Note: Simon Bolivar was one of the most influential revolutionary leaders. He was a Creole born in 1783 in what is now Caracas, Venezuela. The Congress of Angostura took place during the wars of independence of Colombia and Venezuela. This short excerpt was taken from Bolivar's opening speech.

We are not Europeans; we are not Indians; we are but a mixed species of aborigines and Spaniards. Americans by birth and Europeans by law, we find ourselves engaged in a dual conflict: We are disputing with the natives for titles of ownership, and at the same time we are struggling to maintain ourselves in the country that gave us birth against the opposition of the invaders. Thus our position is most extraordinary and complicated.

Document Analysis

1. Using the Background Essay as a reminder, which social class or classes would be “Americans by birth and Europeans by law” in Latin America in 1819? Which social class or classes could not fit into that category?

2. What is the “dual conflict” Bolivar describes?

3. Focusing on the word “we,” which social class do you think Bolivar means when he says “We are disputing with the natives for titles of ownership”?

4. To whom is Bolivar referring when he speaks of “invaders”?

5. Simon Bolivar uses the words “us” and “we” repeatedly in this short passage. Why do you think he does that?

6. How could you use this document to explain why Creoles led the fight in the revolution against Spain?
Document B


One of the main sources of independence sentiment was the growing rivalry between creoles and peninsulares. The Creoles had growing economic and social influence but the peninsulares monopolized all administrative positions.* Denied the political power to go along with their rising prominence, many Creoles began to think of doing away with the inconvenience of Spanish colonialism and move toward independence.

* For example, in 1807 only 12 of 99 judgeships in Latin America were held by Creoles. The rest were held by peninsulares.

Document Analysis

1. What was the difference between Creoles and peninsulares?

2. In the rivalry between the Creoles and the peninsulares, what kind of power did the Creoles have and what kind of power did the peninsulares have?

3. How did the Creoles think independence might change their position?

4. How could you use this document to answer the question, why did the Creoles lead the fight for Latin American independence?
Document C

Source: Juan Pablo Viscardo, An Open Letter to America, written in 1791 and published in Latin America in 1801.

Note: Juan Pablo Viscardo was a Creole born in Peru. He wrote this letter in Europe but it was later distributed in the Americas. Americanos was a term he and others used to refer to Latin Americans. Generally, this term referred to Creoles; sometimes it included mestizos and mulattos. Viscardo was a firm supporter of independence.

Spanish restrictions on travel and commerce sealed America off from the rest of the world [limiting] our basic personal and property rights.... We in America are perhaps the first to be forced by our own government to sell our products at artificially low prices and buy what we need at artificially high prices. This is the result of the Spanish commercial monopoly system, combined with taxes and official fees. And because the official monopoly on transatlantic trade would naturally lead us to produce more in America, the government has been careful to place limitations on what we can legally produce....

... Spain could have left us the administration of our own affairs, one would think. Americanos, being those most concerned by affairs of America, logically ought to fill the public offices of their own country for the benefit of all concerned. But that has been far from the case.

Document Analysis

1. Which country is restricting the Americanos’ property rights?

2. Identify two economic policies that are making Creoles like Juan Pablo Viscardo angry.

3. Who does Viscardo think should be in charge of the American economy?

4. How could you use this document to respond to the question, why did the Creoles take the lead in the fight for independence?
In 1808-09 drought produced a great mortality among Mexico’s livestock and decimated [destroyed] the harvest. ... Food prices tripled. As in the past, agrarian [agricultural] crisis soon affected the rest of the economy: mining and manufacturing faltered and unemployment rose. The mule trains which carried maize to the public granaries traveled under military escort. Dearth [scarcity] also aggravated old agrarian conflicts and led ... to peasant land invasions ... .

Creole elites, indignant and threatened, now sought to capitalize on these social tensions. In 1809, officers of the militia ... hatched a plot which sought to wrest power from the peninsulares and establish a form of Creole home rule, within the framework of the Spanish empire.

Document Analysis

1. What two things happened as a result of drought in Mexico in 1808-1809?

2. What happened to the unemployment rate as a result of the drought?

3. Why do you think the mule trains that carried grain would be escorted by the military?

4. How did Creole elites react to the problem of the drought?

5. How could you use this document to address the question, why did the Creoles take the lead in the fight for independence?
Document E

Source: Mural by Juan O'Gorman called *Grito de Dolores*, 1960-61. At the Museo Nacional de Historia, in the Castillo de Chapultepec in Mexico City.

Note: This mural depicts events on September 16, 1810. From the pulpit of his church, Father Hidalgo, a Mexican revolutionary priest, declared himself in open revolt against Spain. He led about 600 followers, mostly Indians and mestizos, to fight against the injustices of the Spanish colonial system. Hidalgo was a Creole but did not have much support from other Creoles.


My children: a new dispensation comes to us today. Will you receive it? Will you free yourselves? Will you recover the lands stolen three hundred years ago from your forefathers by the hated Spaniards? We must act at once. Will you defend your religion and your rights as true patriots?... Death to bad government! Death to the *gachupines* [peninsulares]!"

Document Analysis

1. What do you see in the mural painting by Juan O'Gorman?

2. Who is the man in the middle of the mural?

3. In the passage from the *Grito de Delores*, what is Father Hidalgo encouraging?

4. Which social class is Hidalgo challenging?

5. Father Hidalgo was a Creole. Why do you suppose he got limited support from other Creoles?
Document F


Note: In 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain, overthrew the Spanish monarchy and placed his brother on the throne.

[If the Creoles had one eye on their masters, they kept the other on their servants. The Creoles were intensely aware of social pressure from below, and they strove to keep the coloured people at a distance... white superiority was not unchallenged; beyond its defenses swarmed Indians, mestizos, free blacks, mulattoes and slaves...

Traditionally the elite looked to Spain to defend them.... [But] when the monarchy collapsed in 1808, the Creoles could not allow the political vacuum to remain unfilled, their lives and property unprotected. They had to move quickly to anticipate popular rebellion, convinced that if they did not seize the opportunity, more dangerous forces would do so.

Document Analysis

1. What does Bethell mean when he writes, “If the Creoles had one eye on their masters, they kept the other on their servants”?

2. Which social classes were challenging the idea of “white superiority”?

3. What did Creoles think about “coloured people” or people of Native, African or mixed ancestry?

4. Father Hidalgo led the revolt in Mexico that is featured in Document E. What does document F suggest about how most Creoles reacted to that revolt?

5. Why could the Creoles no longer count on the Spanish government to control social unrest after 1808?

6. How could you use this document to answer the question, why did the Creoles take the lead in the fight for independence?