

THINKING THROUGH SOURCES
for

Ways of the World

A Brief Global History

VOLUME 2: SINCE THE
FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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Rights and National Independence

If the “rights of man” could be mobilized on behalf of individuals against an oppressive class system as in France, those rights came to be applied also to oppressed peoples, nations, and colonial subjects, as in the United States, Haiti, and Latin America and later all across Asia and Africa. In a well-known letter, written in 1815, Simón Bolívar, a prominent political and military leader in the struggle against Spanish rule in Latin America, made the case for the independence of his continent, arguing that Latin Americans’ collective “rights,” derived from Europe itself, had been massively violated.

Questions to consider as you examine the source:

- What understanding of “rights” informed Bolívar’s demand for independence? Why did he feel that the situation of his people was so “extraordinary and complicated”?
- What were his chief objections to Spanish rule?
- What difficulties did Bolívar foresee in achieving the kind of stable and unified independence that he so much desired?

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

The Jamaica Letter

1815

Success will crown our efforts, because the destiny of [Latin] America has been irrevocably decided; the tie that bound her to Spain has been severed. . . . The hatred that the Peninsula has inspired in us is greater than the ocean between us. It would be easier to have the two continents meet than to reconcile the spirits of the two countries. The habit of obedience; a community of interest, of understanding, of religion; mutual goodwill; a tender regard for the birthplace and good name of our forefathers; in short, all that gave rise to our hopes, came to us from Spain. . . . At present the contrary attitude persists: we are threatened with the fear of death, dishonor, and every harm; there is nothing we have not suffered at the hands of that unnatural stepmother — Spain. The veil has been torn asunder. . . . For this reason America fights desperately. . . .

We are, moreover, neither Indian nor European, but a species midway between the legitimate proprietors of this country and the Spanish usurpers. In short, though Americans by birth we derive our rights from Europe, and we have to assert these rights against the rights of the natives, and at the same time we must defend ourselves against the invaders. This places us in a most extraordinary and involved situation. . . .

The role of the inhabitants of the American hemisphere has for centuries been purely passive. Politically they were nonexistent. We are still in a position lower than slavery, and therefore it is more difficult for us to rise to the enjoyment of freedom. . . . We have been harassed by a conduct which has not only deprived us of our rights but

has kept us in a sort of permanent infancy with regard to public affairs.

Americans today . . . occupy a position in society no better than that of serfs destined for labor, or at best they have no more status than that of mere consumers. Yet even this status is surrounded with galling restrictions, such as being forbidden to grow European crops, or to store products which are royal monopolies, or to establish factories of a type the Peninsula itself does not possess. To this add the exclusive trading privileges, even in articles of prime necessity, and the barriers between American provinces, designed to prevent all exchange of trade, traffic, and understanding. In short, do you wish to know what our future held? — simply the cultivation of the fields of indigo, grain, coffee, sugar cane, cacao, and cotton; cattle raising on the broad plains; hunting wild game in the jungles; digging in the earth to mine its gold — but even these limitations could never satisfy the greed of Spain. . . . Is it not an outrage and a violation of human rights to expect a land so splendidly endowed, so vast, rich, and populous, to remain merely passive? . . .

We were cut off and, as it were, removed from the world in relation to the science of government and administration of the state. We were never viceroys or governors, save in the rarest of instances; seldom archbishops and bishops; diplomats never; as military men, only subordinates; as nobles, without royal privileges. In brief, we were neither magistrates nor financiers and seldom merchants. . . .

These laws favor, almost exclusively, the natives of the country who are of Spanish extraction. Thus . . . those born in America have been despoiled of their constitutional rights. . . .

The American provinces are fighting for their freedom, and they will ultimately succeed. . . . It is a grandiose idea to think of consolidating the New World into a single nation, united by pacts into a single bond. It is reasoned that, as these parts have a common origin, language, customs, and religion, they ought to have a single government to permit the newly formed states to unite in a confederation. But this is not possible. Actually, America is separated by climatic differences, geographic diversity, conflicting interests, and dissimilar characteristics. . . . This type of organization may come to pass in some happier period of our regeneration. . . .

As soon as we are strong and under the guidance of a liberal nation which will lend us her protection, we will achieve accord in cultivating the virtues and talents that lead to glory. Then will we march majestically toward that great prosperity for which South America is destined. Then will those sciences and arts which, born in the East, have enlightened Europe, wing their way to a free Colombia, which will cordially bid them welcome.

Source: Francisco Javier Yanes y Cristóbal Mendoza Montilla: *Colección de documentos relativos a la vida pública del Libertador de Colombia y del Perú Simón Bolívar para servir a la historia de la independencia de Suramérica*, Caracas, 1833, T. XXII, pp. 207–29. Translated by Suzanne Sturn. Used by permission of Suzanne Sturn.

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Rights and Slavery: "Reason and Nature"

The language of "rights," derived from the French Revolution, had implications for race relations and the long-established practice of slavery, as well as for colonial rule. France legally abolished slavery in its colonies in 1794, though it was restored by Napoleon in 1802. The contradiction between the "rights of man," racial inequality, and, by implication, slavery was addressed in an engraving produced in 1793, the year before slavery was abolished, titled "All Mortals Are Equal, It Is Not Birth but Virtue That Makes the