



Simón Bolívar

Art of Venezuela

Rebecca Hinson

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Dedicated to Claudia Battistel Tomada & Gabriela Escobar Rodríguez

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For 300 years, the Spanish Crown dominated its South American provinces. Denied public office and free trade, Creoles (Spanish Americans) yearned for equality and self-government. It took a man of great military might and political vision to lead Spanish territories from the shadow of bondage to the light of independence as Gran Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. That man was Simón Bolívar.



Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad Bolívar y Palacios was born into a rich, white, educated Creole family in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1783. No one could have predicted that he would one day unite white Creole elites, poor whites, *pardos* (free nonwhites with combinations of black, white, indigenous, or Spanish blood), blacks, and indigenous people to challenge the powerful Spanish Crown.



When Bolívar was two years old, his father, a founder of the local elite militia corps, died from tuberculosis. When he was nine, his mother succumbed to the same disease. Bolívar was sent away from the San Mateo estate and his beloved black nurse, Hipólita, to live with his grandfather, who assigned Bolívar's guardianship to his uncles.



Bolívar's studies included reading, writing, grammar, literature, geography, mathematics, religion, dancing, fencing, and horsemanship. Among his teachers was Simon Rodríguez, a channel of independent thinking. Bolívar would encounter him years later in Europe. A born leader at fourteen, Bolívar excelled in the local elite militia corps, rising to second lieutenant within a year.



At fifteen, Bolívar travelled to Spain where he continued his education in mathematics, history, philosophy, and languages. At seventeen, he fell in love with María Teresa Rodríguez del Toro y Alayza. A year later, they married, settling into his beloved Venezuelan San Mateo family estate. Sadly, eight months later Maria Teresa died of a malignant fever.



Desolate, Bolívar returned to Europe where he heard Rousseau's call for society based on reason, not religion. That call led to additional ideals of liberty, equality, and constitutional government. Bolívar witnessed the coronation of French emperor Napoleon, who would later force the abdication of the Spanish king, weakening Spain's control of the Captaincy General of Venezuela.



On August 15, 1805, on Monte Sacro in Rome, witnessed by his mentor Simón Rodríguez and his Venezuelan friend Fernando del Toro, Bolívar vowed, “I swear before you, I swear by the God of my fathers, I swear by my fathers, I swear by my honor, I swear by my country that I will not rest body or soul until I have broken the chains with which Spanish power oppresses us.”



On July 4, 1811, speaking to the Venezuelan provincial congress, Bolívar said, “Let us banish fear and lay the foundation stone of American liberty.” The next day congress declared independence from Spain, and the First Republic of Venezuela was born. Ratified by the landed, white, educated Creole elite, the constitution limited voting rights to property owners and preserved slavery.



Lacking equal rights under the new republic, pardos, blacks, and slaves fought with Spanish royalists against the patriots. Royalist clergy won many citizens to their camp by blaming the revolution for bringing down God's wrath in the form of two earthquakes. Commander-in-chief of the Republic, Francisco de Miranda, failed to pursue the royalists, eventually surrendering on July 25, 1812.



The next summer, Bolívar invaded Venezuela from New Granada (today's Colombia) with a small army. Spanish Captain General Monteverde retaliated by allowing his soldiers to kill hundreds of civilians and patriot prisoners. Bolívar signed a decree of war to the death. Spaniards who did not aid the patriot cause would be executed as traitors to Venezuela.