

Simón Bolívar

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1783, Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad de Bolívar y Palacio was a soldier and statesman who earned the nickname *El Libertador*, the Liberator. Simón Bolívar, as he came to be known, was a Creole, the son of an aristocrat of Spanish descent. Orphaned by the age of six, Bolívar was raised by his uncle, whose main focus was providing an education for his charge. As a teen, Bolívar went to Spain to study. There he met and married María Teresa del Toro y Alayza, the daughter of a Spanish nobleman. She died after a year of marriage. Bolívar himself acknowledged her death as a turning point in his life. It was, he believed, the point at which destiny pointed him toward politics.

After María Teresa's death, Bolívar traveled to France, where he witnessed the crowning of Napoleon Bonaparte and studied the works of the Enlightenment, including those of John Locke, Voltaire, Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Bolívar's experiences in Europe at this time led him to make a promise that he would free his country from Spanish rule. In 1807, he began his journey home to Venezuela, stopping along the way to visit the United States. A year after Bolívar's arrival home in 1809, the fight for South American independence began.

Venezuelan Independence

Though the first move to establish an independent Venezuela out from under Spanish rule occurred in 1797, it would take more than two decades to become a reality. Francisco de Miranda, an experienced soldier who had fought in both the American and French revolutions, attempted to liberate Venezuela in 1806. Unfortunately for Miranda, however, his ship filled with mercenary soldiers made an unsuccessful landfall and was met with little to no support. Miranda was eventually called back to Venezuela in 1810, as the desire for independence continued to spread through New Granada. A war between revolutionaries and royalists led Miranda to sign an armistice with Spain, an action that alienated Miranda's fellow revolutionaries. Miranda was ultimately turned over to the Spanish, and he died in a Spanish prison in 1816.

By 1813, Simón Bolívar had risen to prominence as a leader of the revolution. Bolívar's Creole heritage made him appealing to the higher echelons of New Granada's society, though most European colonists supported the royalist cause. Bolívar's bid for independence faced significant opposition in 1815 after the arrival of Spanish General Pablo Morillo. Morillo reconquered most of New Granada. However, during the process, he managed to enrage many of the Creoles who had originally supported him. The addition of Creoles, *llaneros*, mercenaries from Great Britain and Ireland, and assistance from President Pétion in Haiti bolstered Bolívar's forces and made Venezuelan independence a reality.

On December 17, 1819, Bolívar established the Republic of Gran Colombia. He made Bogotá the capital and himself the president of the newly formed country. In less than four years, Bolívar and his forces defeated the last of the royalist armies in Gran Colombia and turned their attention to the liberation of Upper Peru in 1825. Though Bolívar's forces were successful in Peru, Gran Colombia fell into disarray in his absence. Venezuela became its own country in 1829, followed by Ecuador. Bolívar died the following year.