

Brazilian Independence

Compared to other independence movements in Latin America and in other parts of the world, Brazilian independence was achieved at a much lower cost, both in terms of capital and human life. In 1807, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Portugal in an attempt to further threaten Great Britain, one of Portugal's most significant allies. The prince regent, João, fled to the Portuguese colony of Brazil with the Portuguese court in November 1807 and arrived in Rio de Janeiro in March 1808. Once in Brazil, João introduced sweeping economic reforms, including opening Brazil's ports to trade with other countries besides Portugal and permitting Brazilian manufacturing. João also played an integral role in the development of Rio; in addition to establishing Portugal's Supreme Court and royal treasury and mint in Rio, João was responsible for the construction of numerous cultural, military, and educational institutions in the city.

On December 16, 1815, João established the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves, an action that placed Brazil on equal footing with Portugal. João became king of Portugal the following year after the death of his mother, the queen, though he did not return to his home country for another five years. Mounting crises, revolts, and the threat of being removed from power forced João to return to Portugal in 1821, at which point he named his son Pedro the regent of Brazil.

Pedro was confronted by conflict both in Brazil and in Portugal. In South America, the desire for Brazilian independence was on the rise, while across the Atlantic Ocean, the Portuguese government actively tried to restore Brazil to its original position as a colony and repealed many of João's earlier reforms. When the government in Lisbon finally demanded Pedro's return to Portugal, he refused, instead declaring Brazil's independence on September 7, 1822, and crowning himself Emperor Pedro I in December. Brazil's independence was first recognized by the United States in 1824 and then by Portugal in 1825.

Pedro I was succeeded by his son, Emperor Pedro II, who reigned for nearly fifty years. Pedro II was forced to give up the crown in 1889, at which point Brazil became a republic. Pedro II had left his daughter Isabel in charge while he was in Europe seeking medical treatment. While he was away, she issued what is known as the Golden Law in 1888, which brought an end to slavery in Brazil. Many of the rural elites were furious at losing their enslaved plantation workers and blamed Pedro II. In addition, members of the middle class and the military, as well as urban elites, increasingly saw the monarchy as a barrier to political, social, and economic progress. These dissatisfactions with the crown ultimately led to a military coup on November 5, 1889, and Pedro II's abdication of the throne.