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IBERIANS IN THE AMERICAS: CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND THE CONQUISTADORS

The processes of Spanish and Portuguese empire building in the Americas famously began on 12 October 1492 when Christopher Columbus first set foot upon a small island in the Bahamas. Columbus had set off from Spain with the backing of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabella of Castile, with the aim of reaching the Indies, and was convinced that he had secured a lucrative western trade route to the mainland of Asia.

From that moment on, the conquest and subsequent settlement of the American continent by Iberians began. After Columbus’s initial voyage and his return to Spain to convey news of his venture to the royal court, the Spanish monarchs entered into their enterprise of empire building. Eager to legitimize their venture with the Catholic Church, the monarchs successfully sought a papal Bull from Pope Alexander VI which granted them dominion over all lands that would be ‘discovered’ by Spaniards. As Mario Góngora comments, these Bulls, which gave the monarchs ‘full, free and all-embracing authority and jurisdiction’ over the lands also established ‘in a most emphatic manner, the obligation of sending missionaries at the king’s expense’ (1975: 34), indicating how, from an early date, the twin projects of conquest and conversion to Christianity were intertwined. A further crucial development in these early stages of conquest was the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, which intended to negotiate between the rival Iberian powers, giving Portugal a free reign in Asia and Africa while confirming Spain’s rights in the New World. In fact, however, since the American land mass reached much further east than anticipated, the treaty had the effect of giving Portugal the rights to as yet unexplored Brazil (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983).

After Columbus’s initial explorations of the Americas, two of the most prominent names associated with the subsequent conquest and colonization of Latin America are Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro. Cortés is renowned for the conquest of Mexico and for the defeat of the powerful Aztec empire which reigned there, led by the famous emperor Montezuma. Cortés had arrived in the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1504, and in 1519 led an expedition to the Mexican mainland, heading inland and eventually reaching Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire (the site of current-day Mexico City). After a series
of abortive attempts, Cortés’s political cunning and his capitalizing on rivalries between the Aztecs and some of their traditional enemies led to his successful taking of the Aztec capital on 13 August 1521 (for detailed accounts of Cortés’s battles and conquest of Mexico see Thomas 1993).

Cortés is also famous for his association with one of the iconic figures of Mexican history and national identity: a woman called Malintzin, also known as ‘La Malinche’ who spoke Nahuatl, and who, according to accounts, became Cortés’s interpreter and mistress. She was to provide Cortés with vital information that proved strategic in his battles against the Aztecs. La Malinche still functions as an important figure in discussions of Mexican national identity even today, and can perhaps be seen as heralding one of the first examples of hybridity in that, symbolically, the union of Cortés and La Malinche provided the first generation of Mexicans – people of mixed Spanish and indigenous origin. At the same time, her status as collaborator with the invading Spanish forces has led to her being branded a traitor by many and a source of Mexican shame rather than pride (see Octavio Paz’s excellent 1950 study, El laberinto de la soledad (trans. The Labyrinth of Solitude), in particular the chapter ‘Los hijos de La Malinche’, for more detail on the significance of this figure).

While Cortés had increased the lands of the Spanish crown and made conquests towards the north, there were also explorers who went south, the most famous of these being Francisco Pizarro, who during the 1520s led two expeditions down the west coast of South America. On his return to Spain he told of the gold and riches worn by the inhabitants of these lands, and secured the king’s permission to conquer the land and become its governor. In December 1530 Pizarro set sail from Panamá, reached what is now the coast of Ecuador, and from there went inland, waging war on the Inca empire. The Inca empire was in chaos due to a dispute over succession, and also the fact that its people were fast succumbing to a strange disease – the smallpox that the Spaniards had brought with them to the New World. Pizarro and his men seized the emperor, Atahuallpa, on 16 November 1532, and slaughtered an estimated seven thousand Indians, before finally going on to take Cuzco, the capital of the Inca empire, some months later.

With this conquest, the two most powerful empires in the Americas – the Aztecs and the Incas – were dismantled, and the Spanish empire in the New World had begun to establish itself in earnest.

**Portuguese Endeavours**

Initially, Portugal was primarily concerned to pursue its more profitable overseas dominions in Africa and India, so Portuguese colonization in the Americas had been slower to get underway than that of the Spanish. However, while Spanish ventures of discovery and conquest were restricted, geographically, to the Americas and the Philippines, Portuguese endeavours ranged from India to China, Africa, Indonesia and some Atlantic islands. This meant not only a far
wider Portuguese presence globally, but also that the Portuguese encountered a 
vast range of cultures, religions and commercial practices, all of which has led 
historian A. J. R. Russell-Wood to declare that the complexity of Portuguese 
overseas expeditions ‘makes the Spanish experience in the Americas and the 
Philippines pale by comparison’ (1993: 10).

From Vasco da Gama’s ground-breaking voyage, rounding the Cape of Good 
Hope to the trading post of Calicut in India in 1498, Portuguese expansion over-
seas was primarily motivated by commercial concerns, with a view to controlling 
some of the major trade routes for gold, silver, spices and other commodities. A 
series of strategic overseas outposts were established by the Portuguese, 
including one in Goa on the west coast of India in 1510, Malacca in the Malay 
Straits in 1511, Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, and Colombo in 1518. These stra-
tegic posts, backed up by a series of smaller feitoras or fortified trading posts, 
meant that the Portuguese became major players in Asian and Indian trade 
routes. The profitability of these endeavours to the south and to the east meant 
that Portugal was slower to take up the opportunities for expansion and 
conquest in the Americas.

With regard to expansion in the Americas, the first Portuguese to set foot on 
American soil was Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500, who was blown off course 
while on a trip to South Africa and landed on the Brazilian coast, although for 
more than two decades neither Spain nor Portugal was aware that this in fact 
constituted part of the same continent as the Spanish ‘discoveries’ (Williamson 
1992). During the first years of Portuguese presence in the region, Portuguese 
interest was focused on the rich quantities of Brazil wood which were to be 
found in the region, and this provided the basis for Portugal’s trading posts 
which were set up on the coastline. Portugal took little interest in this overseas 
colony until some thirty years later, when French attempts to rival Portuguese 
trading in the region prompted the Portuguese crown to establish its rule there 
more firmly, sending Martim Afonso de Sousa and some four hundred men to 
found a colony in 1530. Subsequently, between 1533 and 1535 the region was 
divided into fifteen captaincies, with the donatorios (captains) who ruled over 
each one having great power, including the privilege of awarding parcels of land 
known as sesmarias to other settlers.

What must be remembered, however, was that the Iberian conquest of the 
Americas was not simply the imposition of Spanish or Portuguese rule on an 
empty continent; in fact, America was inhabited by a variety of well-established 
civilizations, some of whom – the Incas and the Aztecs – had their own extensive 
and highly organized empires. The Inca empire in South America stretched 
from present-day Chile to Peru, and functioned through an efficient tribute 
system. The Aztec empire of present-day Mexico, meanwhile, had clear divi-
sions between nobles and the lower classes, and its capital Tenochtitlán was esti-
mated to be larger than any European city of the time. Therefore, while the 
actions of the invading Spaniards and Portuguese were acts of colonization, 
historians have pointed out that the process taking place was not a simple impo-
sition of empire onto the indigenous subjects. An existing imperial system was in place for much of the Americas prior to Iberian settlement.

**MYTHS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE AMERICAS**

While the battles of the early conquistadors and the acts of colonization were foremost in the shaping of the relationship between Europe and the New World, a further and highly significant process was taking place at the same time, namely, the depiction of this New World in the letters, chronicles and diaries of those who were encountering it. To use Edmundo O’Gorman’s now-famous phrase, the Spanish, far from describing America, were engaged in the ‘invention of America’; that is, ‘the historical appearance of America lay in considering the event as the result of an inspired invention of western thought and not as the result of a purely physical discovery’ (1961: 4). O’Gorman’s compelling argument, which has since been elaborated on by a variety of historians, proposes that the Spanish, rather than objectively describing an already existing America which they encountered, in fact actively created America, as they fashioned it according to their own European preconceptions. Initially, this invention of America can be seen in Columbus’s insistence on identifying the geographical and cultural features he encountered with accounts of Asia, thus imposing pre-existing models on America.

Second, and more enduringly, even once the existence of America as a separate entity was confirmed, the accounts of conquistadors and settlers still maintained a predominantly European framework within which to see the New World. While there were some notable attempts to convey the newness and difference of the Americas in a way sensitive to the context (such as Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, published in 1552), the majority of those who encountered and described America and its inhabitants tended to repeat stereotypes of otherness. Examples of the Europeanizing lens through which the conquistadors and their successors viewed the Americas can be seen in a series of recurring motifs or myths which shaped the conquistadors’ motivations for exploring and settling the continent.

One of the legends which was associated with America from Columbus’s first voyages to the continent, and which has proved one of the most enduring, is that of the cannibal. Columbus made several references to the existence of man-eaters in the islands he visited in his letters and in his *Journal*, yet the veracity of these accounts, and of the wave of subsequent reports of cannibals that followed, have been the subject of much debate. As historians have shown, Columbus already held the pre-conceived idea that he would encounter man-eaters in the Indies, and he insisted on identifying the terms that the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands taught him – *canibales, canimas* and *caribes* – as denoting man-eaters, despite the fact that he was unable to speak their language (Palencia-Roth 1993).

Columbus sent reports of the existence of cannibals in the Spanish Indies to
the monarchs, which eventually led to the ‘Cannibal Law’ of 1503, granting Spaniards the right to capture and sell any man-eating Indians they encountered. The significance of this law lay in the fact that previously the enslavement of Indians had been forbidden; now, the Cannibal Law provided a way to make slavery legal. Michael Palencia-Roth has further noted how this led to a rash of supposed encounters with cannibals, thus enabling the Spanish who encountered them to take them as slaves (1993: 42–43). In this way, the identification of certain peoples as cannibals was not a disinterested one, but one invested with political connotations.

A further myth frequently associated with Latin America, and whose legacy still remains in the name given to the continent’s longest river, is that of the Amazons. The myth of the Amazons is an ancient legend derived from classical traditions and refashioned throughout medieval Europe. Mention of the existence of Amazons, the fearful tribe of women who assumed the role of warriors and rejected the rule of men, is made as early as Columbus’s letter of his first voyage, in which he suggested there were such women living on some of the Caribbean islands (for a transcription of this letter see Zamora 1993). Other subsequent conquistadors were to follow suit, including Francisco de Orellana, who sailed the length of the great river in the American continent and gave it the name ‘Amazon’ due to the attacks on him by women warriors (Williamson 1992). Again, the figure of the Amazon was not one without its colonizing framing as, in the words of Restrepo, ‘the erotic and dangerous figure of the Amazon [. . .] revealed a deep European fear of an inverted social order’ (2003: 53), thus enabling the native Amerindians to be coded as savage and uncivilized. However, Beatriz Pastor Bodmer has noted that the Amazonian myth does not function solely through the attribution of savage and dangerous characteristics to the inhabitants of the Americas, but that it was also employed in connection with the conquistadors’ thirst for gold, since, ‘according to the medieval version of the myth, the Amazons lived in Far East Asia and consequently were associated with the fabulous treasures presumed to exist there’ (1992: 156). Thus, the continuing myth of the Amazons fulfilled a dual function: that of presenting the native American societies as barbarous, uncivilized and as violating the accepted social order on the one hand; and that of encouraging European quests for gold and riches on the other.

The obsession with man-eaters and wild women exemplified in the cannibal and Amazon myths can be associated with a wider set of preconceptions that the Iberians brought with them to the New World, which belong to European traditions of the barbarian. In terms of Portuguese colonialism in the New World, Cecelia F. Klein has noted the tendency of early sixteenth-century explorers and their illustrators to represent the native women of Brazil as a type of female counterpart of the man-eating ‘wild man’ of European lore, and thus repeating pre-existing European stereotypes (Klein 1995). Moreover, the issue of the representation of women that Klein tackles is pertinent with regard to a continent frequently depicted by its European conquerors as female. This tendency
can be seen in works such as Jan van der Straet’s ‘America’ (c. 1600), in which, in Peter Hulme’s words, ‘in line with existing European graphic convention the “new” continent was often allegorized as a woman’ (1986: xii). The depiction of America as female and the conquering Europeans as male is a constant in colonial images, and indicates the gendered nature of colonial imagery.

Yet not all of the powerful myths shaping Spanish and Portuguese conceptions of the Americas had a basis in European mythology or preconceptions. One of the most influential myths – and arguably the most enduring, given that the term still has currency in both modern-day Spanish and English – is one which, although it resonated with European desire for gold, has its genesis in the New World rather than the Old: El Dorado. The myth of El Dorado, which according to Enrique de Gandía’s *Historia crítica* (cited in Pastor Bodmer 1992) first arose around 1534, was inspired by tales of a Chibcha ceremony in Guatavita (now in present-day Colombia), in which the Chibcha chief, covered in powdered gold, throws gold and other precious objects into the bottom of the lake. As Pastor Bodmar notes, the myth originally referred to this specific setting and ceremony, but soon became the term to describe a marvellous location with untold treasures and quantities of gold. Thus, this localized legend – which in itself has never been definitively corroborated – fuelled a whole range of myths which inspired hundreds of conquistadors to hunt for the elusive city of gold.

**Society in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires**

From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, as the efforts of the Spanish were increasingly directed towards settlement and the establishment of colonial society proper, the New World entered into what James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz have termed the ‘mature colonial period’ (1983: 122), lasting from approximately 1580 to 1750. The vast territories belonging to Spain were divided into two viceroyalties: the viceroyalty of Nueva España (New Spain), covering the northern section of Spain’s empire, from Panamá to Mexico, was ruled from Mexico City while the viceroyalty of Peru, covering Spain’s lands in South America, was governed from Lima. The structure of society within the viceregalies was hierarchical, with the highest ranking official being the viceroy, and the immense areas that he ruled over being divided into smaller administrative areas administered by audiencias.

A series of decrees and laws governed life in the Spanish colonies. In the early states of conquest and settlement, the famous Requerimiento of 1513 was set down, a legal document which stipulated that natives should submit to the Spaniards and accept the Christian faith. The document was to be read out each time the advancing Spaniards came upon a community of Indians, and failure of the Indians to comply would mean that the Spaniards were permitted to wage war on them. In effect, the Requerimiento placed the Indians in an impossible situation, since it meant that unless they submitted to Spanish rule voluntarily, they could be legally brought under their rule by force. Indeed, the
Requerimiento was subject to so many abuses by the Spanish, frequently involving the enslavement of the Indians, that it led to the abolition of slavery by New Laws in 1535, although, in practice, slavery continued in some regions of the Americas until as late as the mid-eighteenth century (see Góngora 1975).

While the Requerimiento was instrumental in conquering Indian communities and annexing their lands, other laws came into place to govern colonial life and work practices. The most infamous of these institutions was that known as encomienda. Encomienda was a system of enforced labour in which Amerindians were obliged to work for, and also in some cases pay goods to, a Spanish encomendero, a holder of the right to encomienda (for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Lockhart and Schwartz 1983: 68–71). While, in theory, the Indians were entitled to wages for their work, in practice payment was soon abandoned as their labour was considered an obligation. However, as Laura A. Lewis notes, while initially the power given to the encomenderos was wide ranging, over time the Crown began to limit their rights, less out of sympathy with the Indians’ plight than out of a need to protect their own interests and prevent the encomenderos from becoming too powerful (Lewis 1996).

In addition to the regulation of colonial society by the state, the rule of the Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas was also upheld through another important institution: the Catholic Church. Associated with the conquistadors from the outset, the Church played a vital role in colonial society in the setting up of schools, universities and hospitals, as well as religious establishments. While the most notorious of the Church’s institutions was the Inquisition, which began to operate in 1569 in Lima and Mexico City, scholars such as Luis Fernando Restrepo caution against overemphasizing this institution (Restrepo 2003). In addition to its educational and charitable roles, however, the Church was strongly committed to evangelism, with almost all of Latin America being converted to Roman Catholicism during the colonial period.

**Race and Gender in the Americas**

Since Columbus’s first encounters with the native inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, the question of racial differences, and how to organize society in relation to race, preoccupied the colonial society. As a whole, colonial society in the Spanish colonies was hierarchized along racial lines: at the top of the social scale were those of Spanish parentage, either peninsulares (Spaniards from Spain), or criollos (creoles, or those of Spanish parentage born in the Americas). Even within this top echelon of society there were significant divisions, with the peninsulares frequently being awarded the most influential administrative and ecclesiastical positions, and the criollos holding positions in landowning.

Below those of Spanish ancestry was the growing group of mixed-race inhabitants of the Indies, constituted in the main of people of Spanish and Indian parentage – although this group also included significant numbers of people of Spanish and black parentage, with, to a much smaller degree, some of mixed
Indian and black parentage. It was this growing class of mixed-race inhabitants that most concerned the colonial society in its urge to classify and assign a fixed place to all its members. As several historians have noted, there developed a series of complex denominations to describe the different possible combinations of racial mixes (see Góngora 1975: esp. 161; Burkholder and Johnson 2001; Andrien 2002). The burgeoning list of terms, such as the zambo for a person of mixed Indian–African heritage, the mestizo for someone of Indian–European heritage, and the castizo for a person of mestizo–European heritage, illustrates the anxieties that colonial society felt over the status of such individuals. Yet, clearly, demarcations along racial lines were difficult to maintain as the number of mixed-race inhabitants grew. By the mid-seventeenth century, men and women of mixed origin were the largest population in most urban areas and a growing number of them began to hold skilled jobs in mines and manufacturing.

While the mixed-race population held an intermediate position in society, the indigenous population occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Although initially there was some differentiation between those of a high rank within their own communities and those of a lower rank, in a relatively short space of time Spanish conceptions of the Indians tended to reduce them to a uniform mass. Indeed, the term ‘Indian’ itself is a European imposition since, as Lockhart and Schwartz note, it ‘did not correspond to any unity perceived by the indigenous peoples’ (1983: 31), and was thus an attempt to homogenize the racially and socially diverse peoples of the Americas under one catch-all term. Within Spanish colonial society, the few members of the indigenous communities who did manage to retain some of their power and status did so in the main because they proved useful to the functioning of the colonial system; that is, they worked as supervisors overseeing the labour of other Indians working for the Spanish, or the collection of tribute payments to the Spanish.

In terms of legislation, initially in the Spanish Indies there was an attempt to enforce a separation of the Spanish and Indian populations, known as the policy of the two republics. Royal orders in 1523 created two authorities: the República de los indios (Indian Republic) and República de los españoles (Spanish Republic). However, this did not mean independence and equality for the indigenous communities, but rather the opposite; this ‘rudimentary apartheid policy’ (Liss 1975: 43) meant that the Amerindian communities were conceived of as inferior to the Spanish ones, and also that their members could be more easily controlled. Moreover, legal and other writings continued to depict the Amerindians as inferior, frequently through strategies of infantilization and feminization (Lewis 1996).

Still lower within the hierarchy were the black members of colonial society, who had arrived in colonial Spanish America during the conquest and initial settlement, and who were, for the most part, brought to the colonies as slaves from Africa. Black peoples were prevalent in the Caribbean in particular, in the islands and throughout the mainland Caribbean coast, where the indigenous population had been all but wiped out and where the slave trade flourished.
Black slaves were also prominent, however, in New Spain, where disease had caused a sharp decline in the indigenous population, which again led to the introduction of increased numbers of black slaves. As Colin Palmer has noted, during the early colonial period, two-thirds of all Africans imported to Spanish America were destined for New Spain (Palmer 1976). Although the status of the black population of the Americas improved slowly over time with some slaves eventually able to purchase their freedom, slavery nonetheless was to become relatively widespread, with even some affluent indigenous households owning black slaves.

In terms of the racial stratifications of the Portuguese empire, the situation in Brazil was broadly similar to that within the Spanish colonies, in that the elite were composed of the white Europeans, the lower classes of the indigenous and black peoples, with those of mixed race lying somewhere between these two. In a similar way to the Spanish colonies, those of Portuguese birth held the majority of the important posts in the colonial administration and in the church hierarchy, while the mazombo or American-born Portuguese were the landowning class. However, that is not to say that the situation in Brazil was identical to that in the Spanish Indies, and there were several factors which meant important differences between the racial make-up of the two empires. First, since the indigenous communities in Brazil were not as highly organized as the Incas or the Aztecs, their members did not benefit from the same role of go-between accorded to indigenous supervisors and overseers in the Spanish colonies. Second, the indigenous population in Brazil died out almost completely due to enforced labour, disease and military defeat, resulting in a much stronger and earlier slave trade than in Spanish America and meaning a greater black presence in Brazil.

The issue of gender, meanwhile, intersected with that of race in colonial Latin American society. Since the initial Iberian conquerors and settlers were for the most part men, the shortage of Spanish and Portuguese women in the Iberian colonies led to these women being highly protected and controlled in colonial society. As Laura A. Lewis has commented, the status of women within colonial society was closely linked with the notion of honour, itself highly implicated in issues of race. Such women were seen by the colonial elite as the 'last line of defense for an elite intent on maintaining its dominance over mixed-races, blacks and Indians by protecting Spanish lineages, the very basis of Spanish authority, from “bad blood’” (1996: 76). In this way, the curtailment of women's freedom – above all, Spanish and Portuguese women's freedom – was intimately bound up with the attempt to control racial 'purity' and prevent interracial relations. Patricia Seed's detailed analysis of marriage in New Spain in particular has shown that although a considerable number of interracial sexual relations did occur, mixed-race children tended to be born out of wedlock due more to prejudice than to any legislation prohibiting interracial marriages (Seed 1988). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these status distinctions remained, but from the latter half of the seventeenth century onwards, as the
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mixed-race population began to grow, so too did the number of legitimate interracial marriages. As Seed has shown, by the end of the colonial period in New Spain approximately 25 per cent of the total population of was 'racially mixed' (25).

INDEPENDENCE

The Spanish and Portuguese empires in the New World were soon rife with divisions along ethnic and class lines, which sowed the seeds for independence movements which came to fruition in the nineteenth century. However, with a few notable exceptions – the French colony of Haiti being a case in point – the drive to overthrow colonial rule in the Americas came less from the indigenous communities than from the creoles. The growing resentment of the creole middle classes against the ruling Spanish and Portuguese elites provided the impetus for independence and the emergence of a specifically Latin American identity. A variety of factors contributed to the struggles for independence: the growing size of the population in the Americas; radical ideas stemming from the American War of Independence and the French Revolution; the increasingly disgruntled creole elite; the Napoleonic wars in Europe (see Bushnell and Macaulay 1994). Some earlier uprisings are notable – although historians caution against designating these ‘precursors of independence’ (Skidmore and Smith 1992: 29) – such as the 1780 indigenous revolt led by Tupac Amaru II, who claimed to be a direct descendent of the Incas. Tupac Amaru II led an army of some eighty thousand men, and was engaged in nearly two years of fighting in southern Peru and Bolivia, but was ultimately defeated.

The more lasting attempts at independence, however, came in the nineteenth century. In New Spain, while Mexico City itself remained under royalist control until 1821, in the provinces a rebellion took place in 1810, headed by the creole priest Miguel Hidalgo. Known as the Grito de Dolores (The Cry of Pain), Hidalgo’s call to arms on 16 September is nowadays celebrated as Independence Day in Mexico. However, although garnering substantial support from mestizos and Indians, and making significant gains, Hidalgo was defeated near Guadalajara early in 1811 and executed. He was succeeded by José María Morelos, who proposed a new vision of society, calling for ‘a new government, by which all individuals, except peninsulares, would no longer be designated as Indians, mulattoes, or castas, but all would be known as Americans’ (Skidmore and Smith 1992: 32). The 1813 Congress of Chilpancingo declared Mexico’s independence from Spain, although two years later Morelos was captured, tried and executed.

Further south, in the viceroyalty of New Granada, the most famous independence figure was Simón Bolívar, a wealthy creole born in 1783 in Caracas, who came to be known as El Libertador (The Liberator). Vowing in 1805 to free his homeland from Spanish rule, Bolivar led the resistance in Venezuela, and in July 1811 the Venezuelan congress declared independence. However, the rebel-
lion was crushed and Bolivar exiled, returning two years later to continue his campaigns. By early 1819 Venezuela was firmly back in Bolivar’s hands, at which point he moved east to New Granada, defeating royalist forces decisively at the Battle of Boyacá in August 1819. In December of that same year the independence of all the provinces making up the viceroyalty of New Granada was declared. Bolivar later advanced to Peru, and thence to Upper Peru, where rebel leaders declared him president for life and renamed the country after him – Bolivia.

Further south still, in the River Plate region the key independence figure was José de San Martín, born in what is now Argentina. In early 1817 San Martín led an army of five thousand across the Andes to attack royalist troops in Chile, where he won the major victory known as the Battle of Chacabuco, and entered Santiago, leading to independence for Chile. San Martín then proceeded to liberate Peru, entering Lima in mid-1821, and formally declaring Peru’s independence on 28 July of that year. From there he went to Ecuador where he had a historic meeting with Bolivar, but the two leaders, unable to agree on tactics, went their separate ways.

For the Portuguese-ruled colony of Brazil, however, the gaining of independence from its colonial master was a different story. As Skidmore and Smith note, this was partly due to Brazil’s relative size, being a country far more populous and wealthy than Portugal itself (1992: 35). In addition to this, Brazil had an altogether different relationship to its colonial master since, when Napoleon’s forces invaded the Iberian peninsular in 1807, the entire Portuguese government decamped to Brazil. Thus, Brazil found itself in the somewhat unusual situation of being the colonial periphery governing the metropolis. The stability and unity that Brazil enjoyed, in contrast to the lengthy civil wars taking place in the Spanish viceroyalties, meant that, although some fighting did take place, the process of independence for Brazil saw far less bloodshed than that of its Spanish American counterparts. Brazil’s independence is formally dated from the famous **Grito de Ipiranga** (Shout of Ipiranga) of 1822, when the monarch Dom Pedro rejected Portugal and proclaimed the independence of Brazil, establishing the first truly independent monarchy in Latin America.

It is important to note, however, that independence for the majority of the Latin American nations meant the transfer of power to a creole élite, rather than to the indigenous communities. (The first country to gain independence in the region was the former French colony of Haiti in 1804 after a slave uprising, proving a striking exception to the rule in that its leaders were the black slave underclass, who effectively expelled Europeans from the island.)

Portugal’s colonies in Africa and India, meanwhile, although smaller and less geographically united than vast Brazil, were to prove more long-lasting, only gaining independence in the twentieth century. Portugal’s principal African colonies of Mozambique and Guinea, which had developed from trading posts, had originally based their economies on a variety of commodities, but by the early seventeenth century they had become focused on the slave trade as the
most profitable endeavour. The official abolition of slavery by Portugal in 1836 threatened these colonies as they had come to rely on a single export and, indeed, there were initially rumours in both Angola and Mozambique of severing links with Portugal itself and joining independent Brazil (Newitt 1981). However, independence did not come about as a result of the crisis caused by abolition; indeed, as Newitt has noted, this crisis in fact led to Portugal’s policy to extend and consolidate its African territories, a policy which predates the general European ‘scramble for Africa’ by some decades.

Instead, independence for Portugal’s major colonies in Africa and India was to come in the twentieth century. The first major Portuguese colony to pass into the hands of the indigenous population was Goa, a small Portuguese enclave on mainland India. After India’s independence from the British was declared in 1947, Portugal initially refused to relinquish its control of Goa, although a United Nations General Assembly ruled in favour of self-determination in the 1950s. In 1961, the Indian army entered Goa, and Portugal finally recognized the sovereignty of India over Goa in the early 1970s.

In Africa, Portuguese Guinea (later named Guinea-Bissau after independence), was the first major colony to liberate itself from Portuguese rule. The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) waged war for independence during the 1960s and by 1973 the PAIGC controlled most of the country, independence being declared on 24 September of that year. As for Portugal’s two other principal African colonies, Mozambique and Angola, although independence movements in these countries were well underway, it was events in Portugal itself that precipitated their independence, in the shape of the military coup of April 1974. The instability this caused, along with liberalization and an increase in political organizations (Cabrita 2001: 72), led to the transfer of power in Mozambique to the nationalist Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo: Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) in September 1974, with official independence being declared in 1975. In Angola, meanwhile, power was handed to a coalition government in 1974, with official independence being declared on 11 November 1975, the day on which the Portuguese left the capital.

In the post-independence era, relations between the Iberian nations and their former colonies have been in a state of flux. In the aftermath of its own Civil War (1936–39), Spain found itself in the position of sending refugees to a variety of Latin American countries, and an estimated number of three and a half million Spaniards emigrated to Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s. Today, the flow of migrants is in the opposite direction, with a notable influx of Ecuadorians, Colombians and other Latin American nationalities into Spain in recent years, attracted by improved living and working conditions. It is worthy of note that, within this context of changing relationships between metropolis and former colony, the 1992 quincentenary celebrations of Colombus’s voyage to the Americas were the scene of intense debate on the nature of his venture, and even of the terms used to describe it. The controversy which arose over the use
of the word ‘discovery’ and its implicit Euro-centric bias – the Americas were already populated by extensive civilizations who had no need of Europeans to ‘discover’ their own existence – led to the search for alternative terms such as ‘encounter’ to define the endeavour more precisely. Such debates are reflective of the continuing legacies of colonialism, and of the ongoing negotiations between Iberian nations and their former colonies.

**Recommended Further Reading**


