Latin American Revolutions: Crash Course World History #31

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today things are going to get a little bit confusing, because we're going to talk about revolution and independence in Latin America

It's a bit confusing because:
1. Latin America is big,
2. It's very diverse,
3. Napoleon makes everything complicated, and
4. As we've seen in the past, sometimes revolutions turn out not to be not that revolutionary.
Witness, for instance, the New England Revolution, who instead of, like, trying to form new and better governments are always just kicking balls around like all the other soccer teams.

(Intro)

Right, so before independence, Latin American society was characterized by three institutions that exercised control over the population.

The first was the Spanish Crown, or if you are Brazilian, the Portuguese crown. So, as far as Spain was concerned, the job of the colonies was to produce revenue in the form of a 20% tax on everything that was called "the royal fifth." So government administration was pervasive and relatively efficient - because it had to be in order to collect its royal fifth.

Then there was the Catholic Church. Even more than royal officials, the church exercised influence over people's everyday lives. I mean, the church even controlled time – the church bells tolled out the hours and they mandated a seven day work week so that people could go to church on Sunday.

And finally, there was patriarchy. In Latin America, like much of the world, husbands had complete control over their wives and any extra-or-pre-marital skoodilypooping was severely punished. I mean, when it was the women doing the illicit skoodilypooping. Men could basically get up to whatever. This was mainly about property rights because illegitimate children could inherit their father's property, but it was constructed to be about, you know, purity.

To get a sense of how patriarchy shaped Latin American lives, take a gander at Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, whose name I'm actually abbreviating. A child prodigy who spoke five languages by the age of 16, de la Cruz wanted to disguise herself as a boy so she could attend University, but she was forbidden to do so. Still, she wrote plays and poetry, she studied math and natural science, and for being one of the leading minds of the 17th century, she was widely attacked, and eventually forced to abandon her work and sell all 4,000 of her books. That's a shame because she had a great mind, once writing that "Aristotle would have written more if he had done any cooking."

Couple other things:
First, Latin America led the world in transculturation, or Cultural Blending.
A new and distinct Latin American culture emerged mixing:
1. Whites from Spain called Peninsulares,
2. Whites born in the Americas called creoles,
3. Native Americans, and
4. African slaves.

This blending of cultures may be most obvious when looking at Native American and African influences on Christianity. The Virgin of Guadalupe, for instance, was still called Tonantzin, the indigenous earth goddess, by Indians, and the profusion of blood in Mexican iconography recalls the Aztec use of blood in ritual. But transculturation pervaded Latin American life, from food to secular music to fashion.

Somewhat related: Latin America had a great deal of racial diversity and a rigid social hierarchy to match. There were four basic racial categories: white, black, mestizo – a mix of white and American Indian - and mulatto, a mix of white and black. We try not to use that word anymore because it's offensive, but that's the word they used.

And from the 16th century on, Latin America had a huge diversity of mixed race people, and there were constant attempts to classify them and divide them into castes. You can see some of these in so called casta paintings, which attempted to establish in a very weird and Enlightenment-y way all the possible racial combinations.

But of course that's not how race works, as evidenced by the fact that successful people of lower racial castes could become "legally white" by being granted gracias al sacar.

So by 1800, on the eve of Latin America's independence movements, roughly a quarter of people were mixed race.

All right, now let's have us some revolutions. How shall we organize this, Stan? Let's begin with Latin America's most successful country as defined by quality of soccer team.

So Brazil - he said as thousands of Argentinians booed him - is obviously different because it was ruled, not by Spain, but by Portugal. But like a lot of revolutions in Latin America, it was fairly conservative. The creoles wanted to maintain their privilege while also achieving independence from the Peninsulares.

And also like a lot of Latin American revolutions, it featured Napoleon. Freaking Napoleon. You're everywhere. He's behind me, isn't he? Gah! So when Napoleon took over Portugal in 1807, the entire Portuguese royal family and their royal court decamped to Brazil. And it turned out, they loved Brazil. King Joao loved Brazil so much...

Off topic, but do you think that J-Woww named herself after King Joao? I mean, does she have that kind of historical sensibility? I think she does.

So King Joao's life in Rio was so good that even after Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, he just kind of stayed in Brazil. And then, by 1820, the Portuguese in Portugal were like, "Hey, maybe you should come back and, like, you know, govern us, King of Portugal."

So in 1821, he reluctantly returned to Lisbon, leaving his son Prince Pedro behind. Meanwhile, Brazilian creoles were organizing themselves around the idea that they were culturally different from Portugal, and they eventually formed a Brazilian Party - no, Stan, not that kind of party, come on - yes, that kind - a Brazilian party to lobby for independence. Then in 1822, they convinced Prince Pedro of boring, old Portugal that he should just become King Pedro of sexy, big Brazil. So Pedro declared Brazil an independent constitutional monarchy with himself as king.

As a result, Brazil achieved independence without much bloodshed and managed to hold on to that social hierarchy with the plantation owners on top. And that explains why Brazil was the last new world country to abolish slavery, not fully abandoning it until 1888.

Right, so even when Napoleon wasn't forcing Portuguese royals into an awesome exile, he was still messing with Latin America. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So Latin America's independence movements began not with Brazil, but in Mexico when Napoleon put his brother on the Spanish throne in 1808. Napoleon wanted to institute the liberal principles of

the French Revolution, which angered the ruling elite of the Peninsulares in what was then called New Spain. They were aristocrats and they just wanted to go back to some good old-fashioned divine right monarchy with a strong church. So the Mexican Creoles, seeking to expand their own power at the expense of the Peninsular elite saw an opportunity here. They affirmed their loyalty to the new king, who was French even though he was the king of Spain. I told you this was complicated.

Then, a massive peasant uprising began, led by a renegade priest Padre Hidalgo, and supported by the Creoles because it was aimed at the Peninsulares, even though they weren't actually the ones who supported Spain. This was further complicated by the fact that to the mestizo peasants led by Hidalgo, Creoles and Peninsulares looked and acted basically identical - they were both white and imperious - so the peasants often attacked the Creoles, who were technically on their side in trying to overthrow the ruling peninsulares. Even though it had tens of thousands of supporters, this first peasant uprising petered out.

But, a second peasant revolt, led by another priest, Father Morelos, was much more revolutionary. In 1813, he declared independence and the revolt lasted until his death in 1815. But since he was a mestizo, he didn't gain much Creole support,so revolutionary fervor in Mexico began to fade... until 1820, when Spain, which was now under the rule of a Spanish, rather than a French king, had a REAL liberal revolution with a new constitution that limited the power of the church. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, in the wake of Spain's liberalizing movements, the Mexican elites, who had previously supported Spain, switched sides and made common cause with the creoles in the hopes that they could somehow hold onto their privileges. And pushing for independence together, things went very well. The Creole general Iturbide and the rebel mestizo commander Guerrero joined forces and won independence with most of the Peninsulares returning to Spain.

Iturbide – the whiter of the two generals – became king of Mexico in 1822 (remember, this was a revolution essentially AGAINST representative government). But that didn't work out and within a year he was overthrown by the military and a republic was declared.

Popular sovereignty was sort of victorious, but without much benefit to the peasants who actually made independence possible. This alliance between conservative landowning elites and the army - especially in the face of calls for land reform or economic justice - would happen over and over again in Latin America for the next century and a half. But before we come to any conclusions, let's discuss one last revolution.

So Venezuela had a cadre of well-trained creole revolutionaries, who by 1811 had formed a revolutionary junta that seized power in Caracas and formed a republic. But, the interior of Venezuela was home to mixed-race cowboys called Llaneros who supported the king. They kept the Caracas revolutionaries from extending their power inland.

And that, is where Simon Bolivar, "el Libertador," enters the picture. Bolivar realized that the only way to overcome the various class divisions (like the one between the Caracas creoles and Llaneros) was to appeal to a common sense of South American-ness. I mean, after all, the one thing that almost all South Americans had in common: they were born in South America, NOT SPAIN.

So then, partly through shows of toughness that included, like, crossing flooded plains and going without sleep, Bolivar convinced the Llaneros to give up fighting for Spain and start fighting against them. He quickly captured the viceregal capital at Bogota and by 1822 his forces had taken Caracas and Quito.

Hold on, hold on. Lest I be attacked by Argentinians who are already upset about what I said about their really good soccer team, I want to make one thing clear: Argentina's general Jose de San Martin was also vital to the defeat of the Spanish. He led an expeditions against the Spanish in Chile and also a really important one in Lima.

And then, in December of 1824, at the battle of Ayacucho, the last Spanish viceroy was finally captured and all of Latin America was free from Spain. Oh, it's time for the open letter? That's A chair, Stan, but it's not THE chair.

An Open Letter to Simón Bolívar. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, Llanero. I wonder if his hips swivel when I wind him up. Context is everything. They do! Hey there, cowboy.

Dear Simón Bolívar,

First, you had fantastic muttonchops. It's as if you're some kind of handsome Martin Van Buren. You were a man of immense accomplishments, but those accomplishments have been richly rewarded. I mean, you have a country named after you. Not to mention, two different currencies.

But for my purposes, the most important thing you ever did was die. You may not know this, Simón Bolívar, but when I'm not a world history teacher sitting next to a fake fireplace, I am a novelist. And your last words, "Damn it, how will I ever get out of this labyrinth," feature prominently in my first novel,
Looking for Alaska. Except it turns out, those weren't your last words!

Your last words were probably, "Jose, bring the luggage." But I decided to use your fancy, romantic, inaccurate last words. It's called artistic license. Put that in your luggage.

Anyway, fantastic life; I just wish you'd nailed it a little bit better with your last words.

Best wishes, John Green.

So by 1825, almost the entire western hemisphere – with a few exceptions in the Caribbean - was free from European rule. Oh, right. And Canada. I'm just kidding, Canadians. It's so easy to make fun of you because you're so nice. So I tease you and then you're like, "Aw, thanks for noticing that we exist." It's my pleasure!

Anyway, this is pretty remarkable, especially when you consider that most of this territory had been under Spanish or Portuguese control for almost 300 years. The most revolutionary thing about these independence movements were that they enshrined the idea of so called popular sovereignty in the New World. Never again would Latin America be under the permanent control of a European power, and the relatively quick division of Latin America into individual states, despite Bolivar's pan South American dream, showed how quickly the people in these regions developed a sense of themselves as nations distinct from Europe, and from each other.

This division into nation states prefigures what would happen to Europe in the mid-19th century, and in that sense, Latin America is the leader of 19th century world history. And Latin American history presages another key theme in modern life - multiculturalism.

And all of that makes Latin America sound very modern, but in a number of ways, Latin American independence wasn't terribly revolutionary. First, while the Peninsulares were gone, the rigid

social hierarchy, with the wealthy creoles at the top, remained. Second, whereas revolutions in both France and America weakened the power of the established church, in Latin America, the Catholic Church remained very powerful in people's everyday lives.

And then, there is the patriarchy. Although there were many women who took up arms in the struggle for independence, including Juana Azurduy who led a cavalry charge against Spanish forces in Bolivia, patriarchy remained strong in Latin America. Feminist ideas like those of Mary Wollstonecraft would have to wait. Women weren't allowed to vote in national elections in Mexico until 1953. And Peru didn't extend voting rights to women until 1955.

Also, Latin America's revolutionary wars were long and bloody: 425,000 people died in Mexico's war for independence. And they didn't always lead to stability: Venezuela, for instance, experienced war for much of the 19th century, leading to as many as a million deaths.

And it's important to note that fighting for freedom doesn't always lead to freedom; the past two centuries in Latin America have seen many military dictatorships that protect private property at the expense of egalitarian governance.

"Freedom," "independence," and "autonomy" are complicated terms that mean different things to different people at different times. So too with the word "revolutionary."

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Location change because I forgot to record the credits, and my shirt matches the wall. Probably should have thought about that one a little bit harder. Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is ably interned by Meredith Danko, and it's written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "giant squid of anger." If you want to suggest a future phrase of the week or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions that will be answered by our team of historians.

Look at the beautiful Crash Course poster! Available now at dftba.com; link in the video description.

Thanks for watching, and, as we say in my home town, Don't Forget To Be Awesome. Ow! That's much harder to do when there's carpet.