

SIMON BOLIVAR
(24 July 1783 - 17 December 1830)



Brief History

Simon Jose Antonio de la Santisima Trinidad Bolívar y Ponte Palacios y Blanco was born in Caracas on July 24th of 1783, descendant of a family of Basque origin established in Venezuela since the end of the XVI century and which occupied a distinguished social and economic position in the province.

His parents were the Colonel Juan Vicente Bolívar y Ponte and Concepción Palacios Blanco. He had two older sisters and a brother: María Antonia, Juana and Juan Vicente. There was another girl, María del Carmen, who died at birth. Before he was three years old, Simón lost his father, who passed away in January of 1786.

The children's education was supervised by his mother, a woman possessing a fine sensibility, but also capable of administering the family's numerous properties. Aside from his paternal heritage, Simón was the owner of a rich "mayorazgo", or inheritance, which was given to him in 1784 by his cousin Juan Felix Jerez y Ariteguieta, a priest.

A restless adolescent

The early years of Simón Bolívar's life were spent with occasional trips to the family estates located in the Aragua Valley. In 1792 Doña Concepción passed away. María Antonia and Juana were married quickly, and the two sons, Juan Vicente and Simón continued to live with their family and maternal grandfather who was their tutor.

On the death of his grandfather, Simón Bolívar's upbringing was left to the care of his uncle, Carlos Palacios. In July of 1795, when he became 12 years old, he suffered a crisis quite common to adolescence. He fled from his uncle seeking refuge in the home of María Antonia and her husband, for whom he felt greater affection.

Studies in Caracas

As a consequence of these events, which came to a happy conclusion, Simón Bolívar spent a few months as a guest of **Don Simón Rodríguez** (1771-1854) also born in Caracas, fervent admirer of Rousseau, who was the headmaster at an elementary school in the city. A relationship of mutual comprehension and sympathy sprung up between the genial pedagogue and social reformer with revolutionary views against slavery, colonialism and strong believer of equal opportunity education, and the young Simón Bolívar. This relationship lasted for a lifetime. Before and after having been Rodríguez's pupil, Bolívar studied under other teachers in Caracas, and was instructed in writing and arithmetic, history, religion and Latin. He also received classes in History and Literature with **Don Andrés Bello** (1781-1865) who cultivated his blossoming wealth of knowledge, which in later years was to make him America's greatest humanist.

At 14 years old, Bolívar entered the Battalion in the White Militia in the Aragua Valley, which had been headed by his father, a Colonel years before. Within a year he was promoted to Second Lieutenant. Bolívar combined the practical training in military duties with theoretical education on subjects considered at that time to be the basis for a proper formation: mathematics, topographic design, physics, etc., which he learned at the Academy established in Bolívar's own home by the learned Capuchin Monk Francisco de Andujar.

Travel and marriage

In early 1799, he traveled to Spain. In Madrid, he devoted himself passionately to his studies. He received the education accorded to a gentleman who was destined to a vital role in worldly and military affairs; he widened his knowledge of history, classical and modern literature, and mathematics, initiating studies in French; he also learned the arts of fencing and dance, making rapid progress in all these activities.

His frequenting of parties and dances polished his spirit, enriched his language, and gave him social poise. In Madrid became acquainted with María Teresa Rodríguez del Toro y Alayza, with whom he fell passionately in love. At the end of 1800, his thoughts turned to setting up a family life, and return to Venezuela, particularly to attend to his properties.



In May 26 of 1802, he married María Teresa. The young newlyweds traveled to Venezuela, but their bliss was short lived, for she passed away in January of 1803.

The widowed youth returned to Europe at the end of the same year, passing through Cadiz and Madrid, and established residence in Paris in the spring of 1804.

Pledge in Rome

In the capital of the rising French Empire, the pleasures offered by a vigorous social life and the mundane pastimes of an intellectual nature occupied Bolívar's time in no less a measure that the fascinating spectacle of a Europe caught up in the throes of an ebullient political transformation.

Frequenting theaters, balls, and parties, where he was introduced to the beautiful women who graced Parisian society, he divided his time between useless coquetry and meetings with scholars such as Alejandro Humboldt and Bonpland, and attended conferences and courses where the most recent theories were made known. During this stage in his life, he devoted himself with passionate abandon to his studies, concentrating his time on literary pursuits. He ran across **Simón Rodríguez** once again, whose wisdom and experience made of him an extraordinary conversationalist and an admirable companion during lectures and travels.

Both of them journeyed to Italy and crossed the Savoy range on foot. While in Rome, on an August day in 1805, in Monte Sacro, Bolívar took an oath in the presence of his teacher that he would not allow his arm to rest nor his soul to die until he had realized his dream of liberating the South American world from Spanish dominion.

At the end of 1806, cognizant of the efforts undertaken by **Francisco de Miranda** in Venezuela, Bolívar comes to a decision that the time has come for him to return to his country. He boards a neutral ship which made a stopover in Charleston, in January of 1807; he travels throughout the United States and returns to Venezuela at the middle of the year.

He now lives in the style of an aristocratic youth, supervising the management of his properties and meets regularly with his brother and a group of close acquaintances to discuss not only literary subjects, but the most important topic: to determine the course of events which would, in future years, give Venezuela its independence.

Revolutionary and diplomat

April 19th of 1810 marks the date of the Declaration of Independence. The “Junta” formed on that day appoints Simon Bolívar, in the company of Luis López Méndez and Andrés Bello, as representative to the British Government. Once his mission was completed, Bolívar returns from London at the end of the same year. In Britain he was able to observe the practical functioning of institutions. Once restored to his place in the Caracas Patriotic Society, he becomes one of the ardent spokesmen for Independence which is finally proclaimed by Congress on July 5 of 1811. Bolívar enters military service, and rising to the rank of Colonel he takes a hand in the raid of Valencia under the orders of Miranda in 1811.

In 1812, despite his efforts, he cannot avoid the fall of Puerto Cabello, of which he was commander to royalist forces as a result of treason. In the middle of 1812, General Miranda capitulates before the Spanish leader Domingo de Monteverde. In the La Guaira port, a group of young officers among them Bolívar, intent on continuing the struggle arrest the unfortunate Miranda. However, all the efforts were futile and Bolívar manages to save himself, thanks to the influence of his friend, Don Francisco Iturbe, who procures him a passport. He then travels to Curazao, later to Cartagena de Indias, where he publishes his “Memorial to the Citizens of Nueva Granada by a Caraqueño”, one of the fundamental pieces of his early literature, in which his political beliefs are set forth, such as the principles which were to guide his actions in future years. He also published the first of his great political statements, “El Manifiesto de Cartagena”, in which he urged the revolutionary forces to destroy the power of Spain in Venezuela.

War to death

His brilliant military campaigns get underway in which victory and defeat alternate until 1818, and from the following years onwards his victories predominated. Heading a small army, he clears the Magdalena River (nowadays part of Colombia) of enemies, and in February of 1813 he takes the Villa de Cúcuta and the liberation of Venezuela begins in May. This series of battles and adroit maneuvers which took the victors within a period of three months from the Táchira boundary to Caracas where he entered on August 6, merit the name “Admirable Campaign” with which it became better known in later years.

After this event, while passing through Mérida, the humble people acclaimed him as the Liberator, a title which the Municipality and people of Caracas conferred on him during a solemn act in October of 1813 and a title with which he was to go down in history.

The period between 1813 and July of 1814, known as the Second Republic, is in reality the Terrible Year of Venezuelan History. The “War to Death” decree creates a furor, and the combats and indecisive battles, won or lost, follow one upon the other with increasing rapidity. Despite important victories, Bolívar as well as General Santiago Mariño (who had previously liberated the eastern areas of the nation) find themselves obliged to give way in the face of a more numerous adversary led by the Spanish Royalist José Tomás Boves.

Boves emerges victorious from the La Puerta battle (June of 1814), and the patriots are forced to evacuate Caracas. A massive emigration towards the east takes place. There, Bolívar and Mariño see their authority challenged by their own companions at arms. The Liberator finds again fraternal asylum in Nueva Granada (today Colombia), where he intervenes with some measures of success in internal political struggles which enable the city of Bogotá to find a place in the newly established United Provinces. In May of 1815, in Cartagena, Bolívar resigns his command to avoid the outbreak of civil war.

A prophetic vision

Isolated in Jamaica from May to December of 1815, Bolívar waits impatiently for the right moment to intervene in the new fight. Meanwhile, he meditates on the destiny of Latin America and in September he draws up the now famous “Jamaica Letter”, in which he reviews with penetrating comprehension and with a prophetic vision, the past, present and future of the Continent. Napoleon’s defeat in Europe and the arrival in Venezuela of a powerful Spanish army under the command of General Pablo Morillo gave a new enthusiasm to sympathizers of the royalist cause. Bolívar, after eluding the knife of a hired assassin, moves to Haiti, in search of financial resources to continue the struggle. Haiti’s President, Alejandro Petion, lends him aid with admirable magnanimity.

An expedition soon leave Los Cayos headed by Bolívar arriving in 1816 at the island of Margarita. A short while later it leaves for the mainland. Carúpano (East of Venezuela) is taken by assault and there, on June 2nd, Bolívar issues a decree which grants the slaves their liberty. The expedition moved on to the port of Ocumare de la Costa, where Bolívar is accidentally separated from the main body of his army, and is forced to leave the shore once again. Returning to Haiti, he organizes a second expedition which arrives at the island of Margarita at the end of the year.

The rebirth of the republic

At the beginning of 1817, Bolívar is in Barcelona (Venezuela). His purpose is to take the Guayana Province, and to make it a point from which to work towards the definitive liberation of Venezuela. In July, the capital of that Province, Angostura (today Ciudad Bolívar) is taken by the patriots. The new state is organized. Bolívar creates the State Council, the Government Council, the Superior War Council, the High Court of Justice, the Trade Council, and undertakes the establishment of a newspaper (which was to appear in June of 1818) called the “Correo del Orinoco”. Meanwhile, his struggle is not confined to the Spaniards but also to the seeds of anarchy which have been sown in his own field: in October of 1817, after a military trial, General Manuel Piar, one of the Republican leaders is shot in Angostura. During the same period the Liberator decrees the “Law of Distribution of national Property”, which was to contribute to the strengthening of patriotic sentiment.

In 1818, the central campaign begins under favorable circumstances, due to the fact that the Liberator manages to surprise the royalist General Morillo in the city of Calabozo, but the Republicans are defeated in the vicinity of Semen. Days afterward, Bolívar is at the verge of dying in the hands of a royalist platoon. He moves again to Angostura on June 5. At this time, a diplomatic agent arrives from the United States, as well as a significant number of European volunteers. Bolívar engaged the services of several thousand foreign soldiers and officers, mostly British and Irish, and established his capital at Angostura.

The Second Venezuelan Congress, convened by Bolívar, was held in Angostura on February 15th of 1819. He gives a speech which is one of the fundamental documents of his political ideology. He presents at the same time a draft of the Constitution.

The Great Colombia

Soon afterward, he launches a campaign which was to liberate Nueva Granada. The army crosses the Andes via the inhospitable Páramo de Pisba, and after bloody battles fought in Gameza and the Pantano de Vargas, in July of 1810, he obtains a decisive victory in the battle of Boyacá on August 7th.

Days later, Bolívar enters Bogotá. Leaving the provinces of Nueva Granada organized under the command of General Francisco de Paula Santander (born in Villa del Rosario near Cúcuta), the Liberator returns to Angostura, where the Congress, with Bolívar’s proposal in mind, issues the Fundamental Law of the “Great Colombian Republic” on December 1819.

This great state created by the Liberator comprised the today republics of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Panamá, also Alto Peru (today Bolivia) and Peru. In addition to these events, which had strengthened the Republican cause, the Liberal Revolution broke out in Spain, in January, 1820.

The situation has changed. The Republic's military has obtained advantages in all areas of the nation. Cartagena is besieged, Mérida and Trujillo are liberated. The new Spanish government attempts to reach a peaceful agreement with the patriots. The appointed rulers of both parties sign in Trujillo, on November 1820, both an Armistice Treaty and another for the Regulation of the War. The Liberator and General Morillo confer in Santa Ana. Some months afterwards, the Armistice having expired, the Republican army begins its march towards Caracas.

On June 24 of 1821, on the Carabobo plains, Bolívar fights a battle which finally seals the independence of Venezuela. What remained of the Royalist Army took refuge in Puerto Cabello, which was destined to fall in 1823. The Liberator makes a triumphant entrance to his natal city, in the midst of a joyous reception from his fellow citizens, on June 29, 1821.

The liberation of Ecuador

Bolívar's sights are now turned towards Ecuador, which was still under the dominion of the Spaniards. He travels by way of Maracaibo to Cúcuta, where Congress is convened, and from here goes on to Bogotá. In 1822 two patriot armies attempt to liberate Quito: Bolívar leads the northern thrust; General Antonio José de Sucre the southern one, starting out Guayaquil.

The action at Bomboná, initiated by Bolívar in April, breaks the resistance of the "pastusos" or Andean people, while the Pichincha battle, won by Sucre on May 24, finally liberates Ecuador, which integrates with the Great Colombian Republic. In Quito, Bolívar becomes acquainted with Manuela Saenz, the cherished love of his last years. On July 11, Bolívar is in Guayaquil, where General José de San Martín (Born in Argentina) lands on the 25th, coming from Perú.

The two illustrious captains of the South American independence embrace and hold conversations there. What they had discussed in private was later revealed in authentic documents emanating from Bolívar and his General Secretary. General San Martín's main objective which was to negotiate the future destiny of Guayaquil, could not be realized because the Province had already been incorporated into the Great Colombian Republic.

Decisive Peruvian campaign

During the middle of 1823, the political-military situation of Perú had deteriorated considerably. Called on by the Congress and the people of that nation, the Liberator left Guayaquil on August 7 and arrived at Callao in early September. Anarchy was rampant among the patriots. Bolívar, whose charge was limited to military operations, dedicated himself to reorganize the military, forming a nucleus comprised of battalions which had accompanied him from where he was given notice that the garrison of Callao had taken up the royalist cause. Facing many difficulties, his indomitable spirit manifested itself in his now famous exclamation “Victory”.

Lima fell into the hands of the royalists, but before dissolving itself, the Peruvian Congress appoints Bolívar Dictator-as in the ancient Roman Republic-with limitless power so as to save the nation. He accepts the tremendous responsibility serenely. Retiring to Trujillo, he works tirelessly, his genius and faith in the destiny of America working miracles. He begins an offensive and on August 6th of 1824, in Junín, he defeats the Royal Army. The campaign continues and while Bolívar enters Lima and re-establishes the siege of Callao, General Jose Antonio de Sucre (Born in Cumana, Venezuela), in Ayacucho, places a definite seal on American liberty on December 9 of 1824.

Great projects of continental unity

Two days earlier, from Lima, Bolívar sent an invitation to the governments of Latin America asking them to send their representative to a Congress that was to be held in Panamá, in June of 1826.

The military phase of Independence had concluded. On February 10, 1825 in the Peruvian Congress in Lima, Bolívar renounces the limitless powers that had been granted to him. Two days later that body decreed honors and recompense for the Liberator and his Army, but he refused the million pesos which he was offered. He leaves the capital to visit Arequipa, El Cuzco and the provinces of Alto Perú. These provinces are constituted into a nation under Bolivar’s protection and is named “Bolívar Republic”, the nation we know today as Bolivia. Bolívar draws up a Constitutional Project for the New State in 1826, in which his ideas for the consolidation of order and the independence of the recently emancipated nations are expressed.

The fight against adverse conditions

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, a revolution known as “La Cosiata” and headed by General José Antonio Páez, breaks out against the Bogotá government, but more specifically against Simon Bolivar and his vision of union. In April of 1826, Bolívar returns to Caracas and manages to reestablish peace at the beginning of 1827. However, the forces working toward dispersion prevailed over tendencies toward union. Bolívar withdraws politically as well as personally from Vice President Santander, until a total rupture in their relations occurs.

On July 5 of 1827 Bolívar leaves Caracas for the last time, boards a ship in La Guaira, and arrives in Bogotá. On September 10, he takes oath before the Congress as President of the Republic. The National Convention meeting in Ocaña in 1828 is dissolved without the diverse parties having reached an agreement. Bolívar, acclaimed Dictator, escapes an attempt against his life in Bogotá in September of the same year; shortly afterward he was forced to launch a campaign against the Peruvian forces which menaced Ecuador. He remained there throughout the year of 1829.

Despite sickness and exhaustion, he struggles to preserve his work. At the beginning of 1830 he returns to Bogotá to install the Constituent Congress. Venezuela again faces agitation and proclaims an Independent State. In Nueva Granada, the opposition grows and becomes also stronger.

A perennial lesson

The fight for the independence of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Panama (a department of Colombia) had involved 696 battles, with an average of 1,400 soldiers per engagement, counting both sides together.

Bolivar received a letter from the then-old Marquis de Lafayette on behalf of the family of George Washington, along with a gold medallion coined after the capitulation at Yorktown. It read, "The second Washington of the New World." Bolivar was deeply moved.

Simon Bolivar began vigorously rebuilding and administering the devastated new states. He was at the height of his power when he convened a congress of Latin American republics in Panama in 1826. He envisioned a league of the fledgling Central and South American nations, but he was far ahead of his time.

The Liberator, with failing health, renounces the Presidency and embarks on a trip to the coast. The news of the assassination of General Sucre, which he received in Cartagena, affects him deeply. He envisions a trip to Europe, but severely ill with Tuberculosis, death takes him by surprise on December 17, 1830 in San Pedro Alejandrino, an estate located on the outskirts of Santa Marta (today Colombia). On December 10, he made his last proclamation to his countrymen, which is considered his political testament;

“Si mi muerte contribuirá a que cesen los Partidos y se consolide la Unión, Yo bajaré tranquilo al Sepulcro”.

“If my death will be a contribution to stop the different Political Parties and to the consolidation of the Union, I will be then dying in peace and rest in my tomb”.

He distinguished himself among his contemporaries through the use of his prodigious talent, his great vision, his intelligence, his understanding for a great nation and unity, his will and abnegation, qualities which he placed entirely at the service of a great and noble endeavor: that of liberating and organizing the civil life of many nations which today view him as their founding Father. His mortal remains, brought to Venezuela with great pomp in 1942, now lie in the National Pantheon in Caracas.

Simon Jose Antonio de la Santisima Trinidad Bolivar y Ponte Palacios y Blanco; popularly known as “Bolivar” remains immortal, one of the greatest military leaders, thinkers & visionaries in the history of the entire world.