


## Paraguay in its independence process, 1811

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### ABSTRACT

The independence processes in Spanish America are preceded by a whole series of historical events in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of Napoleonic supremacy in Europe and its impact on the seat and crown of the Hispanic Monarchy. Of all the countries that would emerge throughout the decades of 1810 and 1820, Paraguay is the pioneer in its independent development, but in a process that first made it independent of the neighboring regions and its influence such as that exerted from Buenos Aires, not so much from Madrid, so distant and distant from those who will become independent due to the progressive isolation and the Mediterranean condition of Paraguay in the heart of South America.

**Keywords:** American Independence, Paraguay, Hispanic Monarchy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Paraguay managed to gain independence from Spain without a drop of blood being spilled in the process. If we look at a photograph of the Iberian Peninsula taken from a satellite, it will be difficult for us to understand that in this space of suggestive shapes and attractive faces, perhaps because it is familiar and dear to us, two different states, Portugal and Spain, coexist. Nearly sixty million people live under what looks like a multicolored dome, and a myriad of economic and political problems waiting for solutions that have not yet arrived. Among them, perhaps the most serious is the claim of the Catalan sovereigntist parties to gain independence from Spain. In our common history, we would have to go back two hundred years to relive similar episodes, when the American colonies decided to become independent from what was later called the Motherland. Obviously, conspiracies were at the basis of the processes that preceded the various declarations of independence. There were also bloody battles, with the miseries that entailed. Only one country, Paraguay, not much smaller than Spain but with far fewer inhabitants, achieved independence peacefully, without a drop of blood being shed in this complicated process. That is something that Paraguayans boast about and are very proud of.

Seen from space, thousands of kilometres away, the appearance of the Iberian Peninsula seems fragile, perhaps because of the proximity of the African continent, solid and imposing. Separated from Europe by the Pyrenees, as some argue, it seems on the verge of breaking away from them, just as José Saramago imagined in his novel *The Stone Raft*. Spain and Portugal sailing adrift, who knows if with a final destination or not. But this is less of a problem compared to what happened two hundred years ago. How much pain for all parties involved would have been spared if the aspirants to proclaim themselves independent republics had followed the example of Paraguay and the Spanish negotiators.

## PROFITIOUS SITUATION

It is something that has been known since the dawn of time, long before there were treatises on what someone called the "art of war", perhaps the first euphemism in history. The enemy or the other alternative must always be hit in his weakest part, except if anything the so-called 'low blows'. The nineteenth century, from beginning to end, was disastrous for Spain, undoubtedly the worst in its history, "the saddest of all the histories of history", as the poet Jaime Gil de Biedma rightly wrote. Without a king, but with men willing to form a government, even if they had to juggle and risk their lives, and with French troops imposing their law with blood and fire, the country was turned upside down. In the Iberian Peninsula the struggle for independence was being waged while in the colonies, on the other side of the Atlantic, initiatives were emerging or others were intensifying to do the same in Spain, where the War of Independence, called the Peninsular War in Portugal, led to different



forms of government. The Supreme Junta and the Supreme Central Governing Board began their journey in 1808, before being abolished by the Council of Regency of Spain and the Indies in 1810. This year is the starting point for the types of government that are beginning to be designed in the Americas, in favour of Ferdinand VII in principle. Also of the generalized uprisings by the majority of the Cabildos and the seats of viceregal and governmental power of Spanish America.

They took advantage of the most propitious moment to try to bring them to fruition. When Napoleon's troops roamed freely through the peninsular territory committing all kinds of outrages and the Spaniards, apart from some episodes of undoubted heroism, never tired of invoking the apostle Santiago, the Blessed Sacrament, the Virgin of the Pillar or the Desired, but it is not known that there was any response, at least history does not account for it. In the midst of chaos and despair, however, the Constitution of 1812 flourished, and had an ephemeral journey in its application.

The events that originated in the Peninsula, where the headquarters and institutions of the Hispanic Monarchy were located, despite the physical and temporal distances, peppered the American territories with responses, first faithful to the viceregal government model remotely controlled from the metropolis. But these ideas of adhesion were progressively put aside and there was an immediate shift to pro-independence or pro-autonomy positions.

The main aspiration of the American Juntas of Government was to exercise effective power over all the provinces that they considered within their jurisdiction, in accordance with the demarcations established by the Bourbon Reforms, the same ones that created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, in 1776, with its capital in Buenos Aires. Sometimes they faithfully adhered to the administrative divisions of the Viceroyalty itself. Others, on the other hand, had more expansionist aspirations. This was the case of those designed by Bolívar, Sucre and San Martín. These started in their schemes of territorial identity, and then extended to the social and cultural aspects of the territories, although it was not an easy task to represent the heterogeneity of these provinces, much more complex than the viceregal seats, the audiences or the governorships. The different political, cultural, social or economic sensitivities that the American republics show today highlight that diversity that caused so many headaches for their promoters.

The brief period of time from 1808 to 1810 contains a complete and varied catalogue of confused and contradictory causes and positions that, just as sunflowers always look towards the light, directed their heads towards one place or another depending on the turn of events. The independence movements identified with the cause of full autonomy began in Buenos Aires in the Second Government Junta, called the Junta Grande after the revolution of May 25, 1810. They were maintained during the Triumvirate and Directory. Among his priority plans was the consolidation of a generalized independence movement that would lead to the emancipation of the provinces of the Río de la Plata.



During that short period, both in Guaranía, present-day Paraguay, the heart of the South America, due to its remoteness and natural isolation, as in Uruguay, then the Banda Oriental that separated the Spanish and Portuguese empires and where the royalist troops were stationed, acted differently from the rest. These two large provinces did not join the Buenos Aires insurrectionary movement, at least in the initial terms.

The processes started from different causes, although the effects converged on the same emancipatory result.

## **BLOODLESS REVOLUTION**

There was no utopianism or independence in the proposals of the Juntas de Gobierno de Asunción. Since it was constituted at the end of 1808, coinciding with the first moments of the Juntas in Guaraní lands, the Cabildo of Asunción showed itself to be the most fervent defender of the royalist cause in the interior of South America, behavior that at that time was also typical of the rest of the American Cabildos, at least that feeling was had. In August 1809, the news of the celebration of the Cortes that the Central Supreme Junta convened in Spain with the presence of representatives elected by the overseas Cabildos was received with great enthusiasm. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia was chosen by lottery, but he was unable to make the long-awaited trip due to the political turbulence that had been unleashed in the Río de la Plata. The aforementioned man, proclaimed Supreme Dictator over time, served as a model for Augusto Roa Bastos in his novel *I, the Supreme*.

When the Regency Council was established in January 1810, ideas underwent a radical change, something that undoubtedly had an impact on political reality. Contributing to all this was the alarming news that, with the corresponding lag, arrived from Spain, where the regime that had prevailed up to that time was practically over. That was the main trigger for the revolutionary movements in the rest of the American Cabildos. In the Río de la Plata, after the dismissal of Viceroy Cisneros in May, the interests of Buenos Aires, disguised at first as a lukewarm loyalty to Ferdinand VII, were the model to be followed by the still incipient Paraguayan political struggle, although in what would later become the capital of Argentina, more and more voices were raised in favor of insurrection. At the end of that year, the initial communiqués and missives moved on to threats and armed means in order to break the peace in which the Paraguayan provinces were immersed.

Thus, the struggle against the interests of Buenos Aires became from that moment on a constant in Paraguayan politics in the Río de la Plata, as opposed to the pretensions expressed by the letters. Faced with the radical demands of the Buenos Aires Junta, the first War Council of Asunción was established, a task that Governor Velasco entrusted to the Cabildo, in which he had full confidence. Creoles and native commenceantes were part of the institution, according to the prevailing custom in those territories, which considered Paraguayans, both mestizos and criollos,



"young men of the land", with rights similar to those from the peninsula from the metropolis, who were the only ones who held public positions or of extreme trust in the rest of the American colonies.

The intention of the Junta of Buenos Aires to isolate Asunción from the surrounding provinces, by land and sea, made the sentiment of the inhabitants of those Guaraní lands be channeled into the defense of the royalist cause. Motivated at the same time by the dispositions of Governor Velasco and Bishop Pedro García, both peninsulars, they carried out a campaign that recommended "a hostile attitude and ferocious treatment" towards those they considered disturbers of the peace and stability of those provinces and their inhabitants. At that time, the Cabildo of Asunción had the help of Montevideo to assert the loyalty and legality owed to the Crown, represented by Ferdinand VII, first desired and then king felon.

The "revolutionary" expedition of Manuel Belgrano, which Buenos Aires sent in January 1811 to try to control a situation that was not propitious to him, was received with open hostility by the Paraguayans who, like the Spaniards thousands of miles away, used guerrilla warfare to record their hostility. After striking blow after blow in endless skirmishes, the Paraguayans retreated inland to further wear down the Buenos Aires troops. In the reports he sent to the Buenos Aires Junta, Belgrano referred to the situation as follows:

"All the individuals of Paraguayan society were enemies of our cause, so the proclamation and the gazettes that were scattered throughout their countryside on the eve of the attack had no effect whatsoever."

Taken from the manuscript: *Relación de la expedición a Paraguay enviada por el insgente Manuel de Belgrano en 1810*, ms. AHNSN Someruelos C. 26, D. 34.

In the rest of the American chapters, meanwhile, loyalties were constantly changing, oblivious to what was happening in Asunción, where the feeling of adherence to the monarch Ferdinand VII was maintained, whose figure was reinforced by the defense of him by the Church and the parish priests, his best qualified workers. Unlike the revolutionary priests of other latitudes, his Paraguayan colleagues, of a more conservative nature, reaffirmed their decision to abide by the power of Governor Velasco. There was, however, an interrelation of ideas and it was not long before a political opening took place and new formulas of shared government between peninsulars and criollos were studied.

On May 14, 1811, a date that every Paraguayan has had engraved in his memory for as long as he can remember, well into the early hours of the morning and on the verge of forging this shared power grab, the Paraguayan heroes went from the home of the Martínez Sáenz family, where the clandestine meetings that led to the proclamation of independence had been held, to the palace of Governor Velasco. At that point, there was no dialogue or negotiations of any kind. A cannon was placed in front of the house that had been provided by Fernando de la Mora, chief of the Urbanos, as the city's Creole Militia was known. That was intended to dissuade the president from sharing power.



The gun, despite its menacing mouth, remained silent. This is what history has told us. It was an intimidation without bloodshed, contrary to what happened in the rest of the American uprisings for emancipation, marked by dozens of battles and years of struggle that in the end only favored the leaders who, often irresponsibly, led so many men to their deaths. They, however, are the only ones who appear in the history books, give names to streets or adorn the squares of so many great cities with statues that represent them. It is true that in the nineteenth century, and in the one that followed, Paraguay bled to death in some terrible contest, but this time at least common sense prevailed. As a sincere tribute to those bloodless events, the Martínez Sáenz house, one of the few examples of colonial architecture preserved in the historic center of Asunción, was declared a National Monument. In the mid-sixties of the last century it was rescued from oblivion and ruin that threatened its disappearance and converted into the Museum of Independence, the most visited in the country. There are original furniture and objects that were used by the owners and the heroes who designed independence.

In mid-May, on the day of San Isidro in 1811, a Triumvirate was created to take charge of the government. In constituting it, the three political positions prevailing at the time were taken into account. The realist, headed by former governor Bernardo de Velasco. Another porteña, close to the Gran Junta de Buenos Aires, led by Juan Valejano Zeballos. And a third that could be defined as pragmatic, defended by the aforementioned José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, a character who, despite who weighs in, was decisive in the Paraguayan history of that century. This was a kind of negation of the previous ones, its adherents did not want to remain loyal to the Crown, but neither did they want to submit to Buenos Aires. Rather, they preferred progressive autonomy. In any case, the political and government decisions adopted from then on led to the cornering of the figure of the governor. In order to maintain the forms, for posturing as we would say now, a Board was convened for the

June 17, 1811, composed of five members. The hegemonic role of Rodríguez de Francia was reinforced, and Velasco was excluded forever and ever from the new governing body. The result didn't seem to surprise anyone.

## **EMANCIPATE YOURSELF IN YOUR OWN WAY**

Of the Paraguayan independence feat, both in the documents where it is recorded and in the oral tradition, the fact that it was the first in which there was no bloodshed is highlighted. This is important and must be valued as it deserves. The norm is to boast just the opposite, of the numerous casualties inflicted on the enemy, which are often exaggerated while minimizing one's own. It is an exercise in decompensation typical of these tasks, and of unscrupulous historians, and the enemy, of course, always belongs to the opposite side of the one who relates the facts, a person usually in the



pay of the one who orders him to narrate them. But the truth is that in this case the weapons, a fundamental ingredient of any self-respecting revolution, rather than threatening the colonial authority, seemed destined to be used to launch salvos in honor of those who decided not to use them. This is demonstrated by the fact that a single cannon was aimed at the house where the Spanish governor lived, and the shots that came out of his intimidating mouth were fired to celebrate the signing of the Act of Independence in which, apart from the heroes, the other great protagonist was Governor Velasco, already won over to the new cause. It was up to both of them, the Spanish and Paraguayan representatives, to bring such an exemplary independence to fruition.

These events were by no means isolated, confined to a more or less extensive territory. They had an international impact that went far beyond the boundaries of the region. It was a phenomenon that progressively led to the emancipation of ancient kingdoms such as Mexico or Peru, or of colonies that were large intermediate provinces converted with the Bourbon Reforms into more independent administrative entities of what until then had been considered a metropolis, and which was later given the nickname of Motherland. Subjected then as now to tensions and centrifugal forces that threaten to turn its territory and its political community into a new entity. The old 'stone raft' may be about to embark on a new journey across the oceans without a defined direction.

From the cultural commemorations of the Bicentennials, inevitable and perhaps necessary because history should not be forgotten, which took place between 2010 and 2012, revisionist positions emerged on the figures, events and repercussions of the different historical interpretations that have shaped the national identity of the different Ibero-American republics. They would be considered valid if such commemorations served to recall the ties and strengthen the common ties between all the countries of the region. But valuable contributions were also added to the national histories of some twenty countries, which in many cases have played a leading role on the international scene.

Between both sides of the Atlantic, there have been processes of back and forth, in the style of Xavier Guerra, in which what unites rather than what separates has greater specific weight, referring, of course, to the cultural values and traditions that have marked our development as modern societies and political communities.

Upon its debut as a nation, Paraguay gathered the fundamental ingredients that make up part of its ideology as a people. Among them, its status as a Mediterranean country capable of integrating into the region of which it is a part, always giving the best of itself. A people who are friends of their friends and the spokesperson for a firm and harmonious voice that has allowed them to put the mestizo culture they inherited in their rightful place, being able to transform it without renouncing substantial elements and adapting it to the new century that is advancing relentlessly.





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