

CHAPTER  
24

## HISTORYMAKERS

# Simón Bolívar

## *The Liberator*

## Section 1

*"The bonds that united us to Spain have been severed."—Bolívar, The Letter from Jamaica (1814)*

Simón Bolívar led his people's fight for independence from Spain. He envisioned the formation of a single country extending from present-day Venezuela to modern Bolivia. However, his plans clashed with those of his followers, and the grand nation he dreamed of creating fell apart.

Bolívar was born in 1783 to a wealthy family from the colony of Venezuela. His education included several years of study in Europe. While there, he married, but soon after the couple reached South America his wife died of yellow fever.

Bolívar then returned to Europe and met with several important thinkers and politicians. One of them told Bolívar that the Spanish-American colonies had vast resources that could make them powerful—if only they could become free of Spanish control. Bolívar returned to South America and joined the movement for independence.

In 1810, a group of rebels in Venezuela removed the Spanish governor from office and took control. The next year Venezuela declared itself independent. By 1813, Bolívar commanded the army. In 1814, however, the Spanish fought back and defeated his troops, forcing him to flee the country.

During Bolívar's exile, he called for all Spanish colonies to rise against European rule to "avenge three centuries of shame." In 1814, he wrote a famous call to arms, *The Letter from Jamaica*, which outlined a plan to create republics reaching from Mexico to Argentina and Chile. Unable to win British or American support, he turned to Haiti. With money and guns from this newly independent republic, he returned to Venezuela to face the largest army Spain had ever sent across the Atlantic.

From 1815 to 1817, neither side won any decisive battles. However, Bolívar began to build the foundation of victory. He declared the end of slavery to be one of his goals, thus winning wider support. He made alliances with two groups of guerrilla soldiers, who harassed the Spanish army. He also hired veteran European troops. Then in 1819, he devised a daring plan to cross the Andes Mountains and surprise the Spanish. His army of 2,000 first had to cross the hot jungles of the Orinoco River

and then the freezing mountain passes. Many died, but Bolívar's army was strong enough to defeat the Spanish in four different battles.

Bolívar returned to the city of Angostura, Venezuela, and joined a congress working on forming the new government. With his urging, members voted to create the republic of Gran Colombia, which would include modern Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. "The lessons of experience should not be lost on us," he said. Europe had too many countries that constantly fought each other. "A single government," he argued, "may use its great resources [to] lift us to the summit of power and prosperity." Bolívar was named president and military dictator of the new republic.

Bolívar won independence for Venezuela in 1821 and Ecuador in 1822. He freed Peru from Spain in 1824 and Upper Peru in 1825, which renamed itself Bolivia. He was president of Gran Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar hoped that these nations would unite and thus become stronger.

Others did not share this vision. Even Bolívar's closest allies in the fight for independence believed that there should be several countries, not one large one. By 1826, civil war had broken out. Two years later, Bolívar reacted to the crisis by declaring himself military dictator. Opponents attacked his palace and tried to assassinate him. The Liberator was now seen as an enemy of the state. Venezuela withdrew from Gran Colombia, and Ecuador followed. Finally, with his body wracked by tuberculosis and his heart sick over the conflict, Bolívar retired in 1830. He died later that year.

### Questions

1. **Perceiving Relationships** Was Bolívar a better military or political leader? Explain.
2. **Organizing Facts and Details** What lesson did Bolívar draw from European history? What did he suggest doing in South America to prevent this problem?
3. **Making Judgments** Would you say that Bolívar was a success or a failure? Explain.