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# Latin American Revolutions

Throughout the 20th century, countries across Latin America engaged in violent struggles to determine the course of their governments. Let's learn more about three influential revolutions in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba.

Around 500 years ago, Spain started to colonize large parts of Central and South America, extracting resources while governing from abroad. And like the Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and North America, many Latin Americans eventually began to question the validity of their rulers. By the mid-1800s, most countries in the region had fought for and gained their independence, led in large part by Venezuelan military hero Simón Bolívar. But deciding who should govern them—and how—would be another long, brutal process, influenced again by political movements abroad: namely, capitalism, fascism, and communism.

Following independence, people of European descent retained outsized wealth and power in Latin America. This was certainly the case in early 20th-century Mexico, where Porfirio Díaz's tyrannical government had been in power for decades. As president, Díaz sought to turn Mexico into a capitalist economy, seizing lands held by Indigenous communities and privatizing them to grow cash crops. Peasant farmers were then forced to work as wage laborers on the enormous haciendas held mostly by the Spanish elite.

In 1908, a wealthy businessman named Francisco Madero published a treatise condemning Díaz, calling for his removal from office. Two years later, he released another key document that gained popular support and sparked the Mexican Revolution. Soon after Madero's troops seized the border city of Juárez, Díaz resigned and was exiled to France. In late 1911, Madero himself was elected president.

The next few years were marked by political chaos. Some of Madero's early supporters, like Emiliano Zapata, became disillusioned over his refusal to implement more radical reforms such as large-scale land redistribution. Then, in 1913, right-wing forces overthrew Madero in a military coup. Just a year later, a liberal faction known as the Constitutionalists took power. They drafted a new constitution that protected land

and labor rights and curtailed the power of the Catholic Church. At the time of its passage in 1917, it was one of the most progressive constitutions in the world.

20 years later and 4,000 miles to the southeast, Bolivians were gearing up for a revolution of their own. After the disastrous 1930s Chaco War, during which Bolivian forces clashed with Paraguay over control of an oil-rich region, rival parties began jockeying for power. The reformist Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, or MNR, backed a successful coup in 1943, putting military hero Gualberto Villaroel in power. But just three years later, Villaroel, widely decried as fascist, was executed in front of the presidential palace. Leaders from the country's Marxist faction seized power, eventually putting the country under military rule. In response, the MNR renounced its most right-wing bloc, earning critical support from mine workers and peasants—and, in 1952, enabling them to overthrow the military junta.

Once again in power, the MNR implemented sweeping reforms that transformed Bolivian society. They abolished literacy requirements for voting, nationalized major mining companies, and transferred large swaths of land to the peasant population. These changes were particularly impactful for Indigenous people, who now had economic power and a voice in the political process.

That same decade, revolution was brewing on an island to the north. As the US-backed military dictator of Cuba, Fulgencio Batista had canceled elections, suspended the constitution, and aligned himself with the wealthy owners of sugar plantations. Meanwhile, a lawyer and communist named Fidel Castro was leading a revolutionary opposition. Though his early revolts were unsuccessful, they helped the young activist make a name for himself, and he started organizing a guerrilla campaign against the Batista regime. For several years, Cuba was in a state of civil war, with Castro's fighters targeting government buildings and plantations and Batista brutally cracking down on suspected revolutionaries. The tide turned in 1958, as support for Batista waned and the rebels won decisive military victories across the island. Early the next year, just before Castro's forces closed in on Havana, Batista fled the country. Castro quickly consolidated power, imprisoning Batista's allies, installing his own government, and postponing elections indefinitely.

Like all revolutions, those in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba each had varying outcomes. While Mexico enshrined important social and political rights in its new constitution, women didn't gain the right to vote until 1953, and most peasants continued to live in poverty. In Bolivia, Indigenous communities benefited from land reform, universal suffrage, and the nationalization of the mining industry, but increased social spending led

to massive inflation. As for Cuba, the communist government introduced universal education and health care and launched an enormously successful literacy program. However, Castro remained in power forcibly until 2008, presiding over decades of mass emigration and economic suffering.

The Mexican, Bolivian, and Cuban revolutions were long and bloody, and they didn't always lead to political stability or economic flourishing. But all three brought about social change that remains visible throughout Latin America today.