

# Modern Latin America

## "These Streets"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

### Lyric: Conquistadors came in fast



After the conquistadors defeated the Incan and Aztec empires, settlers began immigrating to the New World to set up societies. While the Native Americans were being ravaged by disease, the Europeans and their descendants were organizing governments and colonies. Just like the colonists in North America, the people in Latin America began to question rule from abroad. South American-born white citizens of Latin America were known as **Creoles**. By the mid-1800s, the Latin American countries were independent from Europe. But as Spiderman knows well, "With great power comes great responsibility." And for the next 200 years, Latin America would struggle with how to handle the power. When they succeeded, they would flourish; when they failed, millions of citizens would suffer. This tug of war was a time known as the **postcolonial** era, simply meaning "after colonialism."

Notes



*The original French motto was a little stronger: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death*

### **How did Latin American countries become independent of Spain and Portugal?**

People living in Latin America were watching the American and European revolutions very closely. They saw how the United States gained freedom from England in the Revolutionary War. They heard the French Revolution's rallying cry of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" and heartily agreed. But seeing someone else do it was different from getting the freedom themselves.



*Toussaint Louverture*

**What was the first colony to gain independence?**

The first colony in Latin America to gain freedom was Haiti. It had previously been a French colony called St. Domingue. In 1791, while the ruling class of St. Domingue was busy worrying about the French Revolution, the slaves took advantage of the squabbling and revolted. Under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, the slaves managed to overthrow the government. Many consider it the most successful slave revolt in the history of the world. In 1804, Haiti was declared free country.

Lyric: OK, so you wait till your ruler's confused

Notes



*A modern mural where Hidalgo was executed*

### **When did Mexico gain independence?**

Other countries also took advantage of European confusion to break free. After the French Revolution, Spain and Portugal had worries closer to home. Emperor Napoleon was stomping all over Europe, He had invaded Spain and Portugal, and as they say, when the cat's away, the mouse can play. In Mexico in 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rallied Native Americans and **mestizos**, or people of mixed Native American and Spanish heritage, to fight for independence. They lost, and Hidalgo was executed, but the spirit of revolution began to spread. In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain when a Creole who had been charged with killing revolutionaries decided to unite with them instead.



*Napoleon, during his emperor phase*

**How did Napoleon influence Brazilian independence?**

Brazil gained its independence in a different way. But you can thank Napoleon again. When Napoleon took control of Portugal, the Portuguese king fled to Brazil and actually ruled Brazil from there. People were happy the king was close by. But when he returned to Portugal after the fall of Napoleon, Brazil got its own monarch in Dom Pedro I, the son of the Portuguese king. They were now independent.

## Lyric: Up step San Martín and Bolívar

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*José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar*

### Who helped bring independence to Latin America?

Two men became famous for leading Latin America to freedom: **Simón Bolívar** and **José de San Martín**. **Simón Bolívar** led Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador to freedom, and he united them as **Gran Columbia** in 1830. **José de San Martín** was a champion of independence for several countries. He ended up leading Argentina, Peru and Chile to freedom. Depending on whom you ask, these men are heroes or villains. Some celebrate them as crusaders of freedom against tyranny. Others say they didn't do enough for the poor and gained freedom only for the middle class and rich. Either way you slice it, the independence movements they led changed South America forever.

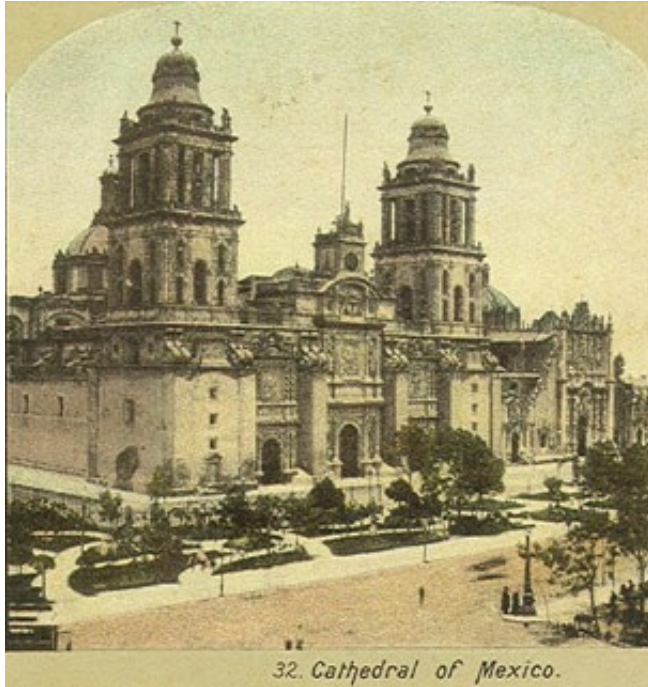
All of Latin America was free from Spain and Portugal by 1825. But it was then that the difficulties of self-rule began.

### Lyric: Things are still run by European descendants, Creoles, tanning on their ranch, By the pool

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#### Why was independence so difficult?

Winning freedom from colonial rule was the easy part. Many fought for revolution with the idea that anything would be better than being ruled by a foreign king. But the toppling of colonial regimes thrust Latin American countries into disorder and anarchy. Think about it this way: in a room where everyone is yelling, you have to scream pretty loud to turn people's heads. And in the confusion of the postcolonial governments, many people were trying to get their ideas put into action, and the most violent, extreme leaders prevailed. They made the kings look like nice guys. And because these violent leaders created the government, they rarely included laws to protect people from the government's power.



32. Cathedral of Mexico.

*Mexico City circa 1900*

**Why did Mexican independence really only benefit the rich?**

Even though Mexico became independent in 1821, people of Spanish origin still held most of the power. In fact, even though they were only 1 percent of the population, they owned 85 percent of the land! These rich estates were known as **haciendas**. And we know what happened in France when land ownership and population numbers were skewed like that—revolution! Some say that the new conditions were actually worse for the indigenous peoples. The Spanish had at least pretended to help the native people keep some of their land. But now, the wealthy people ruthlessly stole almost all the land from the natives and mestizos. Under the independent power, led by **Porfirio Diaz**, Mexico City became very modern and cosmopolitan. But the new improvements really only benefited rich people.

## Lyric: The poor stay poor; dictators stay paid

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### How did Emiliano Zapata help the poor fight back?

**Emiliano Zapata** led a group of peasants in revolt against this new, unequal independence. He famously galloped on horseback with pistols and rifles. He wanted to return the land back to peasants, so he led the burning of hacienda buildings to return them to traditional communities.

**Francisco "Pancho" Villa** also led revolts against the haciendas, though he didn't burn them. He worked to turn them into family ranches. Zapata and Villa gained many followers—far more followers than there were rich landowners. (After all, the landowners were only 1 percent of the population.) But the Creole landowners had control of the cities. They eventually killed Zapata and Villa. And though the constitutionalist landowners beat the rebels, the landowners knew that they couldn't continue to rule without winning more support from the people.

## Lyric: Revolution

Notes



*A mural by Diego Rivera depicting Tenochtitlan*

### What happened after Zapata's and Villa's revolts?

So the landowners gave back a little bit of land. But really, just a little. The vast majority of Mexicans remained poor. Art of the time celebrated the peasant. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera made art that depicted farm life and exposed the violence of the colonizers and their descendants.



**Lyric: Fast forward: Cold War, better pick a side kid,  
Every superpower needs a sidekick, who you want to  
ride with?**

**How did the Cold War affect Latin America? Why did the United States get involved?**

During the Cold War, the United States and the USSR were the two global superpowers, bent on each other's destruction. They basically asked all the other countries in the world to pick a side. Here was the question: Was your government communist? If the answer was yes, you gained the powerful support of the Soviets. And if the answer was no, the United States was your heavily armed buddy. Whether they were communist or not, postcolonial Latin American governments had some ruthless and violent leaders. To fight against the Soviet Union, the United States actively **intervened** in communist Latin American countries like Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Chile. For the United States, *communist* equaled "evil." But it wasn't so simple.

**Lyric: Right with the USA, Or go left**

**What is the difference between left wing and right wing?**

A left-leaning government is a bigger government. These governments usually control businesses. At the extreme, this is what communism tries to do. A right-leaning government is a smaller government. These governments let businesses do their thing. Under pure capitalism, businesses would operate with no rules.

The United States supported parties who wanted to kick the communists out of power. But the United States found itself supporting some ruthless dictators just because they weren't communists.

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**Lyric: Both powers want players on their team.**

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**What is the difference between left and right wing? And why is it confusing?** To understand what went down in Latin America after independence, we need to know two terms: left wing and right wing. These terms refer to people with opposing political views. People who believe in left wing government are often known as liberals. They believe that more people should take part in important government decisions, to give a greater number of people a voice. Left wingers also believe that the government should help support citizens through programs like health care. Those who support right wing government are generally known as conservatives. Right wing governments are smaller. That means that fewer people make the decisions. In the most extreme right wing governments, one person makes decisions. Conservatives think the government should have less of a role in helping people. They put stock in an individual's efforts more than his or her social responsibility.

Neither left nor right is objectively "better" than the other. There can be great and terrible right wing leaders and great or terrible left wing leaders. Can you think of the pros and cons of both types of government?

**Lyric: If you're a communist, the USA's rude, Castro's Cuba can't trade food.**

Notes



Lyric: You'll get overthrown so bananas stay cheap,



### What's a banana republic?

A banana republic is a country that has an almost powerless government and that is instead run or controlled by a company for the purpose of producing and exporting a good (often bananas). **Guatemala** was just such a country in the early twentieth century. The American-owned United Fruit Company (UFC) controlled the only major port, most of the railroad and telegraph wires, and a large portion of the farmable land in Guatemala. The government officials did anything that the UFC told them to do. While back in the United States and Europe, people started expecting bananas to be the cheapest fruit around.

Lyric: Military junta instead, no peace.

### How did the CIA get involved in Guatemala?

Militant dictators had control of Guatemala until the 1950s. One dictator was Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. He had enacted land reforms that were communist in nature, and the United States was strongly anti-communist. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped to overthrow him in 1954. But this coup was followed by decades of violence under the leadership of a **military junta**. The Guatemalans only began to have a democratic government in 1996, and there is still a strong military force there. Many blame the United States for starting this violence.

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Lyric: And in Chile, and I don't mean baby back ribs,  
You'll be really scared when Pinochet steps in



### What is the other infamous September 11th?

Socialist leader Salvador Allende took control of **Chile** in 1970. With the support of the United States, Augusto Pinochet overthrew the government in a military coup on the original infamous September 11 in 1973. But under the harsh rule of Pinochet, people suffered massive **human rights violations**. Thousands were killed and tortured. Pinochet gave up power in 1990 to a democratically elected leader. There were hundreds of legal charges against him for human rights violations, but he died before he had to pay the price.

Notes



*Eva and Juan Perón*

### Who were the "disappeared" in Argentina?

Before the Great Depression, **Argentina** was making lots of money from meat production. But when the depression hit, the people turned to authoritarian leadership. The military general Juan Perón took power after World War II. His wife Eva Perón was quite popular, and while she was alive, Perón enjoyed much support. She was especially popular with poor workers known as the *descamisados*, or "shirtless ones." But a popular leader with a pretty face can distract from the abuses behind the scenes. During Perón's dictatorship, which lasted until his death, he supported the "Dirty War," in which the government sponsored the killing of up to 30,000 people who opposed government views. The people who were killed were known as the "disappeared," since they were taken out of their homes or off the street by secret police and never heard from again. It is assumed that the government killed them. Finally, in 1983 a civilian government was reinstated.

Lyric: In Nicaragua here come the Sandinistas, Soviet-armed guys like Russian police

Notes



*President Ronald Reagan*

### **Why was it controversial when the United States intervened in Nicaragua?**

the most controversial United States intervention happened in **Nicaragua**. The Nicaraguan Somoza family held control of Nicaragua until 1979. That year, the Sandinistas revolted against the government. They were very far left and connected to Cuba and the USSR; these countries actually supplied their weapons. So of course, the United States supported an anti-communist group called the Contras, who fought against the Sandinistas for power.

In 1983, Congress said that President Reagan couldn't support the Contras anymore, but the United States continued to supply them with weapons secretly by sending the weapons to Iran, who then shipped them over to the Contras. (This was during the Iran-Iraq war, and it became known as the Iran-Contra Affair.) The Contras and Sandinistas reached a peace treaty in 1987, though, and there has been a moderate government in place since then.



*Getúlio Vargas*

**What violence occurred in Brazil and El Salvador?**

Like Argentina, **Brazil** also turned to dictatorship after the Great Depression. Their dictator was Getúlio Vargas. He didn't start out as a tyrant, but eventually he turned Brazil into a fascist state. Fascism is the most extreme form of conservative government. Vargas ruled until 1945 as the poor slept in *favelas*, or slums. Upon his overthrow, Brazil slowly returned to a democratic rule.

Civil war broke out in **El Salvador** in 1979 between left wing and right wing guerilla fighters. The right wing fighters had United States support. The war ended years later, after 75,000 people had been killed. Finally, in 1992, the two sides signed a peace treaty.