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## Influence of Chilean Independence: From Napoleon to the Enlightenment

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### Influence of Chilean Independence: From Napoleon to the Enlightenment

The Chilean independence movement was a spectacular era in Latin America. Within the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Chile went from a humble Spanish colony to an independent nation. A series of important events happened between the years of 1808 to 1810. The causes for the changes in Chile's governmental system are numerous. Most obvious is Napoleon Bonaparte's role in destroying European borders and replacing monarchs. Although Napoleon's actions contributed greatly to the severing of ties with Chile's mother country of Spain, other factors were also influential. The Enlightenment also supplied motivation for independence. With other countries, such as the United States, declaring self-rule from their European mother country, Chileans discovered the possibility of their own autonomy. One of the most important influences in the movement for Chile's self-rule resulted from the creation of local juntas. Through these governmental systems Chileans developed confidence and skill in ruling their own country in the absence of their monarch.

Chile was originally a Spanish colony. Spanish conquistadors had laid claim to Chile in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The European invasion of the new world was a significant feat. As Eugene Korth states, "The conquest and settlement of a vast and unknown continent not only paved the way for the release of tremendous physical and spiritual forces; it also brought into focus a number of critical socio-moral problems whose attempted solution embodied a notable intellectual advance."<sup>1</sup> As Spaniards soon discovered the agricultural potential of the land they quickly set up colonies and massacring the native Mapuches. The Spaniards faced

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Korth, *Spanish Policy in Colonial Chile: The Struggle for Social Justice, 1535-1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968). 1.

setbacks when the natives revolted and murdered Spanish citizens. Despite Spain's early setbacks, Spain eventually was able to have a firm grip on Chile's economy and government.

One of the major triggers for Chile's independence movement was the events happening in Europe. The French ruler Napoleon was quickly overthrowing European countries. His actions affected more places than just the European countries that Napoleon invaded. The conflict quickly spread to Latin America. In 1808, the Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII was set aside and Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte was put into power. The establishment of a foreign monarch brought conflict to Chile when the news reached the country. Without their designated ruler, Chile was faced with a vital decision of whether to continue to live under control of a monarch or to explore the option of self rule.<sup>2</sup> Chileans were uncertain of whether France's control would remain permanent or if the occupation would be temporary. Thus disagreements emerged from opposing sides. One side favored "the temporary nationalization of authority in a local junta" and the other side favored "continued submissiveness to French authorities in Spain."<sup>3</sup> The two sides eventually became political parties. One nicknamed "godos," which was headed by the president supported Spain. While the other party which was made up of patriots favored the created of a junta.<sup>4</sup> Many historians differ on the motives of the patriots in forming a substitute government. Although they claimed to set up a junta with loyalty to Ferdinand VII some historians believe that the patriots were just using the "mask of Ferdinand VII" to hide their true desire to ultimately become independent from European rule.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Rector, *The History of Chile* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003). 62.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Loveman, *Chile: A Legacy of Hispanic Capitalism* (New York: Oxford Press, 1979).120.

<sup>4</sup> Anson Hancock, *A History Of Chile* (New York: AMS Press, 1893). 141.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Collier, *Ideas and Politics of Chilean Independence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 73).

Two years after Ferdinand VII's capture the national government was installed. During the two years that separated the capture to the creation of the junta the revolution was "groped towards, prepared, and finally planned."<sup>6</sup> However, the juntas lack complete preparation since they only formed because of immediate dilemmas in Europe. The national junta set up in September 1810 proclaimed its loyalty to Spain. As Brian Loveman states, "The national junta set up September 18, 1810, swore to govern and to protect the rights of the king during his captivity."<sup>7</sup> The national junta was a governing body that was established by a *cabildo abierto*. That junta consisted of seven members and two secretaries.<sup>8</sup> Toro Zambrano was elected, as the president of the junta and under him was José Antonio Martínez.<sup>9</sup> The establishment of a national junta was a major turning point in the story of Chile because it carved the way for independence. Under the junta system Chileans became accustomed to self-government. The leaders of the junta were careful to note that the junta was a necessary adjustment to the Chilean government because "the country desired only union and harmony."<sup>10</sup> Although the junta did face some opposition from the *audiencia*, it was enthusiastically welcomed by Chileans. After the first session of the junta on September 18<sup>th</sup> bells were tolled and musicians serenaded the Conde de la Conquista and other junta members.<sup>11</sup> An underlining factor that contributed to the creation of the junta was the unpopular governorship of Francisco Antonio García Carrasco. Many Chileans looked upon García Carrasco with disdain and thought of him as "one of the nastiest tyrants of history."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Collier, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Loveman, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Hancock, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Jay Kinsbruner, *Chile: A Historical Interpretation* (New York: Harpers & Row Publishers, 1973). 33.

<sup>10</sup> Luis Galdames, *A History of Chile*. (New York: Russel & Russel Inc., 1964). 157.

<sup>11</sup> Galdames, 158.

<sup>12</sup> Collier, 60.

García Carrasco isolated criollo elite and was accused of a smuggling scandal. The discontent that he created in the past sparked the political fever that supported a junta.

The junta had two major objectives: increase revenue and establish a method of defending Chile. After many months the junta was able to create a small army of 1,500 poorly clothed, armed men who made up the defending force of Chile. However, clearly one of the most important accomplishments was freedom of trade. The new junta believed that Chile's economy would improve with the establishment of free trade. By opening Chile's trade to the world it would provide more economic opportunities for the country. However, the proposal for free trade raised opposition from Spanish merchants. The junta retaliated with the Decree of Free Commerce in February 1811 which used language similarly used in the United State's Declaration of Independence.<sup>13</sup> The Decree succeeded in making four of Chile's ports open to free trade. Through international trade the junta hoped that Chile's economy would grow. Benefits of free trade were not immediately noticeable. However, within the first year custom duties had doubled and kept increasing at a constant rate.<sup>14</sup> Along with the benefits of free trade, the decree caused problems of oversupplying goods, which hurt the local market. Among all the benefits of free trade, Chile's independent role in managing its own economy was the most crucial. Free trade did not cause independence but it was a stepping-stone in the process. This process brought many Chileans to appreciate the value of self-government and the importance that local economy should be run locally.<sup>15</sup>

The junta set up a system of representation by way of a congress and an election to elect representatives in April 1811.<sup>16</sup> The election caused great disruption among the Chilean

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<sup>13</sup> Rector, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Galdames, 159.

<sup>15</sup> Kinsbruner, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Hancock, 145.

people, which resulted in skirmishes that caused the deaths of about fifty men. However, the patriots were victorious and the congress first met on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1811. The congress passed several reformatory measures. Some of which include the abolition of slavery and the creation of military schools and firearm manufactories.<sup>17</sup>

New ideas of independence spread widely throughout the new world. Chile watched as other countries became independent from their oppressors. Chileans were aware of such famous documents such as the United State's "Declaration of Independence" and France's "Declaration of the Rights of Man." Both documents emphasized individualism and liberty, demonstrated when the United States declared itself independent from Great Britain, and when France overthrew the monarchy. Chile's interest grew in becoming independent due to the influence of France and the United States. However, Chile did not wish for such a violent revolution like the one that occurred in France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

A rebellion for independence also occurred close to Chilean soil. In Argentina during 1806-1807, a revolt between Creoles and the English occurred, "...showed colonists that they were as capable of forcing respect for the integrity of their territory as the Spaniards, and gave impulse to the still confused idea of nationality."<sup>18</sup> The emergence of Argentine figures such as Juan Martínez de Rozas helped urge the country to claim its well-deserved freedom from absolutism.<sup>19</sup> The growing nationality also gave the country a push towards resistance against outsiders.

In addition to seeing other countries strive for independence, Chile's landscape is also an important factor for creating a national identity. Chile's land varies dramatically from the north to the south due to its vast length. Chile is uniquely distinct, "The Pacific Ocean defines

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Galdames, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Collier, 63.

Chile's western border, and the Andes Mountains define its eastern border"<sup>20</sup> Thus, Chile is geographically isolated from other Latin American countries. The fact that Chile is secluded adds to its nationality, "...this country constituted a geographic unity, separate and distinct from any other, where a considerable population could support itself from its own resources."<sup>21</sup>

Different radical documents emerged in Latin America that urged for independence. One of the prominent authors was Quirino Lemáchez (otherwise known as Camilo Henríquez González) wrote: "Nature made us equal, and only by virtue and a free pact made spontaneously and voluntarily, can another man exercise just, legitimate, and reasonable authority over us."<sup>22</sup> Lemáchez's declaration drew the conclusion that Chile's new government ought to be established without the input of Spain. Lemáchez also established a revolutionary newspaper at this time, which further surfaced revolutionary independence fever. The European Enlightenment of thought also influenced Chile. The Enlightenment brought Latin America a new way of looking at governmental systems. According to Jay Kinsbruner, the Enlightenment meant different things to every individual person, "To some it meant limited monarchy, to others enlightened despotism. To some it meant, perhaps, Locke's property oriented, individualistic liberalism, to others, Rousseau's liberalism of the people – his democracy."<sup>23</sup> The Enlightenment was not the main cause of Chile's movement towards independence. However, it was a major factor since it provided numerous ideas that proved to be beneficial in the creation of Chile's own independent government.

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<sup>20</sup> Rector, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Galdames, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Galdames, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Kinsbruner, 34.

Along with the Enlightenment influence, religion also served as a catalyst for independence. Chile was primarily a Catholic country. The clergy was an influential part of the power in Chile. Spain feared the level of influence that the church had. Of all the Catholic religious institutions, the most worrisome was the Society of Jesus. Spain feared the Jesuits because they had more loyalty to the pope than to their mother country. They were also the richest and most powerful of the religious institutions. Anson Hancock states the vast riches of the Jesuits, "They had innumerable houses, haciendas, mills, vineyards, herds and slaves, and exercised great power and influence."<sup>24</sup> Fear caused the Spanish monarch to declare in 1767 that all Jesuits were banished from the country and their landholdings were sold at public auctions. These actions were made in order to improve Spain's royal absolutism. However, the banishment of the Jesuits had unforeseen repercussions when the era of Chilean independence emerged since the Jesuits were not there to defend Spain from rebellion.<sup>25</sup> The bitter animosity that the Jesuits had against Spain caused for some (such as Juan Pablo Viscardo) to urge Chile for independence.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to religion, the issue of class was important in the Chilean independence movement. Historically, Spain favored peninsulares, Spanish born citizens, for positions of leadership. The creoles, Chilean born, resented this. Although this resentment was blown out of proportion at times, "Though some Chileans complained about the prevalence of peninsulares in public office, most do not seem to have been very concerned about the matter."<sup>27</sup> During years surrounding Chilean independence creoles in fact were dominant in

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<sup>24</sup> Anson Hancock, *A History of Chile* (New York: AMS Press, 1893). 119.

<sup>25</sup> Rector, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Kinsbruner, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Kinsbruner, 44.



politics since many primary political leaders were creoles.<sup>28</sup> At times peninsulares did discriminate creoles based on the fact that they were below them in status. What made the competition between peninsulares and creoles the most important was the establishment of the nation junta as Kinsbruner states, "There was a creole-peninsular competition in late colonial Chile, but it was a competition that grew in dimension and meaning after the establishment of the national junta, that is, after Chileans were appointing or electing whomever they chose to public office."<sup>29</sup>

Several prominent men immersed from the Chilean independence movement and rose to fame. Most important of these patriots was Bernardo O'Higgins who "to him, more than to any man, Chile owes her independence."<sup>30</sup> O'Higgins was an Irishman, educated in England that afterwards moved to Chile. When the revolutionary period occurred O'Higgins firmly exerted his support of the patriot cause. He served as a deputy in the first congress and as a member of the junta. Another significant leader of Chile was José Miguel Carrera who quickly got involved in politics after the absence of Ferdinand VII and eventually became Chile's dictator. Today, Carrera is known in Chile as one of the fathers of the nation.

Although many people tend to focus only on the European activities that resulted in the independence movement in Chile, there are other factors which contributed to Chile's desire for self-rule. As stated, the emergence of ideas of liberty and freedom made many Chileans rethink absolutism. They desired their own governments and the ability to elect their own leaders instead of having rulers (who were typically Spaniards) assigned for them. With the surfacing of several patriotic leaders the movement for localized autonomy was able to reach its high. The Chilean independence movement had the momentum to go well beyond

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kinsbruner, 44-45.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Clissold, Bernardo O'Higgins and the Independence of Chile (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968). 9.

the creation of juntas. The movement continued well into the 1820s with different periods of turmoil including the Patria Vieja, Reconquista, and Patria Nueva. The battle for Chilean land was fought hard and long with many factors influencing its success. Eloquently spoken, Simon Collier explains the motives for the Chilean independence movement, “Patriotic feelings which had been developing from early colonial times, together with political and economic aspirations which had taken shape more recently, were given an unexpected outlet, and the outlet was used.”<sup>31</sup> With these motivations driving them, Chileans fought and died for their dream of a free Chile

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<sup>31</sup> Collier, 45.

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