



Revista de Relaciones Internacionales,
Estrategia y Seguridad

ISSN: 1909-3063

cinuv.relinternal@unimilitar.edu.co

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Colombia

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Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad, vol. 2, núm. 2, julio-diciembre, 2007

Universidad Militar Nueva Granada

Bogotá, Colombia

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE AFRO-DESCENDANT SOLDIERS TO THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE BOLIVARIAN COUNTRIES (1810-1826)

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of the independence process of the Bolivarian nations, thousands of Afro-descendant soldiers were incorporated into the patriot armies, as the Spanish Crown had done once independence was declared. What made people of African descent support the republican cause? Was their contribution to the independence decisive? Did Afro-descendant women play a key role during that process? Why were the most important Afro-descendant military leaders executed by the Creole forces? What was the fate of those soldiers and their descendants at the end of the war? This paper intends to answer these controversial questions, while explaining the main characteristics of society throughout the five countries freed by the Bolivarian armies in the 1810s and 1820s. Based on the author's research, it is proposed that this text represents one of the few works of its kind that analyzes, in depth, the contribution of people of African descent to the Spanish American independence struggles.

Recibido: 3 de septiembre de 2007
Aceptado: 8 de octubre de 2007

Key words: Afro-descendants, independence process, Bolivarian nations, racism and Republican military history.

RESUMEN

En la etapa más difícil del proceso independentista de las naciones bolivarianas, miles de soldados afrodescendientes fueron incorporados a los ejércitos patriotas, como lo había hecho la Corona española una vez fue declarada la Independencia. ¿Qué hizo que descendientes de africanos apoyaran la causa republicana? ¿Fue su contribución a la Independencia decisiva? ¿Jugaron las mujeres afrodescendientes un papel clave durante dicho proceso? ¿Cuál fue el destino de aquellos soldados y sus descendientes al terminar la guerra? El artículo busca responder estas controversiales preguntas mientras explica las características principales de la sociedad en las cinco naciones liberadas por los ejércitos boliviarianos entre 1819 y 1826. El texto representa uno de los pocos trabajos académicos que analiza a profundidad la contribución de la población afrodescendiente a las luchas independentistas en América Latina.

Palabras clave: Afrodescendientes, proceso independentista, países bolivarianos, racismo e historia militar republicana.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1810s the political situation of most Spanish colonies in what we nowadays call Latin America changed. Creole elites wanted to gain political power and have control over the economic resources. The Spanish Crown refused to make substantial changes in its colonial system, which had been used to rule the region for more than three hundred years. Most elites then decided to declare independence from Spain and fight for freedom. However, these intimidating actions neither included the abolition of slavery nor promoted equality to benefit former slaves and their descendants. In fact, once independence was declared most people of African descent kept suffering the noxious consequences of the denigrating discourses and socio-racial divisions created by the Spaniards and supported by Creole elites. The Spanish Monarchy soon took advantage of the slaves' situation and offered them freedom, if they joined the Royalist Army. The Crown also gave high military ranks to free people of African descent who fought the patriot armies. The outstanding fighting qualities of Afro-descendants made the most important Creole leaders realize that the war would never be won without support of people of African descent. That is why freedom to all slaves who joined the patriot armies, as well as military ranks to some Afro-descendants, was also offered by Creoles.

The main purpose of this paper is to describe in depth the decisive role played by Afro-descendant soldiers throughout the war for independence in the so-called Bolivarian countries (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia). These five nations were freed by the same precursor, Simón Bolívar. Although the most important battles were held from 1816 to 1826, war actually started in the early 1810s, when the Spanish Kingdom rejected the declarations of independence and encouraged its Army to retake control of the rebel nations. The role of Afro-descendants during both periods will be explained in the text. Before doing so, a summary of previous research on this topic as well as the analytical framework of the text will be presented. Also, the socio-economic and political context in which most Afro-descendants lived before and during the war will be described. The role played by General Manuel Piar and Admiral José Prudencio Padilla, who had African background, to win the war will be studied in detail. An overview on the contribution of Afro-descendant women to the independence process will be also shown. The paper will be concluded by emphasizing how Afro-descendant soldiers helped defeat the Spanish Empire in the above countries, and why the Creole elites did not fulfill the Bolivarian (official) promise of abolishing slavery after winning the war.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Even though there is still much research to be performed in order to explain the crucial contribution of the people of African descent to the Spanish Empire's former colonies during the independence struggles, some authors have provided detailed analyses of the experience of Afro-descendant troops in that time. Two well-documented texts remain as critical sources for the study of African and Afro-descendant slaves who became soldiers in Spanish America. The first one, *Esclavos y Reclutas en Sudamérica (1816-1826)*, was written by Nuria Sales (1970). Her text is known as an extensively researched work that explores the various functions exercised by the slaves in South America. The second one, *The Language of Liberation: Slave Voices in the Wars of Independence*, is a recent essay written by Peter Blanchard (2002). His text describes how the struggles mentioned above provided some slaves an unprecedented opportunity to voice their feelings and thoughts while helping secure the independence of their nations and their personal freedom.

Other books acknowledge that slaves and free Afro-descendants played a key role in freeing the Bolivarian nations. These texts will be used to explain the socio-economic, cultural and political context that characterized former colonies during the independence process. It is important to note that there are many authors who study the independence of Spanish America. They focus on how some military leaders, including both General Piar and Admiral Padilla, led the patriots to win determinant battles. These authors' documents will be used to show why the above Afro-descendant leaders were executed by the Creole forces themselves during

the aftermath of the independence. One of those texts, *Prensa, Abolición y Racismo hacia los Afrocolombianos, 1810-1851*, was written by the author in 2001. This text will be also utilized to support the analytical framework presented below.

The terms *Afro-descendants* and *people of African descent* are mentioned throughout the paper. They refer to persons who had/have African background and whose ancestors lived in slavery. These terms did not exist in the nineteenth century. The Spaniards called the people of African descent '*negros*', '*pardos*', '*morochos*', '*mulatos*', '*zambos*', '*morenos*', etc.¹ These discriminatory and offensive expressions persisted in the Bolivarian countries after the war for independence was won, and even after the abolition of slavery in the 1850s.

It should be noted that the terms *Afro-descendants*, *people of African descent*, *Afro-Colombians*, *Afro-Venezuelans*, *Afro-Bolivians*, *Afro-Ecuadorians*, *Afro-Peruvians*, etc, are political concepts created to strengthen the cultural identity of groups of African ancestry. Mosquera (2000) underscores that the Afro-descendant populations in Latin America not only comprise those persons usually called *blacks* in the region but also the Afro-mestizos² and the Afro-indigenous groups. Again, these categories did not exist in the nineteenth century. The Spaniards utilized dozens of terms to classify people according to their skin color and/or socio-racial conditions. As mentioned above, the Spanish Americans kept discriminatory distinctions alive after the defeat of the Spanish Empire. In fact, the Creole elites came to approve laws that promoted the immigration of white Europeans to help improve what the Creoles called '*la raza latina*' (*the Latino race*), and achieve progress of the Andean countries (Reales 2005).

Despite those socio-racial divisions and the slaves' limited options to succeed, many of them fought for the patriot armies and won their freedom. In pursuing that dream, thousands of them were assassinated, but their contribution guaranteed the triumph of the patriots, who in the end did not care much about Afro-descendants and decided to maintain slavery.

THE INDEPENDENCE PROCESS AND THE SITUATION OF AFRO-DESCENDANTS IN THE 1810s

Some historians have emphasized the resentment of Creoles at their exclusion from the highest offices and have seen independence as the struggle of the Creole elites to gain political power commensurate with their economic position. Others have drawn attention to exclusion of

¹ Mellafe (1984) and Reales (2001) list other terms utilized by the Europeans to discriminate against black people and their descendants during slavery.

² Afro-mestizos are 'mixed' people of African, European, and indigenous descent.

Creoles from the transatlantic trade or have underlined the basic difference in character and interests between creoles and Spaniards and the awareness among Creoles of a distinct identity and a sense of nationality (Alamán 1994). In any case, controversies between Creole elites and Spaniards became the main cause of the independence movement.

Although in South America European-born Spaniards clearly were given preference for the highest decision-making posts, the Creole elites, because of their skills, adaptability, and/or wealth, exercised an unusual degree of authority (Burns 1980). This fact made it easier to prepare a climate of opinion toward independence. As Ocampo (1989) suggests, some powerful Creoles realized that they could convince popular masses about the need for freedom and sovereignty while promoting independence. The Bourbon reforms, the Enlightenment, and colonial revolts and protests also fed the independence discourse. Ideas of liberty, freedom, rights and equality were spread all over the Spanish colonies that declared independence in the early 1810s. Even though intellectuals of the independence process highlighted that the former colonies would be different from what the Imperial system had imposed, the truth is that the first period (1810-1815) of the process did not bring significant changes to Afro-descendant people. In fact, this process neither ended slavery nor eliminated the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times. The main objective of the independence movement was then made clear to all South Americans: The independence was especially to benefit Creoles who already had power in Spanish American society.

In the 1810s this society was still divided by statute and custom into socio-racial castes, the famous '*sistema o sociedad de castas*,' which comprised, broadly speaking, Euro-mestizos, free people of African descent (Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous), indigenous people, and black slaves. The castes were ruled by white people (both Europeans and Creoles). Free Afro-descendants were not permitted to become physicians, lawyers, or to enter the various civil, Church, or military bureaucracies. When the colonial militia was created, some free people of African descent were permitted to serve, but only in segregated units (Kinsbruner 1994).

The term '*casta*' was a pejorative reference to those of mixed blood, before and during the independence process. Mellafe (1984) points out that the preference was to be considered *Euro-mestizo* just to be close, socio-racially speaking, to the white rulers. Some Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous bought the 'pure-blood certificate' from authorities. This illegal operation, known as '*gracias al sacar*,' was utilized not only to gain social respect but also to have access to political and economic benefits and policies. There can be no doubt that Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous realized that '*el blanqueamiento*' (*whitening*) was the best strategy to ascend in the socio-racial pyramid (structure) inherited from the colonial époque.

It is hard to tell how many Afro-descendants bought those certificates since operations like these were usually hidden. Most historians suggest that there should not have been lots of them due to lack of economic resources among Afro-descendants (Reales 2001). The general situation of slaves was obviously worse. Although sometimes owners were “respectful” to their slaves and manumitted them after years or decades of hard work, most slaves were treated as wild beasts. This is one of the reasons why from the first days in Spanish American slave society, running away, or ‘*el cimarronaje*’,³ was a common occurrence.

Revolts, rebellions, conspiracies, and protest movements were notorious manifestations of the hostility expressed by slaves for their condition. Theft and destruction of property were constantly recorded and had to do not only with their material condition and poverty, especially in the big cities, but also with their general situation as victims of oppression (Klein 1986). The Spanish Empire took advantage of the dramatic situation experienced by most slaves to offer them freedom, if joining the Royalist Army. It provided Afro-descendant slaves and people of African descent in general an unparalleled opportunity to improve their social status. It opened the doors to several professions and education by selling certificates of whiteness, while the Creole elites, temporarily in power, intended to keep the same people under strict control as well as the institution of slavery. Thus, many Afro-descendants, both slaves and free people, remained strong supporters of the Monarchy and rapidly constituted a serious military threat to the new regime (Rodríguez 1998). They demonstrated excellent fighting qualities and defeated republican armies in different places.

The coalition between people of African descent and the royalist forces grew stronger in 1812, even when Bolívar, the would-be Creole elite Liberator of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, had perceived that the Spaniards had been mobilizing black slaves and Afro-descendant soldiers against the Creole elites since the independence was declared. In a few months, the first Venezuelan republic was defeated militarily by that coalition. The Crown had succeeded. Thousands of people of African descent perceived it as a protector, while the Creole elites still oppressed them. Domínguez (1980) suggests that these events made Simón Bolívar realize that the balance of forces to win the war rested on the political ability to mobilize Afro-descendants to one side or another. Bolívar then had no choice but to also offer them freedom and military ranks, if joining the patriot armies.

AFRO-DESCENDANT SOLDIERS AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE BOLIVARIAN INDEPENDENCE

During the Spanish American war for independence, the Afro-descendant people were shrewdly exploited by white leaders on both sides in conflict (Morner 1978). Before describing the key

³ The Spaniards initially called ‘*cimarrones*’ the animals (bulls, horses, cows, etc) that escaped from their stables.

role played by Afro-descendants in freeing the Bolivarian countries, it should be noted that in 1813 Bolívar, as commander of the republican forces, proclaimed a “war to the death” against those Afro-descendants who joined the Royalist Army. The slaves, the fugitive slaves, and the freedmen from the Venezuelan plains joined those from the coast and rose up against the white lords. Social banditry and defensive collective violence were politically and militarily mobilized by the royalist officer José Tomás Boves (Domínguez 1980).

Boves was one of the first ‘*caudillos*’ (provincial chieftains) of the independence time. He emerged as the most powerful royalist leader who challenged the republicans. As ambitious and ruthless as Simón Bolívar, Boves was, in contrast, a lower-class trader from Asturias, who initially eagerly supported the autonomous juntas. The high-handed actions of the Venezuelan elite, however, caused him to change his allegiance. Boves had lived in the plains to the south of Caracas, the ‘*llanos*’, and had developed the skills and attitudes of the ‘*llaneros*’ (cowboys), most of whom were of African descent. In 1813, Boves returned to the ‘*llanos*’ and formed a superb cavalry force, composed primarily by Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous soldiers who bitterly resented the Creole elites who had earlier attempted to reduce them to serfdom. Boves promised to distribute the land of white aristocrats to his men. But most of all, he gave them a real opportunity to vent their anger against their former oppressors (Rodríguez 1998). His army gave no quarter. Thus the republicans’ terror met with an equally violent royalist response. As Kinsbruner (1994) states, the ‘*llaneros*’ became the Legion of Hell, and with justification they carried as their standard a black flag emblazoned with a death’s head.

Boves was known as the most powerful royalist agitator ever seen. He was the first one in eliminating the castes and promoting Afro-descendant soldiers to the highest military ranks (Liévano 1974). He had as many as twelve thousand troops, but no more than a hundred and sixty were Spaniards. Although he was conscious of being an officer of the king, his target was the white population. After he had taken control of Calabozo, he ordered the execution of the eighty-seven white persons found in the town. Total white extermination continued in Santa Rosa and Aragua (Domínguez 1980). Venezuela endured the worst aspects of civil war.

The glory of Boves and his Afro-descendant plainsmen culminated in 1814. On June 15, with a force of about 3,000 troops, Bolívar confronted Boves, with an equal force near the town of La Puerta. Boves sent his infantry into the patriot’s center and his cavalry against both flanks. In only two and a half hours, the ‘*llaneros*’ thoroughly vanquished the patriots. Bolívar managed to escape to Caracas. Boves took Valencia and then pressed on toward Caracas. An advance force defeated Bolívar’s troops outside the capital on July 6. Bolívar boarded ship and escaped to Cartagena. The Venezuelan Republic collapsed. Although some patriots continued to fight and Boves was killed in a battle in early December (Kinsbruner 1994), his army entered Caracas and proclaimed the full restoration of the Empire. By the beginning of 1815, Venezuela

was again a royal colony. Bolívar summarized this issue well when, addressing himself to the Creole elites, he wrote: "Your brothers, not the Spaniards, have torn the country apart."⁴ The would-be liberator of five nations had clearly understood that he would need the military support of Afro-descendants to win the war. He changed his strategy and offered them freedom, if joining the republican armies. Paradoxically, one of the first groups that fought for him was the '*llaneros*,' whom the Crown had started again oppressing by the end of 1815.

THE AFRO-VENEZUELANS

During the independence process the Afro-descendant population (both slaves and free people) comprised more than 30% of the total population in the Bolivarian countries.⁵ Needing strong soldiers for the patriot armies and trying to lure away slaves from supporting royalist leaders, Bolívar granted most slaves the freedom they wanted. However, the offer of personal freedom was predicated upon one important condition: slaves had to fight for their freedom and support the Creole idea of liberty (Blanchard 2002). Bolívar offered military ranks to free people of African descent who joined the republican cause, just as the Crown had done. In 1815, Creole elites understood that the Spanish Empire could not be defeated without direct participation of Afro-descendant soldiers. Some Creoles (not all) then supported Bolívar and offered their slaves freedom in return for military service. Thousands of slaves responded. Also, many Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous saw Bolívar's promise as a perfect way to gain political power and respect. From 1815-1816, therefore, growing numbers of Afro-descendants were incorporated into the republican army. They were also needed to fill the gaps in the patriot ranks left by Creole casualties and desertions, and they themselves were imbued with greater expectations from wartime socio-economic mobility (Lynch 2006). The traditional structure of the republican army, which limited the scope of revolutionary militarization in the Bolivarian nations (Halperin-Donghi 1973), was transformed. The Creoles retained control, but now the Afro-descendants had greater opportunities for advance to higher ranks, even when they were not completely convinced by the republican cause (Lynch 2006).

⁴ Quoted in Laureano Valenilla, *Cesarismo Democrático* (Caracas: Garrido, 1961). Note: Domínguez (1980) uses this quote to present how Bolívar realized that the war would only be won when Afro-descendants fought for him.

⁵ Although there is no unanimity with regard to the number of slaves and free Afro-descendant people in the five Bolivarian nations (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), many historians agree that they comprised more than 30% of the population (Reales 2005). For figures, see John Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (New York: Norton, 1986), 191; Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 334-35; Leonardo Reales, *Prensa, Abolición y Racismo hacia los Afrocolombianos, 1810-1851* (Bogotá: Tesis Uniandes, 2001), 64-65; and Peter Blanchard, "The Language of Liberation: Slave Voices in the Wars of Independence." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 82.3 (Duke University Press, 2002), 449-523.

In 1816, Bolívar returned to Venezuela from Haiti, where he secured key supplies in exchange for the promise of abolishing slavery in the five countries that he wanted to free with the support of the slaves. It should be underlined that some powerful Creoles never followed his strategy. Nevertheless, Bolívar's campaign served to nullify rebellions of slaves, who no longer actively fought the republic as they had done in 1813-1815.

By the beginning of 1816, José Antonio Páez led the '*llaneros*' in Venezuela. Páez was a new caudillo who came from a poor background and had been forced to flee to the '*llanos*' at the age of seventeen after having killed a man in his hometown, apparently in self-defense. At first a greenhorn, Páez had been hardened by the rough conditions and tough companions and he gradually emerged as the most powerful leader of the '*llaneros*'. Bolívar knew that Páez's army would be needed to win battles not only in Venezuela but also in Peru, Ecuador, and New Granada (Colombia). Bolívar won Páez's trust and the new caudillo placed the '*llaneros*' under Bolívar's command. Páez was attracted to Simón Bolívar by the latter's force of character and his vitality. But Bolívar had to offer more to Páez's *Afro-descendant warriors*. They demanded property, and Bolívar issued a decree that national lands – that is, those seized from the Crown – would be divided among the loyal troops (Graham 1994). With control of the '*llanos*' and the support of these *Afro-descendant* soldiers, who were a lethal (as well as plundering) cavalry, Bolívar could defeat the Royalist Army in Venezuela and proceed on to Colombia.

At the beginning of the war for independence Páez could neither read nor write. A few years later, he would become president of Venezuela. In short, *Afro-descendant soldiers* not only had won the war for independence in Venezuela but also had taken Páez to power. These brave '*llaneros*' had to continue fighting in Colombia and the other Bolivarian countries, and wait for more than three decades to see the end of slavery in the region.

THE AFRO-COLOMBIANS

Altogether, Bolívar was the titular head of a strong army of approximately 4,000 men, most of whom were *Afro-descendants* (Kinsbruner 1994). From 1818 Bolívar turned his mind towards the liberation of New Granada (Colombia). That year he sent General Francisco de Paula Santander to Casanare as governor and vanguard of a greater expedition. Casanare was a semi-desert, a poor and under-populated province, but it was a sanctuary of independence. It provided a nucleus of another army, and it could become a perfect base for an invasion of New Granada. Santander saw that some *Afro-descendant guerrillas* supported both the '*llaneros*' and the republican cause. The Spanish Army was morally devastated. By May 1819 Santander was able to report to Simón Bolívar that Casanare was clear of royalists, enthusiastic for its independence, and ready for its role in the campaign (Lynch 2006).

It was useful for Bolívar that his forces were full of Afro-descendants, because his plan of attack was extremely demanding. In 1819, Afro-Granadan (Afro-Colombian) soldiers (both slaves and free people) joined the patriot armies. European travelers who visited the Bolivarian countries emphasized that the majority of Afro-Colombian soldiers rapidly demonstrated their outstanding qualities as fighters and noted that they played a key role in winning the most important battles throughout the country (Reales 2001).

On July 25, 1819, Bolívar's armies fought the royalist forces, far superior in numbers, and at Pantano de Vargas earned victory from a hard day's battle, won by sheer courage against all odds, by Colonel Juan José Rondón's 'llanero' cavalry (Lynch 2006). Once again, Bolívar's forces relied on Afro-descendants to win a crucial battle. On August 7, the patriots defeated the royalists at the famous Battle of Boyacá. On August 10, Bolívar entered Bogotá in triumph, having freed New Granada with the decisive support of Afro-descendant soldiers.

The Creole elites were afraid to release former slaves and Afro-descendants in general into Bolivarian society. Bolívar himself believed that *'la pardocracia'* (Afro-mestizos' rule) would govern, sooner or later, the liberated countries, if he did not limit the Afro-descendants' aspirations. Bolívar realized that it was impossible to return to pre-war conditions, that it would no be longer a question of resisting slave expectations but of controlling and directing them. In 1819, when he was reinforcing the army after Boyacá, Bolívar ordered a reluctant Santander to recruit five thousand slaves in Colombia (Lynch 2006). Invoking Montesquieu's philosophy on the link between political liberty and civil liberty, Bolívar argued that left in a free society without freedom for Afro-descendants, they would be dangerous and prone to rebellion: *"It is a political maxim drawn from history that any free government that commits the absurdity of maintaining slavery is punished by rebellion and in some cases by extermination, as in Haiti: What is more appropriate or just in the acquisition of liberty than to fight for it? Is it right that only free men should die for the emancipation of slaves? Is it not expedient that the slaves should acquire their right on the battlefield, and that their dangerous numbers should be reduced by a process that is both effective and legitimate? In Venezuela we have seen free populations die and the slaves survive. I do not know whether this is politic, but I do know that unless we recruit more slaves in Colombia the same thing will happen again."*⁶

Some historians argue that Bolívar was neither a slave-driver nor a racist (Lynch 2006). Others insist that Bolívar's letters help prove the contrary (Reales 2001). In any case, Bolívar made effective his order and recruited five thousand Afro-Colombian slaves, who either died in combat (in Ecuador, Peru or Bolivia), or also had to wait for more than three decades to see the end of legal slavery in the region.

⁶ Bolívar a Santander, Cañafistola, 20 de Mayo de 1819, *Cartas Santander-Bolívar*, I, 92. In John Lynch (2006).

THE AFRO-ECUADORIANS

Before going to war in Ecuador, Simón Bolívar encouraged the Colombian Congress to approve manumission norms to gradually end the institution of slavery. Most Congressmen were slave owners. On July 21, they approved the 'Manumission Law of 1821' and secured economic reparation for themselves. Sons and daughters of slaves had the opportunity to gain freedom if, and only if, they worked for their owners for at least 21 years and after that hard-work period they could demonstrate that they were able to serve society. Otherwise, they had to join the armed forces or do slave common jobs, now as "free" people (Reales 2001). Bolívar showed the Manumission Law as an outstanding philanthropic success. Nonetheless, this Law simply helped maintain slavery and perpetuate the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times (González 1977). Bolívar never fulfilled the promise (freeing all Afro-descendant slaves) that he had made in Haiti to president Alexandre Petion.

After the approval of the Manumission Law, Bolívar decided to march on Quito while his lieutenants extinguished the remaining pockets of royalist resistance. Some Creole leaders in Ecuador had attempted to obtain military assistance from San Martín⁷ - who had won battles in Argentina, Chile, Peru and Ecuador itself - and Bolívar, without compromising the country. San Martín sent envoys, and Bolívar dispatched General Antonio José de Sucre with troops, most of whom were soldiers of African descent. In 1822, the Bolivarian armies achieved the independence of the former Kingdom of Quito (Ecuador). The nation was placed under martial law. Ecuador had achieved independence but not liberty (Rodríguez 1998). Bolivarian officials replaced local authorities and promised Afro-Ecuadorian slaves freedom in return for military service in the republican armies.

Accepting and fighting for the patriot's cause thus became a route to personal freedom in Ecuador. It should be noted, however, that re-enslaving Afro-descendant military personnel was also a common practice in Ecuador and the other Bolivarian countries (Klein 1986). In any case, there is no doubt that some Afro-descendant slaves joined the Bolivarian forces under the command of Sucre. Alejandro Campusano, an Afro-Ecuadorian slave recalled that "the sweet voice of the patria came to ears, and desiring to be one of its soldiers as much to shake off the yoke of general oppression as to free me from the slavery in which I found myself, I ran swiftly to present myself to the liberating troops."⁸ It is possible that Campusano was one of

⁷ General José San Martín recruited approximately two thousand Afro-Argentinean soldiers to fight the Royalist Army throughout the Andes (Andrews 1994).

⁸ "El Señor Procurador Municipal en defensa de Alejandro Campusano, esclavo, sobre se le declare exento del servicio de la esclavitud," 1826, Archivo Histórico de Guayas, Guayaquil, no.5996. In Blanchard (2002).

the Afro-Ecuadorians who did not want to fill the traditional role associated with slavery in his country, which was laboring on tobacco and cacao farms in the Coast.

Some Afro-Ecuadorian slaves also looked for personal power, taking advantage of the aftermath of the independence. Blanchard (2002) highlights that everywhere Afro-Ecuadorians were attracting notice for their aggressiveness. They ran away, refused to work, stole and sold stolen produce, and attacked people. In Ecuador and Peru many abandoned the coastal farms to join the bands of highwaymen and guerrillas who were disrupting coastal communications and threatening political stability. These acts were blamed on the slaves' belief that it was the time of freedom. Without a doubt, Afro-Ecuadorians (both slaves and freedmen) fervently adopted the catchword of the period, freedom. Nevertheless, the institution of slavery survived and, in fact, many of those rebel Afro-Ecuadorians were re-enslaved. Their actions were not sufficient to overcome the domination of the Creole slaveholders and the control of the Bolivarian forces. The patriot armies actually grew stronger after the war in Ecuador. In 1823, Bolívar was ready to face his last challenges; Peru and Upper Peru (Bolivia).

THE AFRO-PERUVIANS

After the liberation of Ecuador, Bolívar was anxious to pursue the enemy in the south, and he offered aid to the Peruvian leaders, but the offer was rejected and he was vilified in the Lima press. Bolívar believed that he had the right to intervene in Peru without invitation, in defense of the republican cause. The Royalist Army had occupied the south of the country and the north was affected by a civil war. It was the extreme inconvenience of this anarchy which drove the Peruvian elites to seek Bolívar's assistance (Lynch 2006).

It is important to point out that General San Martín had already vanquished the royalists in Lima when Bolívar occupied the capital in 1824. As a matter of fact, San Martín proclaimed the first 'Peruvian' Manumission Law, prohibited the slave trade, and incorporated many Afro-Peruvian slaves into his infantry (Sales 1970). Although the royalists kept fighting in Peru, San Martín ruled the country from 1821 to 1823. His temporary government was characterized for notorious irregularities in the recruitment of Afro-Peruvian slaves. Bribing local authorities to re-enslave Afro-Peruvian soldiers, before they had the opportunity to demand their freedom, was a common practice during that period. In 1824, when the Congress itself appointed Bolívar dictator, new norms regarding Afro-Peruvian slaves were approved. None of them, however, announced an early end of slavery.

Despite constant frustrations among Afro-descendant slaves, many of them adopted the Bolivarian language, suggesting by doing so that their struggle was basically the same struggle

as that of the Creoles. Gregorio Layoso, an Afro-Peruvian slave, had been given by his owner to the Spanish forces. When the Spanish were defeated by the patriot armies he had fled, '*por amor a mi patria*' (as lover of my patria), and enlisted in the Bolivarian forces.⁹ Was Layoso's love genuine? Layoso, like many Afro-descendant slaves who became soldiers, was probably trying to establish a strong tie with the new rulers to seek his personal freedom. This kind of 'temporary' love was also seen in Upper Peru, the last stop of the Bolivarian campaign.

THE AFRO-BOLIVIAN

Most Creole elites in Upper Peru (Bolivia), royalist by interest if not conviction, were forced to reappraise their position when the victories of Bolívar in Peru and the triumph of the independence process eradicated the royalist presence in South America. By 1824, the Bolivian aristocracy was prepared to abandon the sinking ship, hoping to find an alternative haven, an ideal guarantee of their political, economic, cultural and socio-racial predominance. Convinced that Spain's last bastion in the region was doomed, the Creole elites sought an alternative regime which could help preserve this predominance (Lynch 1986). They rapidly turned to Bolívar as their Creole savior. Bolívar assigned the liberation of Upper Peru to Sucre. As Sales (1970) would say, the Afro-descendant presence in the Bolivarian forces made possible the final victory. In 1825, the death of the royalist leaders marked the end of the Spanish power in Upper Peru. Subsequently, Sucre formed the new Republic of Bolivia. By the beginning of 1826, when the last royalist forces surrendered, Bolívar dominated South America as president of Colombia, commander of the armed forces of Venezuela and Ecuador, dictator of Peru, and ruler of Bolivia (Rodríguez 1998).

Like their counterparts in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, the Bolivian elites monopolized the few assets the country possessed, and they continued to exert an inexorable control over the institution of slavery. The Bolivian Congress declared former slaves free citizens, but they could only abandon the house of their master if the latter agreed. The principal objects of concern were labor and recompense. Some Afro-Bolivian soldiers, who helped win the war for independence of 'their nation,' were re-enslaved. Historical documents also demonstrate the reproduction of the socio-racial pyramid in Bolivia and the other Bolivarian countries, in spite of the independence triumph and laws promoting the existence of a society formed by free men and women (Reales 2005). In short, Afro-descendant slaves represented an investment which owners were not prepared to lose. 'The only indemnity slaveholders seek', reported Sucre, 'is that slaves should be forced to work in their haciendas as peons.'¹⁰

⁹ Caso de Gregorio Layoso, 1827, Archivo Arzobispal, Lima, Causas de Negros, exp. 35. In Blanchard (2002).

¹⁰ Sucre a Bolívar, 20 de junio de 1827, *Memorias del General O'Leary*, i, 436. In Lynch (1986).

This would also become the characteristic of the abolition process in the other Bolivarian nations; slavery was replaced not by freedom but by servile labor.

THE AFRO-DESCENDANT WOMEN

Throughout the text, it has been shown that the role played by Afro-descendant soldiers during the independence process was paramount. No direct reference to the contribution of Afro-descendant women to the independence struggles has yet been made. Women of African descent were as important as the soldiers to achieving the Bolivarian triumph. In 1825, Carl Gosselman, a European traveler and researcher, visited Colombia and realized how valuable Afro-Colombian women were to the Bolivarian troops. He wrote the following lines about an Afro-Colombian woman who had voluntarily worked for the patriot armies: "My nurse was a black woman who took good care of me as if I were a child. Despite her skin color and name, Matías, I cannot exclude her from my writings since she was the one who saved my life when I got ill in Colombia."¹¹ Charles Empson, a British traveler, also underscored the key role played by women of African descent during the independence struggles. Empson wrote: *"The person who helped us was a black woman called Manuela. She had been slave of the Viceroy. She gained her freedom after distinguishing for her outstanding work in a republican hospital, where she saved many soldiers. As a nurse she was excellent. She certainly was not beautiful; yet she possessed a stately figure and superior manners. She was a wonderful cook, organizer, and surgeon. After spending six months at Mrs. Manuela's, I was still impressed on her ability to cure almost everything."*¹²

Afro-descendant women were extremely useful in the fight against the royalists in Peru and Bolivia and many gained their freedom in return for serving in a republican hospital and/or denouncing their former owners. Condemning a Spaniard for crimes against the Bolivarian regime was not only a sign of patriotism; it could be a route to freedom (Blanchard 2002).

Women of African descent also challenged the socio-racial system that characterized the 'Bolivarian world,' before, during and after the independence process. These women were well-known for defending their individual rights in the courts. Permanent demands for freedom

¹¹ Gosselman, Carl. *Viaje por Colombia, 1825-1826*. Banco de la República. Archivo de la Economía Nacional, Bogotá, 1981, págs. 331-332. In Reales (2001).

¹² Charles Empson, *Narratives of South America. Illustrating Manners and Customs*, London, William Edwards. Ave Maria Lane, 1836, págs. 53-67. Nota: Esta cita fue tomada del material sobre viajeros que se encuentra en el Archivo del Museo Británico de Londres, y me la facilitó el historiador Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, a quien agradezco su inmensa colaboración, Bogotá, marzo del 2001. In Reales (2001).

and equality would be heard until the institution of slavery was finally abolished some 30 years after the war for independence was won. Blanchard (2002) underlines that the independence struggles gave both women and men of African descent an unparalleled opportunity to voice their thoughts. The elites, however, refused to have a society in which Afro-descendants could enjoy the same rights and liberties. The executions of General Piar and Admiral Padilla were a clear indication of the racist attitude of the elites.

FEARING '*LA PARDOCRACIA*': THE EXECUTIONS OF PIAR AND PADILLA

Some '*pardos*' (Afro-mestizos) achieved high military ranks as a result of their evident successes on the battlefield. Piar and Padilla were the most famous cases. They obtained the highest ranks and became indispensable officers to win battles during the first years of the war for independence. However, Bolívar and his supporters, fearing the triumph of what they called '*la pardocracia*' (Afro-mestizos' rule), ordered the executions of both officers.

Bolívar always knew that he had to manage his armies carefully, to include the '*pardos*' only as a subordinate partner and under Creole control. Autonomous leaders of African descent were not allowed. Both General Piar and Admiral Padilla became not only a challenge to Bolívar but also a socio-political threat to the ideals of Bolivarian society. Piar was an Afro-mestizo who had made the Afro-descendants his constituency (Lynch 2006). According to a royalist chronicler, "Piar was one of our most terrible enemies, adventurous, talented, and with great influence among the castes, to whom he belonged. He was thus one of the few Venezuelans who could inspire the greater part of the population."¹³ Piar relied on his military abilities to obtain the rank of general-in-chief, which was given by decree of Bolívar.

There is no doubt that Piar became the most powerful military leader of '*the castes*' in the 1810s. When Bolívar believed that the Afro-Venezuelan officer was planning a rebellion against the Creole elites and the political system, he ordered Piar to be "hunted down." The general was captured, judged, and sentenced to death as a traitor (Lynch 2006). Bolívar later said to General Santander that he feared the advent of '*la pardocracia*' (Afro-mestizos' rule) in Venezuela and Colombia (Reales 2001). This was the reason why Admiral Padilla would meet the same fate of Piar.

José Padilla, veteran of the war against the Spanish Empire and hero of the battle of Maracaibo in 1823, was the founder of the Colombian Navy and the officer who won the naval war against the Crown. After liberating the 'Bolivarian seas,' Bolívar stated that Padilla was the

¹³ Díaz, *Recuerdos sobre la Rebelión de Caracas*, 336. In Lynch (2006).

most important man of Colombia (Torres 1990). However, Bolívar had serious reservations about Padilla's socio-political ambitions: *"Padilla will be able to do whatever he wants if he keeps leading his people. Equality before the law is not enough for them in their present mood. They want absolute equality as a social and public right. They will demand 'la pardocracia', that they, the 'pardos,' should rule. This is a very natural inclination which will ultimately lead to the extermination of the privileged class."*¹⁴

In 1828, Santander and Padilla were accused of leading a conspiracy against Bolívar. Santander, Padilla, and other officers were arrested. General Rafael Urdaneta, the presiding judge of the trials, accused Santander of being the main leader of the rebel officers. However, he was only condemned to banishment whereas Padilla was condemned to death. Bolívar gave Padilla's execution order without hesitation. Padilla faced the firing squad shouting 'Cobardes' (Cowards) and refusing a blindfold (Lynch 2006). Padilla, who thought that it was better to die free than to live as a slave, was executed for challenging a society in which Afro-descendants were not allowed to succeed in politics (Reales 2001).

The executions of Piar and Padilla clearly indicate that the Creoles wanted to maintain the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times. Santander, who would become ruler of Colombia in the 1830s, agreed with the reproduction of this structure. As Lynch (2006) would say, the Creole elites, far from facing 'extermination,' were more capable of preserving power for themselves, as they proved in the course of the nineteenth century and beyond.

THE FATE OF AFRO-DESCENDANT SOLDIERS AT THE END OF THE WAR

By the late 1820s, the 'Bolivarian' Creole elites did not want to follow Bolívar's rules anymore. His dream of uniting the five nations that he had liberated with the crucial support of Afro-descendant soldiers would never be officially achieved. What then was the fate of these brave soldiers? Many of them died on the battlefields; others escaped to live as 'cimarrones' in 'palenques' (maroons' small towns); and others either continued serving their nations for years or were re-enslaved by their former owners.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the 'Bolivarian' nations were affected by civil wars and Afro-descendant soldiers, especially slaves, were again utilized by the groups in conflict. Again they were offered freedom in return for their military support. One of those wars occurred in Colombia in the 1830s, where Colonel José Obando challenged the authorities at both local and national levels. Even though Obando belonged to the Colombian elites, he never agreed

¹⁴ Bolívar a Santander, Lima, 7 de abril de 1825, *Cartas Santander-Bolívar*, IV, 344. In Lynch (2006).

with the execution of Padilla, whom he considered a legitimate and reliable leader (Reales 2001). Obando's reputation as a military and political leader was undeniable. He became the most popular officer of Colombia at the end of the war for independence (Bethell 1987). Obando took advantage of his reputation to declare a war against the conservative regime that governed Colombia in the 1830s and 1840s. His main ambition was obvious; he wanted to rule the country and impose a liberal regime. Obando knew that without Afro-descendant soldiers it would be impossible to do so. Therefore he offered immediate freedom to those slaves who would fight with him. Many Afro-Colombian slaves, across the country, trusted Obando and joined his forces. In 1841, President Pedro Alcántara Herrán realized that Obando could overthrow the regime with his growing 'Afro-descendant' army and ordered Obando to be killed and his slaves to be captured and re-enslaved (Reales 2001).

Afro-Colombian fugitive slaves fought the conservative regime for almost three years. Obando's personal war ended in 1843, when the Congress approved and made effective the Law of 22 June, which was written by president Herrán himself. This Law stated: "Any slave who denounces and proves that three or more slaves are planning to escape and fight the system will gain freedom, after the national authorities economically compensate his owner for losing labor force."¹⁵ President Herrán, who was a slaveholder himself, then defeated Obando's armies in a few months. The Law of 22 June proved to be extremely effective. Most slaves wanted freedom and did not give much importance to the consequences of the strategy utilized to accomplish that purpose. This is why many of them took advantage of the 'benefits' of that Law (Reales 2001). The Law of 22 June also indicates the central characteristic of abolitionism in Colombia (and the other Bolivarian countries), that is, the economic reparations for slave owners when the institution of slavery officially ended.

In the 1840s, a few years before the abolition of legal slavery¹⁶ in South America, some Bolivarian nations experienced a massive slave trade, even though such trading was prohibited by the manumission laws. Nonetheless, Colombian, Peruvian and Ecuadorian politicians (most of whom were slave owners) approved decrees to reestablish that trade. Entire Afro-Colombian families were sold to slaveholders in Ecuador and Peru (Reales 2001). British pressure¹⁷ to eliminate the slave trade and slavery, and other concerns, made the regimes in the region end

¹⁵ Ley de 22 de junio de 1843. Gaceta de la Nueva Granada, Bogotá, 22 de junio de 1843, S.P. In Reales (2001). Note: The translation is mine.

¹⁶ Colombia was affected by the problem of illegal slavery, before and after the official abolition of the institution in 1851 (Reales 2001).

¹⁷ Blackburn (1988) describes how substantive were the triumphs of British abolitionism and anti-slavery policies in general at both national and international levels. Note: It is important to recall that the British Empire was the most important commercial partner of most Bolivarian nations in the nineteenth century.

that institution without affecting the socio-economic and political interests of the elites. The governments approved significant economic reparations for slave owners, they allowed former slave owners to offer the same non-qualified 'jobs' to former slaves, and they supported the elites perpetuating the socio-racial structure and racist practices against Afro-descendants that had existed before the independence wars (Reales 2001). In the midst of the abolition process, the most prestigious Colombian newspaper, *El Neogranadino*, summarized the last provision as follows: "The African race is destroying the civilized races in the Americas. As Spanish Americans, we need to encourage the immigration of white Europeans to improve our blood and behavior. We need to make effective this immigration before liberating the Negroes."¹⁸ In the 1850s, more than three decades after the Bolivarian promise of ending slavery in the freed countries, the abolition process came to an end. Despite the decisive contribution of thousands of soldiers and women of African descent to the independence of 'their' nations, the manumission processes, and the abolition of slavery, most Afro-descendants neither were included in society as equal citizens, nor were they given real opportunities to enjoy their rights. As Sharp (1968) would say, all people of African descent had become free before the law, but their skin color continued to be the central sign of their inferior socio-racial status. None of the five Bolivarian nations had enough political will to incorporate Afro-descendants into their key decision-making spaces (Hebe 1974). In summary, most former soldiers and women of African descent who survived the war for independence and civil wars that followed did not substantially improve their living conditions, not even when legal freedom was constitutionally granted. Almost two centuries later, Afro-descendants continue to be the poorest people in the region (Reales 2005), and there is still much to be done to overcome their complex socio-economic and political problems.

CONCLUSION

In the 1810s, controversies between Creole elites and Spaniards became the main cause of the independence movement in the Bolivarian region of South America. The Spanish Crown took advantage of the slaves' situation to incorporate them into their military forces in return for freedom. The royalists also gave high military ranks to free people of African descent who fought the republican armies. The excellent fighting qualities of Afro-descendants made the most important Creole leaders realize that the independence war would never be won without support of people of African descent. That is why freedom to slaves who joined the patriots, as well as military ranks to some Afro-descendants, was also offered by Creoles.

¹⁸ Artículo "Raza Hispano-Americana". *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 30 de agosto de 1850, S.P. In Reales (2001). Note: The translation is mine.

Despite socio-racial divisions and the slaves' limited options to succeed, many of them fought for the patriot armies and won their freedom. In pursuing that dream, thousands of them died on the battlefields, but their contribution guaranteed the triumph of the patriots, who in the end maintained slavery, in spite of the Bolivarian promise of ending that institution once the war was won. Perhaps the bravest Afro-descendant soldiers of that time were the "*llaneros*." They not only played a key role in liberating several countries but also took General José Páez to power in Venezuela. Women of African descent also played a crucial role in the war. Most Afro-descendant women gained their freedom in return for serving in republican hospitals or denouncing Spaniards.

The Afro-descendants' actions, however, were never sufficient to overcome the socio-racial system that characterized the Bolivarian world. As argued above, Creole elites continued to exert inexorable control over slavery after the independence process. This control was also related to the fear of having '*pardocracias*' in the region. The executions of General Piar and Admiral Padilla, who were Afro-mestizos, indicate that the Creole elites definitely did not want to end the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times. The elites' behavior made many slave soldiers of African descent escape to live as '*cimarrones*' in '*palenques*' (maroons' small towns). Other soldiers either continued serving their nations for years or were re-enslaved by their former republican owners.

In the 1850s, some 30 years after winning the independence war, slavery was abolished in the five Bolivarian countries. Four reasons made the abolition of slavery possible: British pressure to end the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself, the approval of significant economic reparations for the slaveholders, the benefits (for these slave owners) of offering the same non-qualified 'jobs' to former slaves, and the advantages (for the elites) of perpetuating socio-racial divisions and racist practices against Afro-descendants under a legal frame.

Although the abolition of slavery gave freedom to people of African descent and made them equal before the law, their skin color continued to be the central sign of their (inferior) socio-racial status in the Bolivarian countries. None of the five Bolivarian nations had enough political will to incorporate Afro-descendants into their important socio-political and economic decision-making spaces and posts.

In summary, most former soldiers and women of African descent who survived to the war for independence and civil wars that followed did not significantly improve their situation, not even when legal freedom and equality to all citizens were constitutionally granted. Finally, it should be underscored that almost two centuries later, Afro-descendants continue to be the poorest people in the region, and there is much to be done in order to overcome the racism and racial discrimination practices that still affect them.

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Note:

This paper presents several footnotes in which some primary sources are used. These sources include national archives' texts and newspapers, traveler's chronicles and other contemporary works. They can be consulted in Blanchard (2002), Lynch (2006), and Reales (2001).