

A HISTORICAL TRADITION



WARFARE HAD BEEN RAGING throughout much of Spanish South America for three years when a slave by the name of Francisco Estrada appeared before a Buenos Aires court in 1813 to ask for his freedom. He based his claim on an offer made two years earlier by the commander of an army from revolutionary Buenos Aires that had invaded the neighboring Banda Oriental (modern Uruguay). The commander had declared that any slave belonging to a Spaniard and living in Montevideo (still held by royalist forces) would be freed upon joining his forces. At the time of the invasion, Francisco's owner had instructed him to leave his hometown of San José and head to Montevideo. Instead, Francisco, together with his wife and child, sought to join the invaders. He eloquently recalled, "We sought the opportune moment to place ourselves under the flags of freedom. . . . We chose the generous system of the *Patria* [homeland], we sang the hymns of freedom, and we linked our desires, our hearts, to the holy principles of the just system of Freedom. Together we renounced forever and with indignation that cruel, unhappy, and disorganized government that degrades men and refuses to permit those who are called slaves to reclaim, if they so wish, the rights of humanity."¹

What Francisco meant by "flags" is not entirely clear. Was he referring to the colors of battalions and regiments that at that time played a central role in maneuvering troops in battle? Was he referring specifically to the flag of the Buenos Aires revolutionaries that

prominently displayed a red Phrygian cap connoting liberty? Or was he making a more metaphorical allusion, with the flags representing both the cause of political freedom and the promise of personal emancipation, which by 1813 had become closely intertwined in the wake of the spreading insurrection? His meaning remains something of a mystery and, unfortunately for Francisco, his appeal for freedom remained in doubt, as his owner challenged the request and demanded his return. Nevertheless, his words expressed a common feeling among the Spanish American slave population at this time: they wanted to be free, and the wars had created unforeseen opportunities to achieve that goal.

Thousands of slaves, like Francisco, found themselves fighting in what was the most extensive mobilization of black slaves for military purposes during the colonial period. They took part in the independence struggles that chronologically spanned the years from 1808 to 1826 and, in the case of Spanish South America, stretched geographically the entire length of the continent from north to south, through the viceroyalties of New Granada, Peru, and Río de la Plata. In many areas the slaves' contributions proved vital to those struggles, yet they have attracted only limited attention from historians of the events. Reid Andrews, Núria Sales de Bohigas, and Peter Voelz are among the few who have placed these soldiers at the center of their works.² The neglect is surprising, since references to slave involvement appear in memoirs of the wars, and their involvement attracted both literary and artistic attention in the decades after independence was won. One of the best known is the story of "el negro Falucho," made famous by the Argentine president, soldier, and writer Bartolomé Mitre. It tells the tale of a heroic black soldier from Buenos Aires who, in 1824, while serving the patriot forces in the Peruvian port of Callao, refused first to join a military mutiny and then to honor the royalist flag that was being raised over the city's fortress. His resistance led to his execution, but as the muskets fired, he proclaimed with his last breath, "Viva Buenos Aires!" Today, the general view is that while a black soldier may have participated in resisting the mutiny, the noble death was a creation of Mitre's imagination.³ Nevertheless, his choice of hero to represent the emerging Argentine nationalism is an interesting one.

An artistic rendering of a similar theme can be seen in the Museo Histórico Nacional in Santiago, where among the many exhibits illustrating Chile's colorful history is a rather striking painting entitled "Battle of Chacabuco," by José Tomás Vandorse. Completed in 1863, it presents a snapshot

of the battle fought outside Santiago on February 12, 1817, which ended with victory for the invading patriot forces under the command of General José de San Martín. The blue and white flags flying above the columns of troops advancing from the left clearly indicate their Argentine origin. But what is most interesting about the picture is the race of the soldiers. While the mounted officers are white, virtually all the rank and file are black. It shows that forty-six years after the event, in one person's mind at least, patriot success had rested on the shoulders and the skills of black soldiers.

Black soldiers were not something new to Spanish America. They had been part of the military history of the region since the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century. But the scale of slave military service during the independence period was unprecedented. Previously, their participation in the colonies' military forces had been tightly circumscribed, largely because of concerns about arming enslaved men. However, as warfare spread and the need for soldiers grew, those concerns were conveniently ignored or minimized, and thousands of slaves in the three viceroyalties soon found themselves in the armed forces, fighting for both royalists and patriots. This is not to say that they were preferred over any other group; indeed, opposition to recruiting slaves was voiced almost everywhere. Nevertheless, slaves came to serve, and in numbers that far exceeded their percentage of the general population. For example, of the soldiers recruited in Ecuador, according to Sales de Bohigas, 30 percent were slaves.⁴ They also joined armies that were relatively small by European standards. Whereas over a quarter million soldiers fought at the battle of Waterloo in 1815, at the 1819 Battle of Boyacá, which determined the fate of Colombia, the royalists fielded an army of 2,700 men against the patriots' 2,800; at Ayacucho, the concluding battle of the wars of independence, 6,000 men on the patriot side confronted 9,300 royalist soldiers.⁵ As a result, in many instances slave recruits determined the difference between military success and failure. Without their involvement, the patriot cause in particular would have been greatly weakened, and the fight for independence would have taken even longer than it did, probably with a different trajectory, and consequently with different results.

The insatiable need for soldiers during the extended conflict was the obvious reason for slave recruitment, but other factors also came into play. At first glance, slaves seem to be far from the ideal soldiers. Commanders desired disciplined veteran troops who were accustomed to the rigors and demands of army life and required little training. The Liberator, Simón Bolívar,

wistfully wrote of the Spanish enemy, "The worst is that all are divinely disciplined."⁶ One of his solutions was to hire foreign mercenaries, veterans of the Napoleonic wars. However, European veterans were not available in adequate numbers, and those who came often lacked the desired experience and proved more trouble than they were worth. Even the Spanish crown was unable to provide sufficient Spanish veterans to meet its military needs in the colonies, in part because of the situation at home, and in part because of the logistics of moving large numbers of troops across the Atlantic. In eight years it sent only forty-one thousand soldiers to deal with the insurrections throughout all of Spanish America. As a result, it was forced to rely on locals.⁷ Newly recruited slaves may have lacked the military skills of these veterans, but unlike other sectors of the population, they at least were accustomed to discipline. And they had other attractions: they were available, they were of the right age, and African-born slaves furthermore had a reputation for military experience gained in their homeland.⁸ Moreover, slaves (again, unlike any other sector of the population) were considered property and could thus be purchased and compelled to serve for a certain length of time. Of equal importance was the fact that they could be sent to fight far from their home regions, a situation other sectors of the population frequently resisted.⁹ In return, they received their personal freedom. The authorities hoped that this would not only secure the necessary recruits but also create feelings of loyalty toward their emancipators that would compel them to complete their assigned period of service and in the process develop the skills of the veteran soldier. They might even be convinced to reenlist. On the other hand, slaves' status as property created certain problems, since both the crown and the new creole, or American-born white rulers remained committed to protecting property rights. They frequently resorted to drafting slaves, but they still felt an obligation to compensate owners, and money was often in short supply. Fortunately for recruiters, many owners were prepared to sell for less than the slave's true value or with the promise of future compensation. Sometimes this was out of sense of loyalty, but it was also because in many parts of Spanish America slaves were not absolutely essential to local economic activities and, consequently, were available. In other instances, the interests of owners could be ignored, most notably if they supported the enemy side. Their property was considered forfeit, and their slaves could be expropriated and assigned to whatever task their new owners chose, including military service.

Also playing a role in the recruitment of slaves were the intellectual pressures of the time. Recruiting and freeing slaves satisfied the enlightened beliefs of some of the independence leaders. Their primary goal was political freedom, but a few came to the realization that true freedom could not be achieved as long as any sector of society remained in bondage. Freedom in return for military service thus satisfied various interests, and attacks upon the institution of slavery became a part of the independence struggles.

Indeed, the widespread participation of slaves unleashed an unanticipated and unwanted social movement in the midst of the political struggle.¹⁰ While the majority of the slaves who served were drafted or donated by their owners, large numbers took advantage of the situation to act on their own: running away, claiming to be free, joining one of the armies, and even rebelling. Some may have been responding to feelings of loyalty to one side or another, but most were attracted by the offer of securing what until then had seemed an unattainable goal: personal freedom. Recruiters whetted their hopes with this offer, and news that runaways who signed up were being granted their freedom provided a further stimulus to follow suit. Slaves, to use Carlos Aguirre's phrase, became "agents of their own freedom."¹¹ In freeing thousands of slaves, recruiting slaves during the wars of independence had additional social repercussions. It reduced the numbers left in bondage and thereby helped to weaken a pillar of the system. At the same time, a flurry of antislavery legislation that was designed to win slave support for the cause further undermined the institution. The legislative attack, together with recruiting efforts and the growing commitment to the concept of freedom, aroused large sections of the slave population. In the words of John Lombardi, slaves "discovered a sense of power during these years as the contending armies wooed their support."¹² Recruits used their association with the increasingly influential military to try to achieve improvements for family members still in bondage, while those not in service, both men and women, used the changing circumstances to try to better their own lot. As the wars continued, slaves became increasingly aggressive and demanding, raising further questions about slavery's future. In one of the ironies of Latin American history, the evil of warfare helped undermine the evil of slavery.

Nevertheless, the institution survived. Except in the case of Chile, where abolition occurred in 1823, slavery remained too important and the slaveholders too powerful for the system to disappear at this time. Fearful of social unrest and racial warfare, the elites acted to ensure that their interests were

protected. As John Lynch has written, "During the wars of independence popular revolt, while not successful, was menacing enough to compel the creoles to tighten their grip on the revolution."¹³ Where slaves were concerned, recruiters had to figure out how to mobilize slaves without unleashing racial unrest and an abolitionist struggle that could lose slaveholder support. Their solution, in general, was to pursue a policy of gradualism, using legislation to wear away at slavery without destroying it. They were largely successful. In this they were assisted by the slaves themselves, who were prepared to risk their lives to secure their personal freedom but not to attack slavery as an institution. In large part this was because they, like other sectors of society, were found on both sides of the struggle. Many remained staunchly loyal to the crown, considering it more capable of defending their interests. Slaves, consequently, were making choices as the wars unfolded, but rather than being united by the common cause of the struggle against slavery, they confronted one another in the opposing armies. They fought one another, and they killed one another. Thus, while the actions of the slaves during the wars undoubtedly weakened slavery, another generation would pass before the institution was finally abolished in all of Spain's former mainland colonies.

The slaves who fought were descendants of the estimated one million who had been brought from Africa to Spanish America since the beginning of Spanish rule.¹⁴ Imported largely as a replacement labor force for the declining Indian population, they may not have come to occupy the central economic role that they did in Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and the southern United States, yet they were of undoubted importance to Spanish America's economy, and vital in some areas. In common with the pattern of chattel slavery elsewhere in the Americas, tens of thousands of them were assigned to rural work on Peruvian sugar plantations and vineyards, Venezuelan cacao and sugar estates, Ecuadorian tobacco and cacao farms, livestock ranches in Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and Colombian gold mines. They were also prominent in the urban sector. As Frederick Bowser writes, in early colonial Peru "blacks were perhaps most conspicuous as retainers and household servants in the urban areas along the coast and in many parts of the highlands." In Argentina, according to Tulio Halperín-Donghi, they were a "predominantly urban group," while in Venezuela the largest concentration of slaves was located in and about Caracas.¹⁵ In the urban centers they occupied a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs, in addition to domestic service. In Buenos Aires, for example, they worked in artisan shops as shoemakers,

hatmakers, jewelers, bakers, barbers, and tailors. They were employed in tile factories, they worked as dentists, they cared for animals, and they were involved in all aspects of transport.¹⁶

In this vast and varied continent, the respective slavery systems differed according to region and economic activity, but, as in all American slaveholding societies, there were common features. Most notably, slaves had to cope with an institution that was inherently brutal and dehumanizing. Everywhere they were considered property and treated as such, so that whatever stability they may have established in their lives could easily be disrupted by sale or assignment elsewhere. Everywhere they were subject to harsh treatment and punishments. Rural slaves in late colonial Peru were reported to have particularly suffered, as owners sought to recoup their investment as quickly as possible.¹⁷ In Quito the whipping, starving, and other mistreatment of young slaves prompted the comment in 1811 that in spite of the efforts of the crown to ease their servitude quietly, there were “still men who in an insult to religion and to humanity itself” treated the slaves “with all the rigor and cruelty of the ancient Romans. Considering them beasts or individuals of another species,” such owners sacrificed their slaves “to the barbarous pleasure of seeing them die, devoured by the fiestas in the Circuses and Amphitheaters.”¹⁸ Even in Buenos Aires, where slavery in the late colonial period was described as “mild,” slaves were assigned to “the least desirable, most degrading, unhealthiest, and worst-paying jobs,” with little chance of improving themselves.¹⁹ Not only that, but the conditions of slaves in some areas were actually deteriorating in the early nineteenth century as a result of local economic problems, higher slave prices, and other developments, including a sharp rise in the size of the slave population.

Changing slave demographics were a product of the expansion of the slave trade in the late colonial period, one aspect of a wide spectrum of administrative and economic reforms introduced by the crown beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century to attempt to reassert its control over its colonies and increase its financial returns. To meet the labor needs for the anticipated economic expansion, the slave trade was opened to all nations in 1789, which resulted in an influx of African slaves. Perhaps one-fifth of all colonial slave imports occurred after that year. In the south, an estimated 45,000 slaves were imported through Buenos Aires between 1750 and 1810 for sale both in the city and the interior.²⁰ Another 15,000 passed through Montevideo after 1770.²¹ On the other side of the continent, 1,500 Africans

were introduced into Peru annually between 1799 and 1810 from Buenos Aires and Chile.²² In the north, in Venezuela over 26,000 slaves were imported legally and illegally after 1770.²³ Consequently, on the eve of the independence struggles, slaves numbered around 30,000 in the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, 78,000 in New Granada (modern Colombia), 87,800 in Venezuela, 5,000 in Quito (modern Ecuador), over 40,000 in Peru, and another 6,000 in Chile.²⁴ And while their percentage of the total colonial population remained small—nowhere in Spanish South America did they exceed more than 10 percent—their continuing concentration in certain regions and in urban centers added weight to their numbers. Thus, although the slave trade was halted early in the nineteenth century in response to crown directives and the disruptions of the Napoleonic wars, tens of thousands had recently arrived, and many of these remembered what it was like to be free.

Freedom, however, both for these new arrivals and for American-born slaves, was a scarce commodity. The opportunities were uncertain and in many areas virtually impossible to realize, even though no absolute barrier prevented slaves from securing their freedom, as the sizeable population of free blacks and free mulattoes—or *pardos*, as the latter were called in some regions—attested. In parts of Venezuela, opportunities for manumission actually grew in the late colonial period, as slaves who served as foremen on the expanding cacao estates were rewarded for several years of service with freedom, and many slaveholders freed slaves in their wills. But this seems to have been the exception. In Buenos Aires, with its “mild” system, for example, manumission was tolerated but not encouraged by either church or state. When it occurred, both here and elsewhere, more females than males benefited, and it more often involved slaves who bought or were granted conditional freedom in return for additional years of service than it did slaves who received their freedom outright.²⁵ Everywhere slaves had the legal right to self-purchase, but there were difficulties in accumulating the necessary funds. In Buenos Aires, women had greater access to cash than did men, but saving the sum of even 100 pesos was described as “an insurmountable obstacle,” while the value of prime female slaves was several times this amount. The price of male slaves was similarly high: the average price for a young male in early nineteenth-century Buenos Aires and Lima was 300 pesos, and many sold for much more. Those prices rose even higher following disruptions to the slave trade in the final years of the colonial period, reaching as much as 650 pesos in some areas. Thus, even though new ways for buying one’s free-

dom, such as gradual self-purchase over time, were introduced, and the earning capacity of slaves seems to have been growing in the declining years of colonial rule, the doors to freedom remained firmly closed to most. In Buenos Aires manumissions may have increased in the late colonial period, but by 1810 those freed still constituted only 1.3 percent of the population. In the province of Caracas the figure was higher but still less than 5 percent.²⁶

With exploitation a fact of life and manumission rare, Spanish American slaves responded, as they did everywhere, by engaging in various forms of passive and active resistance.²⁷ In doing so they demonstrated an ability to overcome the numerous factors that divided them, such as place of birth, ethnic identity, work location, and occupation, as well as the actions of owners and local officials. Two things that united them were their unique legal status and their racial identity. So, too, did their wish to establish biological ties and families that linked the black and mulatto communities. Their place of work could foster ties as well, especially the “gang” nature of work on plantations and in mines. Such workplace ties of solidarity may have been less common in urban centers, but contacts could be made in streets, plazas, and marketplaces.²⁸ Equally important were the organizations and associations, some with African roots, that came to incorporate many members of the black community, both slave and free. Especially notable were the religious brotherhoods or *cofradías* that had appeared early in the colonial period under the auspices of the church for the purpose of caring for a particular church or religious image. These were originally established along African ethnic or racial lines but gradually broadened their membership to include slave and free, black and mulatto, African and American-born. They collected money that paid for members’ funerals and in some cases to purchase the freedom of a member, although the beneficiaries were few in number.²⁹ In other words, slaves were not isolated from the rest of the community. They managed to meet, socialize, and exchange news, information, and rumors. They used the opportunity to establish their identity and to protect their interests, and these same activities created a milieu where they could consider and plan more active forms of resistance.

Slave agitation had been a part of colonial life from the time of the first arrivals and seemed to intensify in the waning years of the empire as a result of the disruptions of the era. The economic and administrative reforms that antagonized various sectors of the colonial population, the 1767 expulsion of the Jesuits (who were one of the major slaveholders in the region), and the

influx of new slaves all served to provoke a response. Buenos Aires may have been spared serious slave unrest, but this was not the case elsewhere.³⁰ For example, slaves were drawn to the major rebellions that flared in the Andean region in the early 1780s. The number who actually participated in the Túpac Amaru and Túpac Katari rebellions in Peru and Upper Peru (modern Bolivia) was small, but the rebels' offer to free any who joined their cause and their issuance of abolition decrees did not go unnoticed.³¹ The Comunero rebels in New Granada freed a small number of slaves and attracted many others. In both areas the rebellions failed, but in their aftermath slave unrest seemed to spread, with large numbers in New Granada reportedly fleeing their owners, establishing runaway communities (*palenques*), and engaging in conspiracies.³² The crown recognized and attempted to address the source of the dissatisfaction, but its efforts may have only exacerbated the problem. In 1784 it approved but never promulgated a new slave code that offered some protections for the slave population. Five years later, when it finally issued a document that incorporated many of these reforms, opposition by colonial officials and slave owners prevented its implementation and led to its rapid withdrawal. This triggered a new round of protests and violence, as slaves believed that they had been denied an opportunity to improve their situation.³³

Fear of slaves and slave agitation had always existed in the colonies and was a factor in limiting the number of imports over the years. Those fears intensified with the late colonial unrest, and then reached an entirely new plane with the outbreak of the slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint Domingue in 1791. Leading eventually to the destruction of both slavery and French rule on the Caribbean island and the establishment of the black republic of Haiti, the bloody events of the Haitian Revolution clearly indicated that slaves could be a revolutionary force—a terrifying thought for proponents of slave regimes throughout the Americas.³⁴ Although modern historians disagree over the impact of the Haitian example and its American and French revolutionary antecedents among slaves in Spanish America, local elites at the time seemed convinced that radical ideas were circulating and that slaves were responding to them. They almost invariably blamed the Haitian events for the subsequent slave uprisings and conspiracies.³⁵ Most threatening was the Chirino uprising of 1795 in Coro, Venezuela, which involved slaves and free blacks who cited the events in France and Saint Domingue in calling for emancipation. Two years later the northern coast of Venezuela was again the scene of agitation as the result of the

conspiracy of Manuel Gual and José María España against Spanish rule. This movement, too, made reference to the rights of man and called for the abolition of slavery, attracting slaves and black militiamen whom the conspirators planned to arm and transform into a revolutionary militia. Further slave agitation occurred in parts of New Granada, as well as in Peru, where coastal estates were particularly affected.³⁶ Adding to the turmoil and providing a further indication of slave dissatisfaction was an explosion in the number of runaways, a product perhaps of the recent importation of large numbers of recently enslaved young African males. In Venezuela at the end of the colonial era, an astonishing thirty to forty thousand slaves were reported to have run away. Although the figure is probably exaggerated, it indicates a lack of control over the local slaves, as well as their desire to be free.³⁷ In the Banda Oriental, slaves were also running away and forming bands, and local officials accused black crewmen from French ships of spreading French revolutionary ideas.³⁸

None of these developments equaled the magnitude of the Saint Domingue insurrection, but they did give further warning of the racial powder keg on which the Spanish colonies rested and ensured continuing attention to the slave population. They reinforced creole loyalty to the crown, in the belief that Spanish soldiers were the only protection against possible racial unrest. And they strengthened the conviction that the slave population had to be controlled. At different times throughout the colonial period, restrictive legislation had been introduced to achieve that end. Prominent among these laws were prohibitions on slaves carrying weapons or even tools, in the belief that these might be used to attack owners. The frequent reissuing of these laws indicates that they had little effect, but their reappearance is also a measure of the continuing fear—a barometer of racial apprehension.³⁹ In the aftermath of the Saint Domingue rebellion and various local uprisings, the authorities responded once again. In March 1803, free blacks and slaves in the Banda Oriental were prohibited from using all types of arms. In Venezuela, where in recent years creole owners had strongly opposed any concessions to the black and especially to the extensive free *pardo* population, slave imports from Africa were curtailed, and—in an attempt to isolate blacks from any sort of weaponry—creoles asked that *pardos* not be accepted into the local militia units.⁴⁰

In the light of these fears and developments, one might be surprised by the fact that some colonial officials considered accepting slaves into the mili-

tary. Peter Voelz's explanation for the change of attitude is that during the wars of independence the situation became "desperate."⁴¹ This was certainly true, but it constitutes only part of the story. Paving the way for that desperate gamble was a history of ties between the black population and the military that can be traced back to the conquest. In the early sixteenth century, much of the region's defense had been provided by the conquistadors and their retainers, in a semifederal pattern. As Spanish rule solidified, these forces were supplemented by a small number of Spanish regular soldiers stationed in a few vital locations, and by militia units drawn from various sectors of the growing local population. With the introduction of the militias, military training became part of the routine of colonial life, often occurring on Sundays in the central squares of the prominent towns. In keeping with a rather idealistic view of warfare, as well as the hierarchical and racist framework of the colony, the preference was to draw soldiers from those who were considered loyal and respectable. This restriction seemed to limit military service to men of European descent, and regulations were issued to try to maintain that selectivity.⁴² However, the growing needs and the demographic realities of the colonies soon produced militia units that included increasing numbers of nonwhites. Prominent among them were units of free blacks and mulattoes. In Peru they operated throughout the colonial period, with free blacks actually dominating the coastal militias. Their slave roots led to questions about their loyalty in some areas, and in Venezuela the growing dislike and fear of *pardos* meant many opposed their recruitment. Nevertheless, a pattern was established, and their numbers expanded in the late colonial period, largely in response to Spain's military setbacks during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and, in particular, the loss of Havana to British forces in 1762. A flurry of military reforms was introduced that were designed to prevent future embarrassments. Fortifications were built and strengthened, the stationing of Spanish regular troops was formalized, military training was intensified, and new militia units that often incorporated free blacks and mulattoes were established to supplement the regulars.⁴³ In the viceroyalty of New Granada, for example, *pardos* came to be the preferred militiamen, with battalions formed in Cartagena, Panama, and elsewhere. In Venezuela, despite continuing reservations, the new militia groups included regiments of free blacks and mulattoes. In Peru, mulatto militia units from Lima played a role in crushing the Túpac Amaru rebellion. In Buenos Aires, free blacks comprised 10 percent of the city's 1,600 militiamen by 1801, serving in a

battalion of *castas* (nonwhites) that included corps of Indians, *pardos*, and blacks. Elsewhere in the southern viceroyalty, Montevideo had companies of free *pardos* and free blacks in the artillery and the grenadiers, and Córdoba had two companies of *pardos*. To address the reiterated concerns about enlisting blacks, especially those questions about their loyalty that were raised frequently after the Haitian Revolution, controls were put in place. For example, commanders of the black regiments had to be white, a restriction in Venezuela that was extended to all ranks above captain. Nevertheless, free blacks and mulattoes volunteered, and they volunteered in greater numbers than whites, in part because other “respectable” professions were closed to them. They were also attracted by the privileges that came with military service, such as the military *fuero* that granted them their own courts, access to pensions, and other perquisites, as well as exemption from certain taxes, labor levies, and tribute payments. A further attraction was the possibility of social mobility that came with promotion through the ranks. Many blacks became noncommissioned officers, while some even reached officer rank. Indeed, there seemed to be no limitation on how high they could rise, except in Venezuela.⁴⁴ As a result, the military became a profession with a definite black link, so that in most parts of the colonies the sight of blacks in uniform, carrying arms, and even commanding units was not uncommon.

This recruitment of free blacks and *pardos* helped prepare the ground for the eventual consideration of slaves as soldiers. As Matt Childs has written, recruiting blacks and *pardos* into the militia “militated against the racial subordination a slave society demanded.”⁴⁵ Other factors also made this possible, for despite the long-standing fears and prohibitions, slaves had not been completely cut off from the colonies’ military history. In fact, they had been involved since the beginning of Spanish rule. During the conquest period they had been part of the conquistadors’ armies and fought alongside them to establish Spanish rule.⁴⁶ They had then participated in securing Spanish dominion over the region and subsequently helped defend it against foreign incursions. They had also filled a number of quasi-military roles, such as serving on royal ships and as slave catchers.⁴⁷ In the eighteenth century they appear in the military records of different areas, although whether they performed a combat role is unclear. In the 1760s they were used as auxiliary support battalions for the Cuban forces, as well as in the ammunition and storage sections of the artillery. In late eighteenth-century Florida they served with the artillery, as well as in the navy as sailors and rowers transporting

supplies. At the same time, Spaniards in Cuba “employed free and enslaved Africans in local self-defense, as plantation and town militias, as coastal sentinels, and even as sailors on locally organized patrol boats.” This may, on occasion, have involved bearing arms.⁴⁸ The creation of black militia units also created opportunities for slaves. Some who served in these militias were slaves who were performing military service in place of their owners, others were runaways claiming to be free, and still others were slaves who had been donated to the crown. In Bogotá in 1805, Doña Petronila Cuenca asked for the return of her slave, Isidro, whom she had donated to a militia battalion.⁴⁹ Whether he was a soldier or a laborer is not stated.

Thus, despite the fears and the restrictions, slaves provided military service during the colonial era. And while the prohibition on slaves carrying weapons may have been raised once again following the events in Haiti, this proved to be anything but rigid. Events showed that exceptional circumstances could weaken even the most strongly held attitudes. Pragmatic realities could force officials and elites to make what were radical and—to many—unpopular decisions. Prominent among these were military threats, which on occasion led to the mobilization of virtually the entire local population, including slaves. For example, they were called upon to serve in the unsuccessful defense of Havana in 1762.⁵⁰ A more striking case occurred in 1806 and 1807, just before the outbreak of the independence struggles, when English forces invaded the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata. A footnote to the Napoleonic wars, these invasions involved the landing of several thousand English troops in the viceroyalty. In the face of the crisis, the authorities in Buenos Aires and Montevideo decided to arm slaves and accept them into the military, despite misgivings that they might join the enemy. In Buenos Aires, 688 volunteered to fight. They served alongside free blacks and *pardos* and played an important role in defeating the invaders. Carrying knives and lances, they displayed a “loyalty and courage which surprised those who had hesitated about arming them.”⁵¹ In accordance with accepted practices, all who distinguished themselves in the fighting were promised their freedom. However, following the victory two lotteries were held, and only seventy were granted the promised reward, with their owners receiving compensation. No one seems to have challenged the broken promise; some of the slaves who fought remained in the armed forces, perhaps in anticipation of future emancipation, and a number of those who had been freed also decided to continue their service.⁵²

Yet, despite this precedent and firm evidence that slave recruiting would not lead to a Haitian-style bloodbath, there was no dramatic shift in attitude regarding the arming of slaves. Their use as soldiers in Río de la Plata did not alter fundamental realities. The failure to honor the promise to free the combatants certainly demonstrated that the views of slaves had not changed: they continued to be property, not citizens. They could be called on if needed and then returned to slavery. The desire not to alienate the slaveholders and thus undermine the slavery system remained constant, especially with the virtual termination of slave imports and accompanying rise in slave prices. Perhaps the only important lesson from the English invasions was that defense of the state was no longer perceived to be a “privilege and honor exclusive to the free man.”⁵³ But at the same time, authorities and slave owners may have been right in wondering about the slaves’ loyalties. Their defense of Río de la Plata had indicated some sense of patriotism, but was it loyalty to Spain, the king, or the local leaders? What could serve to arouse and mobilize them? Marixa Lasso posits that the Haitian example may have prompted Spanish American blacks to support the republican side during the wars of independence, in the hope of achieving similar changes.⁵⁴ This could be true, but it fails to account for the slaves’ differing responses once the independence struggles began. At first glance, they seemed to have little reason to support the crown that had been behind their enslavement. But at the same time, they had little love for the creoles who were usually their masters. There was some appreciation of, and perhaps even commitment to, the *patria*, but probably not among those who had recently arrived from Africa. The one thing that could arouse and win them over was the offer of personal freedom, as the Buenos Aires example indicated. Haiti, republicanism, democracy, even independence—all were of little importance to the vast majority of slaves. What they wanted was the opportunity to become free. Until 1810 that seemed a faint hope, but in that year the situation changed, and it changed dramatically. Warfare erupted, and suddenly the most valuable colonial commodity became its soldiery.

Slaves were recruited into the opposing armies in various ways and participated in a variety of activities once in the ranks. In the case of the northern viceroyalty of New Granada, the cause of the king initially proved more attractive, while the growing conflict also provided an opportunity for those in Venezuela to rise in an antipatriot rebellion that remained a backdrop to the early struggles. In contrast, in the southern viceroyalty of Río de la Plata,

the creole government in Buenos Aires was successful in drawing slaves into its military ranks through an effective recruiting program. The patriots' reliance on slaves was indicated by the prominent role of blacks in the army that José de San Martín began organizing in western Argentina, beginning in 1815, for the purpose of invading Chile. That same reliance also developed in Venezuela as the patriot cause under Simón Bolívar began to gain ground after 1816. His successes on the battlefield served to attract more and more slave volunteers, some who were former royalist soldiers, although far more continued to be secured through forced recruitment of one sort and another. Nevertheless, with their assistance Bolívar finally freed the northern region from Spanish rule. In like fashion, San Martín's largely black army defeated the royalist forces in Chile, but his efforts to recruit local slaves there for his pending invasion of Peru met with little success, as owners proved unwilling to accede to the Argentine general's requests. That same reticence was also evident once he arrived in Peru in 1820.

Nevertheless, as elsewhere, recruiting programs were introduced and slaves secured, ensuring that they continued to play a role as the independence wars came to a close. Thousands of slaves had been recruited, and their efforts to enlist were a sign of how strongly slaves sought the personal freedom that was being offered through military service. But the ex-slaves also wanted to enjoy that freedom, and many sought to limit their service once they discovered the hardships that military life involved. This response is an indicator of the slaves' aroused sensibilities and the ways in which the wars of independence had weakened slavery's traditional means of control. An increase in activism was evident among the female slave population as well. Their ties to black soldiers provided ways to improve their situation and further challenge the slavery system. But while the disruptions of the wars and the activities of the slaves did much to weaken slavery and initiate the processes leading to abolition, the postindependence period found the ex-slave soldiers unable to achieve that loftier goal. They were too divided, their owners too powerful, and slavery too important for it to disappear at this time. Slaves had helped to free their countries from Spanish rule, but they were not able to destroy the system that kept many of their families and friends in bondage.