

# INTRODUCTION

On 25 May 1810 the elites of Buenos Aires with the vociferous backing of the city's lower classes made the fateful decision to remove the Spanish viceroy and assume direction of the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata. The "May Revolution," as it came to be known, marked a crucial step in the move toward self-rule and independence for what is today Argentina and the other countries that comprised the viceroyalty. Outside Buenos Aires the response to the events was mixed, with governing groups in some cases choosing to follow the Buenos Aires example and even accept its leadership. Others decided to pursue their own path, which for some meant remaining loyal to the crown—at least for the time being. Fundamental to these decisions were the events in Spain that had left the country prostrate: the French invasion, the forced abdications in 1808 of the Spanish monarchs Carlos IV and Fernando VII, and their replacement on the throne by Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Joseph. The developments created a political vacuum that provided an opportunity for separatists and supporters of independence in the colonies to promote their agenda of self-rule. They initiated a process that would ultimately break the bonds of loyalty that had existed between Spain's king

and his American vassals since the time of the conquest some three hundred years before.

In this work I examine those bonds in the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata in the years between 1777 when the viceroyalty was created and the May Revolution of 1810, focusing on the elites of three of the viceroyalty's principal cities, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Córdoba. Urban centers throughout the colonial period were pivotal to Spanish rule in the Americas. They were the local administrative units that had jurisdiction over a wide swath of the surrounding countryside as well as being home to the bureaucrats, religious personnel, military men, merchants, artisans, workers, and members of other sectors of society who supported and participated in the various activities that constituted urban life and maintained Spanish rule. The cities were linked through ties to the king, religion, and the commercial activities that developed over the years.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the three cities under discussion, Buenos Aires was the largest, the viceregal capital with its expanding administrative and commercial sectors; Montevideo was the viceroyalty's principal port with its lucrative hinterland based on a trade in cattle hides; and Córdoba was an educational and strategic center with its university and college and its location on the royal road that linked the silver mines of the interior to the coast. The elites of the three cities played a vital role in the viceroyalty's affairs, getting involved in local decision-making to ensure that their interests and their goals were protected. Until 1810 most of these elites displayed a firm commitment to the Spanish king and to Spanish rule, a commitment that was reinvigorated over the years in response to the benefits dispensed by the crown as well as the arrival of Spanish-born immigrants or *peninsulares* who joined their cohort. But this commitment was also rooted in fear, fear that grew over time in response to a number of perceived threats to their position, wealth, and style of life. Those threats were a product of both internal and external sources—specifically, revolutionary ideas, black slaves, the Indigenous population, Portuguese encroachers, and British invaders. The presence of those threats reaffirmed and strengthened the elites' loyalty to a king who, they believed, would defend their interests. He may not have been physically present, but that very absence ensured loyalty across a wide spectrum of the population for it meant that he represented different—often competing—images to his subjects that ultimately served to unite them.<sup>2</sup> Their heartfelt cries of “¡Viva el rey! [Long live the king!]" following the successful reconquest and defense of Buenos Aires against the British in 1806 and 1807 revealed that their feelings remained firmly in place despite the numerous divisions, challenges, and uncertainties they had faced since the

creation of the viceroyalty. Indeed, as shown in the following pages, those divisions, challenges, and uncertainties were an important factor in explaining their continuing loyalty.

Detailing elite loyalty was not my original aim in delving into the history of the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata. Rather, my interest had been quite the reverse: to uncover the dissent and dissatisfaction that may have existed at the time in an attempt to clarify who were aggrieved and thus likely to join the dissidents calling for self-rule and independence in the early nineteenth century. The existence of such dissent had been evident in the colonies for some time. In the mid-eighteenth century the Spanish scientists Jorge Juan y Santacilia and Antonio de Ulloa noted the divisions that existed between Spaniards and American-born creoles in the parts of Spanish America they visited. The Prussian naturalist and traveler, Alexander von Humboldt, in his visit to the region between 1799 and 1804 found even deeper divides. He described the animosity that existed between Spaniards and creoles, with the latter increasingly calling themselves “Americans” as they objected to the denigration they faced at the hands of the Spaniards.<sup>3</sup> Historians following in Humboldt’s footsteps assigned the reason for the hostility and the sense of separate identity to the administrative, economic, religious, and military reforms introduced by Spain’s Bourbon monarchs in the second half of the eighteenth century. These reforms significantly altered the ways in which the colonies were being run and resulted in widespread criticism, resistance, and even rebellion. Prominent among these historians was my thesis supervisor, John Lynch, who coined the term “the second conquest” to describe the reforms and their negative impact on the colonies. It was the subject of the only public lecture I ever heard him deliver, marking his promotion to University Professor at University College London, and it lies at the heart of the first chapter of his much cited study of the independence period, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808–1826*. His argument, which was supported by other historians working on the late colonial period, was that discontent existed and was directed first at the local resident Spaniards and eventually at the government and nation that had introduced the reforms that discriminated against the creoles purely on the basis of something over which they had no control, their place of birth. However, other historians were not convinced, finding in places such as Chile and Colombia little evidence that the reforms had such a profound influence. An alternative view emerged, promoted by writers such as François-Xavier Guerra, Jaime E. Rodríguez O., and Roberto Breña, that it was not past decisions but the events from 1808, beginning with the abdications of the Spanish monarchs, that explained the creoles’

decision to follow their own path.<sup>4</sup> Others agreed, producing the view that now seems generally accepted—and one that even Lynch might have shared (to some extent at least) for he certainly recognized the importance of the 1808 events and devoted a separate section to them in his opening chapter.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the revisionist view, my thought was that there must have been something happening before 1808 that helped to explain the apparently rapid change of attitude throughout the colonies following the French invasion, that there was perhaps some inherent animosity just waiting for the opportunity to flare into open rebellion. Even Guerra hinted at earlier roots when he argued that from the time of the independence of the United States the governing Spanish elites considered Spanish American independence inevitable.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, crown officials came to believe that serious dissent existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, finding it in the conspiracies and intercepted letters of individuals calling for independence, notably the Venezuelan Francisco de Miranda but also others, such as the Mexican Francisco Javier Clavijero and the Peruvian Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán, two Jesuits who were known for their nationalistic writings.<sup>7</sup> Gabriel de Áviles, the viceroy of Río de la Plata between 1799 and 1801, saw among the *rioplatenses* what he called a “spirit of independence,” which he ascribed to their contact with foreigners.<sup>8</sup> His views suggested that there may have been an underlying lack of commitment to Spanish rule, with the disaffected finding justification in the enlightened ideas of the time as well as the American example.

However, my trolling through the archives uncovered very little in the way of overt or even covert opposition to the crown or to Spain among the elites, at least in the major urban centers of the viceroyalty of Río de la Plata. Opposition may well have existed among the lower orders of urban society as well as in the countryside but was not a visible sentiment among the urban elites. The number of individuals calling for independence was extremely small and had a negligible influence before 1808. Members of the so-called independence party, mentioned by the Argentine writer Carlos Roberts and others, may have been stimulated by the British occupation of Buenos Aires in 1806, but on regaining control of the city the authorities displayed little concern about the group.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, local residents showed minimal interest in Miranda’s efforts, perhaps recognizing that he was out of touch with what was occurring even in his own homeland and that he had little hope of success. He, too, seemed to realize this since he sought to secure his goals through European or American intervention rather than through the efforts of Venezuela’s creoles. In Río de la Plata one precursor of independence, ac-

According to the Argentine historian Ricardo Levene, was the writer and public prosecutor of the *audiencia* or high court of Charcas in Upper Peru (modern Bolivia), Victorián de Villava, whose publications described the errors of the regime, the corruption and incompetence of its officials, and the need to end the exploitation of the Indigenous workers in the mines. However, Villava was a reformer, not a revolutionary, and the one independence figure whom he is known to have influenced, Mariano Moreno, appears to have remained comfortable with Spanish rule until 1810. Moreno is also known to have read Viscardo y Guzmán's *Carta dirigida a los españoles americanos* with its call for creoles to rebel against the Spanish crown, but he did not do so until 1807.<sup>10</sup> Another apparent radical, the Córdoba cleric Gregorio Funes, described as "one of the most revolutionary American intellectuals," openly displayed his appreciation of enlightened ideas years before the May Revolution.<sup>11</sup> However, his reputation is primarily based on his justification for independence and explanation of the historical roots of the new state after 1810. In sum, rather than individuals calling for self-rule or separation, what I found in Río de la Plata were frequently stated expressions of loyalty to Spain and the crown. As in other parts of Spanish America there were annual acts of obedience along with occasional displays celebrating coronations, royal marriages and births, as well as the arrival of royal officials that demonstrated the depths of colonial allegiance.<sup>12</sup>

This then raised the obvious questions: why was there such firm loyalty among this particular group and why had it not been undermined by the changes associated with the late colonial reforms? The answers lie in a complex mix of positive and especially negative pressures affecting the urban elites in the decades following the creation of the new viceroyalty. The eighteenth century was a period of significant change for Spain as its Bourbon rulers sought to reestablish the country's former glory, hence the basket of reforms, many of which had their roots in enlightened ideas while also being promoted by their French relatives. The changes were a move toward rationalization and modernization, which were not always appreciated by the various tradition-bound groups in Spain and its colonies.<sup>13</sup> The French association also produced complaints as it drew Spain into France's frequent wars, usually against Britain. And while this had the effect of providing a further rationale for reestablishing Spain's military might, financing rested to a great extent on the increased exploitation of colonial resources. Consequently, the reforms often produced new demands on the overseas empire, which had the potential for antagonizing those targeted at a time when other loyalties were emerging that had long-term repercussions. For one, creoles

were developing an increasing sense of allegiance to their place of birth or *patria*, which was a factor in the eventual division of the viceroyalty into four separate countries as well as the appeal of federalism as a postindependence form of government. This fragmentation had been apparent for some time. Mark Szuchman presents a picture of extensive diversity in the viceroyalty before the May Revolution, adding that already “atomistic tendencies made consensus among political figures difficult to achieve.”<sup>14</sup> Groups within their respective communities were competing for political and economic influence in response to the opportunities provided by the creation of the viceroyalty. But simultaneous with those divisive elements, and counteracting them, was an overarching loyalty to the crown. According to José Carlos Chiaramonte, there was a “mosaic of sentiments of group belongings” that combined with fidelity to the monarch to produce a sense of alliance among the population.<sup>15</sup> This broader loyalty has been recognized by Jeremy Adelman who argues that patriotism may have been expressed as a regional element but it also referred to the empire.<sup>16</sup> Or, in the words of Nicolas Shumway, despite the development of regionalism “the Spanish colonies were carefully designed to extend the Spanish Empire, to be culturally, economically, and politically dependent on their mother country. They were not intended to develop a unique and independent sense of nationhood, but to be extensions of Spain, unquestioning in political loyalty, religious faith, and taxes. Moreover, few, if any, of the Spanish American colonists dreamed of a destiny other than that assigned by Spain.”<sup>17</sup> Shumway adds that a national identity did not appear until after independence, a view shared by Guerra, who writes that no nationalist movement existed before independence, but rather, there were only some individuals and small groups and they existed “in secret.”<sup>18</sup>

In Río de la Plata this loyalty was in part a product of the benefits that resulted from the creation of the viceroyalty. There were numerous opportunities despite the reforms. The new viceroyalty generated a dynamism and an enthusiastic belief in the future that were laid at the feet of the monarchy. As shown in chapter 1, local inhabitants enjoyed a variety of political and economic advantages. These advantages included jobs in the bureaucracy, for even though the highest levels were reserved primarily for peninsulares, lower positions remained open to creoles who thereby secured some degree of political influence. Economically, the viceroyalty was the conduit of silver from the mines in Upper Peru to the Atlantic, as the shipments of bullion now flowed through Buenos Aires instead of Lima. Silver was supplemented by hides, processed meat, and other agricultural goods, benefiting landholders and their agents and creating a demand for imports, all of which stimu-

lated the urban commercial sector at both the wholesale and retail levels. The growing slave trade, too, provided opportunities in the form of profits for merchants and workers for urban and rural employers. The resulting influx of Spanish traders determined to take advantage of the economic possibilities may have provoked criticism and aroused animosities elsewhere in the empire, but these were muted in the new viceroyalty as ties were established between immigrant families and the local community that proved profitable to both. All merchants, regardless of their place of birth, suffered to some extent as a result of Spain's wars during these years, yet Portuguese ships and the introduction of neutral shipping after 1797 ensured a flow of both imports and exports, while smuggling, which had always been a vital part of the local economy, remained very much alive despite efforts to suppress it, securing the returns that kept producers, merchants, and their bureaucratic allies content.

The resulting loyalty was wrapped up in a style of life that the urban elites enjoyed and were determined to maintain, which is the focus of chapter 2. As in other parts of the empire, these elites tended to be a largely conservative group—hierarchical, patriarchal, Catholic, and racially white—with set ideas about who should be included in their circle. Purity of blood was of utmost importance in determining status, and along with this came an expectation that members would follow what was considered to be appropriate behavior. Accepting these rules was seen as a way of maintaining their position while keeping the masses in their place. However, their efforts met with mixed success as the lower classes often failed to display the expected respect, and individuals within their own group ignored the rules and violated the stated norms. All of this contributed to a sense of uncertainty during this critical period and reinforced the need to retain ties with a Spain that remained a model as well as a buttress for elite views at a time when unity seemed to be of the utmost importance.

Unity, however, was not a firmly entrenched characteristic of the viceroyalty's urban elites. The financial opportunities and other benefits that came with the creation of the viceroyalty while fomenting loyalty also proved to be a factor in promoting differences and rivalries among members of the elite as they sought to maximize their returns, which often meant securing political power at the expense of others in their class. Hector Lobos's description of Córdoba, where the overriding tranquility sporadically broke to reveal "an unquiet undercurrent," also applied to the other cities.<sup>19</sup> The animosities that developed are examined in chapter 3—animosities that were not between Spaniards and creoles as might be expected, but rather, between the mer-

chants of Buenos Aires and those of Montevideo and between groups within cities, such as in Córdoba where they competed for municipal positions. The divisions were bitter at times and frequently involved appointed officials, but the hostility tended to be directed internally and not across the Atlantic. In fact, the king was seen as the ultimate arbiter in these disputes, further enhancing his status and ensuring that ties remained in place. If he were gone, who among the contending groups would replace him? Anyone else was bound to harbor biases that could have been disruptive to the urban elites' position and style of life.

However, in the Age of Revolution the position of the monarch seemed anything but secure. Just as the viceroyalty was being created, British North Americans were cutting their ties with their king. Then in 1789 the outbreak of the French Revolution and the execution of Louis XVI splintered relations between Spain and France. In the viceroyalty the events in France raised alarms, not out of fear of an actual French attack but more because the ideas that had led to the developments in France might infect the local population, especially the lower classes and the slaves. The elites came to see those ideas and their promoters as a definite threat to their style of life, preeminent position, and economic benefits, as shown in chapter 4. The suspicions produced a questioning and even a rejection of some of the ideas that had lain behind the establishment of the viceroyalty and had fostered many of the resulting developments. The outbreak of war with France was marked by the spread of anti-French paranoia and the persecution of members of the French community in Buenos Aires. The war was brief and the French alliance was rapidly reestablished, yet concerns remained about the possible impact of enlightened ideas with their revolutionary potential.<sup>20</sup> Far more reassuring to the urban elites was the Spanish conservative model, which necessitated continuing ties to the mother country.

Further reinforcing these ties were the threats to the elites' position from a number of internal and external actors that appeared simultaneously with the spread of subversive ideas. One was the viceroyalty's slave population, the focus of chapter 5. Susan Socolow has written in reference to Córdoba that its "white citizens often behaved as though they were under siege from other racial groups."<sup>21</sup> This is a description that could be applied elsewhere in the viceroyalty and, indeed, throughout all of Spanish America, explaining to a great extent the reason for elite loyalty everywhere.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Río de la Plata that fear was rooted to a large extent in the growing numbers of slaves. Imported to meet the viceroyalty's expanding agricultural and domestic needs, they soon aroused concerns because of their foreign customs,

their reputed unhealthiness, and their apparent willingness to engage in acts that may have been triggered by a desire to defend their perceived rights and resist exploitation but that were seen as rebellious. Thus, although no slave rebellion occurred within the viceroyalty, slaves did engage in other acts of violence that resulted in increased apprehension following the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. And as the importation of slaves continued, these fears intensified despite initiatives that were designed to keep the slave population under control.

Another exploited nonwhite group who challenged the urban elites' position during these years was the viceroyalty's Indigenous population, as discussed in chapter 6. Almost immediately following the creation of the viceroyalty, rebellions erupted among Indigenous communities in the Andean region, affecting the northwestern part of the viceroyalty but with an impact that stretched all the way to the coast. By 1783 the rebellions had been suppressed, yet the fears they had aroused remained very much alive. In the case of Peru, the rebellions and the possibility of a recurrence have been cited in explaining that region's firm and long-lasting commitment to Spain.<sup>23</sup> To some extent the same was true of the new viceroyalty, which assisted in suppressing the rebellions. And although the almost thirty-year gap before the outbreak of the independence struggles provided a period for the fears to dissipate, nevertheless the arrests, trials, and imprisonment of some of the accused ringleaders involved Buenos Aires for over a decade and kept the events alive in people's minds. In addition, and reinforcing those concerns, were the threats arising from another and more proximate Indigenous quarter, the unconquered tribes of the pampas. Throughout the entirety of the period and despite numerous attempts to defeat and even eradicate them, the native groups challenged those living in and around the three cities, frustrating settlement opportunities and adding to the insecurities of the region.

An aspect of the Indigenous threat that was particularly relevant to the part of the viceroyalty known as the Banda Oriental (today's Uruguay) was the local tribes' ties with invaders and smugglers from the nearby Portuguese territory. It constituted one of the foreign threats the elites had to face during these years as detailed in chapter 7. These threats were posed by Portuguese incursions across the border from Brazil and by a growing British presence in the region that raised the possibility of British naval attacks. The Portuguese menace was more immediate because of the geographical factor, the years of conflict over the northern bank of the Río de la Plata, and the uncharted frontier between the two empires. With their capture of the town of Colônia do Sacramento directly across the river from Buenos Aires in

1777 the Spanish seemed to have asserted their control over the Banda Oriental. However, Portuguese ambitions in the area had not ended as shown by their frequent raids across the border, their continuing involvement in smuggling activities, their support for Indigenous groups, and even formal warfare in 1801. The British military threat, on the other hand, was tied to the Anglo-Spanish conflicts of this period that raised the prospect of attack and invasion and led to economic setbacks because of British-imposed blockades. To some extent the blockades had a positive effect, as they justified limiting the presence of British merchants, slavers, and whalers whose involvement in legal and illegal commercial activities in the viceroyalty presented an obvious threat to the merchant community by providing cheaper goods. Furthermore, their presence raised the possibility that they might spread unacceptable political and religious ideas. In response, the elites turned to Spain as an obvious source of assistance.<sup>24</sup>

Fears of a possible British attack proved well founded for, in 1806 and 1807, British expeditions occupied Buenos Aires and Montevideo, which is the topic of chapter 8. The invasions have been cited as a central factor in the undermining of Spanish rule, as the local residents defeated the invaders with little assistance from the mother country, convinced them to demand the removal of the ineffectual viceroy, and helped develop a growing sense of confidence in their own capabilities. Yet the response to the invasions also revealed a population committed to maintaining Spanish rule. All sectors of the viceregal population participated, including the Indigenous communities and the slave population. Past divisions were put aside, if only briefly, in an unprecedented display of unity to oust the invaders and to regain control of the region for the crown. Thus, the growing sense of self-confidence did not translate into immediate calls for autonomy, nor did it win support for the small number of pro-independence backers. Rather, commitment to the crown may never have been stronger, for the successes against the British were followed by frequent expressions of loyalty, some even enunciated by future revolutionaries.

However, this ended almost immediately with the French invasion of Spain and the abdication of Fernando VII in 1808. Loyalty was now redirected, as is shown in the concluding chapter. The initial loyalty that was evident in the outpouring of support for the Spanish king after his arrest and forced abdication began to founder because of political uncertainties. Divisions that had been momentarily papered over with the British invasions now flared into the open without the controlling hand of the monarch. In the face of this crisis, members of the urban elites remained committed to

the ideas that they had long espoused but now had to maintain on their own. The problem was that different viewpoints emerged on how this was to be achieved, reflecting in part the past divisions that now assumed increasing importance and led to friction and the decision of some elites to follow their own path. It was not a unanimous decision, indicating that the old ways had not disappeared entirely and that maintaining the status quo remained very much alive as a goal and with it the need to retain the Spanish connection. Independence was not demanded at this time, unlike in other parts of Spanish America. But the events in Spain set in motion developments that ultimately spelled an end to Spanish rule in the viceroyalty and the gradual creation of new, national loyalties. What in the past had brought the elites together against perceived common enemies that threatened their style of life and, by extension, the survival of the imperial connection no longer held. Attitudes that had developed in response to the imperial connection continued to determine the elites' actions, although those attitudes were now taken in new directions as the struggles for independence unfolded. Local loyalties assumed increasing importance, leading to contending views, friction, and divisions that would afflict the region for decades. The overriding loyalty to the crown that had ensured unity in the past had now been lost, and with it went the region's geographical linkages resulting in the dissolution of the viceroyalty. Fears certainly remained, but vassalage to a distant monarch was now a thing of the past.

