



The Ten Most Important Events in the History of Latin America

1. Papal Bull Inter Calera and the Treaty of Tordesillas (1493-1494)

Many people do not know that when Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Americas, they already legally belonged to Portugal. According to previous papal bulls of the 15th century, Portugal held claim to any and all undiscovered lands west of a certain longitude. After Columbus’ return, both Spain and Portugal laid claims to the new lands, forcing the pope to sort things out. Pope Alexander VI issued the bull Inter Calera in 1493, declaring that Spain owned all new lands west of a line 100 leagues (about 300 miles) from the Cape Verde Islands. Portugal, not pleased with the verdict, pressed the issue and the two nations ratified the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which established the line at 370 leagues from the islands. This treaty essentially ceded Brazil to the Portuguese while keeping the rest of the New World for Spain, therefore laying the framework for the modern demographics of Latin America.

2. The Conquest of the Aztec and Inca Empires (1519-1533)

After the New World was discovered, Spain soon realized that it was an incredibly valuable resource that should be pacified and colonized. Only two things stood in their way: the mighty Empires of the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru, who would have to be defeated in order to establish rule over the newly-discovered lands. Ruthless conquistadores under the command of Hernán Cortés in Mexico and Francisco Pizarro in Peru accomplished just that, paving the way for centuries of Spanish rule and enslavement and marginalization of New World natives.

3. Independence from Spain and Portugal (1806-1898)

Using the Napoleonic invasion of Spain as an excuse, most of Latin America declared independence from Spain in 1810. By 1825, Mexico, Central and South America were free, soon to be followed by Brazil. Spanish rule in the Americas ended in 1898 when they lost their final colonies to the United States following the

Spanish-American War. With Spain and Portugal out of the picture, the young American republics were free to find their own way, a process that was always difficult and often bloody.

4. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848)

Still smarting from the loss of Texas a decade before, Mexico went to war with the United States in 1846 after a series of skirmishes on the border. The Americans invaded Mexico on two fronts and captured Mexico City in May of 1848. As devastating as the war was for Mexico, the peace was worse: the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded California, Nevada, Utah and parts of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming to the United States in exchange for \$15 million and forgiveness of about \$3 million more in debts.

5. The War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870)

The most devastating war ever fought in South America, the War of the Triple Alliance pitted Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil against Paraguay. When Uruguay was attacked by Brazil and Argentina in late 1864, Paraguay came to its aid and attacked Brazil. Ironically, Uruguay, then under a different president, switched sides and fought against its former ally. By the time the war was over, hundreds of thousands had died and Paraguay was in ruins. It would take decades for the nation to recover.

6. The War of the Pacific (1879-1884)

In 1879, Chile and Bolivia went to war after spending decades bickering over a border dispute. Peru, which had a military alliance with Bolivia, was drawn into the war as well. After a series of major battles at sea and on land, the Chileans were victorious. By 1881 the Chilean army had captured Lima and by 1884 Bolivia signed a truce. As a result of the war, Chile gained the disputed coastal province once and for all, leaving Bolivia landlocked, and also gained the province of Arica from Peru. The Peruvian and Bolivian nations were devastated, needing years to recover.

7. The Construction of the Panama Canal (1881-1893, 1904-1914)

The completion of the Panama Canal by Americans in 1914 marked the end of a remarkable and ambitious feat of engineering. The results have been felt ever since, as the canal has drastically changed worldwide shipping. Less known are the political consequences of the canal, including the secession of Panama from

Colombia (with the encouragement of the United States) and the profound effect the canal has had on the internal reality of Panama ever since.

8 The Mexican Revolution (1911-1920)

A revolution of impoverished peasants against an entrenched wealthy class, the Mexican Revolution shook the world and forever altered the trajectory of Mexican politics. A bloody war, which included horrific battles, massacres and assassinations, the Mexican Revolution officially ended in 1920 when Alvaro Obregón became the last general standing after years of conflict, although the fighting continued for another decade. As a result of the revolution, land reform finally took place in Mexico, and the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party,) the political party that rose from the rebellion, stayed in power until the 1990's.

9. The Cuban Revolution (1953-1959)

When Fidel Castro, his brother Raúl and a ragged band of followers attacked the barracks at Moncada in 1953, they may not have known they were taking the first step to one of the most significant revolutions of all time. With the promise of economic equality for all, the rebellion grew until 1959, when Cuban President Fulgencio Batista fled the country and victorious rebels filled the streets of Havana. Castro established a communist regime, building close ties to the Soviet Union, and stubbornly defied every attempt the United States could think of to remove him from power. Ever since, Cuba has either been a festering sore of totalitarianism in an increasingly democratic world, or a beacon of hope for all anti-imperialists, depending on your point of view.

10. Operation Condor (1975-1983)

In the mid-1970's, the governments of the southern cone of South America – Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay – had several things in common. They were ruled by conservative regimes, either dictators or military juntas, and they had a growing problem with opposition forces and dissidents. They therefore established Operation Condor, a collaborative effort to round up and kill or otherwise silence their enemies. By the time it ended, thousands were dead or missing and the trust of South Americans in their leaders was forever shattered. Although new facts come out occasionally and some of the worst perpetrators have been brought to justice, there are still many questions about this sinister operation and those behind it.