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Independence movements

There are certain dates that become a recognized form of shorthand for the events they represent. Two such dates are 1492 and 1776: the former represents the beginning of the sustained conquest and colonization of the Americas; the latter signifies the conclusion of this period of colonization. Europeans made their way to the Americas in a variety of ways with numerous objectives, but always considered themselves Europeans. Only with the United States Declaration of Independence did the colonizers residing in North America decide to rupture their ties with the mother country and create new, independent states. After 13 British colonies declared independence and achieved a surprising victory against the British Crown, other colonies in the region were encouraged and began their own wars of independence. The first and most brutal of these wars was in Haiti where the slaves had suffered tremendously under French rule and sought to eliminate Europeans from the country. In one of the later movements, Brazil achieved independence from Portugal in a relatively bloodless fashion. In the middle (literally and figuratively) were the wars for independence among the Spanish American colonies: similar, in that they were fighting the same European power, but each distinct due its own history, demography and relation to the Spanish Crown.

The era of independence movements began in the 1760s and lasted well into the 1820s. It covered most of the two continents and involved the European powers. In the beginning there were colonists; by the end of this period, there were Americans, Peruvians, Mexicans, Brazilians and Haitians. It was a turbulent period for the entire region but the different means and methods of independence came to define the countries that were created out of these movements.

What is meant by the Americas?

At face value, the Americas seem homogenous; all countries share the same alphabet, they are all ex-colonies, they achieved independence at roughly the same time, and in all of them Christianity is the prevailing religion. The reality, however, is more complicated. Not only do the Americas cross two continents and the nearby islands, isolated geographically from the rest of the world by two oceans, but they are often isolated from one another. The Americas are defined by mountain ranges that cut across them, making travel difficult. Even today, the best way of getting from one country to the next is often via air travel. And there is little consistency in the heterogeneity of the population of the countries in the region. In some countries, the indigenous population constitutes the majority; in others, it has been all but eradicated. Political systems also vary tremendously. Democracy prevails in some countries, but in others military dictatorships are still dominant and there have even been attempts at monarchies. Some countries have been very right-wing while others are Marxist in their politics.

The syllabus demands that students and teachers have knowledge of the United States, Canada and Latin America (the Caribbean is implied here even though it is not really Latin or American, and Greenland is excluded, although it is geographically American). The emergence of the Americas as modern, independent states must be looked at as an integral, related unit.

This should be accomplished through adopting a case-study approach where possible. Understanding the individual historical context of a country is just as important as understanding the trends in the region. In any comparative study, there will always be differences, and these often come out in more detailed study. A comparison between two countries that were part of the same colony can yield considerable distinctions. Mexico and Guatemala were both part of New Spain and fought the same war of independence but peacefully split in 1823, reflecting the economic and social differences of two countries, that may not have been so apparent to outsiders.

Another feature that is a necessary component of studying the Americas is the regional dominance of the United States of America. This amalgam of 13 individual colonies—each with its own laws and relationship to the British Crown—became the most powerful American state, if not the largest, and its actions had considerable effects on the rest of the Americas. Thus the United States dominates any regional study not for reasons of ideology or national preference but simply due its status as a world power. No one Latin American state, nor its leadership, has dominated the region in the same way but many have had their moments: Toussaint L'Ouverture's Haiti, the Porfiriato in Mexico, Fidel Castro's Cuba and Juan Perón's Argentina are examples of countries that took center stage in the region for a substantial period of time. Lastly, Canada demands its own examination as its history is very different; it did not fight a war of independence and still retains the British monarchy even though it is constitutionally independent from the British legal system.