

Review/Reseña

Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom. Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

Slavery and Political Independence: A New Reading

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Thanks to Peter Blanchard's recent publication "Under the Flags of Freedom," we have a much more detailed account on slaves' experiences during the wars of independence throughout Spanish South America. We learn that about half of the army soldiers initially recruited by Generals Jose de San Martín and Simón Bolívar were slaves attracted to their ranks by promises of freedom and manumission. The royalist army also recruited among slaves and had a similar percentage of slaves in its ranks. The royal

army had the advantage of having had black soldiers well before the outbreak of the wars of independence. Blacks, pardos, morenos and mulattoes had been enlisted to fend off British attacks in the Caribbean, and had joined militias to guard Spaniards and Creoles, especially from Indian upheavals. After attempting for a long time to establish a Spanish-only standing army, this proved to be impossible in large measure due to continued warfare in Europe itself. As the colonial royal army became 'Americanized' it also included a growing number of non-white soldiers.

At the outbreak of hostilities, patriots and royalists began to intensely bargain over the bodies and minds of slaves to fill the rank and file of both armies. Given earlier experiences it comes as no surprise that slaves initially sided with the royalists; the king was part of what they had grown up with; the 'insurrectos' still were—in slaves' eyes—an undefined (and weak) contender. Over the years, this bargaining was triangular, unequal, and conflicting, and involved the military, the slaves, and the slave owners on both sides, often with 'sliding' loyalties. For the generals, recruiting slaves was the only option to wage a war and to avoid that the contesting generals would use the same slaves for their own cause; for the slaves it meant a terrain of unending bargaining because they were engaged in a learning process and often had to remind slave owners and generals about promises made; for the slave owners it was about finding arguments to, first, prevent the recruitment of their best slaves and then, to lessen the costs of losing their slaves by demanding compensations for what they thought was rightfully-owned property now lost. Blanchard discusses these bargaining mechanisms in great detail, based on a thorough assembly of many cases found in several different archives throughout Spanish South America. The topic and the (correct) perspective chosen make it extremely difficult to find systematic and statistical evidence, especially on the actual status of the soldiers. Given the fluidity of the ongoing bargaining, the back and forths, and often the physical absence of a paper trail, it is almost impossible to document who was who at which point. Blanchard's intelligent use of situational evidence still provides a very broad picture of

the many different locations and situations we find black-soldier-slaves engaged in. Moreover, something that is saliently praise-worthy, is an entire chapter (out of 8) in which he systematically presents the emotional, physical, and ideological plights of black slave women.

Blanchard looks at the historical processes during the wars of independence through the lenses of the actors and notes the differences of attitudes, ideas, and actions in situation-specific contexts and in regional contexts. The history he conveys for Bolívar's efforts in the northern part of the hemisphere is very different from what San Martín thought and did. The difference is based on who the slaves and the slave owners were, what they did, and their relative concentration and economic importance. In the north, slaves in Venezuela and Nueva Granada worked mainly in the mines and on the fields, which means that they were rural slaves in large concentrations inserted into export-producing sites; in the south, slaves in the Río de la Plata and also in the Chilean Captaincy were more concentrated in cities. These urban slaves were mainly artisans and domestic servants, with a very scattered ownership pattern, that is, more slave owners had fewer slaves. In places where slave ownership is widespread, slave owners usually hold less power over slaves and slavery, and the ties between slave owners and slaves are closer. This situation helps explain why slave owners in the Río de la Plata and Chile were more inclined to let their slaves join San Martín's army to surmount the Andes into Chile and then Peru, while slaves themselves were much more easily convinced about the benefits of becoming soldiers.

In contrast, Bolívar, Páez and Santander found much more resistance among slave owners, in part because Bolívar himself was very lukewarm about the manumission of slaves until the very end of the wars of independence, and even then, he could and would do very little to pursue a full-fledged manumission. He would rather accept slave-soldiers on a loan-basis, that is, as a temporarily limited 'donation' of a slave's earnings for the owner. In tandem, slave owners could—through this 'donation'—present

generals with a good patriotic (or royalist) deed while still holding on to their slaves.

Over the course of the more than ten years that the wars of independence lasted, timid attempts were undertaken to increase slaves' hopes for freedom if and when they joined either army. Some competition over who offered more to entice black slaves' enlistment ensued. However, even if both contenders were bargaining over who offered more, neither side overstepped or went beyond (in the north and in the south) the abolition of the slave trade and the declaration of the free womb, and eventually individualized manumission for exceptional war deeds or years of service that had to be certified by the respective commander. Even then, though, individual manumission often happened only under very exceptional circumstances or when the army (and then the state) had enough resources to pay a compensation to owners or was able to establish a lottery system.

The closer San Martín and Bolívar were to Lima, the lesser their efforts to recruit slaves. Their relative number in the army—from having been highly disproportionate in terms of their overall numbers in the population—decreased, as their nominal number also did. Thousands of black and casta slaves and non-slaves had died in the battlefields before the final battles in Ayacucho and Junín took place in 1824. They had literally been used as cannon fodder; many never made it to 1824 or returned home because they were sold off to places that continued to be strongholds of slave owners; and many had to return home with injuries that made them completely inadequate for war or work, had there been work for them in the first place. As Spanish-owned land was redistributed to the victorious patriotic officers, very few—if any at all—returning slaves found a way to survive, some having to return to their former owners, some being rejected by their former owners because they were sick and weak.

Overall, and in many dramatic ways described by Blanchard, slaves' participation on both sides of the struggle was skillful, dedicated and full of hopes, off-and-on crystallizing into a more self-centered political agenda,

that is, freedom for all, but without ever leading to an organized vindication under black flags and leadership. To the contrary, their demographic decline, the hardships encountered during and after the wars, and last but not least, the increased demands imposed on female slaves to take care of their families during and after the wars, did not allow for either female or male leadership. Although slavery had substantially been weakened, so had female and male slaves in terms of numbers, strength, and ideas. In the years after independence, they continued to go to court, to invoke their contributions to the 'patria', to find ways to rid themselves of slavery, even if this meant to continue fighting on the side of the factions that emerged after the wars of independence were over. One wonders—with Blanchard—what a slave or ex-slave who had fought on Bolívar's side thought when he/she after 1825 found himself/herself fighting for general X against Bolívar, when general X had previously fought at Bolívar's side. During a period in which notions like 'nation', 'freedom', 'liberty', and 'citizenship' were taking shape, the message slaves and ex-slaves had to read through living the action was all but clear, especially as far as their own lives were concerned, not to mention the lives of all remaining slaves. In most places it would take one more generation before abolition (with ongoing compensation to slave owners) was in place.

Overall, Blanchard's book is a most welcome contribution to our still slowly (but firmly) growing wisdom on blacks and castas in Latin America. It adds to earlier work done by many of my dear colleagues, dutifully listed and quoted in this very fine piece of research.