

## María Antonia Bolívar and the War for Independence in Venezuela

Evelyn M. Cherpak  
Retired Archivist  
Portsmouth, RI  
[Evelyn.Cherpak1@gmail.com](mailto:Evelyn.Cherpak1@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This article explores the relationship of María Antonia Bolívar, supporter of the royalist cause during the wars for independence, with her brother, Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of northern South America, during the conflict and in the aftermath. It explores the role of a woman of the elite who accepted and executed responsibility for the protection of the Bolívar family properties and wealth.

**Keywords:** María Antonia Bolívar, Simón Bolívar, Venezuela, Wars for Independence

\*\*\*\*\*

### A Divisive Issue

The declaration of independence proclaimed by the Congress in Caracas, Venezuela, on July 5, 1811, and the war of independence that followed created a rift in *mantuano* families between those who supported the continuation of Spanish rule and those who desired a free and independent republic for political, social, and economic reasons. Old and distinguished families like the Rodríguez de Toros, the Galindos, the Palacios, and the Jérez de Aristeguietas were divided between those who remained loyal to the crown and those who supported the patriots.<sup>1</sup> However, no family was more torn asunder by events than the Bolívars. Simón Bolívar, leader of the independence army and liberator of northern South America, early on supported ending ties with Spain. His brother, Juan Vicente, sailed to the United States in 1810 with orders from the junta that supported King Ferdinand VII to meet with Spanish Ambassador Luis de Onís to propose provincial autonomy, to procure weapons, and to obtain machinery to establish textile factories in Caracas. Unfortunately, he died in a shipwreck off Bermuda on the way home in July 1810.<sup>2</sup> His sister, Juana Bolívar Palacios,<sup>3</sup> favored an independent republic, as did her husband, Dionisio Palacios Blanco y Sojo, who died at the Battle of Maturín in 1814, and her son, Guillermo, who died at the Battle of Hogaza in 1817.<sup>4</sup> Throughout hostilities, María Antonia, Bolívar's favorite sister and a staunch royalist, remained loyal to the king.

### Women as Participants

Little has been written about elite women who supported Spanish rule, while the activities of those who supported and took an active part in the independence movement in Venezuela have been fully documented.<sup>5</sup> Women attended meetings of the Patriotic Society of Caracas whose members favored independence; others sponsored *tertulias* (intellectual and literary meetings) where plans to end Spanish rule were discussed and formulated. Josefa Palacios tried to convert Spanish sympathizers to the patriot side at her Caracas *tertulia*. Patriotic women of all classes made economic contributions by donating money, jewels, uniforms, arms, and food to the troops. They acted as spies, couriers, informants, guides, and scouts. They hid patriots in their homes and ran the risk of punishment or death if discovered. The camp followers or *juanas*, cooked, nursed, and buried the dead. Others manned the barricades or soldiered with the independence armies, some disguised as men. General Manuel Piar's army organized a unit of women soldiers who fought alongside the men. Three women who fought at Barinas in 1813 died there, while in 1814 twelve women combatants at Ospino were killed and one female soldier was killed at Valencia.<sup>6</sup> Those who did not fight lost property, possessions, and money and were forced into exile and a life of poverty. No doubt the women who supported Spanish rule made some of the same contributions and suffered similar deprivations, but their stories are less widely known. Because of her connection to the leader of the independence movement, her political views, and surviving documentation, María Antonia Bolívar has entered the historical record.

### Loyal to Spain

María Antonia Bolívar was born on November 1, 1777, to Juan Vicente Bolívar and María de la Concepción Palacios de Blanco. Members of the Caracas elite, the Bolívars owned extensive slave-tended plantations in the Aragua Valley as well as the Aroa copper mines. Although María Antonia received an education as her letters demonstrate, her main purpose in life was to make a suitable marriage to a man of her social class. In 1792, at age fifteen, she married Pablo Clemente Palacios y Francia. The couple had four children: Anacleto, Valentina, Josefa, and Pablo Secundino.<sup>7</sup> Marriage and motherhood were the goals of women of the upper and middle classes; the only other acceptable option for single women was the convent.

The war for independence was a turning point for María Antonia Bolívar and her family, resulting in both a personal crisis and a historical crisis. Before war broke out in 1811, she lived a quiet domestic life within the confines of her family, social group, and the Catholic Church. War threatened her social position, her standard of living, and her substantial financial and economic interests that included five houses in Caracas, eleven houses in the port of La Guaira, two sugar mills, a cacao hacienda in Tacarigua Valley and slaves.<sup>8</sup> The independence movement ran counter to her monarchical convictions that were informed by her social position, education, training, and family background.

When hostilities began, María Antonia was living in Caracas. Although estranged politically from Simón Bolívar because of her support for royalist rule, she remained in contact with him throughout the war and until his death. She looked after his properties that were part of the family patrimony, as she was interested in maintaining the family's holdings, despite their differences, and she visited him when he was in the capital. She did not let her political views change their close filial relationship and their mutual interest in preserving their inherited wealth. In fact, she acquiesced to his request to turn over 300 slaves from his San Mateo plantation to the republican army. She wrote: "The country needs soldiers for its defense. Proceed to form your new battalion."<sup>9</sup> María Antonia did not let her personal political views hinder the needs of her brother's army and the resultant losses their property would suffer if devastated by the Spanish Army. When Simón Bolívar issued the proclamation of the War to the Death in 1813, she moved to her estate in Macarao for safety reasons and to avoid any connection with political plots in the capital. There, during February 1813, she hid Spaniards and Canary Islanders who were loyal to the crown in her house, a deed that was punishable by death.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, she would not have taken these steps if she did not support the crown.

### Exile

By the time the Second Republic collapsed in 1814, María Antonia and her family had returned to Caracas. Secure in her political convictions and convinced that she would be safe with the return of Spanish rule, María Antonia intended to remain in the city, but Simón Bolívar ordered her family to leave the country for their safety. An armed guard escorted them to La Guaira where they boarded a ship for exile in Curaçao (Boletín de historia y antigüedades 1950). They spent nine years in exile, moving from Curaçao to Havana, Cuba in 1819.

The conclusion of the War to the Death in 1814 did not improve the condition of women in Venezuela, whatever their political affiliation. José Tomás Boves,<sup>11</sup> a *llanero* in the Spanish Army, ordered women to leave Cumaná Province in October 1814.<sup>12</sup> Issues of safety and security impelled women to seek refuge in convents or leave Venezuela and seek sanctuary in the Caribbean Islands. The most extensive migration of women took place in July 1814, when thousands of women marched east to safety. Casualties were great as many died of starvation or drowned on the way.<sup>13</sup>

The lot of émigré women was not a happy or prosperous one. Homesick and consigned to a life of poverty, some took menial jobs to support their families. There is no record that María Antonia Bolívar took on any kind of paid employment during her exile, despite the fact that she could not rely for support on her invalid husband who had epilepsy and dementia, nor on her children who were too young to work.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately, she received financial aid from wealthy patrons, Juan Ricardo of Kingston, Jamaica, and Antonio León of St. Thomas.<sup>15</sup> From the very beginning of her exile, she repeatedly petitioned the Permanent Council of War and the Royal Audiencia in Caracas regarding her embargoed properties, her involuntary status as an émigré, and her expressed desire to return to Venezuela, but her requests were denied. On August 28, 1816, she wrote: "I beseech Your Majesty that by the weight of the reasons already expressed, and as token of my innocence, you find it worthy to grant me and my family admission to the capital with freedom and delivery of all my possessions according to the stated justifications."<sup>16</sup> María Antonia insisted that her emigration was not one of personal choice; it was mandated by her brother. Like most of the terrorized population, she had to leave to save her life and that of her family. She cited her anti-republican sentiments and her actions as proof of her loyalty to the crown.

When the reformers of Venezuela began their movement to change the face of government, I could not better demonstrate my disgust and opposition to those developments than by quitting the capital and retiring to the town of Macarao. From that vantage point I witnessed the unfolding of unexpected changes and progressive horrors of so disastrous a revolution with the suffering of a sensitive woman and a tender mother who saw the precipitous disappearance of the general peace of the territory, who observed its internal division by the incremental effects on the populace of the spirit of discord, the fanaticism of equality and other destructive monsters. Far too wedded to my principles, I railed often against the false philosophy that assailed our tranquility to force us to succumb to chaos and anarchy and the unfathomable sea of evils and dangers that completely surround us.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, as added proof of her loyalty, she cited the names of individuals whom she rescued from the patriot forces. Throughout 1816, the *Junta Superior de Confiscos y Secuestros* called witnesses from the village of Macarao to testify regarding María Antonia's political conduct and her support of Spanish rule. They testified that María Antonia and her husband never opposed the crown, either in word or deed, that she provided them with money, hid them in her home, and that she emigrated, not because she was disaffected with Spanish rule, but on orders of her brother. If she did not leave, he threatened to take away her children.<sup>18</sup> In September 1817, the *Real Audiencia de Caracas* acted on her case and decided that as a loyal citizen she would be allowed to return to Caracas with her family, and that her embargoed properties and money would be returned to her, including the portion the government had collected from her estates during her absence. The *Audiencia* condemned the conduct of Simón Bolívar.<sup>19</sup>

By the time María Antonia received permission to return to Caracas, she had moved to Havana, Cuba, and decided to remain there for a time. The continued warfare, the uncertainty, and the impoverished state of the country influenced her decision. Instead, in February 1819, María Antonia appealed to the King of Spain through Don Alexo Ruíz, former Secretary of State in the Department of the Treasury. He pleaded her case, confirmed her loyalty, cited her efforts to harbor Spaniards during the War to the Death and her forced emigration ordered by Bolívar. He requested that she be given a pension of 1000 pesos while she remained in Havana, which King Ferdinand VII granted (Quintero 2002). María Antonia followed this request with another petition to the king, citing the fact that her power of attorney in Caracas had been unsuccessful in lifting the embargo on her properties because she carried the Bolívar name. In addition, she requested that the properties of her late brother, Juan Vicente, be turned over to her, despite the fact that they did not belong to her. They included an indigo plantation in Suata, two houses in Caracas, twelve houses in La Guaira, a cacao plantation in Tacagua, a cattle ranch in Caicara, and copper mines in San Felipe. María Antonia was assiduous in claiming the Bolívar family estates and mines as part of their patrimony. The king did not address her claim, but in 1827 the haciendas at San Mateo, Suata, and Caicara and five houses in La Guaira came to her in an agreement abolishing the entail of Juan Bolívar adjudicated with her brother.<sup>20</sup> In 1820, after another plea to the king for an increase in her pension, he doubled it to 2000 pesos because "... of her heroism and patriotic conduct on behalf of the cause of the king."<sup>21</sup>

### The Aftermath of Independence

On June 24, 1821, the republican army defeated the royalist army at the Battle of Carabobo and, for all intents and purposes, freed Venezuela of Spanish control. Pockets of resistance still remained; the last Spanish garrison at Puerto Cabello was finally routed in 1823. That very year María Antonia and her family returned to Venezuela aboard a United States frigate of war to reclaim her properties.<sup>22</sup>

According to the provisions of the 1819 Congress of Angostura, Venezuela and New Granada were united as Colombia, with the seat of government in Bogotá. The central government was in the hands of Vice President Francisco de Paula Santander<sup>23</sup> while Bolívar was leading armies in Ecuador and Peru. The Colombian Congress did not always act favorably toward Caracas. The political arrangement benefited neither the Venezuelan elite nor General José Antonio Páez who was vying for leadership of the country. Despite the political factionalism and the separatist movement in eastern Venezuela, state and local governments organized, and Bolívar's army received money and men for the liberation of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru.<sup>24</sup>

The Venezuelan economy was devastated in the aftermath of war. Plantations that had been sequestered by either the royalists or the patriots were rented out and worked for the benefit of the side that held them. A great many estates that were not seized were destroyed or ruined. Thus, agriculture that had been the mainstay of the economy for centuries suffered a drastic decline. The task of rebuilding the agricultural infrastructure fell to returning émigrés, as did the revival of North Atlantic trade and commerce.



### Advice

Upon her return to Venezuela, María Antonia made peace with her brother and cautiously accepted the new republican administration and leadership. She quickly abandoned her loyalty to the crown and realistically accepted the new order of things. María Antonia was a pragmatist above all and her conservative support of the king, when many were supporting the patriot cause, may have been to protect her wealth and property, and because she believed that the Spanish forces would ultimately defeat the patriot army, she felt she would then come out on the winning side. In fact, to prove her loyalty to the republican government, she cautioned Bolívar not to accept monarchical schemes that were presented to him. José Antonio Páez wanted to create an empire with Bolívar as the head and in the autumn of 1825, he sent a delegation to Peru with this offer. In a letter to Bolívar, she wrote:

. . . But always say what you said in Cumaná in 1814, that you would be a liberator or dead. That is your true title which has raised you above great men and will keep for you the glories that you have acquired at the cost of so many sacrifices: hate anyone who proposes a crown to you for he seeks your ruin. Remember Bonaparte or Iturbide and many others you know, I am very satisfied with your way of thinking and I believe you incapable of permitting similar things, but I cannot but declare the feelings of my heart, because of the interest I have in your happiness.<sup>25</sup>

Bolívar acknowledged her warning and heeded it. In a letter to Francisco Paula de Santander, Vice President of Gran Colombia, he wrote: "my sister tells me that there are three parties in Caracas, monarchists, democrats and pardocrats, that I must be the Liberator or die is her advice. This is the advice to follow even if I knew that, in doing so, all of humankind would perish".<sup>26</sup> Bolívar was interested in María Antonia's opinions, trusted them, and paid heed to her advice. He did not hesitate to quote her to his political confreres.

Simón and María Antonia Bolívar, both during and after the war for independence, had an egalitarian and an interdependent filial relationship. In the aftermath of Venezuelan independence and the absence of Bolívar as he led the independence armies in Ecuador and Peru, María Antonia kept him informed of political events, she gauged the mood of the country, and she reported what she saw and heard. She was his most trusted source and he asked her for political news as his letter of July 1825 indicated. He wrote: "Always send me news about politics and everything else, because what you tell me is most accurate."<sup>27</sup>

### Legal System in Chaos

Her letters not only contained news of political events but also dealt with various lawsuits and the convoluted Venezuelan legal system. She had four lawsuits pending that involved property and money: one was Bolívar's claim to the Aroa mines that was contested by señores Lazo and Estévez who embargoed a portion of the proceeds from the copper mines until the suit was decided. The second major litigation involved the Aristeguieta entail inherited by Bolívar upon the death of his brother Juan Vicente. José Lecumberri, a descendant of Bolívar's aunt and a member of the Aristeguieta family, challenged the claim. In 1824, the Supreme Court of Bogotá decided in favor of Bolívar as the rightful heir, but in 1829 he turned over the properties that he received from the dissolution of the entail in 1827 to his nephew Anacleto. The other lawsuits involved haciendas that tenants had either abandoned or owed rent on and a house where the tenant had not paid rent for years.<sup>28</sup>

According to María Antonia, the laws were unsound and cumbersome because both authoritarian Spanish and liberal Colombian Codes were used simultaneously. Litigation was time consuming and confusing, and the average citizen was unable to understand the laws. In her opinion, the judges were thieves, and Venezuela was ungovernable without legal reforms.<sup>29</sup> Frustrated and impatient with the legal system, she wanted Bolívar to use his political clout to settle the lawsuits, but he refused, saying that he wanted no more rights than the ordinary citizen.<sup>30</sup> She suggested that Bolívar have Congress appoint a commission to draft new laws to present to the legislature.<sup>31</sup> He attempted to institute some changes when he returned to Gran Colombia in 1827, but these had little effect on the legal system.

### Slavery

María Antonia was a slave owner and feared the loss of her labor force with the war's end. Slaves entered Venezuela from the Caribbean Islands during the colonial period where their labor supported the plantation

economy and urban households. Located mainly in the coastal regions, they made up sixty per cent of the population.<sup>32</sup> The republicans needed their support to win the war for independence and along with the *llaneros* they ensured victory for the patriot side. As a member of the social elite and a former slave owner, Bolívar proposed emancipation of slaves at the Congress of Angostura in 1819 in an effort to recruit them for his army and to keep his promise to President Alexandre Pétion of Haiti. At the Congress of Cúcuta in 1821, in an attempt to mollify property owners, he modified his stance on full emancipation by proposing that the sons of slaves be freed.<sup>33</sup> María Antonia feared the results of this limited emancipation as it would lead to the ruin of the country and benefit neither race. She attributed the troubles in Caracas, in part, to the presence of former slaves.<sup>34</sup> As a member of the white property owning elite, she felt threatened by the liberty and social mobility of emancipated slaves. Once freed, slaves abandoned the *haciendas*, leaving owners without an adequate labor force to harvest crops and turn a profit, as was the case at Bolívar's estate at Tuy. Over and over again in her letters to her brother, María Antonia referred to the collapse of the plantation economy and the scarcity of labor.<sup>35</sup> She also feared slave insurrections, like those that occurred in Venezuela in the eighteenth century and later in Haiti. While she praised the Bolivian Constitution of 1826, she urged Bolívar to reconsider the provision for the emancipation of slaves (Boletín de la academia de historia 1933).

### Venezuela in Need

María Antonia repeatedly asked Bolívar to return to Venezuela, as she and her fellow citizens believed that he was the only one able to restore order to the republic. She wrote: "Come although it may be for a short while, but bring along 1000 white soldiers because the troops here are very corrupt."<sup>36</sup> In addition, she advised him to consider "... political matters that are as vital as war."<sup>37</sup> But Bolívar was not able to return to Venezuela until 1827, three years after the victory at Ayacucho that liberated Peru.

During his absence, factions in Colombia and Venezuela sought to diminish his influence and power. Although president of Colombia, Bolívar was unable to contain the separatist movement led by Páez. After Páez took extraordinary measure to recruit troops for the militia, ostensibly to maintain order, the civil governor and Intendant, Escalona, ordered him to Bogotá to answer for his excessive use of force; however, his supporters in Valencia convened an assembly that proposed separation from the union.<sup>38</sup> María Antonia informed Bolívar of the growing separatist movement and the threat posed by Páez. She urged him to return to Venezuela. "This country is lost. . . if you do not come soon and take energetic measures that can save it. Our enemies work ceaselessly to destroy us."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Spaniards were paying revolutionaries to begin a civil war.<sup>40</sup> The Liberator was interested in and mindful of her opinions and advice. He returned to Caracas in 1827 and his presence had a calming effect, but only temporarily. By 1830, the separatist forces had gained ground and Venezuela declared its independence from Colombia.

In July 1829, María Antonia again wrote to Bolívar about the anarchic state of affairs in Venezuela and appealed to him to return. The military was deserting, the Congress was divided between monarchists and democrats, Páez was crazy, and civil disorder abounded. The clergy and the people begged for his return. In addition, there were threats against the Bolívar family. "Our family is always awaiting death, because some of the most adamant say the Bolívar family should be destroyed to the fifth generation."<sup>41</sup> In fact, the situation was so dire that María Antonia considered emigrating to the United States. Begging for alms in a foreign country or living with the Moors would be superior to remaining in Venezuela, she wrote.<sup>42</sup>

Although María Antonia's letters kept Bolívar informed of the political situation in Colombia, he advised her not to intervene in political matters as they were not the proper sphere for women. In a letter of 10 August 1826, he sternly warned her of the dangers of partisanship. He urged her to devote her energies to the care of her home and family and to leave politics to men. He wrote:

I warn you not to get involved in political business nor adhere to or oppose any party. Let opinion and things go along although you believe them contrary to your way of thinking. A woman ought to be neutral in public business. Her family and her domestic duties are her first obligations. A sister of mine ought to observe a perfect indifference in a country which is in a state of dangerous crisis and in which I am viewed as the point at which opinions meet.<sup>43</sup>

Hence, the involvement of women in politics was abhorrent to Bolívar and other national leaders who were products of a patriarchal society. Women assumed new responsibilities in extraordinary times, like the war for independence, but once the conflict was over they were to return to their proper spheres of influence as wives and mothers. No other role was suitable or acceptable for them.

### Bolívar's Properties

María Antonia, however, was not constrained by propriety and the social mores of the times as she took on non-traditional roles and responsibilities for Bolívar during the 1820s. Given the extent of the family fortune, he found it necessary to entrust her with the management and disposition of his estates and mines during his absence from Venezuela. The preservation and protection of family properties and interests were of supreme importance to elite families. The Bolívar's wealth derived from two sources: the copper mines at Aroa that came to him through Francisco María de Narváez who, in turn, acquired them from the king, and houses in Caracas and *haciendas* in the valleys of Yare, Taguaza, and Macaira, along with a substantial number of slaves that he inherited from his godfather el canónigo Doctor Don Juan Félix Jérez de Aristeguieta.<sup>44</sup> To expedite matters, he gave María Antonia power of attorney over the Aroa mines in 1824 and instructed her to rent them, pending his approval of the contract.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Bolívar trusted her to carry out his wishes, but he had the final say in business matters. María Antonia promptly rented the mines to British entrepreneurs John D. Cochrane and Robert Lowry. Bolívar requested that she keep a strict accounting of the rental money, as some of it was to be retained for the litigation and the rest to be distributed to pensioners and friends.<sup>46</sup>

The rich mines of Aroa proved to be a long standing problem for Bolívar and María Antonia. The mines had been abandoned by Juan Bolívar in 1804 and had been taken over by two women, María de la Cruz Uruia and Francisca Sagazasu, who continued mining operations there throughout the war.<sup>47</sup> Simón Bolívar's attempt to reclaim them resulted in a lawsuit between the parties that dragged on in the courts for years. The lawsuit over the mines and the sale of the mines filled the siblings' correspondence.

As early as 1825, Bolívar decided to sell the mines, and he authorized María Antonia to advertise the sale. He hoped that he could interest British investors in buying them. The selling price was 200,000 pounds sterling, the proceeds of which would be deposited in a London bank where they would have access to the money. Both he and María Antonia contemplated living abroad after he retired from public life, and they needed a nest egg to support themselves.<sup>48</sup> A discovery of gold, which proved to be false, and silver at the mining site in 1825 increased their value and made their sale more urgent.<sup>49</sup>

Two years later, in 1828, with the lawsuit still pending, Bolívar asked María Antonia to pay 3,000 pesos to the families to end the litigation, then find a judge who would confirm him as the sole owner, and ready the mines for sale.<sup>50</sup> He ordered her to send the deeds to London, to transfer the power of attorney to her son-in-law, Gabriel Camacho, and to cover drafts, all of which she failed to do. Frustrated by her delay, he transferred his power of attorney to Camacho.<sup>51</sup> He berated María Antonia for ignoring his orders and for her unwillingness to complete the transactions. In February 1829, he again transferred his power of attorney, this time to Lino Clemente<sup>52</sup> who was to handle the pending sales contract in London.<sup>53</sup> Although María Antonia's lack of diligence in this important matter did not create a major rift between them, he acknowledged that she had made mistakes in handling the sale of the mines. Furthermore, he asserted that women were normally not involved in business dealings. He wrote: "For this reason, I have transmitted my power of attorney to others who understand better than you do. Let them work and do not meddle in anything, especially in paperwork and for that I will remain grateful to you."<sup>54</sup> This is the last extant communication that Bolívar had with his sister over the mines. In 1832, two years after Bolívar's death, the issue was settled; the mines were sold to a British firm by María Antonia, her sister Juana and Bolívar's niece, all heirs of the Liberator's estate.<sup>55</sup>

María Antonia was responsible for managing and collecting rents from Bolívar's numerous plantations and houses as well as the Aroa mines. She requested power of attorney in these matters as she was unable to make decisions or carry out Bolívar's orders without it. By 1825, she received the power of attorney, but she still relied on Bolívar for advice and directions concerning his properties.<sup>56</sup> One of her first duties was to inventory each plantation to assess expenses and profits. María Antonia anticipated acquiring enemies with her new responsibilities and did so as her Uncle Feliciano refused to cooperate with her request to review the accounts of the Chirgua estate prior to her receiving the power of attorney. She reported that the haciendas at Tuy, Macaira, and Araguaita were not producing enough to cover their costs, and by 1828 she considered selling the San Mateo plantation as well.<sup>57</sup> The lack of draft animals, the loss of slave labor, and the fevers that decimated the remaining work force reduced productivity, created shortages, and reduced profits. Despite these adverse conditions, María Antonia pursued her own business interests and purchased a sugar mill at Marrero. She asked Bolívar for a loan of 5000 pesos to pay for the mill.<sup>58</sup>



Bolívar's urban properties in La Guaira were in a state of disrepair and María Antonia took steps to have them repaired; however, she encountered the wrath of her sister Juana who had to find other quarters when Bolívar ordered that her house be vacated. Furthermore, Juana laid claim to the La Guaira property, although it legally belonged to Bolívar. Despite receiving 150 *pesos* a month from her brother, she was not content. María Antonia begged him to settle the matter (Boletín de la academia de la historia 1933).

Simón Bolívar entrusted María Antonia with the distribution of pensions and gifts from his estate to needy widows, relatives, and friends. She gave 40 *pesos* to his nurse Hipolita,<sup>59</sup> 150 *pesos* to the widow of Doctor Francisco Paúl,<sup>60</sup> 200 *pesos*, to the widow Valero, 300 *pesos* to the widow of Simón Carreño<sup>61</sup> and monies to his impoverished cousins Luisa and Josefa Bolívar. She took charge of the education of their nephew, Fernando Bolívar that the Liberator funded.<sup>62</sup> In turn, María Antonia requested monies from Bolívar for good causes that she supported. She asked him for 1000 *pesos* to repair the roof of the church of the Holy Trinity that had been damaged by the 1812 earthquake. She had pledged that amount if he survived the war, but in her current impoverished state she could not afford to fund her bequest.<sup>63</sup>

Although María Antonia did not share Bolívar's political views during the wars for independence, once Venezuela was liberated she supported his military campaigns in Peru and his presidency of Gran Colombia. She believed that only he could save Venezuela and triumph over his enemies. When his portrait was finished, it was carried in a military procession through the streets of Caracas to the cathedral where a *Te Deum* was celebrated, and it hung in her home where visitors could see it (Boletín de la academia de la historia, 1933).

### Final Years

Simón Bolívar died on December 17, 1830, near Santa Marta, Colombia. Prior to his death, he praised his sister as possessing "much talent", so any rancor over the management of his affairs was forgotten. María Antonia, her sister Juana, and the three children of their late brother Juan Vicente--- Juan, Felicia, and Fernando---were named heirs in his will. María Antonia and Juana received two-thirds of his estate and his niece and nephews the remaining one third.<sup>64</sup> After Bolívar's death, María Antonia retired to her estate at Macarao, but scandals tarnished her name. In 1833, she was accused of forging a deed of gift from her late brother for 30,000 *pesos* in an attempt to defraud her sister Josefa. When María Antonia refused to pay the agent 250 *pesos* for the transaction, the fraud was discovered, but, in the end, the charges were dropped. In 1836, she became enamored of a young *creole* to whom she gave 8,000 *pesos*. They quarreled, and she accused him of robbing her. He was sent to jail, but when their letters became public he was acquitted and their affair became common knowledge.<sup>65</sup> María Antonia's last deed for her brother was to arrange the return of his remains to the Chapel of the Holy Trinity in Caracas as per his will, but she died on October 7, 1842, before this was accomplished.<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusion

María Antonia Bolívar was a member of the social elite in colonial Venezuela.<sup>67</sup> She was an educated, intelligent, and literate woman, but her role in society as wife and mother was defined by law, tradition, and social mores. Before the war for independence began, she led a sheltered life, fulfilling her destiny as wife and mother, but once hostilities began, her life was radically changed by war, exile and poverty. María Antonia held divided loyalties during the conflict. She gave her political support to the Spanish King and the royalist cause by sheltering his supporters and petitioning for a pension and a return to her homeland, but she also communicated with her brother, Simón Bolívar, regarding family rural and urban properties, mines and estates, as well as political issues, and she was sympathetic to his needs. The ties of blood were strong, despite their political differences. She assumed managerial and administrative responsibilities over his affairs when he was absent from Venezuela and vigorously defended their family interests, although she always sought his opinion before making any final decisions. She was an astute observer of political conditions in Venezuela and kept the Liberator informed of events. Bolívar valued her news and advice, but he cautioned her against any involvement in the turbulent and volatile post independence political world. Women were not to make any significant contribution to the building of a nation in the aftermath of independence. Once the war ended they returned to their domestic and nurturing roles. It was only when women became educated and aware of their status, in the late nineteenth century in the countries of the Southern Cone, that the Feminist movement was born and change began.

## Notes

- 1** Inés Quintero, "María Antonia Bolívar: Convicciones monárquicas de una criolla principal," (paper presented at Central University of Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela, July, 2002), 2. She is the author of the biography entitled *Criolla Principal: María Antonia Bolívar, hermana del Libertador* (Caracas: 2003, reimp. 2005) and *El fabricante de peinetas* (2011).
- 2** Gerhard Masur, *Simón Bolívar* (Albuquerque, 1969), 91. Recent biographies of Bolívar are John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar, A life* (2006) and Elías Pino Iturrieta, *Simón Bolívar, Esbozo biográfico* (2012). Another biographical source on the Bolívars is *Diccionario de historia de Venezuela* (Fundación Polar, 1989, reimp. 1997).
- 3** Juana Bolívar (1779-1847) and her daughter Benigna emigrated to Curaçao, then to St. Thomas and Haiti before settling in Angostura, Venezuela, in 1819. She returned to Caracas in 1822.
- 4** *Sir Robert Ker Porter's Caracas Diary, 1825-1842: A British Diplomat in a Newborn Nation*, ed. Walter Dupouy (Caracas, 1966), 413.
- 5** For the contributions of women to the independence movement in northern South America, see Evelyn M. Cherpak, "The Participation of Women in the Independence Movement in Gran Colombia, 1810-1830" in *Latin American Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Westport, CT, 1978)
- 6** José Dolores Monsalve, *Mujeres de independencia* (Bogotá, 1926), 23, 54, 55, 58; José Félix Blanco, *Bosquejo histórico de la revolución de Venezuela* (Caracas: 1960), 206.
- 7** Luis Avilés Pérez, "Anotaciones sobre María Antonia Bolívar," *Boletín de historia y antigüedades* XXIV (February 1937):88.
- 8** "Gestiones ante el consejo de guerra. Sumaria información de la conducta política de Doña María Antonia Bolívar," *Boletín de la academia nacional de la historia* XXXIII (July-September 1950):319.
- 9** "Desde este momento son tuyos, puesto que la Patria necesita soldados para su defensa. Procede a formar tu nuevo batallón." Pinzón Uzcátegui, "La hermana de Bolívar donó a la patria 300 esclavos." *Boletín historia: órgano de academia de historia de Cartagena de Indias* IV (February 6, 1930):68.
- 10** "Gestiones ante el consejo de guerra," 329-330.
- 11** José Tomás Boves (1782-1814) served in the Spanish Army where he won victories over the Republican Army in the plains. He had a reputation for extreme cruelty toward his enemies.
- 12** Francisco Javier Yanes, *Historia de la provincia de Cumaná en la transformación política de Venezuela desde el día 27 abril de 1810 hasta el presente año de 1821* (Caracas, 1949), 148.
- 13** Narciso Coll y Prat, *Memoriales sobre la independencia de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1960), 297.
- 14** Quintero, "María Antonia Bolívar," 5.
- 15** Avilés Pérez, Anotaciones, 89.
- 16** "A Vuestra Autoridad suplico que en fuerza de las razones expuestas y en obsequio de la inocencia, se digné disponer mi admisión y la de mi familia en esa capital con la libertad y entrega de todos mis bienes tomando al efecto las justificaciones que van ofrecidas." Quintero, "María Antonia Bolívar", 7.
- 17** "... Cuando los reformadores de Venezuela empezaron sus movimiento para cambiar la faz del Gobierno, no pude manifestar de otra suerte mi disgusto y oposición a aquellas novedades que abandonando la capital y retirándome al pueblo de Macarao. Desde aquel retiro vi sucederse las vicisitudes y progresivos horrores de tan funesta revolución con el dolor propio de una mujer reflexiva y de un tierna madre que veía desaparecer a pasos precipitados la tranquilidad general del territorio, que observaba el incremento que tomaban las divisiones intestinas, el espíritu de la discordia, el fanatismo de la igualdad y otros monstruos desoladores de los pueblos. Demasiado apegada a mis principios declamé muchas veces contra la falsa filosofía que nos arrebató el estado de orden para hacernos sucumbir en el desorden y en la anarquía y en el piélago insondable de males y peligros que nos circundaban por todas partes." Ibid., 3.
- 18** Gestiones ante el consejo de guerra, 319-320.



**19** Quintero, "María Antonia Bolívar," 5.

**20** Convenio celebrado entre El Libertador y su hermana María Antonia Bolívar, January 25, 1827, *Papeles de Bolívar*, ed. Vicente Lecuna, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1920) II: 209-212.

**21** "... de su heroísmo y conducta patriótica en la causa del Rey." Royal Order, Madrid, June 20, 1820, *Boletín archivo general de la nación* XXVII (September-October 1941): 150.

**22** Avilés Pérez, "Anotaciones," 88.

**23** Francisco de Paula Santander (1792-1840) served in the patriot army that liberated New Granada at the Battle of Boyacá in 1819. As vice president of Gran Colombia, he acted as chief executive in Bolívar's absence, but when the Liberator returned in 1828 he assumed power. Santander was wrongly implicated in a plot against Bolívar in 1828 and he was exiled. In 1832, he was elected president of Colombia.

**24** John Lombardi, *Venezuela: The Search for Order: The Dream of Progress* (New York, 1982), 152-153.

**25** "Pero di siempre lo que dijiste en Cumaná el año de 14, que serías libertador o muerto. Ese es tu verdadero título, el que te ha elevado sobre los hombres grandes y el que te conservará las glorias que has adquirido a costa de tantos sacrificios: detesta a todo el que te proponga corona porque ése procura tu ruina. Acuérdate de Bonaparte o Iturbide y de otros muchos que no ignoras, estoy bien satisfecha de tu modo de pensar y te creo incapaz de permitir semejante cosa, pero no puedo menos que declararte los sentimientos de mi corazón por el interés que tengo en tu felicidad." "Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar. Correspondencia de parientes del Libertador." *Boletín de la academia nacional de la historia* XVI (April – June 1933):275.

**26** "Mi hermana me dice que en Caracas hay tres partidos, monárquicos, demócratas y pardócratas, que sea yo Libertador o muerto es su consejo. Este será el que seguir, aun cuando supiera que, por seguirlo, pereciera todo el género humano." Simón Bolívar to Francisco de Paula Santander, February 21, 1826. Lecuna, *Cartas* V: 223.

**27** "Dame siempre noticias políticas y de todo porque lo que tú me dices es siempre lo más cierto." Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, July 10, 1825, Vicente Lecuna, ed., 12 vols. *Cartas del Libertador corregidas conforme a los originales* (Caracas, 1919), V: 19.

**28** "Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar," 268.

**29** María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, July 29, 1824, *Papeles de Bolívar*, II:152.

**30** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, April 1825, *Cartas del Libertador*, IV:302.

**31** María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, *Papeles*, II:152.

**32** Lombardi, *Venezuela*, 45.

**33** Masur, *Bolívar* 311.

**34** Simón Bolívar to Francisco de Paula Santander, June 28, 1825, *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, comp. Vicente Lecuna, ed. Harold A Bierck, trans. Lewis Bertrand, 2 vols. (New York, 1951), II:512.

**35** "Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar," 278.

**36** "Ven aunque sea por poco tiempo, pero trae aunque sea mil hombres de tropa blancos porque esta tropa aquí está muy maleada." Ibid., 267.

**37** "...asuntos políticos que son tan necesarios como lo de guerra." Ibid.

**38** Lombardi, *Venezuela*, 155..

**39** "Este país es perdido. ...sino vienes muy pronto o tomas medidas enérgicas que lo pueden salvar." María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, July 11, 1830, *Papeles*, II: 166-167.

**40** "Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,"285.

**41** “Nuestra familia estamos siempre esperando la muerte, porque algunos los más deschavetados o furiosos dicen que debe ser destruida la familia Bolívar hasta la quinta generación.” María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, July 11, 1830, *Papeles*, II: 166-167.

**42** María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, March 28, 1826, *Ibid*, 16; “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 292.

**43** “Te consejo que no te mezcles en los negocios políticos ni te adhieras ni opongas a ningún partido. Deja marchar la opinión y las cosas aunque las creas contrarias a tu modo de pensar. Una mujer debe ser neutral en los negocios públicos. Su familia y sus deberes domésticos son sus primeras obligaciones. Una hermana mía debe observar una perfecta indiferencia en un país que está en estado de crisis peligrosa, y donde se me ve como el punto de reunión de las opiniones.” Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, August 10, 1826, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, VI: 53.

**44** María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, July 29, 1824, *Papeles*, II:153,170.

**45** Power of Attorney on the Aroa Mines, March 31, 1824, *Selected Writings*,443-444.

**46** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 265; María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, March 28, 1826, *Papeles*, II: 159-160.

**47** *Papeles*, II:154.

**48** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, October 24, 1825, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, V: 145; “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 165.

**49** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 276.

**50** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, September 8, 1828, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, VIII: 50.

**51** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, November 19, 1828, *Ibid.*, 124.

**52** Lino Clemente (1767-1834) was appointed secretary of war and secretary of the navy in 1810. He signed the declaration of independence in 1811 and the first Venezuelan Constitution. During the war for independence and the early days of the republic, he organized the siege of Cartagena and headed the Department of Zulía where he fought troops of General Pablo Morillo. He was head of military forces in the province of Caracas in 1827, and director general of the Department of Revenue in 1829 before he retired from public life in 1830.

**53** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, February 5, 1829, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, VIII: 238.

**54** “Por esta razón ,he transmitido mi poder a otros, que lo entienden mejor que tú. Déjalos, pues, obrar y no te metas en nada, especialmente en cosa de papeles y de ello te quedará muy agradecido.” Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, August 4, 1829, *Ibid.*, IX: 65-66.

**55** *Diccionario de historia de Venezuela* ed. Manuel Pérez Vila (Caracas, 1988) I: 413.

**56** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 274.

**57** *Ibid.*, 269-270, 281; Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, March 9,1827, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, VI:221.

**58** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar”, 269.

**59** Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, July2, 1827, Bolívar, *Cartas del Libertador*, VI:326.

**60** “Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, April 7, 1825, *Ibid.*, IV:326.

**61** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar,” 274.

**62** “Simón Bolívar to María Antonia Bolívar, February 8, 1826, *Papeles de Bolívar*, II:157; María Antonia Bolívar to Simón Bolívar, March 28,1826,*Ibid.*,160.

**63** “Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar”, 271.

**64** Last Will and Testament of Simón Bolívar, December 10, 1830, *Selected Writings*, II: 768.

**65** *Sir Robert Ker Porter's Caracas Diary*, 761, 935.

**66** María Antonia Bolívar to Carlos Soubllette, April 14, 1838, *Papeles de Bolívar* , II:169; Avilés Pérez, "Anotaciones,"102.

**67** For the best general work on the Latin American woman during the colonial period, see Susan M. Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000).

**Bibliography**

Avilés Pérez, Luis. "Anotaciones sobre María Antonia Bolívar." *Boletín de historia y antigüedades* XXIV (1937): 88-102.

Blanco, José Félix. *Bosquejo histórico de la revolución de Venezuela*. Caracas: Biblioteca de la academia nacional de la historia. 1960.

*Cartas del Libertador corregidas conforme a los originales*. Edited by Vicente Lecuna. Caracas: Lit. y Tip. del comercio. 1929-1959.

"Cartas dirigidas a Bolívar. Correspondencia de parientes del Libertador." *Boletín de la academia nacional de la historia* XVI (April –June 1933): 268-311.

Coll y Prat, Narciso. *Memoriales sobre la independencia de Venezuela*. Caracas: Academia Nacional, 1960.

*Diccionario de historia de Venezuela*. Edited by Manuel Pérez Vila. Caracas: Fundación Polar,1988.

"Gestiones ante el consejo de guerra. Sumaria información de la conducta política de Doña María Bolívar." *Boletín de la academia de la historia* XXXIII (July-September 1950): 319-327.

*Latin American Women in Historical Perspective*. Edited by Asunción Lavrin. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978.

Lombardi, John. *Venezuela: The Search for Order: The Dream of Progress*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Masur, Gerhard. *Simón Bolívar*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

Monsalve, José Dolores. *Mujeres de independencia*. Bogotá: Biblioteca de historia nacional, 1926.

*Papeles de Bolívar*. Edited by Vicente Lecuna. Madrid: Editorial-America. 1920.

Quintero, Inés. "María Antonia Bolívar: Convicciones monárquicas de una criolla principal." Unpublished paper presented at the Central University of Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela (July 2002): 1-11.

Royal Order, Madrid, June 20, 1829. *Boletín de archivo general de la nación* XXVII (September-October 1941): 150.

*Selected Writings of Bolívar*. Edited by Harold A. Bierck, compiled by Vicente Lecuna and translated by Lewis Bertrand. New York: Colonial Press, 1951.

*Sir Robert Ker Porter's Caracas Diary, 1825-1842: A British Diplomat in a Newborn Nation*. Edited by Walter Dupouy. Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1966.

Uzcátegui, Pinzón. "La Hermana de Bolívar donó a la patria 300 esclavos." *Boletín historia: órgano de la academia de la historia de Cartagena de Indias* V (February 6, 1930): 68-69.

Yanes, Francisco Javier. *Historia de la provincia de Cumaná en la transformación política de Venezuela desde el día 27 de abril de 1810 hasta el presente año de 1821*. Caracas: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación. 1960.



