

José de San Martín, (born Feb. 25, 1778, Yapeyú, viceroyalty of Río de la Plata [now in Argentina]—died Aug. 17, 1850, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Fr.), Argentine soldier, statesman, and national [hero](#) who helped lead the revolutions against Spanish rule in [Argentina](#) (1812), [Chile](#) (1818), and [Peru](#) (1821).

Early life and career

San Martín's father, Juan de San Martín, a professional soldier, was administrator of Yapeyú, formerly a Jesuit mission station in Guaraní Indian territory, on the northern frontier of Argentina. His mother, Gregoria Matorras, was also Spanish. The family returned to [Spain](#) when José was six. From 1785 to 1789 he was educated at the Seminary of Nobles in Madrid, leaving there to begin his military career as a cadet in the [Murcia](#) infantry regiment. For the next 20 years he was a loyal officer of the [Spanish](#) monarch, fighting against the Moors in [Oran](#) (1791); against the British (1798), who held him captive for more than a year; and against the Portuguese in the [War of the Oranges](#) (1801). He was made captain in 1804.

The turning point in San Martín's career came in 1808, following Napoleon's occupation of Spain and the subsequent patriotic uprising against the French there. For two years he served the Sevilla (Seville) junta that was conducting the war on behalf of the imprisoned Spanish king Ferdinand VII. He was promoted to the rank of [lieutenant colonel](#) for his conduct in the Battle of Bailén (1808) and was elevated to command of the Sagunto Dragoons after the Battle of Albuera (1811). Instead of taking up his new post, he sought permission to go to [Lima](#), the capital of the viceroyalty of Peru, but traveled by way of London to [Buenos Aires](#), which had become the principal centre of resistance in [South America](#) to the Sevilla junta and its successor, the Cádiz-based Council of Regency. There, in the year 1812, San Martín was given the task of organizing a corps of grenadiers against the Spanish royalists centred in Peru who threatened the revolutionary government in Argentina.

One possible explanation for this startling change of allegiance on the part of a soldier who had sworn fealty to Spain is that it was prompted by British sympathizers with the independence movement in Spanish America and that San Martín was recruited through the agency of James Duff, 4th Earl of Fife, who had fought in Spain (and who caused San Martín to be made a freeman of Banff, Scot.). In later years, San Martín averred that he had sacrificed his career in Spain because he had responded to the call of his native land, and this is the view taken by Argentinian historians. Undoubtedly, peninsular Spanish prejudice against anyone born in the Indies must have rankled throughout his career in Spain and caused him to identify himself with the creole revolutionaries.

In the service of the Buenos Aires government, San Martín distinguished himself as a trainer and leader of soldiers, and, after winning a skirmish against loyalist forces at San Lorenzo, on the right bank of the Paraná River (Feb. 3, 1813), he was sent to Tucumán to reinforce, and ultimately replace, General [Manuel Belgrano](#), who was being hard pressed by forces of the viceroy of Peru. San Martín recognized that the Río de la Plata provinces would never be secure so long as the royalists held Lima, but he perceived the military impossibility of reaching the centre of viceregal power by way of the conventional overland route through Upper Peru (modern Bolivia). He therefore quietly prepared the masterstroke that was his supreme contribution to the liberation of southern South America. First, he disciplined and trained the army around Tucumán so that, with the assistance of gaucho *guerrilleros*, they would be capable of a holding operation. Then, on the pretense of ill health, he got himself appointed governor intendant of the province of Cuyo, the capital of which was [Mendoza](#), the key to the routes

across the Andes. There, he set about creating an army that would link up overland with the soldiers of the patriotic government in Chile and then proceed by sea to attack Peru.

Campaign across the Andes

To his disappointment, when the first stage of this plan was nearing completion, loyalist forces recaptured Chile (although the Chilean liberator, Bernardo O'Higgins, was able to escape to Mendoza). This made it necessary for San Martín to fight his way westward across the formidable barrier of the Andes. This was accomplished between Jan. 18 and Feb. 8, 1817, partly by a double bluff, which caused the Spanish commander to divide his forces in order to guard all possible routes, and more especially by careful generalship that ensured the maximum concentration of force at the enemy's weakest point, backed by adequate supplies. San Martín's skill in leading his men through the defiles, chasms, and passes—often 10,000 to 12,000 feet (3,000 to 4,000 m) above sea level—of the Andean cordillera has caused him to be ranked with Hannibal and Napoleon. On February 12 he surprised and defeated the royalists at Casas de Chacabuco and took Santiago, where he refused the offer of the governorship of Chile in favour of Bernardo O'Higgins (who became supreme director) because he did not wish to be diverted from his main objective, the capture of Lima. Nevertheless, it took him more than a year to clear the country of royalist troops. He finally routed the principal remaining armies, some 5,000, on April 5, 1818, at the [Battle of Maipú](#).

The next stage of San Martín's plan involved the creation of the Chilean navy and the accumulation of troop ships. This was accomplished, despite a shortage of funds, by August 1820, when the rather shoddy fleet, consisting mainly of armed merchant ships, under the command of Thomas Cochrane (later 10th Earl of [Dundonald](#)), left Valparaíso for the Peruvian coast. Cochrane, whom San Martín found a cantankerous colleague, had failed the year before to take the chief port, Callao, which was well-defended. The port was therefore blockaded, and the troops were landed to the south near Pisco; from this point they could threaten Lima from the landward side. True to his cautious nature, San Martín resisted the temptation to assault the capital, which was defended by a superior force, and waited for almost a year, until the royalists, despairing of assistance from Ferdinand VII (who had since been restored to the Spanish throne), withdrew to the mountains. San Martín and his army then entered Lima, the independence of Peru was proclaimed on July 28, 1821, and the victorious revolutionary commander was made protector.

San Martín's position was nevertheless insecure. He had broken with his supporters in Buenos Aires when, against their wishes, he insisted on pressing on to Lima; he was unsure of the loyalty of the Peruvian people and of the backing of some of his officers, many of whom suspected him of dictatorial or monarchical ambitions; and he lacked the forces to subdue the royalist remnants in the interior. Moreover, Simón Bolívar, who had liberated the northern provinces of South America, had annexed [Guayaquil](#), a port and province that San Martín had hoped would opt for incorporation in Peru. He therefore decided to confront Bolívar.

Meeting with [Bolívar](#)

The two victorious generals met on July 26, 1822, in [Guayaquil](#), where Bolívar had already taken control. What passed between them in their secret discussions is unknown, but what is clear is that San Martín hurried back to Lima, a disappointed man. There, seriously ill, faced by recriminations and overt disaffection, he resigned his protectorship on September 20. In a message to the Peruvian Congress he left a farsighted warning: "The presence of a successful soldier (no matter how disinterested) is dangerous to the States that have just been constituted."

The rest of his life was spent in exile with his daughter, in Brussels, Paris, and Boulogne-sur-Mer, wisely avoiding any further involvement in the anarchic situations that marred the early history of the newly independent nations. He died in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1850.

Assessment

San Martín's contribution to the cause of independence was his military skill. The boldness of his plan to attack the viceroyalty of Lima by crossing the Andes to Chile and going on by sea, as well as the patience and determination with which he executed it, was undoubtedly the decisive factor in the defeat of Spanish power in southern South America. Whether at Guayaquil he consciously made a great renunciation of personal ambition so that Bolívar, and with him the cause of independence, might triumph, or whether he went into voluntary exile because Bolívar made it clear that he was not prepared to help Peru so long as San Martín remained in control, remains an unresolved historical problem.

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