CHAPTER TWO

Nature, God, and Nation in Revolutionary Venezuela

The Holy Thursday Earthquake of 1812

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Modern nations, careful of their own remembrance, snatch from oblivion the history of human revolutions, which is that of ardent passions, and inveterate hatred. It is not the same with respect to the revolutions of the physical world. They are described with the least accuracy, when they happen to coincide with the period of civil dissents.

—Alexander von Humboldt, *Narrative of Travels*

If nature opposes us, we will struggle against her and force her to obey us.

—Simón Bolívar, March 26, 1812

† On the morning of March 26, 1812, Venezuelans began preparing for the Holy Thursday celebrations later that day. That particular Holy Thursday was more than just a religious holiday; it also marked an important political milestone for the young republic. Two years earlier, on Holy Thursday of 1810, the patriot cabildo of Caracas had deposed...
though join the religious processions and churches, tumbled down in all and "the afternoon, the Grenadiers waited everything; and the crash of knees in to attend Mass. Afterward, the plaza mayor in front of the cathedral was to be the scene of the day's most important ceremonies. Fusiliers and grenadiers waited in formation at the doors of the cathedral, ready to join the religious processions as they emerged from the cathedral after Mass. Suddenly, tiles began to fall from the buildings, houses cracked, and "the earth began to move with a horrifying noise." A French eyewitness wrote that "shocks succeeded each other with incredible rapidity; and were so strong that persons standing and walking tottered, and were even thrown to the ground." Across the city "public houses, public buildings, and churches, tumbled down in all directions. Clouds of dust enveloped everything; and the crash of edifices, with their dead and wounded inhabitants, exhibited terrible spectacles on every side." Many who fell to their knees in prayer at the first tremor were crushed by falling buildings. In the Plaza San Jacinto, a journalist named José Domingo Díaz saw "the greater part of the temple collapse, and there also, amid the dust and the death, I witnessed the destruction of a city that had enchanted both its natives and foreigners.”

Similar scenes were played out across central and western Venezuela, along the coastal cordillera and the Andes. Sebastián Bueno, the parish priest of the small coastal town of Choroní, was celebrating Mass when "a terrifying earthquake, accompanied by a horrifying subterranean roar appeared about to consume us all; the earth shook so hard that it threw up boulders from its center; it sundered in various places, vomiting streams of water, and knocked down the buildings of this valley, in whose ruins we would have all been buried, if God had not taken care to show us his mercy, permitting this assault to last only three minutes.” Fortunately, few people in Choroní were hurt. Other cities and towns were not so lucky. The French soldiers Poudexn and Mayer wrote that the city of "San Felipe was so thoroughly destroyed, that it was difficult to find traces that it had ever existed." More than half of San Felipe's population perished, and the death toll must have included many members of the patriots' operational army stationed there. In the western city of Mérida, the city's bishop and most of its leading clergy were killed when the cathedral collapsed. "Mérida no longer exists," wrote a survivor named Francisco de Yepes, "and half of its inhabitants are buried in the ruins.” The destruction also extended to the coastal port cities of La Guaira and Puerto Cabello, the interior cities of Barquisimeto and San Felipe, and a host of smaller communities. In a few short minutes, the earthquake killed ten thousand people in Caracas and La Guaira, and possibly twenty thousand more people across Venezuela. In the following weeks, aftershocks continued to shake the country. On April 4, the country suffered an aftershock almost as large as the original earthquake. Díaz remembered that "those were eight hours in which we tasted all the bitterness of the death that we saw at our feet." This aftershock "completed the destruction of those things which had escaped the former.”

According to modern geologic research, the Holy Thursday earthquake appears to have been produced by a displacement between the Caribbean and the South American tectonic plates, which meet in Venezuela. The shocks probably traveled along the Morón and Boconó faults, moving east to west along the coastal cordillera from Caracas to Puerto Cabello, and then southwest down to the Venezuelan Andes. The most seriously damaged cities were all situated close to these fault lines. The earthquake had three major foci. The first was in Caracas, its port city of La Guaira, and the surrounding coastal region. The second was roughly three hundred kilometers to the west, around the patriot strongholds of Barquisimeto and San Felipe. The third was the Andean city of Mérida, in southwestern Venezuela. Curiously, as Humboldt later noted, the lowland cities of "La Victoria, Maracay, and Valencia, scarcely suffered at all, despite their proximity to the capital.” Some seismologists and geologists argue that the Holy Thursday earthquake was a single seismic event with three foci; others argue that the event in Mérida was separate from the one that struck central and western Venezuela; still others argue that there were three separate but almost simultaneous events. They also disagree on the scale of these events, with estimates ranging from six to eight on the Richter scale. While the geologic specifics may be contested, one central fact is clear: patriot cities bore the brunt of the shock, while the royalist cities escaped virtually unscathed. The royalist strongholds of Maracaibo and Coro did experience a “very violent and long shock” but suffered “no disaster whatsoever.” Similarly, the royalist city of Angostura in the east was also spared.
The patriots could ill afford this catastrophe. In the colonial period, disaster-stricken cities in Spanish America could count on administrative and logistical support from the empire. The empire had also built a political framework that survived the most catastrophic earthquakes, such as the one that struck Lima in 1746. As Charles Walker has observed, the colonial government “responded effectively to the immediate needs of the population, then their attention turned to preventing social protest and to rebuilding.” Walker’s comparative study of disaster relief in late colonial Latin America found that disasters revealed fractures in colonial domination—“horizontal” fractures between the elites and the lower classes, and an increasing “vertical” division within the upper classes. The Spanish colonial government had contained these fractures. The government of republican Venezuela could not.

Venezuela’s independence had aggravated existing vertical and horizontal fissures in Venezuelan society and produced new ones. The Holy Thursday earthquake struck at a critical moment in the political history of Latin America. Venezuela was the first Spanish colony in the New World to declare independence from Spain. Independence in Venezuela was not, however, the product of a widespread, grassroots movement. The road to independence began in 1808, when French troops invaded Spain and deposed King Ferdinand VII. Napoleon installed his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne, but Spain’s colonies did not recognize Joseph as their legitimate ruler. At first, many colonies pledged allegiance to a Spanish government in the city of Cádiz, which ruled in the name of the deposed Ferdinand VII. In some colonies, however, local elites established juntas of their own, to govern in Ferdinand’s name until he could be restored to the throne. At first, Venezuela followed this essentially conservative pattern. On Holy Thursday of 1810, a group of the local elite deposed the Spanish captain general and replaced him with a Junta Conservadora de los Derechos de Ferdinand VII (Committee to Defend the Rights of Ferdinand VII). The following year, a more radical creole faction gained control of the Caracas junta. This faction included the aged revolutionary Francisco de Miranda, recently returned from European exile, and a young creole named Simón Bolívar. On July 5, 1811, Venezuela declared full independence from Spain and established a congress to govern the new republic.

From the moment it was established, Venezuela’s First Republic was beset with internal divisions, which partly reflected the country’s racial structure—in which a minority of whites dominated a much larger non-white population. A decade earlier, the French traveler François Depons had estimated that whites (creoles and Spaniards) accounted for 20 percent of the population, slaves of African descent for 30 percent, “effranchised slaves, or their descendants” another 40 percent, and Indians the remaining 10 percent. Depons’s categories likely simplified a more complex reality. Many of the “Africans” and “Indians” in his count were likely people of combined African, European, and indigenous parentage. In Venezuela, both pure and mixed-race people of African descent were known as pardos, while those of mixed European and Indian descent were known as mestizos. To succeed, the white leaders of the republic needed the support—or at very least the tolerance—of the nonwhite population, especially the pardo majority. For the pardos, independence was a mixed blessing. For example, the constitution abolished many facets of legalized racial and occupational discrimination. But it replaced those older forms of discrimination with new ones. It limited suffrage to property Venezuelan creoles; it abolished the slave trade but allowed for the continuation of slavery. While some pardos chose to side with the republic, others chose to rebel. Small uprisings of pardos broke out across the colony, and in July and August of 1811 a major pardo uprising broke out in the city of Valencia. Patriot troops suppressed this revolt with great difficulty. In addition to these struggles over race and class, divisions emerged within the ruling white elite. Independence sparked a resurgence of regionalism. The leaders of the western provinces of Maracaibo, Coro, and the eastern province of Guayana declared their loyalty to Spain, as a way of regaining autonomy from Caracas. In both regions, the royalists began to raise armies to threaten patriot forces. The constitution of December 1811 also declared freedom of worship. This generated resistance from the Catholic Church, particularly from the archbishop of Caracas, Narciso Coll y Prat. He maintained a facade of reluctant cooperation with the new republic, while at the same time secretly supporting royalist movements across the country.” Nonetheless, before the Holy Thursday earthquake, the government had been able to manage the complex domestic situation—albeit tenuously—and to fend off the royalist incursions from the provinces. The earthquake upset this delicate balance and precipitated the republic’s collapse five months later.

Historical accounts of the First Republic’s collapse commonly overstate the disaster’s psychic impact on the Venezuela’s inhabitants, while
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God, Nature, and the Politics of Divine Wrath

Even as the dust was settling on Holy Thursday, royalist and patriot leaders alike sought to control the public discourse on the catastrophe—to establish a dominant interpretation. Broadly speaking, the royalist leadership argued that the earthquake was divine punishment for Venezuela's religious and political apostasy. They called for Venezuela's populace to repent and return to the fold of church and crown. In contrast, the patriots publicly contended that the earthquake was simply a natural catastrophe, with no broader divine or political significance. It was not, in this interpretation, divine punishment for anything. Venezuela's political elites—on both sides—conducted a vigorous public debate on these issues in the country's official publications, its newspapers, and in its pulpits. It is more difficult to know what ordinary Venezuelans made of the catastrophe. Many of them did see the disaster as divine punishment, but they did not politicize it in the way that the royalist elites had hoped. The earthquake produced a widespread popular outpouring of grief and repentance, cast in religious terms. But this did not translate into overt political protest or resistance. Most often, popular responses to the Holy Thursday earthquake followed the patterns of response of the colonial era. Divine punishment was interpreted primarily as response to sin—both individual and communal—and not as a response to Venezuela's political situation.

The royalists found signs of divine anger everywhere they looked. Shortly after the shaking ceased, priests in Caracas preached extemporaneous sermons that claimed the earthquake was divine punishment meted out to Venezuela for having rebelled against Ferdinand VII. The royalist José Domingo Díaz reported that when the Trinidad church collapsed, a stone from one of its pillars rolled across the plaza and knocked down the gallows where the bodies of executed royalists had been hung the previous July. The only pillar of the church that remained standing was the one that bore the Spanish royal coat of arms. Royalists repeated these and other stories to mount a propaganda campaign harping on the theme of divine punishment. In the royalist stronghold of Guayana, officials circulated an edict that argued that the earthquake had been a "punishment from Heaven sent to the infidel citizens of Caracas." Outside observers also noted that this interpretation of the disaster posed a serious political threat to patriot government. The earthquake was a death blow to Miranda, and his followers," wrote a British naval officer from La Guaira, "if the adherents of Ferdinand the Seventh do not lose time in taking advantage of the effect which this calamitous visitation has had on the minds of the populace. [The earthquake] gave a degree of solemnity to the calamity which was truly awful, and inspired very generally an Idea that it was a Judgment of the Almighty upon them, manifesting his displeasure at their defection from Loyalty to their Sovereign."
Patriot responses to the earthquake were more varied. Some sought a more positive interpretation of divine punishment, while others dismissed the notion of divine punishment altogether. The journalist José Domingo Díaz found one patriot leader, don Rafael de León, walking through the ruined city "with the happiest face I had ever seen... congratulating everyone 'because God had so clearly shown his will by destroying even the houses that had been built by the Spaniards.' Díaz's account is also the only source for the widely repeated account of Simón Bolívar's movements immediately after the earthquake. Díaz claims to have found Bolívar climbing on top of some ruins near the Plaza of San Jacinto, trying to assess the damage. "He saw me and said to me the following impious and extravagant words: 'If nature opposes us we will struggle against her and force her to obey.'" While Díaz intended this as a criticism of Bolívar, Venezuelan nationalists later enshrined this phrase as the "Mensaje de San Jacinto." It would be easy to dismiss Díaz's account as apocryphal, since he was a bitter enemy of the patriots. Yet patriot writings published in the weeks following the earthquake suggest that his accounts of Bolívar and de León were consistent with prevailing patriot interpretations of the earthquake. De León's almost comically optimistic interpretation was echoed by a passage in the patriot newspaper the "Gazeta de Caracas," which noted that earthquakes were phenomena "that undoubtedly contribute to the beautification of nature." Similarly, Bolívar's claim that the earthquake was an act of nature rather than an act of God also reflected prevailing patriot interpretations of the disaster in the following months.

Through April, May, and June of 1812, the leaders of patriot government and the Catholic Church argued over the earthquake's meaning, both publicly and privately. Both sides were concerned with swaying popular opinion. At first, the government tried to popularize completely naturalistic explanations. On April 4, for example, the government requested Archbishop Coll y Prat to write a pastoral letter that would criticize "superstition" and argue instead that the earthquake was a "common effect in the order of nature." The following day, government leaders asked him to order his parish priests not to blame the earthquake on the political situation. He chose to avoid a direct confrontation with the government but also refused to write the pastoral letter. He questioned the patriots' arguments. "I know quite well that rain, hail, lighting, and earthquakes are effects of natural causes," wrote Coll y Prat, "but I am also aware... that the Supreme Author of nature who governs, directs, and moves his agents, uses them to punish vices." He did not directly criticize the political system but pointed to the rampant partisanship, impiety, and libertinage that plagued the republic. He compared Caracas unfavorably to the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God had destroyed for their sins. He did offer to write a pastoral letter that would ask his priests to call for a return to public order and tranquility, and to have their parishes perform acts of penitence. These suggestions appear not to have satisfied the government. It was only three months later, in June of 1812, that the archbishop finally submitted a pastoral letter on the earthquake for official approval. The letter reiterated his earlier position: while the earthquake was not punishment for having rebelled against Spain, it was punishment for the widespread immorality that he saw in the republic. He closed by saying that "religion is the soul of all states. Be true Catholics and all will be perfect and settled." But true virtues "can neither be learned nor practiced outside the Apostolic, Roman, Catholic Church." So implicitly, but not very subtly, Coll y Prat was arguing that the earthquake had been caused in part by the republic's decision to allow freedom of worship.

Aside from their debates with the church, the patriots also began a publicity campaign to show that the earthquakes could not possibly be connected to the political system. For example, a broadsheet published on April 13 noted that Caracas had suffered earthquakes when the country was under the "tyrant" king, as had Lima, Acapulco, and Guatemala. It concluded that earthquakes carried no political agenda and were just "effects of nature." The patriot "Gazeta de Caracas" reprinted an official report of a 1641 earthquake that had caused proportionally similar damages to Caracas, even though the city's citizens had then described themselves as "most loyal vassals" of the king. The cabildo (town council) of Caracas criticized those who characterized the earthquake as divine punishment for political sins, because "these effects of natural causes happen in all countries of the world, in republics as in monarchies, in Christian, non-Christian, infidel, and protestant countries."

The patriots also tried to sidestep the issue of divine wrath by drawing a distinction between religion and superstition. This way, they hoped that their criticisms of "divine wrath" would not be seen as a public attack
against the Catholic Church. They described religion as a "civic virtue," while it was "superstition, fanaticism, and ignorance [that] attribute the natural effects of creation to political opinions." Other patriot publications allowed that the earthquake might have had a divine origin but argued that God's actions were not in any way connected to Venezuela's politics. An official broadsheet described the patriots as "religious" and "Christian" and argued that "earthquakes are not made to punish vices, but to test our constancy, and to remind us that there is a supreme being who can destroy in an instant all that exists in creation." Other patriot writings from this time take a slightly different position, arguing simply that "God rewards and punishes in his kingdom, and we in ours." Still other documents argued that the earthquake was not divine punishment, but rather a divine test of republican virtue: "God . . . wishes to try your firmness, and to make you worthy of the Liberty which you have gained over your tyrants. That Liberty is a supreme felicity, which cannot be merited, enjoyed, or preserved without the Heroism of Virtue, Patience in Calamities . . . ![If you are dismayed in the holy work which you have commenced against the ambitious, you will again be slaves and unworthy to be free." 27

Most ordinary Venezuelans, however, do not appear to have interpreted the earthquake in purely naturalistic terms. Instead, following colonial patterns, they interpreted it in religious terms. One priest noted prosaically that "these inhabitants, as Catholics, have no other consolation than attending the sacraments of penitence and communion." In Caracas, the "stunned and tearful" survivors flocked to the plazas, fell to their knees, and begged for divine forgiveness. In La Guaira, an English sea captain found a "most awful and affecting scene": "hundreds of suffering inhabitants were seen mixed with heaps of ruins, and many of them still yet alive with their heads out, imploring assistance from their fellow citizens, who, instead of affording them aid, were throwing themselves prostrate before images, beating their breasts, and imploring for themselves the protection of their saints."28 These reports are more than simply exaggerations of foreign observers. Internal reports sent by parish priests to Narciso Coll y Prat, the archbishop of Caracas, speak of similar popular responses. A priest in Puerto Cabello, Joseph Felix Roscio, reported that after the earthquake he went to the town plaza, where the people had congregated and "exhorted them to repent, as the only means to placate the wrath of God irritated by our sins. Your lordship would be pleased to see how the people crowded to the confessional to purify their consciences."

For several days after the disaster, Roscio heard confessions from three in the morning until twelve at night.29 Similar scenes were played out across the afflicted regions, as priests quickly set up makeshift chapels and confessions in tents to deal with the widespread popular demand for religious consolation. There is a significant silence in these reports—none of these letters from parish priests to the archbishop connect the earthquake to politics in any way.

While ordinary Venezuelans might have sought spiritual consolation, most of them did not—as royalists hoped and patriots feared—interpret the disaster as divine punishment for their politics. After the earthquake, according to one British account, some survivors sought "to make atonement for their past bad conduct, married the women with whom they had cohabited for many years previous; and even instances have occurred of men of property espousing their slaves, with whom they had illicit intercourse. In fact, every thing was forgotten but a regard to the salvation of their souls."30 Such behavior suggests that these Venezuelans interpreted divine wrath as punishment for individual sins, rather than collective ones. The turn to the confessional also suggests that most survivors interpreted divine punishment in individual terms.

Other Venezuelans responded to the disaster in a completely secular, pragmatic manner. While some prayed, others looted the ruins and the victims. As in accounts of other disasters in colonial Latin America, the descriptions of the looters are frequently racialized. George Robertson, from England but then in Valencia, reported that the city of San Felipe "was plundered by the Sambos [a derogatory term for people of African descent] immediately after the earthquake." In Caracas, according to the British major George Dawson Flinter, "Negroes were to be seen entering the houses that were still standing . . . carrying off every thing that they could lay hands on; and it has been related to me . . . that those who were buried up to the necks in the ruins . . . had the earrings dragged out of their ears."31 Both are hearsay accounts reported to foreigners, whose accounts in turn often highlighted the supposed barbarity of nonwhites. Nonetheless, in much of Europe and Latin America, postdisaster looting was common, and there is no reason to suppose that behaviors in Venezuela were any different. Given the racial structure of the population, it is likely that many of the looters were nonwhites. In any case, the accounts of looting reported here suggest that not all ordinary Venezuelans were paralyzed or overwhelmed with superstition.
The popular responses to the Holy Thursday earthquake and its aftershocks reveal the strength of colonial cultural structures in revolutionary Venezuela. Only a handful of Venezuelans appear to have interpreted the event in purely naturalistic terms. Simón Bolívar's proclamation in the Plaza San Jacinto still represented a minority opinion rather than the mainstream of popular thought. Many ordinary Venezuelans still turned to God and the church for succor in times of crisis. Through their actions—their confessions, their public penitence, and their marriages—they showed that they did not accept the purely naturalistic interpretations advanced by the patriots. On the other hand, these same people seem not to have accepted the prevailing royalist interpretation that the earthquake was punishment for Venezuela's purported political sins. While the disaster produced immediate and widespread popular religious mobilization, this did not translate into the direct popular political action that the royalists had hoped for and the patriots had feared.

**The Political Crisis:**

**Republican Government and Disaster Management**

The earthquake produced a vicious circle of material and ideological crises. It produced critical shortages of capital, food, weapons, and soldiers. These shortages made it difficult for the republic to manage the disaster from within and to fend off the royalist challenge from without. This in turn contributed to a domestic and international crisis of confidence in the republic, causing many Venezuelans to abandon the patriot cause and making it difficult for the government to get aid from abroad. In response to these challenges, political power in the republic became increasingly concentrated—and increasingly vulnerable. It was these crises, rather than popular superstition, that ultimately shifted popular support back to the royalist side.

The earthquake was a catastrophe for the patriot military forces and a boon to the royalists. Many patriot troops stationed in Caracas—including sappers, artillerymen, and “a regiment of troops of the line”—were killed when the San Carlos barracks collapsed. In western Venezuela, the earthquake broke a critical military standoff. Before the earthquake, a force of some twelve hundred well-disciplined and well-armed patriot troops stationed in Barquisimeto had blocked the advance of a royalist invasion from Coro. The force of roughly five hundred royalists, led by Domingo de Monteverde, had been forced to stop in nearby Siquisique, because they had run short of food, ammunition, and weapons. When the earthquake struck, Barquisimeto was “completely destroyed along with the majority of its citizens, and its garrison was entombed in the barracks.” More than two-thirds of the patriot troops at Barquisimeto died in the earthquake. Monteverde's royalist troops, stationed on the open plains or in tents, were almost completely unharmed. Following the earthquake, Monteverde sent an advance guard of two hundred troops to Barquisimeto, which they occupied on April 2 without firing a shot. They pulled an arsenal of badly needed weapons and supplies from the ruined patriot garrison, including “four bronze cannons, three of steel, twelve cases of musket balls, over two thousand cartridges, six hundred cannonballs and grapeshot, powder, tents, and other tools.” This gave them the supplies that they desperately needed to continue their advance on the patriot capital of Valencia. In the coming weeks, other cities and provinces in western Venezuela quickly succumbed to the advancing royalist armies. Early in May, royalist forces captured Carora, gaining “three hundred muskets, 12 small guns, and a great quantity of ammunition, without H. M.'s arms having sustained the least injury.” The ruined city of Mérida surrendered to a royalist army from undamaged Maracaibo. By mid-May, six weeks after the earthquake, most of western Venezuela was under royalist control.

In eastern Venezuela, the patriot army in Guayana also suffered a serious blow on Holy Thursday—even though the earthquake had barely been felt in the area. On that morning, royalist forces mounted a surprise attack on a patriot army advancing toward the city of Angostura. One-third of the patriot force was killed or wounded, six hundred were taken prisoner, and they reportedly lost “thirty armed vessels,” and almost all of their weapons and ammunition. They retreated in disorder over land, leaving the royalists in control of the Orinoco River. Later accounts of this event sought to connect it with the earthquake. José Domingo Díaz wrote that “both sides believed that [the earthquake] . . . was divine punishment for the crime of rebellion.” According to Díaz, soldiers in the patriot army were “overtaken by terror and despondency” by the earthquake, while the morale of the royalist forces was given a corresponding boost. In this battle, however, the element of surprise likely had a greater impact on the battle's outcome than did the earthquake.

The royalists' military successes—made possible in large part by the earthquake—helped tip volatile popular sentiment in their favor. As
Monteverde's newly energized and rearmed royalist forces in western Venezuela gained control of Barquisimeto and neighboring settlements, their inhabitants quickly pledged allegiance to King Ferdinand VII. Robert Lowry, the U.S. consul at La Guaira, observed that Monteverde's royalist army "had been joined by a considerable portion of the inhabitants of the interior, among whom the superstitious idea principally excited by the priesthood, that the earthquake was a chastisement of Heaven for abandoning the cause of Ferdinand the Seventh, has pretty generally spread itself." Monteverde himself, however, attributed this popular change of heart primarily to his military success. "The enthusiasm of my troops," wrote Monteverde, "and the cowardice that the enemy has shown... ensure the good success of what has been undertaken, and to this is added the great shock which the earthquake of the 26th has caused to the citizens of these towns." Monteverde's assessment is insightful—popular support followed primarily from military success. But it was primarily the material shocks of the earthquake—rather than the spiritual ones—that had helped shift popular opinion to the royalists.

In addition to its military defeats, the patriot government was also faced with the immense challenge of delivering disaster relief in the areas it still controlled. The resources of Venezuela's republican government were already badly stretched in fighting the royalists. In the days following the earthquake, the government ordered everyone except rescue workers out of Caracas, to prevent outbreaks of cholera and other diseases and to prevent injuries from the further collapse of buildings. Municipal governments and the Catholic Church conducted most of the disaster relief. In Caracas and La Guaira, survivors set up tent cities on the plains on the outskirts of the cities. The municipal government of Caracas organized teams to clear rubble from the roadways and rivers to allow shipments of food to enter the city and to ensure that the survivors had adequate drinking water. Another major challenge was retrieving and disposing of the victims' bodies. Workers in Caracas "have been digging out the bodies ever since [the earthquake], and burning them. It is shocking to see, at the close of the day, heads, arms, and legs, that have been left unburnt, as the fire dies away, and the stench is terrible." In La Guaira, bodies at first were dumped in the sea. When the seas became too heavy to row out safely, workers began to burn corpses forty at a time. As in Caracas, the stench from the bodies was often overwhelming. In early April the government authorized the cabildo of Caracas to recruit workers from the refugee camps and the areas around Caracas to help with the task. Still, such official relief efforts met only a small part of the population's needs.

The international political situation made it virtually impossible for Venezuela's government to seek aid from abroad. The republic could expect no help from Spain, and most other European countries were embroiled in the Napoleonic wars. As the threat of famine grew through April and May of 1812, the Venezuelan government approached the U.S. government for disaster relief. The Venezuelan representative in the United States, Teléforo de Orea, asked the U.S. secretary of state, James Monroe, to relax the U.S. embargo against trade with South America to allow food shipments through. The U.S. Congress refused, fearing that speculators might take advantage. Nevertheless, it did appropriate fifty thousand dollars to supply aid to Venezuela and chartered six ships to send flour, corn, and other food to Venezuela. The aid came far too late: the first ship did not arrive in Venezuela until early June. Furthermore, most of the supplies remained stuck in La Guaira because of shortages of labor and transportation to ship it to the rest of the country. Back in the United States, de Orea also sought official diplomatic recognition for the Venezuelan republic. Although the U.S. Congress was sympathetic to the republican cause, it decided to withhold recognition to see whether the republic would survive. Its vulnerability was becoming more apparent with each passing day.

Famine and misery spread though the shrinking area under patriot control. "Never was any country in a more deplorable state than this at that period," observed U.S. envoy Alexander Scott. When the patriot armies retreated into the coastal mountain range, they lost access to the herds of cattle on the llanos—the grasslands of central Venezuela—which were a key source of food for Caracas. Scott complained that "not a pound of meat could be procured" in Caracas or La Guaira. Caracas got what food it could from Barlovento, the agricultural region to the east of the city. A British observer worried that "the resources of the country were almost totally exhausted, the absence of provisions is threatening to turn into starvation." Later that month the journalist José Domingo Díaz saw hunger "in all its forms for the first time, in a soil which appeared exempt from it by nature." In the besieged patriot areas, the population began to feed on what weeds (verdolaga) they could collect. Dysentery became rampant.

The earthquake also aggravated a growing fiscal and agricultural crises that had begun the year before. In the years 1811–1812, Venezuela accumulated a trade deficit of almost 575,000 pesos. Even before the earthquake,
the government began issuing paper money to make up for the shortfall in revenues. Its only source of hard currency was foreign trade. But the earthquake destroyed much of the productive infrastructure on Venezuela's coffee, sugar, and cacao plantations, whose exports gave Venezuela most of its hard currency. In response, the government began to print more paper money, which led to further inflation. By early June, the value of the paper money had depreciated by almost a third. It had only "imaginary" value, in the words of José Domingo Díaz. Besides the property losses, which the U.S. consul Alexander Scott later estimated to be around four million dollars, the earthquake provoked capital flight from Venezuela. Because of the earthquake, "all foreigners, and every person having the means, are leaving the place for the islands and elsewhere." One observer estimated that "three fourths of the wealth of Caracas are lost." In a single gloomy letter, the patriot lawyer and soldier Francisco Paúl summarized Venezuela's catastrophic economic situation. He noted that commerce was paralyzed—some business owners had been taken from their businesses and pressed into military service, while others were confined to prison "simply because of their origin and nature." In short, concluded Paúl, "there are no businessmen and, as a result, there is no business." The regions still under patriot control could not produce enough food, the liberation of the slaves had led to the collapse of commercial agriculture, and the government's failure to meet its contracts meant that few foreign ships would be willing to trade with Venezuela. The country's domestic and commercial agriculture were almost completely paralyzed.

The earthquake also contributed directly to the collapse of congressional government and the emergence of a dictatorship in Venezuela. Many members of Congress had been killed in the earthquake, and others were too busy working on the rescue efforts to attend sessions. The few members of Congress who did attend expressed concern about how to cope with the recovery efforts, dealing with the potential problems that "malice, aided by superstition, could use to profit from the recent calamity." On April 3, the remaining members of Congress, "convincd ... that the natural and political circumstances in which Venezuela finds itself, demand measures that are incompatible with the calm and meditation of better times," modified the constitution. The new constitution temporarily granted dictatorial powers to a three-person Executive, "so that in the current circumstances it can attend to the salvation of the country." This was meant to be a temporary measure, and they planned to reconvene the full Congress on the 5th of July, the first anniversary of the declaration of independence. But the three-person Executive proved no more capable than the full Congress at managing disaster relief and waging war. By the end of April, it had appointed the controversial Francisco de Miranda head of the army and granted him sweeping powers. Nonetheless, Monteverde's royalist troops kept moving forward through the demoralized patriot cities. He recaptured the patriot capital Valencia on May 3. In desperation, on May 18 the Executive officially named Miranda dictator of Venezuela. This decision split the patriot ranks. The landed creole elite were deeply suspicious of Miranda's radical republicanism. Many patriots did not trust Miranda and obeyed him only with great reluctance.

Faced with crises on all sides, Miranda's government began to unravel. Miranda's patriot army was still larger and better trained than that of Monteverde's royalist forces, but it was completely demoralized. Miranda was unwilling to attack the royalist army because of the "despondency and discontent" so clearly evident in his own forces. Increasingly desperate, on June 19 Miranda imposed martial law. The law allowed Miranda to conscript all free citizens (including pardos) and a thousand slaves. This declaration provoked an insurrection of pardos and slaves in Barlovento on June 24, the day of San Juan Bautista, patron saint of blacks in Venezuela. The insurrection in Barlovento cut Caracas from its remaining source of food. On July 5, the critical patriot garrison at Puerto Cabello betrayed its leader, Simón Bolívar, and defected to the royalists. Faced with a destroyed capital, a demoralized army, a starving citizenry, and an impending race war, Miranda capitulated to Monteverde on the 25th of July. Venezuela's first republic had collapsed. Reflecting on the state of Venezuela in the following months, Alexander Scott concluded that "the earthquake and its fatal consequences, the civil war and its unfortunate termination, the merciless reign of the conquerors, ... the destruction of the Estates, and [the] misery of the inhabitants, have reduced the country to a state from which it will not emerge for years."

**Holy Thursday and the Collapse of the First Republic**

For the royalists, Monteverde's victory proved that the earthquake had been divine punishment for rebellion. On October 15, Archbishop Coll y Prat published the pastoral letter on the earthquake that had been banned by the patriots. He called for a public fast and public acts of penitence. On
October 19, "the image of Nuestra Señora del Rosario, ancient patroness of earthquakes in this capital, was carried from the chapel of Santo Domingo to that of San Pedro, followed by sermons in the plaza mayor." The fast was observed from the 21st to the 24th, and from the 30th to the 30th the church offered the sacrament of penitence to anyone who presented themselves. On October 30, the patroness of earthquakes was returned to the chapel of Santo Domingo. Waiting at the altar were all the royalist high military command and the leadership of the church. This included the victorious general Domingo de Monteverde who, as the royalists had criticized for returning to the burrow somewhat chastened, Collins single 'general of Venezuela and president of the Royal Audiencia of Caracas. It also included the triumphant but somewhat chastened Coll y Prat, whom Monteverde and the royalists had criticized for not having mounted a more active opposition to the patriots. By honoring the patroness of earthquakes, Monteverde and Coll y Prat reaffirmed the unity of church and state and the rule of Ferdinand VII in the troubled province.\(^{47}\)

Not everyone, however, drew the same conclusions about the meanings of the earthquake. Exiled in Cartagena, six hundred miles to the west of Caracas, Simón Bolívar reflected on the collapse of the republican government. He argued that the deaths caused by the earthquake, and the "general consternation" that it caused, "were only of secondary importance among the causes which led to the annihilation of our liberty and independence. Political errors committed by the government had a more direct influence on the catastrophe."\(^{48}\) Bolívar sketched out these lessons in greater detail in his *Manifiesto de Cartagena*, published in December of 1812. He described the earthquake as "the immediate cause of Venezuela's ruin" but continued that "this event could have happened without producing such fatal results had Caracas been governed at that time, by a single authority."\(^{49}\) A centralized government, argued Bolívar, could have responded to the disaster—and to other threats—much more quickly and effectively. The lessons of the earthquake formed the cornerstone of Bolívar's philosophy of government during the long wars of independence that followed.

While the Holy Thursday earthquake did not alone cause the collapse of the First Republic, it changed the course of the collapse. Even without the earthquake, it is unlikely that the First Republic could have survived over the long term. Manuel Lucena Samoral has shown convincingly that the republic faced severe economic problems that would have been difficult to overcome. The republic would also have probably faced repeated insurrections from the paro majority and from the *llaneros*—mestizos from Venezuela's vast grasslands—who did, in fact, help topple the Second Republic in 1814. But had the earthquake not destroyed the patriot garrisons in Caracas and Barquisimeto, they could have counted on more troops and weapons to meet the royalist armies. The patriot army at Barquisimeto would likely have fended off—and possibly even defeated—Monteverde's smaller and poorly armed royalist contingent. These military victories, in turn, might have won the patriots continued popular support. They might have been able to use the reserve army stationed in Caracas to regain control of eastern Venezuela and the Orinoco. Without the earthquake, the Venezuelan Congress would likely have remained in charge of the republic. Miranda would never have had the opportunity to become dictator and the patriots would not have become so internally divided. A more stable republic might also have received diplomatic recognition, foreign aid, and even troops. French mercenaries arrived in Venezuela in June and July of 1812, and a few years later British mercenaries reinforced the patriot armies and contributed to their ultimate victory. Even if the patriot government had lost in the end, a stronger government could have sued for peace and signed an armistice on more equitable terms. Francisco de Miranda might have returned to England to continue drumming up British support for Latin American independence, instead of ending his days in a Spanish prison. Simón Bolívar might have remained just another footnote in history, a minor creole leader in a failed attempt at independence. Had the colony eventually achieved independence—as seems likely—it would have begun its life as a republic with more of its productive infrastructure intact, instead of languishing in poverty and ruin for a half century.

More broadly, the story of the Holy Thursday earthquake sheds light on how societies in Latin America responded to disaster during the age of Independence—a long "middle period" that lasted from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. In spite of the political and social upheaval that accompanied the First Republic, the response to disaster followed well-established colonial patterns. People turned to their faith and the Catholic Church for spiritual consolation. Purely naturalistic interpretations of natural disaster—which had been much in vogue in Europe for at least a century—did not have deep roots in colonial society. The debates over divine punishment among the
royalist and patriot elite suggest that the modern/traditional divide was not absolute. Even Archbishop Coll y Prat allowed that nature followed laws (albeit ones designed by God), while many patriot publications conceded that the disaster may have been divine punishment. Conversely, the repeated elite condemnations of popular “superstition” show how poorly they understood the lives and interests of Venezuela’s majority. At a popular level, the failure of both patriots and royalists alike to make any significant political capital out of the catastrophe shows just how alienated most ordinary Venezuelans were from elite interests on both sides.

From a political perspective, the Holy Thursday earthquake was a dramatic test of a new form of government in Latin America and gave the new republics a foretaste of the domestic and international challenges that they were to face in the years to come. When the disaster struck, the Venezuelan republic was doubly isolated. It could not draw upon the resources of the Spanish empire for disaster relief, as cities across Latin America had done when disaster struck in the colonial period. But since the republic had not been recognized by most of the world’s major powers, it could not count upon the international community for relief either. This might not have mattered so much if the republic had enjoyed more solid support from its own citizens. But the earthquake highlighted the republic’s vulnerability on many fronts. It could not effectively meet the population’s immediate needs, nor could it do much in the way of preventing social protest or rebuilding. The disaster may have tipped popular opinion toward the royalists, but this shift was not motivated primarily by superstition. Rather, it was motivated by the republic’s failure to deal swiftly and adequately with military, economic, and political crises—all of which were aggravated by the earthquake. The collapse of the First Republic showed Bolivar and other patriot leaders that they needed to build their new republics on more solid political foundations.

The Legacies of Holy Thursday
The royalist victory proved fleeting, but the earthquake’s long-term physical and economic consequences endured. Much of Venezuela’s physical and economic infrastructure was in ruins. Over the next seven years, the destruction caused by the earthquakes was compounded by brutal warfare. In 1813, the patriots reconquered much of their lost territory, including Caracas, and established the Second Republic. That republican experiment also failed, and royalists regained control of Caracas in 1814. In 1816, while the colony was in royalist hands, the archbishop and the Ayuntamiento petitioned King Ferdinand VII for financial support for reconstruction. They noted that most of the colony remained in ruins and that its economy was too poor to fund the work of reconstruction on its own. Caracas was in such poor condition that in 1817 the Spanish authorities even considered moving the city to a different location. By 1820, Caracas’s population had fallen to half the size it had been a decade before. In the end, then, the Spanish empire was no longer able to manage natural disasters and contain social fissures as it had in the late colonial period. No doubt, this failure helped the patriots regain control of the nation and its ruined capital in 1821. For much of the nineteenth century, successive governments tried—with only limited success—to rebuild Venezuela’s devastated cities and infrastructure.

Venezuela’s recovery began after independence was finally consolidated in the early 1820s. Even so, ruins continued to dominate the landscapes of Venezuela’s major cities. Upon arriving in La Guaira in the mid-1820s, for example, William Duane from the United States noted that “the effects of the earthquake of the 26th of March 1812 are visible at every step.” One half of the city’s houses were still in ruins. “The dissonance of the cracked bells [in La Guaira’s churches] reminds the inhabitants three or four times [daily] of the calamity. . . . Whole Squares are still in ruins, little having been done but to clear the streets of rubbish.” Caracas was in somewhat better shape. From a distance the view of Caracas was dominated by its famous red roofs, but upon closer inspection Duane found that “one fifth of the city was still in ruins. . . . In this quarter, little has been done but to disencumber the streets of rubbish, which has been thrown within the cracked and tottering walls of the roofless buildings.” The British diplomat Sir Robert Ker Porter found the city in much the same shape several years later. As late as the 1850s, ruined churches, monasteries, and houses still dotted the landscapes of Caracas, and only two bridges provided access to the city. It was not until President Antonio Guzmán Blanco began a program of urban renewal in Caracas during the 1870s and 1880s that the final physical traces of the earthquake in Caracas were erased.

Although the Holy Thursday earthquake’s physical traces are gone, it has gained an increasingly important cultural and political significance. In 1831 Richard Vowell, a former British volunteer in the Venezuelan Lancers,
published a novel entitled *The Earthquake of Caracas*, as part of a trilogy on Venezuelan independence. Much of the novel is pure invention, although Vowell did fight for the patriot armies in Venezuela from late 1817 to 1819 and so witnessed the damage that the earthquake had caused. More significantly, the earthquake—and in particular Bolivar’s "mensage de San Jacinto"—became an iconic moment in the national founding myth of Venezuela. This process began in the early twentieth century, around the time of the centennial of independence. In the 1920s, the Venezuelan artist Tito Salas depicted Bolivar’s proclamation in a painting for Bolivar’s newly restored birthplace. As part of the celebrations of Caracas’s 400th anniversary in 1967, Bolivar’s words were carved onto a monumental wall on the Plaza San Jacinto, in foot-high letters, underneath the shields and flags of all the countries he helped liberate. In a 1967 article celebrating the plaza’s restoration, the historian—and later president—Rafael Caldera described the earthquake as “the moment that split the history of Venezuela in two.” In fact, it did nothing of the kind. If anything, the Holy Thursday earthquake showed the patriots just how fragile the republican project was, and how much work lay ahead of them before they could succeed.

**NOTES**


4. H. Poudenz and F. Mayer, *Memoria para contribuir a la historia de la revolución de la capitania general de Caracas desde la abdicación de Carlos IV hasta el mes de agosto de 1814* (Paris, 1815; repr. in *Tres testigos europeos de la Primera República*, ed. Ramón Escobar Salom [Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1974], 131). Urquinaona estimated San Felipe’s population to be 75,000 people. This is excessively large for the period, and is probably just a typographical error. The true population was probably closer to 7,500. In 1806 Depons estimated San Felipe’s population to be 6,800. See Pedro Urquinaona y Pardo, *Memorias de Urquinaona (Comisionado de la regencia Española para la pacificación del Nuevo Reino de Granada)* (1825; repr. Madrid: Editorial América, 1917), 90; and F. Depons, *Travels in Parts of South America during the Years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804* (London: Phillips, 1806), 126–27.


16. Letter of May 29, 1812, quoted in Report by the Interim Governor of the Province of Guayana, October 20, 1812, 408–9, Tras. 5.4.22, Independencia y República, 1808–1814, Archivo General de la Nación, Caracas, 421–24.


27. Hall of Representatives to the Sovereign People of Caracas, April 9, 1812, WA 1/111, PRO.


34. Cevallos to Governor of Caracaz, May 17, 1812, WA 1/111, PRO.

35. Parra-Pérez, *Historia*, 421; Francisco de Mijares to the Governor of Caracaz, May 15, 1812, WA 1/111, PRO.


38. Domingo de Monteverde to the Governor of Coro, March 29, 1812, Carora, in Muñoz, *Monteverde*, 192.


43. Francisco Paúl to General Miranda, July 7, 1812, in *Epistolario*, 64–67.


47. “Penitenciaría pública,” *Gazeta de Caracas*, November 8, 1812.


