

Jose Tomas Boves and the Legion of Hell: Class Warfare in Venezuela, 1813-1814

By JERRY KNUDSON*

THE men on horseback riding through the Venezuelan town of San Fernando de Apure one day in 1819 halted before a bizarre sight in the main square. There, impaled on a stake, was a human skull—not an uncommon sight in the wartorn years of the struggle for independence, but it was the bird nest inside the skull that caught the eye of José Antonio Páez, patriot commander of the rough cavalymen of the plains who rode behind him. Páez learned that the skull was that of Pedro Aldao, renowned patriot fighter who had been slain five years earlier by the royalist renegade guerrilla, José Tomás Boves. Taking the bleached skull down for burial, the soldiers were startled when a yellow bird flew out. Yellow was the color of the patriot battle flag, and they marveled at this good omen and the two fledglings found inside.¹

In a larger sense, this grim remnant of Pedro Aldao represented thousands of other Venezuelans who had died at the hand of Boves and his Legion of Hell, a fierce horde of plainsmen who had plunged the country into chaos in 1813 and 1814. The story of José Tomás Boves, feared as the Scourge of God and the Lash of Venezuela, never has been told fully, for the memory of this elusive Asturian has been painful to both participants in the herculean struggle for Venezuela. Both sides disavowed him not for his brutality but because under his royalist banner marched the seditious concept of racial and social equality—a concept dangerous for the aristocratic Spanish hierarchy and disastrous for the Creole leaders of the revolution, intent on forming their own hierarchy in a separate government. For essentially the rebellion on the Llanos or plains of Venezuela that Boves touched off in 1813 was not a counter-attack on the patriot separatists, nor a demand for return to things as they were under Spanish rule. It was racial warfare of an intensity that decimated the population of Venezuela and crippled the movement

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for independence. It was social warfare that devastated the countryside and doomed the second republic. In the horrors of pillage and plunder, torture and mass executions, Venezuela careened backward in time to an era of dark savagery. And the scars of that period, today still called "the terrible years," were not limited to isolated skulls found in village squares. Few if any nations have endured such cruel birth pangs, but rather than being baptized in blood, Venezuela almost drowned in it. No one knows the actual number of victims that fell under the policy of *guerra a muerte*—war to the death—but they exceeded those of the French Revolution and probably ran into the hundreds of thousands in a country of meager population.² On the vast plains of the Apure and Orinoco rivers, in provincial villages and the capital itself, the terror spread until it engulfed the country.

The significance of those two dreadful years has been lost in the glow of adulation with which history has enshrined Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, the man who first declared war without quarter. Bolívar exorcized the memory of everything about Boves except that he committed atrocities and that he was Spanish. The struggle to heal the wounds of internecine warfare, and to bring the civil war back to the safer foundation of Venezuela against Spain rather than Venezuela against itself, was not accomplished by Bolívar, but by José Antonio Páez, who captured the loyalty of the plains marauders and directed their wrath against the mother country rather than against their brothers. This dramatic change insured the independence of Venezuela, and in the transformation, the philosophy of Boves was forgotten. The meaning of the Legion of Hell was rediscovered only in 1954 by historian Juan Uslar Pietri, who wrote:

The popular rebellion of Venezuela in 1814 was not a simple local happening, natural in the fighting, but a social event of more breadth than is registered in the history of the American emancipation. We do not find a similar movement in any other part of the continent, if we except colonial Santo Domingo, that can be compared to that of Venezuela.³

José Tomás Boves, protagonist of desperation and focus of Venezuelan despair, was regarded by patriotic Venezuelans as sub-human, a terrifying Attila of the New World, ignorant, despicable. A Spanish writer called him a brilliant military commander, misunderstood but "a greater man than Pizarro."⁴ The almost incredible carnage left in his wake has fascinated all writers of the period, but few have realized that no single man, no single will, could have been responsible for this bloodshed. Boves did not instigate

the plains uprisings of 1813. Underlying causes of social distrust, racial hatred and economic longing had smoldered for decades; Boves merely stepped onto the scene at the propitious moment. He was the catalyst and not the cause; his leadership sharpened the blade of insurrection but did not forge the knife.

The guerrilla leader was born in the Asturian town of Oviedo on September 18, 1782, the son of poor and obscure parents, Manuel de Bobes and Manuela de la Iglesia. His father died when José Tomás was five, and at eleven he left his mother and sisters Maria and Josefa to enter the naval academy of the Royal Asturian Institute. Testimony by his teachers at this school indicated that Boves was a model youth who sent excess pay to his mother, passed the nautical examinations after four years of study, and became a second-class pilot on merchant ships that plied the Mediterranean. Promoted to first-class pilot, he commanded the brigantine *Ligero* for the firm of Pla and Portal, which shuttled trade between the Antilles and the northern coast of South America. While in the Caribbean he became involved in piracy or running contraband, was apprehended, judged guilty by Spanish authorities, and condemned to the prison of Puerto Cabello for eight years. Some Spanish merchants in the Venezuelan port town of La Guaira interceded, however, and had the sentence commuted to confinement in the interior town of Calabozo.⁵ Here on the far reaches of the Llanos, José Tomás Boves discovered his place in the world.

In a few years he made the transition from sailor to trader to guerrilla leader. His trading activities, based on Calabozo, took him far and wide across the Llanos throughout the province of Guarico, and during these years before the revolutionary outbreak of 1810 he came to know the countryside and the men who lived on it. He sold clothing and other goods to the rough Llaneros in return for cattle and hides they had produced or stolen, and in the process he became an expert horseman and judge of men. Physical descriptions of Boves vary; some later writers described his flaming red hair and fiery beard that reached to his chest, but Liborio Llovera, who actually saw the guerrilla chief, recorded a different view: "Of medium height and weight, blonde, and not bad-looking, he subjected whoever surrounded him by his resolute attitude even in the most difficult moments."⁶ Little is known of his personal life except that in Valencia he had an illegitimate son, ironically named José Trinidad Bolívar.⁷

No one can specify what personal quality of this Spaniard commanded the fanatic devotion of the unruly Llaneros, but Boves discovered the touchstone that fired this prairie breed of men. He

traded with them and saw they were in want; he knew they despised the ruling white Creoles of the far-off cities. Boves promised not only the loot of temporary plunder, but redistribution of all white property; he offered freedom (and license) to the slaves, black, mulatto, or zambo; he provided a direction for the aimless and a cause for the apathetic. He turned society upside down and fanned the flames of a racial war. Pietri noted that "He was beyond doubt the chief of strongest personality that treaded on the royalist field during the independence and the most formidable caudillo that the history of Venezuela knows."⁸

The plains arena for this caudillo was described by Boves' contemporary and successor, an adopted son of the Llanos, José Antonio Páez:

In the great expanse of territory, which like the vast surface of the ocean presents around one an immense circle whose center seems to be everywhere, are seen from distance to distance here small villages with few inhabitants, there rustic houses with roofs of dried palm leaves, that in the midst of such a great solitude seem to be the oases of that apparently limitless desert.⁹

The men who roamed these desolate stretches of grasslands, alternately sun-baked and flooded, were keenly aware of themselves. Dwarfed by the immensity of nature, they compensated by pushing bravery to the point of fanaticism. They developed hard attitudes in a harsh land, settling their quarrels by hand-to-hand combat with knives; they were the law in their land-locked domain, and they scoffed with derision at the world outside. When the revolutionary juntas were being formed in the cities, the Llaneros riding herd on their bands of cattle said, "Juntas! We know of no more juntas than those of the beasts we have here."¹⁰ One of their ballads revealed their toughness, wit, and devil-may-care attitude: "My horse and my zamba mistress, If they die at the same time, To the devil with the woman! My horse is what I grieve for."¹¹ And they also had a gnawing sense of social injustice. Páez noted that they sang, "El pobre con agua justa, Y el rico con lo que gusta."¹²

Dissent to the patriot cause appeared early in the stubborn plains region. The republican Congress sent Dr. José Ingacio Briceño to investigate the cause for unrest in Calabozo, and Boves was condemned to death for denouncing the patriot agent. After Briceño left, however, Judge Juan Vicente Delgado changed his mind, deciding to send Boves to republican general headquarters.¹³ When royalist Eusebio Antoñanzas arrived with two hundred men on May 21, 1812, Boves and other prisoners were freed and their captors killed. With a handful of royalists and the fastest horses

available, Boves overtook the few patriots who escaped and killed them.¹⁴ He had nothing left in Calabozo: his shop had been sacked and burned, his pride outraged.¹⁵ Boves enlisted in the royalist cause and succeeded Pedro Arias as military commander of Calabozo at the beginning of 1813. His rapid rise to prominence stemmed from uncovering a patriotic conspiracy in Espino, a nearby town on the Orinoco. A group of patriots in Calabozo, disgusted with the "gross manners and immorality" of commander Boves, conspired to assassinate him when he went to pacify Espino, but the leader of the conspirators betrayed them and surrendered the town.¹⁶ By way of punishment, Boves staged a formal execution, but when the executioners fired their weapons the victims did not fall. Only powder had been placed in the guns! This was repeated time and again, prolonging the agony until the patriots finally were killed with lance thrusts. The reign of terror had begun.¹⁷

Boves remained under the orders of Juan Manuel de Cajigal in Barcelona, but when the Captain General retreated to the Guayana region in June 1813, Boves refused to cross the Orinoco with his Spanish chief. In the small village of Las Piedras he assumed his role as caudillo and began arming the slaves against their masters. By August he had formed the nucleus of his roving band of terrorists, and in the months to come the Llaneros flocked to his standard. The Legion of Hell appealed to the wanderers of the plains, for in its ranks they knew the tangible ends of plunder and rapine; the abstraction of royalty meant little to them and the empty phrases of the patriots even less. Thus, a third force arose on the plains, destined to shatter the country and leave little worth having by either of the original combatants.¹⁸

Like barbaric nomads, the followers of Boves raided the plains region, striking with lightning speed and disappearing as quickly into the prairie vastness from which they came. At first, it was not an army, but small and highly mobile bands which fought, withdrew, reformed, and fought again with fluid dexterity. The men were half-naked and barefoot with spurs attached by leather straps around their ankles. They used sheepskins for saddles and rawhide for bits, and fortunate was he who had a woven horsehair bridle. From their sombreros dangled human ears slashed from white victims; behind them came a convoy of carts and a caravan of women, some of them captives serving as beasts of burden because the infantry preempted the mules to avoid fatigue before battles.¹⁹ Boves never accepted any deserters into his ranks, and he prohibited anyone to recover the wounded, even himself, from the field while the battle was still in progress.²⁰ This phantom horde ate the flesh

of horses killed on the battlefields and anything else that came to hand. At the head of the Legion rode José Tomás Boves, under a skull-and-crossbone banner, his red cape swirling in the dust.²¹

In the closing months of 1813 and throughout 1814 the motley army of Boves increased in size from the original group of eight hundred lancers to about eight thousand men, making the guerrilla's strength predominant in the theater of war. Before the plains uprisings, no more than two or three thousand men had massed on either side in battle.²² Boves commanded a new kind of army, one described by William Robinson, English merchant in La Guaira: "Boves and Rosete had under their command at least seven or eight thousand men, among which there were no more than fifty whites or Spanish Europeans, and a thousand free colored persons; the rest were slaves, negros and zambos."²³ To appeal to these men, Boves used racist methods such as the decree, "There should not remain one white on the Llanos for two reasons: the first, that territory having been destined for the colored, and the second, to assure retreat in case of a defeat. . . ."²⁴

The goal of the Legion of Hell became the systematic destruction of the white race and division of its property; all movable goods were shared immediately after the raids and land was apportioned by bonds.²⁵ Thus, while the city council of Caracas played a "game of children," in the words of a French officer, the human history unfolding on the Llanos was of paramount significance. As historian Pietri noted, "In reality, this struggle of races was a sublimation of a class struggle, because the whites were the possessors of all the riches of Venezuela and the negros and colored persons were the 'pariahs' of that social organization."²⁶

No holds were barred in this frenzied social struggle, for the rules were stated in the terse phrase, *guerra a muerte*. Historians are far from agreement as to who started this policy of genocide,²⁷ but the responsibility seems to rest clearly on Simón Bolívar, whose proclamation from the town of Trujillo on June 15, 1813, stated: "Spaniards and Canary Islanders, count on death, even though being neutral, if you do not actively work for the sake of the liberty of America! Americans, count on life, even when you are guilty!"²⁸ Boves' corresponding Edict of Guayabal, which condemned all whites regardless of their political stand, was not issued until November 1, 1813, four and a half months after the Liberator's decree. Vicente Lecuna, foremost authority on Bolívar, maintained that he was forced to declare war without quarter by the terms of the Spanish blockade declared by the Supreme Council of Spain and the Indies on August 30, 1810, which called for "the complete

extirpation of these evil-doers and [the punishment of] their leaders with all the rigor which the rights of sovereignty authorized. . . ."²⁹ Other writers reasoned that since the Spanish commander Domingo de Monteverde had proclaimed *ley de la conquista* before Bolívar led his invading army from New Granada across the frontier, the Trujillo proclamation was the only possible reply to the Spanish position.³⁰ In one way or another, Simón Bolívar has been excused, and Lecuna regarded proclamation of *guerra a muerte* "the most daring step of American history."³⁰

More significant than the origin of the policy were its effects, for proclamations could not change the death struggle that already gripped Venezuela. The Trujillo document and the Edict of Glayabal merely formalized an existing policy. The patriots hoped to intimidate the Spanish with open reprisals, and to push moderate Creoles into patriot ranks.³¹ On the other hand, Boves seized on the technique to give his property-hungry men free rein in their depredations. Each side maneuvered with cold calculation to capture the political incentive, little caring what the rest of the world thought of their procedure. But the proclamation of *guerra a muerte* gave official status to open-faced genocide, and the fall of the second republic can be traced directly to this savage policy, which stiffened the royalist attitude of most Venezuelans in 1813-1814.³²

One writer has aptly called this period an "epoch of insanity," for neither side could claim the rule of reason.³⁴ Patriot General Rafael Urdaneta wrote that the valleys of Aragua had been "annihilated by the excursions of Boves"³⁵ while the January 16, 1813, proclamation of patriot Captain Antonio Nicolas Briceño had touched off an "epidemic of assassinations."³⁶ Article Nine of this infamous document stated, "Presenting a number of heads of European Spanish, including the [Canary] islanders, will be considered sufficient merit . . . to obtain rank in the army." The republican soldier who presented twenty heads was to be promoted to second lieutenant, fifty heads deserved a captaincy, and so forth. Bolívar approved this document in Cúcuta on March 20, 1813, with the modification that only those Spaniards found with weapons in their hands were to be killed.³⁷

With the later pronouncement of *guerra a muerte*, the lines were drawn with deadly precision and the war assumed a monolithic quality with no hope of moderation, exchange of prisoners, or return to more humanitarian principles. In the Edict of Guayabal, Boves had said, "the death of only one Creole will recommend his [slayer's] soul to the Creator, foreseeing that the property which these traitors have usurped, will be divided among the soldiers that

defend this just and saintly cause. . . ."³⁸ On their part, the patriots were equally adamant. José Félix Ribas declared on February 21, 1814, "I reiterate my oath . . . that I will not pardon in the midst of punishing and exterminating this accursed race."³⁹ The next day Juan Bautista Arismendi added, "I swear to you, Caraqueños, that I, horrified at so many evils, will never pardon any Spanish enemy; his blood will be shed by my orders, and I am sure that the Liberator finds himself animated by the same desire."⁴⁰ Patriot commanders also allowed pillage and looting, and on January 25, 1814, Bolívar had authorized the confiscation of Spanish property.⁴¹

The most desperate patriot action came in February 1814 when Bolívar ordered the execution of all Spanish prisoners in La Guaira and Caracas, as Boves threatened the strategic triangle of these two cities and Maracay. The executions began on February 12, 1814, and continued day and night. Knives were sharpened in the presence of the doomed Spaniards and loyal Creoles.⁴² In La Guaira the victims were led from the prisons in files of two, shackled, each carrying on his back the wood which would consume his corpse. Patriot bystanders shouted insults, threw stones and spat on the prisoners as voluntary executioners carried out the sentence with machetes or crushed skulls with large rocks to save precious gunpowder. Patriot women dressed in white with blue and yellow sashes danced *el palito* at the scene. In Caracas the executions also were the occasion for a public spectacle. All prisoners over twelve years of age, some nine hundred royalists, met their death in an unprecedented mass execution that occasioned the severest reprisals and plunged Venezuela into a bloodbath.⁴³

Only one voice of moderation was heard above the clamor. José Francisco Heredia, Spanish regent of the Royal Audiencia in Venezuela, prevented a Spanish military tribunal at Coro from slaughtering about fifty patriot prisoners as a reprisal for the Caracas and La Guaira executions,⁴⁴ but Captain General Cajigal later ordered the prisoners put to death. On June 1, 1814, Heredia directed an impassioned letter to his superior, deploring the atrocities committed by Boves' army of the Apure but pleading for an enlightened policy. He objected that war without quarter only made the participants desperate and prolonged the struggle since they would not surrender, having "no hope of being treated as men."⁴⁵ On August 30, 1814, Heredia again wrote to Cajigal, urging him to rescind his order. What would it avail the King to promise a grant of amnesty if all the insurgents were dead? Partisans of the Spanish persecution insisted that it was a necessary demonstration of justice, while Heredia noted sadly, ". . . these discords among

the brothers would never have happened without the absence of the father."⁴⁶ For the second time, Heredia saved the lives of the Coro prisoners—at a heavy personal cost, for he himself feared assassination.

The attitude of Heredia was echoed by a later Venezuelan historian, Juan Vicente González, who wrote:

The *guerra a muerte*, or called the *Terror* of the years 1813 and 1814, far from being a means of victory, was an insuperable obstacle for obtaining it; it created thousands of enemies for the Republic in the interior, it alienated foreign sympathy, it cast 60,000 Venezuelans into the grave in two years, and it was the cause of the disasters of La Puerta and Urica.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, what Bolívar called Boves' "dominion of death" continued to spread across the land.⁴⁸ José Ambrosio Llamozas, field chaplain for the Legion of Hell, later wrote, "Boves' insatiable thirst for blood was not only against the whites, although against these it was more ardent: on the battlefields and in the peaceful towns, unparalleled horrors were committed by his order."⁴⁹ The pace of atrocities was stepped up after Campo Elías defeated Boves at Mosquitero on October 14, 1813, and then entered Calabozo and ordered the throats cut of one-fourth of the town's inhabitants.⁵⁰ After Boves' triumph at San Marcos on December 14, 1813, he re-occupied Calabozo, where he ordered eighty-seven white citizens decapitated, left a wanted list for thirty-two more, and gave Dionisio Díaz Toro orders to kill any whites who appeared in Calabozo.⁵¹

Father Llamozas later testified to the brutality of the renegade guerrilla he served: "All the inhabitants, men, women and children, of the towns of San Joaquin and Santa Ana of the province of Barcelona were beheaded in the number of more than a thousand by the lieutenant of cavalry, don N. Molinet, a Frenchman, by virtue of the order of Boves. . . ." ⁵² A sergeant, Domingo Camero, was dispatched with Molinet with secret instructions to kill the Frenchman if he did not comply exactly with Boves' orders. Llamozas read these orders and urged the two men not to carry them out, especially with regard to women and children, but the soldiers insisted they must comply or lose their lives. Molinet was promoted to captain for fulfilling the order and burning towns and churches. On the High Llano Boves ordered entire villages beheaded and burned, erasing them from the face of the map. Vicente Lecuna emphasized, "The beheadings in mass of men, women and children executed by Boves did not have a parallel in any other country in the world in the nineteenth century."⁵³

Without doubt, however, Boves' reputation went beyond the

limits of fact and into the realm of popular folklore, for who can believe that he strapped horns on the heads of prisoners and lanced them in a grisly replica of a bullfight?⁵⁴ One story—forcing the women of a captured town to attend a dance while, unknown to them, their husbands and sons were being executed—is set in so many different locales in various accounts that the incident seems to be apocryphal. On the other hand, ample evidence points to a streak of unbridled sadism in the guerrilla chief. Boves delighted in dragging Creoles by horses' tails through the streets of captured towns; women and young girls were raped and later slain; mothers named their newborn children "Boves" in a pathetic attempt to evade the Spaniard's wrath.⁵⁵

José Tomás Boves had become a spectre dreaded throughout the countryside and a menace to the second republic. On January 8, 1814, Bolívar wrote to Santiago Mariño, "This man [Boves] is now a terrible enemy, forcing us to divide our forces into the multitude of factions scattered in the interior of the province."⁵⁶ Stimulated by the promise of pillage, insurrections blossomed like nightshade from the Llanos and valleys of Tuy to the gates of Caracas. Boves assumed supreme command of these plundering bands and marched on Caracas itself, striking terror in the hearts of villagers along the way. Refugees fled before him like frightened animals escaping an oncoming prairie fire.

Vicente Lecuna ascribed the reasons for Boves' success to the dissatisfaction under patriot rule and the inability of the republicans to buy arms. The guerrilla fighter himself received arms and clothing from Guayana, sent by Spanish authorities in Puerto Rico.⁵⁷ By 1814, Boves commanded 19,000 men, of whom he could throw 12,000 into a single action,⁵⁸ a strength that commanded the respect of Spanish authorities. In the first phase of his career, the upstart guerrilla had been tolerated for the value of the diversionary actions he had launched against the soft underbelly of the second republic from the plains of Guarico. There he had the Spanish-controlled rivers and supply routes at his back and great space in which to maneuver.⁵⁹ Now his stature threatened to overshadow that of the Captain General himself, Juan Manuel Cajigal. The Ministerio Universal de Indias turned a conveniently deaf ear to the protests of Cajigal and the archbishop of Caracas against Boves' brutality. After all, he was winning and his men were screaming the name of Ferdinand VII as the net drew ever tighter around Caracas.⁶⁰

Eduardo Blanco regarded the year 1814 as one long, chaotic battle, the dimensions of which were almost indistinguishable.⁶¹

This was so because the object of Boves was not to claim territory, but to kill whites, reap plunder, and terrorize patriot ranks. Thus, when Boves triumphed in a battle, he said "that he had won," but when fate went against him, he said "that he had not lost."⁶² The Lion of the Llanos was playing an astute game, compounded of harrowing tactics to demoralize the enemy and a scorched-earth policy to deprive the patriots of their badly needed sources of food supply. Still, the object of this carnage was plunder and the rich plum of Caracas dangled always before the Llaneros' eyes.

The gateway to the capital city was La Puerta, a cleft in the escarpment overlooking the Llanos. This was the pivot point of the battle for Caracas and the republic itself. Boves approached the pass with two thousand cavalry and one thousand infantry as Campo Elias retreated slowly before him, from San Juan de los Moros to Villa de Cura, finally stationing his forces for a stand at La Puerta. Boves charged the patriot right flank and was repulsed, and then the fight opened all along the line. Campo Elias was pouring murderous fire into Boves' columns, but the patriot commander made the mistake of leaving his fortified heights and attacking. Once in the open, his men were surrounded by Boves' cavalry and, unable to regain their former positions, they fled in every direction. The dike of La Puerta had been breached and the enemy was within the patriot perimeter.⁶³

Bolívar hurried from the east to throw his forces on Boves' rearguard, while the troops of Caracas accosted the Spaniard from the front. As Boves' troops spilled into the valley of Aragua, the next attempt to stem the tide was made at San Mateo, Bolívar's own hacienda, where a bitter fight of ten and a half hours took place on February 28, 1814. The patriots gained time when Boves, wounded in the thigh, retired to Villa de Cura to recuperate. The fighting lapsed into a stalemate during the month of March; encounters took place every day, but they were probing actions and skirmishes at outposts, Bolívar trying to lure the royalists into open battle before Boves returned to the scene of action. The Liberator could not attack Boves' camp because the advantage of Bolívar's heavy artillery made only his permanent position tenable, so he marked time while awaiting the arrival of Santiago Mariño and the army of the east. The Liberator dispatched Manuel Sedeño with twenty men on a suicide mission to infiltrate Boves' headquarters at Villa de Cura and assassinate the guerrilla leader, but his men refused to follow him into the royalist bastion.⁶⁴ In a proclamation, Boves offered pardon to whoever joined his ranks and ironically added, "even to him who took up the pen to advise Bolívar that I was

prostrate from my wound in Villa de Cura with only the rearguard of lancers."⁶⁵

Quiet descended on both camps after March 17. On March 20 Boves returned to his troops, determined to destroy Bolívar before Mariño arrived. On March 22 and 23, the initiative turned to the royalists who launched probing attacks. Finally, on the night of March 24 Boves ordered movements around both patriot flanks while his main army attacked Bolívar's front. Morales with eight hundred men swept around the left flank as Boves charged the center three times. After nine hours of the most stubborn fighting of the revolution to that time, Boves at nightfall found himself where he had started in the morning.⁶⁶

The first assault on Caracas had been repelled, but the patriots were shaken. In three encounters in two days, Boves had lost half of his three thousand men, more than two thousand horses, and all his supplies, but the Legion of Hell regrouped in the south. For the second time, the patriots prepared their defenses at the gorge of La Puerta, rugged gateway to the Llanos. When Bolívar arrived to assume personal command, he found the republicans had situated themselves a league beyond the opening itself on a small but high mesa bounded on the west by the deep gorge of the Río Guarico, almost dry at that time of the year. The Liberator wanted to advance the position, but it was too late—Boves was upon them. As usual, the royalist troops advanced in three columns. Boves' horse was shot from under him, and he suffered a slight arm wound, but he led the cavalry group in a wide sweep around the left patriot flank that cut off any retreat. At this second battle of La Puerta, Boves' favorite pincer action was completely successful. Entire patriot companies were destroyed in fearful slaughter; skulls were smashed with butts of guns, and the lances littered the field with corpses. Boves lost only forty dead and fifty wounded, while patriot losses were one thousand dead, wounded or dispersed. Some republican soldiers committed suicide rather than face torture at the hands of Boves. Bolívar and surviving officers and soldiers fled, on foot and on horseback, after breaking through the surrounding army; José Francisco Bermúdez escaped by throwing his costly cloak to the scrabbling Llaneros. On the next day Boves invited captured Colonel Diego Jalon to breakfast at Villa de Cura and ended the meal by ordering his guest beheaded.⁶⁷

When news of the disastrous defeat at La Puerta reached Caracas, the city was stunned. Caraqueños waited helplessly from day to day until the growing sense of panic broke in ragged waves of hysteria. Reason and order collapsed in the capital, forcing

Bolívar to clamp marital law on the city on June 17. As one writer described it, "The disorder in the city is total. Everything is permitted. The people do whatever comes to mind. No one obeys and no one commands. Selfishness rules, all trying to flee without bothering about the next person. A defense of the city under such conditions is madness."⁶⁸

As Boves neared the coast, foreign naval officers described the havoc. An English sailor named Woodford wrote, "The devastation is tremendous; the towns are entirely deserted and the Country covered with dead bodies."⁶⁹ William Watson, senior British naval officer in the harbor of St. Thomas, wrote to Thomas Perceval on June 26, 1814, ". . . as the present contest against General Boves bears every feature of a War of Colour. . . . I am decidedly of opinion that nothing but the immediate interference of his M's Gouvenment can save the white Inhabitants similar fate to that of St. Domingo."⁷⁰

On the rainy morning of July 7, 1814, Bolívar led an exodus of 20,000 Caraqueños away from the doomed city. Incessant rains had made the roads along the coast almost impassable as the silent caravan made its way east to Barcelona and Cumaná.⁷¹ At first there was no safety even in flight. General José Trinidad Moran, who participated in the death march from Caracas, later wrote, "The cavalry of Boves pursued us the first days of our retreat, and any person found was lanced: the Spanish desired the extermination of all Americans."⁷² Citizens used to the easy life of Caracas could not endure the twenty-day march; they perished by hundreds along the roadside from exhaustion, exposure, and fever. In desperation, mothers threw their children from precipices.⁷³

With the fall of Caracas, the second republic crumbled—Valencia and Barcelona fell to the royalists; the republicans besieging Puerto Cabello disbanded, and the patriots lost at La Cabrera. Boves entered El Pao and Cumaná, where not a single living being was found after a few hours, leaving Maturín the last patriot stronghold.⁷⁴

With complete victory in his grasp, Boves became more assertive and more brutal in his reprisals. The guerrilla chief declared himself independent of Captain General Cajigal and organized a separate state with the territory he had conquered, to which he proposed adding the provinces of Barcelona, Cumaná and Margarita. Disdainfully, he left the western provinces and Puerto Cabello to Cajigal. He named the liberal Marquis de Casa Leon political governor of the province of Caracas, and Juan Nepomuceno Quero military governor. To the latter, Boves wrote, "If at my

arrival to that city [Caracas] which will be within twenty days, I find one patriot, you will pay with your head."⁷⁵ Blood ran in the streets of captured Valencia; by one order, Boves decreed the death of almost one thousand persons. In Caracas, Boves tried to persuade the few who remained in the city to return to their jobs, while at the same time he ordered the death of all those "who have been the cause of the sacrifice of Europeans, Canary islanders, and sons of the country."⁷⁶ Executions were carried out at night, quietly.

Boves brought the reign of terror with him when he entered Barcelona on the east coast in the last days of September. Forty-eight men were killed with machetes on the banks of the Neveri and their corpses thrown into the river.⁷⁷ When the Legion of Hell defeated the troops of Manuel Piar, supreme chief of the east, at Cumaná on October 12, the eastern part of the country fell under the three flags of Boves—a skull-and-crossbones on black, signifying death; crimson, signifying blood, and the Spanish flag. More than one thousand civilians were slaughtered in Cumaná alone. Some sought sanctuary in the churches, but the horsemen pursued them inside and killed them there. Soldiers wrote obscene phrases on the walls of houses in Cumaná with human blood. Magdalena Sucre, sister of a major figure in the liberation of Peru, threw herself from a balcony; a brother, Vicente Sucre, was beheaded in the hospital. Llamozas recorded that, "On every side were heard voices, 'This is a Caraqueño, this is a patriot,' and the victims fell."⁷⁸ After a victory dance which lasted until three in the morning, Boves paid the forty Caracas musicians by ordering them beheaded.⁷⁹ A Spanish naval officer wrote Heredia, "Infinite are the victims who are sacrificed daily, and never has any province of the globe been in greater anarchy. Each commander is arbiter of the life of those who compose his town, and each one is independent: they only respect the authority of Boves, and they flatter him with assassinations in the name of Ferdinand VII. . . ."⁸⁰

When on November 27 Boves united his troops with those of Francisco Tomás Morales, a Canary islander who had served as his second-in-command throughout the campaign of 1814, the fate of the second republic was sealed. Remnants of the patriot forces under Bermúdez and Ribás regrouped for a final stand at Urica on December 5. The two armies faced each other on an extensive mesa ideal for Boves' cavalry tactics. The republican cavalry surrounded Boves' right flank, but the guerrilla chief led a fanatical charge against the patriots from his center—a charge which claimed his life. The royalist center and left, however, succeeded in surrounding the patriot line and carried the day. Five hundred captured infan-

trymen were beheaded during the night while Ribas and Bermúdez fled almost alone to Maturín, where Morales was destined to defeat them on December 11.⁸¹

When Boves fell at Urica, he died with 1,500 Venezuelan republicans and 800 Venezuelan royalists in one of the bloodiest battles of the wars for independence.⁸² According to Morales, Boves died when his horse fell in a skirmish before the main battle.⁸³ The Asturian was buried under the major altar of the church of Urica, unable to enforce the revolutionary Act of Urica, drawn up by Llamozas, which denied the authority of the Royal Audiencia.⁸⁴ Morales carried on the tradition of his chief, however, and ordered the death of any officials under him who recognized royal authority, sending their heads to Caracas to intimidate Captain General Cajigal.⁸⁵

Neither side regretted the passing of the Lion of the Llanos. From his refuge in New Granada, Bolívar wrote, "The death of Boves is a great loss for the Spaniards, because they will find it difficult to reunite in another the qualities of that chief, but greater is the misfortune that has happened to us, with the loss of our forces and with the failure of the army that was diverting the enemy throughout the east."⁸⁶ The Liberator was intent, in this letter and others,⁸⁷ to identify Boves with the Spanish cause and not with the revolutionary third force which he actually headed. If Boves had lived longer, the civil war would have taken an entirely different course. Judging from the Act of Urica, the Llaneros eventually would have been fighting both the invading New Granadian patriots and the Spanish force of 11,000 men sent under General Pablo Morillo.

The attitude of Morillo became apparent when he prohibited the *Gaceta de Caracas* from describing the funeral oration for Boves in the cathedral of Caracas.⁸⁸ In the hope of arranging a truce, the new Spanish commander dissolved the army of Llaneros and made Morales a brigadier in the regular ranks. Unfortunately for Spain, the conciliatory policy of Morillo allowed José Antonio Páez to gather the Llaneros under his banner, and this event marked a critical turning point which guaranteed the final success of Bolívar and independence.⁸⁹ Only the magnetic personality of Páez could re-orient the loyalties of the Llaneros, for as he himself wrote in 1822, "You can be sure that these men, although they go to heaven, never, never will be converted into sons of the country, nor will they forget the principles that they acquired in the school of Boves and Morales in the disgraceful epoch of 1814."⁹⁰ When the Llaneros joined the patriot forces, even their former ranks under Boves

were recognized.⁹¹ And the army of Páez in 1817 adopted the black flag that Boves had used in 1814. Once again colored soldiers under a black banner faced the white troops under the white flag of Spain.⁹²

The policy of war to the death, started by Bolívar and intensified by Boves, produced long-range adverse political effects, impossible to measure but a reality nonetheless. Who could forget the numbers of dead? The consensus of historians is that the Legion of Hell killed about 70,000 noncombatants.⁹³ Contemporary charges and counter-charges placed the figure much higher. The *Gaceta de Caracas* under royalist editor José Domingo Díaz claimed that the patriots caused the deaths of 228,651 victims, reckoning also the natural increase in population that was blighted by war without quarter. On the other hand, Venezuelan writers contended that Boves and Morales, not the patriots, must bear the responsibility for this frightful genocide.⁹⁴

Foreign observers were horrified at the ferocity of the warfare in Venezuela in 1813 and 1814. An English mercenary wrote, "It is scarcely hazardous to assert that there was never a period, in any age or country, in relation to which history has recorded more premeditated slaughter, or greater cruelty in the application of tortures more dreadful than death itself. . . ."⁹⁵ And Beaufort T. Watts, United States charge d'affaires at Bogotá, wrote to Secretary of State Henry Clay, "Pillage, fire, and the sword, were the offerings made to these children people, who had been devoted to the King, and religion, of Castile and Leon. A war of extermination raged in Venezuela by the Spanish Chiefs Boves and Morillo, that nothing but the genius of Bolívar could successfully oppose. . . ."⁹⁶

Only one person looking backward with the perspective of time could see a bright side to this somber picture. Daniel Mendoza maintained that the existence of Boves and his Legion of Hell tempered the patriot forces for their final victory. Mendoza wrote, "I believe that the liberty of all America was born on the Llanos of Venezuela, because if the movements of rebellion [on the plains] had not claimed the attention of the city council of Caracas and placed it in fear, perhaps a strong nucleus of forces would have been able to oppose the revolutionaries capable of crushing them for a long time."⁹⁷

Certainly it was José Tomás Boves who unwittingly taught Bolívar the tactics that finally proved decisive in the long struggle. On the plains of Carabobo and elsewhere, Bolívar adopted his former adversary's techniques: long, rapid marches to engage the enemy on open ground suitable for cavalry, and rapid advances

along the enemy's flanks in a strategic maneuver of encirclement.⁹⁸ Previously, the patriot forces—like their European counterparts upon which they were modeled—had regarded the cavalry as simply a helping hand for the infantry.⁹⁹ In short, Boves showed Bolívar how to fight on the Llanos of Venezuela, although the Liberator suffered many setbacks before comprehending the key to success so clearly demonstrated for him in 1813 and 1814.

Bolívar accepted the tactics of Boves and through Páez welcomed the men who had fought under the Spanish guerrilla, but the Liberator rejected the egalitarian concepts of Boves. It seems apparent that the Spaniard offered land and loot for all as a calculated device to obtain recruits, but perhaps this man called "the first caudillo of Venezuelan democracy" actually envisioned a social revolution.¹⁰⁰ At any rate, the movement cut short by Boves' death was well on its way toward toppling the established order in a full-scale social upheaval with all the trappings of terrorism. Bolívar himself realized the dimensions of his adversary, writing, "I have heard it said that the people make the war, and Boves proved this to me much to my cost."¹⁰¹

To most contemporaries, however, the social revolt on the Llanos never reached recognizable dimensions as a movement of the people that had nothing to do with the squabble between Spain and the city councils. The Legion of Hell placed countryside against city, poor against rich, colored against white. Never in its history has Venezuela come closer to revising its basic social order than when José Tomás Boves rode the plains of the Llanos. His death ended a brief but turbulent era that planted the seeds of future violence. This was the darkness before dawn, and the unresolved shadows have lingered into the twentieth century.

1. R. B. Cunningham-Graham, *José Antonio Páez* (London, 1929), 144-145.
2. Juan Uslar Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814, Contribucion al estudio de la historia de Venezuela* (Paris, 1954), 107.
3. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 9.
4. Luis Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes o el Leon de los Llanos* (Madrid, 1934), 203.
5. Rafael Maria Baralt and Ramon Díaz, *Resumen de la historia de Venezuela desde el ano de 1797 hasta el de 1830* (Paris, 1939), 184.
6. Quoted in Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 95.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 89-90.
9. José Antonio Páez, *Autobiografía del General José Antonio Páez* (New York, 1946), I, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, I, 6-7.
11. Carl Sachs, *De los Llanos* (Caracas and Madrid, 1955), 89.
12. Páez, *Autobiografía*, I, 7.
13. Baralt and Díaz, *Resumen*, 185.
14. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 125.
15. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 97.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 98.
18. José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias del Regente Heredia de las Reales Audiencias de Caracas y Mexico* (Madrid, 1916), 266.
19. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 70.

20. *Ibid.*, 27 and 42.
21. *Ibid.*, 46.
22. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 100.
23. Quoted in *ibid.*, 102.
24. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 102.
25. *Ibid.*, 107.
26. *Ibid.*, 103.
27. According to Nikolai K. Dekker, genocide is "partial or complete extermination applied to a group as a group." *Genocide in the USSR, Studies in Group Destruction* (New York, 1958), 2.
28. Eloy G. González, *Historia de Venezuela, Desde el descubrimiento hasta 1830* (Caracas, 1930), I, 556.
29. Francisco Javier Yanes, *Relacion documentada de los principales sucesos ocurridos en Venezuela desde que se declaró estado independiente hasta el ano de 1821* (Caracas, 1943), 153.
30. Mario Briceno-Iragorry, *Casa Leon y su tiempo, Aventura de un anti-heroe* (Caracas, 1946), 229.
31. Vicente Lecuna, *Cronica razonada de las guerras de Bolívar* (New York, 1950), I, 46.
32. Rafael Urdaneta, *Memorias del General Rafael Urdaneta, general en jefe y encargado del gobierno de la Gran Colombia* (Madrid, 1916), 6.
33. Juan Vicente González, *Biografía del General José Félix Ribas, primer teniente de Bolívar en 1831 y 1814* (Madrid, 1918), 83.
34. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 40.
35. González, *Ribas*, 67.
36. Urdaneta, *Autobiografía*, 71.
37. In 1914 Vicente Lecuna discovered a decree issued by Bolívar from Puerto Cabello on January 28, 1814, which modified the policy of *guerra a muerte*. If the royalists, whatever their origin, voluntarily surrendered, they were not to be executed or mistreated. See Lecuna, *Papeles de Simón Bolívar* (Madrid, 1920), 21-22.
38. Lino Iribarren-Celis, *La guerra de independencia en el estado Lara, Ensayo de interpretacion historica* (Barquisimeto, 1951), 274.
39. Lino Duarte Level, *Cuadros de la historia military y civil de Venezuela* (Madrid, 1917), 284.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 283.
42. Heredia, *Memorias*, 243.
43. Vicente Lecuna, *Papeles de Simon Bolívar*, 23. According to Lecuna, the republican government wanted to ship the prisoners to the Antilles or Bermuda but the defeat of Vicente Campo Elias at La Puerta on February 3, 1814, did not allow time for this. Lecuna regarded the executions as a military necessity because of a planned uprising by the prisoners, and insufficient garrisons in Caracas and La Guaira.
44. Heredia, *Memorias*, 243-249.
45. *Ibid.*, 253-254.
46. *Ibid.*, 258.
47. González, *Ribas*, 80-81.
48. Vicente Lecuna, ed., *Cartas del Libertador* (Caracas, 1929), I, 65.
49. *Ibid.*, I, 130.
50. Lecuna González, *Historia de Venezuela*, 600-601.
51. Lecuna, *Cronica Razonada*, I, 180-182.
52. Baralt and Díaz, *Resúmen*, 186.
53. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 107.
54. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 20.
55. Heredia, *Memorias*, 238.
56. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 208.
57. *Ibid.*, 209.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Heredia, *Memorias*, 238.
60. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 133.
61. Eduardo Blanco, *Venezuela heroica* (Caracas, 1935), 50.
62. Felipe Larrazabal, *Vida del Libertador Simón Bolívar* (Madrid, 1918), n. 1, 267-268.
63. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 209-210.
64. *Ibid.*, 230.
65. *Ibid.*, 231.
66. *Ibid.*, 235-238.
67. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 281-282.
68. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 150.
69. *Ibid.*, 221.
70. *Ibid.*, 219.
71. Daniel F. O'Leary, *Bolívar y la emancipacion de Sur-America, Memorias del General O'Leary* (Madrid, 1915), 275.
72. Alfredo Guinassi Moran, *General Trinidad Moran, 1796 a 1854, Estudios historicos y biograficos* (Arequipa, 1918), 31.
73. O'Leary, *Bolívar*, 276.

74. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 134.
75. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 301.
76. Heredia, *Memorias*, 276.
77. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 331.
78. *Ibid.*, 333-334.
79. Francisco Javier Yanes, *Historia de la provincia Cumaná en la transformation politica de Venezuela desde el dia 27 de Abril hasta el presente ano de 1821* (Caracas, 1949), 147.
80. Heredia, *Memorias*, 285-286.
81. Lecuna, *Cronica razonada*, I, 337-338.
82. Level, *Cuadros*, 298.
83. González, *Historia de Venezuela*, I, 503-504.
84. Level, *Cuadros*, 299.
85. González, *Historia de Venezuela*, I, 504.
86. Lecuna, *Cartas del Libertador*, I, 134.
87. See also Bolívar letters of September 1815, *Cartas del Libertador*, 213, and October 16, 1830, *ibid.*, IX, 335.
88. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 179.
89. *Ibid.*, 180-182.
90. Enrique Otrera Ricaurte and Ana Rueda Briceno, eds., *Archivo del General José Antonio Páez*, II, 103.
91. J. A. Cova, *El Centauro, Vida del General José Antonio Páez, Caudillo Venezolano y brigadier del ejercito argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1947), 44.
92. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 106.
93. Bermúdez de Castro, *Bobes*, 191.
94. González, *Ribas*, 287 and 294.
95. Anonymous, *Recollections of a Service of Three Years During the War-of-Extermination in the Republics of Venezuela and Colombia* (London, 1828), 3.
96. William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States Concerning the Independence of the Latin-America Nations* (New York, 1925), II, 1323.
97. Daniel Mendoza, *El Llanero, Estudio de sociologia Venezolana* (Madrid, 1919?), 143-144.
98. Level, *Cuadros*, 280-281.
99. Pietri, *Historia de la rebelion popular de 1814*, 99-100.
100. González, *Ribas*, 139.
101. Bolívar to Francisco de Paula Santander, Pamplona, November 1, 1819, *Cartas del Libertador*, II, 114.