
Valle, María Remedios del

(?-1847), soldier and nurse,

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.75270>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

nicknamed “capitana” and “Madre de la Patria” (Mother of the Homeland), was a military heroine during the Argentinian Wars of Independence. Rising to the rank of sergeant major of the cavalry, she was present during the Wars of Independence from the beginning, fighting and assisting the army of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata in its campaign in Upper Peru (present-day Bolivia) between 1810 and 1817. She was born in Buenos Aires in the second half of the eighteenth century. The details of her parentage are unknown, but according to her military record, she was a *parda*, one of the categories applied to the descendants of African slaves. She married and was the mother of two children, one of whom was adopted, although neither child’s name is known.

It is known that in July 1810, after that year’s revolution of 25 May, María Remedios del Valle, together with her husband and children, enlisted in the Auxiliary Army of Peru, today known as the Army of the North, the first military body deployed by the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata. The objective of these forces was to liberate Upper Peru (Bolivia) and Peru from Spain. These forces were active between 1810 and 1817, with three auxiliary expeditions, but they failed to achieve their desired result. In the Army of the North, María Remedios and her family made up part of the division of the commander, Bernardo de Anzoátegui, which arrived in Potosí in December of 1810. They participated in both the defeats and the triumphs of that army: the defeat at Huaqui (20 June 1811) and the army’s subsequent retreat to Jujuy, the exodus from Jujuy (23 August 1812), the victories at Tucumán (24 September 1812) and Salta (20 February 1813), and the defeats at Vilcapugio (1 October 1813) and Ayohuma (14 November 1813).

On the eve of the battle of Tucumán, María Remedios asked General Manuel Belgrano, one of the heroes of the struggle for Argentine independence (and the creator of the National Flag and the commander of the Army at that point in time) for permission to tend to the troops wounded at the front lines of battle. But Belgrano believed that the army was no place for a woman. Defying the general’s answer, María Remedios stationed herself in the rearguard of troops and went forward with the plan she had proposed to Belgrano. In recognition of her work, General Belgrano named her a captain of the army. In the battle of Avohuma, she was wounded and captured by the Spanish. During her time in prison, she aided her fellow patriot commanders, officers, and soldiers—prisoners like her, who on several occasions she helped to escape. When they discovered what she was doing, the forces loyal to the Crown sentenced her to be whipped in public for nine days. Eventually, she was able to escape the custody of the Spanish and flee. Despite having lost her husband and children, dead on the battlefields, she returned to the army, where she continued assisting the wounded soldiers in the lines of battle. It is probable that the nickname “Madre de la Patria” was coined by those badly wounded soldiers who found themselves in the excellent care of this brave woman of African descent.

Once the mission of the Army of the North had concluded, María Remedios returned to Buenos Aires, and nothing more is known of her until October 1826, when she opened a file for payment in compensation for the services rendered to the country by herself and by her family members who had died in combat. Her request was rejected by the authorities. In 1827 General Juan José Viamonte, who had been her comrade in arms, recognized her in the street, and saw that the “capitana” was in a deplorable state of poverty. With the help of Viamonte and other generals and colonels, she submitted a request for a pension to the legislature in Buenos Aires. The discussion of her request was postponed because of the Argentine-Brazilian War (1825–1828), but it was taken up again in 1828. The petition was viewed by the authorities with suspicion, since there was a lack of records that could certify that María Remedios del Valle was a soldier during these campaigns. For this reason, various prominent men, such as General Viamonte, the legislators Tomás Manuel de Anchorena and Francisco Silveyra, and Colonel Hipólito Videla, had to testify as to her bravery and her relevant participation, not to mention the fact that she had been the only woman under the command of General Manuel Belgrano. Eventually, they agreed to give her a salary as a captain of the infantry, and a few months later she was granted the rank of sergeant major of the cavalry. In 1830 she was placed on Inactive General Staff, with a full military salary corresponding to her rank. In 1835, Juan Manuel de Rosas, the governor of Buenos Aires, appointed her to the Active General Staff, with the rank of sergeant major. From 1836 until her death in 1847, María Remedios del Valle appears in the army records under the name Remedios Rosas.

In the late nineteenth century, traditional Argentine historiography, building on the work of the historian and statesman Bartolomé Mitre, created a gallery of national heroes, which was almost entirely made up of men. A few women, such as Josefa Tenorio, were recognized by the liberal historians of the late nineteenth century, but “la capitana,” María Remedios del Valle, was not among those recognized in narratives of the independence era or in the national memory. It was not until the early 1930s that the historian Carlos Ibarguren noted her heroic exploits for the first time. But even then, her remarkable story was largely ignored until the first decade of the twenty-first century, as popular and academic histories began to recognize men and women who were active protagonists in Argentine history, but who had been deliberately omitted from liberal historiographies.

This recovery project was notable in highlighting and reevaluating the contributions of Argentina’s African descendants, such as María Remedios del Valle. Since 2008 she has become known as “Madre de la Patria,” and her story has been told in various widely read magazine articles. In 2010 the erection of a monument in her memory was proposed, and in 2011 a well-known brand of drinking chocolate, Chocolates Águila, included her portrait and a small biography on the packaging. This homage was part of a series that also included other heroines of Argentina’s fight for independence. In 2013, the Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo (National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism, or INADI), a branch of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of the Republic of Argentina, launched a contest titled “María Remedios del Valle: Las mujeres afrodescendientes en la Argentina” (Women of African Heritage in Argentina), which called for the production of historical research, literary essays, and anthropological studies on the roles of black women in Argentine history and culture.

Since 2013, the 8th of November has been celebrated as the Día Nacional de los/as Afroargentinos/as y de la Cultura Afro (The National Day of Afro-Argentines and African Culture) in commemoration of María del Valle, who died on 8 November 1847.

[See also Tenorio, Josefa.]

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See also

Tenorio, Josefa <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75195>>