

# The Encomienda System

## Duration

Two or three class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

## Resources

### 1. Teacher Commentary



### 2. Student Handout



### 3. Homework



## Objectives of Lesson

- To describe the encomienda system and its effect on Native American society
- To read a historical source with speaker, audience, and context in mind
- To practice using primary sources to support a historical argument

## College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Topic 1.5:** Labor, Slavery, and Caste in the Spanish Colonial System (p. 42)
- **Learning Objective 1.E:** “Explain how the growth of the Spanish Empire in North America shaped the development of social and economic structures over time.”
- **Key Concept 1.2.II.B:** “In the encomienda system, Spanish colonial economies marshaled Native American labor to support plantation-based agriculture and extract precious metals and other resources.”

## Student Activities

- Class reading of an excerpt from the New Laws regarding Spanish colonial practices in the Americas
- Practice using primary sources to support a historical argument

## NOTES

*Write or type in this area.*

## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to help students understand the role of Native American labor in the encomienda system in the Spanish Empire in North America. Under this system, the Spanish government gave certain individuals the right to claim native labor within a specified geographic area to be used on agricultural plantations, mining operations, or other labor-intensive activities. It allowed the Spanish Empire to expand, but the expansion came at the cost of Native American autonomy and sovereignty. The goals of this lesson are to explore how the encomienda system facilitated the growth of the Spanish Empire in the initial stages of the Spanish colonial empire, as well as how the encomienda system established social and economic structures that had long-term effects on the Americas.

We recommend that you begin this lesson with a brief explanation about the history and practices of the encomienda system in Spain. Although it was most notoriously used in the Americas, this system was previously used in Spanish areas of Europe. It can be a tricky system for students to understand, especially if they are more familiar with either the chattel slavery used in the United States prior to the Civil War or the mission system used in the American Southwest. Spending some time establishing how the system was intended to work will help set the scene for a more robust discussion of how the system led to abuse in the Americas. We have provided some brief notes below to help guide your discussion.

The worksheet included in this lesson focuses on an excerpt from the New Laws, followed by a series of questions that ask students to use it to build a historical argument. It draws on the general structure of a DBQ by presenting students with a question and a passage. The worksheet should help familiarize students with the DBQ process while reviewing the material about the encomienda system. We recommend that you work through the excerpt and questions as a class using the teacher's commentary to provide historical background, context, and analysis.

This lesson also includes a homework assignment that reviews the encomienda system using a multiple-choice format.

## Historical Context

The encomienda system was Spanish labor system in which the Spanish monarch awarded Spaniards with the labor of non-Christian people. It was different from other communal slavery systems in the early modern world because it was sharply focused on labor, not land or natural resources. In this system, an *encomendero* (the owner of the encomienda) was given the right to control the labor of the indigenous people.

## NOTES

*Write or type in this area.*

Because the native people were considered wards of the state, the encomendero was supposed to treat them with a certain level of respect. The encomendero was supposed to provide the laborers with specific benefits, such as a Christian education, in return for their free labor. Encomienda grants were given to distinguished Spaniards to control the labor of a set number of people in a territory, but they did not specify which people were required to provide the labor. They also did not specify what kind of labor was to be performed.

Although it was used most notoriously in the Americas, the encomienda system was actually a long-standing Spanish tradition that predated the Columbian Exchange. The Spanish first used the system during the *Reconquista* (the period of time from 711 to 1492 in which the Spanish reclaimed territory lost to Muslim forces) to allocate Muslim labor in conquered territory to Spanish soldiers. From then on, it became a way to reward military personnel who were distinguished because of their bravery, military success, or personal relationship with the monarch.

In the most idealistic discussions of the system, the Spanish monarch discussed the laborers as “free vassals of the crown” and tried to put structures in place to prevent the encomienda system from devolving into slavery. For example, the New Laws of 1542 (excerpted in the worksheet) expressly stated that native people owned the land that they worked—not the encomendero. It also stated that the laborers should not be treated as slaves, that they could not be taken to remote regions to fish for pearls, and that the laborers should be compensated. One of the most controversial provisions in the New Laws was that individual holdings under the encomienda system would end with the current holder. That would mean that a rich encomendero could not pass the labor to their children upon their death. All labor would technically become property of the Spanish Crown, not individual Spanish subjects.

However, Spain was a long way from the New World, and the regulations created by the Spanish monarchs were sparsely enforced. The American encomenderos often exploited the system by requiring labor from all parts of the native population (including children) or forcing the native population to work in extremely difficult conditions on plantations and in mines. Many New World encomenderos refused to acknowledge the New Laws of 1542 that attempted to reform the system. In some places, an encomendero waged armed conflict, or even killed colonial officials, in order to maintain authority on his encomienda.

## NOTES

*Write or type in this area.*



The cover of the New Laws of 1542 that attempted to reform the encomienda system.

## Document-Based Question

1. Evaluate the extent to which the encomienda system in the Spanish Empire in North America fostered the development of new economic structures from 1481 to 1607.

### Document 1

**Source:** Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, *New Laws of the Indies of the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians*, 1542

“As We have ordered provision to be made that from henceforward the Indians in no way be made slaves, including those who until now have been enslaved against all reason and right and contrary to the provisions and instructions thereupon, We ordain and command that the Audiencias having first summoned the parties to their presence, without any further judicial form, but in a summary way, so that the truth may be ascertained, speedily set the said Indians at liberty unless the persons who hold them for slaves show title why they should hold and possess them legitimately. And in order that in default of persons to solicit the aforesaid, the Indians may not remain in slavery unjustly, We command that the Audiencias appoint persons who may pursue this cause for the Indians and be paid out of the Exchequer fines, provided they be men of trust and diligence.”

### Thesis Statement

*Write or type your response in this area.*

### Notes

*Write or type your response in this area.*

How would you use this document to support your argument?

*Write or type your response in this area.*

## Commentary

### ① Historical Background

The encomienda system was a Spanish labor system in which the Spanish monarch awarded Spaniards with the labor of non-Christian people. It was different from other communal slavery systems in the early modern world because it was sharply focused on labor, not land or natural resources.

### ② Questions for discussion

Encourage students to think about the significance of this date range. It covers the period of time from Columbus's arrival to the founding of Jamestown.

Ask your students the following:

1. What was distinctive about this time period?
2. How did this date range set a precedent for future historical eras in the Americas?

③ In the most idealistic discussions of the encomienda system, the Spanish monarch discussed the laborers as “free vassals of the crown” and tried to put structures in place to prevent the encomienda system from devolving into slavery. However, Spain was a long way from the New World, and the regulations created by the Spanish monarchs were sparsely enforced.

④ Charles V was the Holy Roman Emperor, the Archduke of Austria, and the King of Spain simultaneously. Many historical sources identify him using his title of “Holy Roman Emperor” because that title covered the most geographic terrain.

⑤ The Spanish colonial courts

⑥ Sample thesis: The encomienda system led to permanent economic changes for American Indian communities in the Spanish Empire in Americas because it created forced labor systems that denied American Indians personal agency, economic independence, and the ability to use traditional agricultural and harvesting methods.

⑦ Consider having students take notes on this section either as a class or in small groups.

Read the following sample response and evaluate it using the questions below.

The encomienda system was a deeply unequal system that “gave” Spanish officials control over the labor of American Indians without the consent or willing participation of the laborers. According to King Charles V in Document 1, this system was not supported to make the native population into slaves. He decreed that no native people should be made into slaves, except for those that were legitimately slaves—a difficult and ambiguous position to take. Clearly, encomienda owners took advantage of this ambiguity to treat the laborers abusively, ignoring the decree by a European monarch issued an ocean away. They routinely denied the native population agency over their labor and their working conditions, leading to the creation of permanent economic structures that were unequal and exploitative.

- ⑧ This response effectively uses the document to support its argument by citing the text and demonstrating critical thinking by describing the author’s argument. In addition, the response analyzes the challenges of the author’s position.
- ⑨ This paragraph uses the document to support its argument and draws a very clear line between the document and the topic sentence.
- ⑩ This paragraph could be made stronger by adding in additional information that could help students earn some of the historical context points or HAPPY points. For example, this paragraph could include a larger discussion of the author’s point of view to ensure that it receives as many points as possible.

1. Does this response use the document effectively to support its argument? ⑧

*Write or type your response in this area.*

2. What are the strengths of this paragraph? ⑨

*Write or type your response in this area.*

3. What can be changed to make this paragraph stronger? ⑩

*Write or type your response in this area.*

4. Rewrite the paragraph here if necessary.

*Write or type your response in this area.*

## Document-Based Question

1. Evaluate the extent to which the encomienda system in the Spanish Empire in North America fostered the development of new economic structures from 1481 to 1607.

### Document 1

**Source:** Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, *New Laws of the Indies of the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians*, 1542

“As We have ordered provision to be made that from henceforward the Indians in no way be made slaves, including those who until now have been enslaved against all reason and right and contrary to the provisions and instructions thereupon, We ordain and command that the Audiencias having first summoned the parties to their presence, without any further judicial form, but in a summary way, so that the truth may be ascertained, speedily set the said Indians at liberty unless the persons who hold them for slaves show title why they should hold and possess them legitimately. And in order that in default of persons to solicit the aforesaid, the Indians may not remain in slavery unjustly, We command that the Audiencias appoint persons who may pursue this cause for the Indians and be paid out of the Exchequer fines, provided they be men of trust and diligence.”

### Thesis Statement

*Write or type your response in this area.*

### Notes

*Write or type your response in this area.*

### How would you use this document to support your argument?

*Write or type your response in this area.*

Read the following sample response and evaluate it using the questions below.

The encomienda system was a deeply unequal system that “gave” Spanish officials control over the labor of American Indians without the consent or willing participation of the laborers. According to King Charles V in Document 1, this system was not supported to make the native population into slaves. He decreed that no native people should be made into slaves, except for those that were legitimately slaves—a difficult and ambiguous position to take. Clearly, encomienda owners took advantage of this ambiguity to treat the laborers abusively, ignoring the decree by a European monarch issued an ocean away. They routinely denied the native population agency over their labor and their working conditions, leading to the creation of permanent economic structures that were unequal and exploitative.

1. Does this response use the document effectively to support its argument?

*Write or type your response in this area.*

2. What are the strengths of this paragraph?

*Write or type your response in this area.*

3. What can be changed to make this paragraph stronger?

*Write or type your response in this area.*

4. Rewrite the paragraph here if necessary.

*Write or type your response in this area.*

# The Encomienda System

Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“As We have ordered provision to be made that from henceforward the Indians in no way be made slaves, including those who until now have been enslaved against all reason and right and contrary to the provisions and instructions thereupon, We ordain and command that the Audiencias having first summoned the parties to their presence, without any further judicial form, but in a summary way, so that the truth may be ascertained, speedily set the said Indians at liberty unless the persons who hold them for slaves show title why they should hold and possess them legitimately. And in order that in default of persons to solicit the aforesaid, the Indians may not remain in slavery unjustly, We command that the Audiencias appoint persons who may pursue this cause for the Indians and be paid out of the Exchequer fines, provided they be men of trust and diligence.”

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, *New Laws of the Indies of the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians*, 1542

1. The laws in the excerpt were most likely given in response to which of the following?
  - (A) The discovery that missionaries were attempting to convert American Indians to Christianity
  - (B) Political scandals resulting from the Spanish monarch's public support of the Atlantic slave trade
  - (C) The growing concern over injustices against the American Indians in Spanish colonies in the Americas
  - (D) Disagreements among European monarchs over territorial claims in the Americas
2. Labor systems like those described in the passage most directly contributed to
  - (A) concerns about the economic stability of mercantilism
  - (B) calls to limit the authority of the Spanish monarch over encomienda owners in the Americas
  - (C) efforts to prohibit the Atlantic slave trade in Spanish-controlled areas of the New World
  - (D) rapid development of plantation economies and mining operations in the Americas
3. Charles V issued the New Laws of 1542 to express opposition against the
  - (A) ways that encomienda owners were acting independently of Spanish authority
  - (B) agricultural methods used in Spanish America
  - (C) use of the American Indian population as forced labor in Spanish mines
  - (D) idea of requiring religious education on the Spanish encomienda system

## WORKSHEET

### Thesis Statement

The encomienda system led to permanent economic changes for American Indian communities in the Spanish Empire in the Americas because it created forced labor systems that denied American Indians personal agency, economic independence, and the ability to use traditional agricultural and harvesting methods.

### Notes

*Laborers are not slaves, but they were clearly being treated like slaves.*

*Charles V is a long way from the Americas.*

*Why is some slavery considered "legitimate"?*

How would you use this document to support your argument?

*This document is a challenging one to incorporate because it requires "reading between the lines." In order to support the argument that the encomienda system disrupted the existing economic structures in the Americas by denying American Indians personal agency, this passage could be used to argue that some encomienda owners treated laborers as slaves. The document shows that there was a difference in how the monarchs wanted the encomienda system to work and how it was actually practiced in the Americas.*

1. Does this response use the document effectively to support its argument?

*This response effectively uses the document to support its argument by citing the text and demonstrating critical thinking by describing the author's argument. In addition, the response analyzes the challenges of the author's position.*

2. What are the strengths of this paragraph?

*This paragraph uses the document to support its argument and draws a very clear line between the document and the topic sentence.*

3. What can be changed to make this paragraph stronger?

*This paragraph could be made stronger by adding in additional information that could help students earn some of the historical context points or HAPPY points. For example, this paragraph could include a larger discussion of the author's point of view to ensure that it receives as many points as possible.*

## HOMEWORK

1. The correct answer is **C**. The New Laws of 1542 admonish labor owners in the encomienda system that their laborers should not, under any conditions, be treated as slaves. As a historical document, the presence of this law suggests both that the encomienda owners in the Americas were treating their laborers as slaves, and that the abuse was so severe that the Spanish monarchs thought that direct intervention was necessary to curb the worst of the abuses.
2. The correct answer is **D**. The encomienda system was an exploitative labor system that allowed some Spanish colonial representatives to force American Indians to provide poorly compensated labor. Many encomienda owners, taking advantage of the low cost of labor, forced laborers to mine or work on large plantations. Both processes produced incredible wealth for plantation owners.
3. The correct answer is **A**. The relationship between encomienda owners and the Spanish monarch was always difficult because the distance between the two locations made it very difficult for the Spanish government to control the actions of encomienda owners. Encomienda owners, realizing that the Spanish Crown could not effectively control its actions, used its lack of oversight to implement a system that was often abusive and beyond the scope of the traditional Spanish encomienda system. When the Spanish government attempted to impose the New Laws of 1452, many colonial communities in the Americas rose in opposition.