

Topic 1.5: The Spanish Colonial System

OVERVIEW

Shortly after Columbus' voyages, the Spanish crown sent **conquistadors** (conquerors) to conquer lands in the New World in the name of the Spanish Empire. Over the following decades, Native Americans in Latin America were conquered, declared to be subjects of Spain, and required to provide labor for their conquerors.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Spanish were the first Europeans to begin colonizing the New World. Spanish colonists presumed that they were entitled to the resources of the lands that they conquered, and that Native Americans should give up their indigenous religious practices and convert to the Christian religion. These presumptions would later be shared—to some degree or another—by other European colonizers.

KEY TERMS

Encomienda

The *encomienda* was a system of forced labor that was set up by the Spanish in their conquered territories. The Spanish crown gave grants of land in the New World to Spanish citizens, who required Native Americans to live in the area and work in the plantations or mines.

Plantation

A plantation is a large farm that relies on the work of a poorly-paid or enslaved labor force to produce cash crops for profit. In the Spanish colonies, Native Americans initially provided the labor force, but they were gradually replaced by African slaves.

Caste System

The Spanish developed a classification system, in which a colonial subject's *casta* was determined by the races of their parents. Historians debate the degree to which the caste system in the Spanish colonies constituted a formal racial hierarchy.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

What **caused** the demise of the *encomienda*?

Bartolomé de las Casas' lengthy and passionate account of the *encomienda* system's abuses, combined with Native American revolts against Spanish rule, motivated the Spanish government to abolish the *encomienda*.

What **effect** did the demise of the *encomienda* system have on the Spanish colonies?

The Spanish colonies increasingly depended on slave labor, since African slaves were not considered subjects of the Spanish crown, and were not protected by the laws that regulated the treatment of Native Americans.

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CORTÉS AND THE AZTECS

Shortly after Columbus' voyages of discovery, the Spanish crown commissioned **conquistadors** (conquerors) to extend Spain's empire into the New World. One of the most noteworthy conquistadors was **Hernán Cortés**, who conquered the **Aztecs**. In the century prior to European contact, the Aztecs had built a large empire in present-day Mexico. Their capital city, Tenochtitlan, supported a population that was on par with some of the largest European cities at that time. Aztec advancements included a written language, an accurate calendar, and aqueducts that brought water to their populous capital. However, the Aztecs lacked important weapons technologies, such as firearms, steel, and warhorses. With the latest advancements in weaponry (and the help of Native American allies with a shared interest in toppling the Aztec Empire), the Spanish conquered the Aztecs and became the new rulers of Mesoamerica.

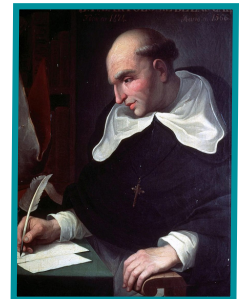


A replica of an Aztec calendar stone.

The Spanish divided their conquests into large land grants, or **encomienda**, which were issued to Spanish colonists along with the presumed right to require Native Americans to do agricultural labor on **plantations** or to work in gold and silver **mines**. Spanish colonists sent large quantities of gold and silver back to Spain, making the Spanish monarchy the wealthiest European monarchy in the sixteenth century. However, the expense of maintaining a large empire later led the Spanish Empire into decline.

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

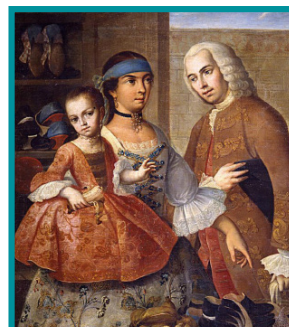
The *encomienda* system conflicted with the goals of Spanish priests, who journeyed to the new world to Christianize the Native American population. **Bartolomé de las Casas**, a Spanish priest, wrote a scathing critique of the *encomienda*, in which he chronicled abuses committed by Spanish colonists against Native Americans. After de las Casas' work was published, the Spanish crown issued the New Laws, which reformed the colonial labor system in order to prevent mistreatment of Native Americans.



Bartolomé de las Casas

Although well-intended, the New Laws had only a limited effect, as Spanish colonists in remote areas tended to ignore the laws. In addition, Spanish colonists began relying more on the importation of African slaves, who had a natural resistance to European diseases and were not protected by the New Laws (unlike Native Americans, Africans were not considered to be subjects of the Spanish crown).

THE CASTE SYSTEM IN THE SPANISH COLONIES



An eighteenth-century painting depicts a Spanish father and his mestiza wife with their child.

The Spanish colonies were home to a diverse population that included Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans. Inter-marriage among these groups was common in the Spanish colonies (partly because a high proportion of Spanish colonists were single men). This resulted in an intricate **casta** (lineage) system, in which at least sixteen distinct classifications existed based on the lineages of a child's parents. Historians generally refer to those of mixed European and Native American lineage as **mestizo**—a word that can also be used to refer to the blending of Spanish and indigenous cultures that occurred in Latin America as a result of generations of intermarriage.