

The Age of Exploration 1500-1800

THE STORY MATTERS...

During the Age of Exploration that began in the late fifteenth century, European explorers made voyages in search of wealth, new lands, and converts for Christianity. They found all of these things and more, including civilizations undreamed of by Europeans. They also established the first global trading empires. One of these European explorers was Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator who made several voyages to the Western Hemisphere.

Lesson 17-3

Colonial Latin America

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

labor draft

Content Vocabulary

peninsulare mestizo creole mulatto
encomienda mita

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What are the effects of political and economic expansion

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The colonization of Latin America by Portugal and Spain lasted from the early sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century. The Latin American colonies—rich in gold, silver, and other natural resources—proved to be very profitable for the two European nations. However, colonization led to many changes for both the indigenous peoples and the outsiders who settled there. The interactions of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and the European colonists led to the formation of new social classes. The Catholic Church also had a great influence.

Colonial Empires in Latin America

GUIDING QUESTION *What were the social characteristics of colonial Latin America?*

In the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal imposed their rule on the new lands they had conquered. Spain established an enormous colonial empire that included most of South America and parts of Central America and North America. At the same time, Portugal became the ruler of Brazil. Within the lands of Central and South America, a new civilization arose, which we call Latin America. This name comes from its principal languages, Spanish and Portuguese, both derived from Latin.

Social Classes

European colonies imitated the culture and social patterns of their parent countries. Colonial Latin America was divided by social classes that were based on status. At the top were **peninsulares**, Spanish and Portuguese officials born in Europe. They were called *peninsulares* because they came from the Iberian Peninsula, the part of Europe containing Spain and Portugal. The *peninsulares* held all the important government positions. Below the *peninsulares* were

the **creoles**, descendants of Europeans born in Latin America. The *creoles* resented the *peninsulares*, who retained power and regarded the *creoles* as second-class citizens.

Beneath the *peninsulares* and *creoles* were numerous multiracial groups. The Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America lived with Native Americans and Africans. Many Native Americans were forced to work in mines and on plantations. Because they were not able to do all the work that was required, however, enslaved Africans were also used for labor. Over a period of three centuries, as many as 8 million Africans were brought to Latin America.

Spanish rulers permitted intermarriage between Europeans and Native Americans. Their offspring became known as the **mestizos**. In addition, the offspring of Africans and Europeans—called **mulattoes**—became another social group. Other groups emerged as a result of unions between *mestizos* and *mulattoes* and between Native Americans and Africans. The coexistence of these various groups produced a unique multiracial society in Latin America.

The *peninsulares* and *creoles* considered all these multiethnic groups to be socially inferior. However, over a period of time, *mestizos* grew in status due to their increasing numbers. Some *mestizos* became artisans and merchants in cities, and others became small-scale farmers or ranchers. The groups at the very bottom of the social scale were the Africans and conquered Native Americans.

Economic Foundations

One source of wealth for the Portuguese and Spanish came from resource extraction, or the removal of natural resources from the land. The most important resource extraction was the mining of gold and silver. The abundant supply of those precious metals exported from Latin American colonies financed Spain's wars and stimulated further colonization.

Farming became a more enduring source of prosperity as Spanish and Portuguese landowners created immense estates. However, colonial farming practices also damaged the environment as a result of deforestation, overgrazing, and overcultivation of single export crops.

To maintain a supply of labor, the Spanish continued to make use of the **encomienda** system. In this system, Spanish

landowners forced Native Americans to pay taxes and provide labor. In return, the landowners were expected to protect them and ensure they were instructed in the Catholic faith. In Peru, the Spanish used an arrangement known as the *mita*, which allowed authorities to draft indigenous labor to work in the silver mines.

This system of landowners and dependent peasants became a feature of Latin American society, and it could be an extremely damaging one.

The harsh working conditions under the system contributed to a drastic decline in the Native American population. It was the population decline among Native Americans that spurred the importation of enslaved Africans. Catholic priest Bartolomé de Las Casas (bar. to • lo • MAY day lahs CAH • sahs) spoke out against the *encomienda* and its effects on the indigenous peoples.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“[T]he Spaniards, from the beginning . . . were no more solicitous of promoting the preaching of the Gospel of Christ to [the Native Americans], than if they had been dogs or beasts, . . . laying many heavy [burdens] upon them, daily afflicting and persecuting them, that they might not have so much time and leisure at their own disposal, as to attend their preaching and divine service; for they looked upon that to be an impediment to their getting gold. “

-Bartolomé de Las Casas, from
A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies, 1534

Trade provided another avenue for profit. Besides gold and silver, other products shipped to Europe were sugar, tobacco, diamonds, and animal hides. In turn, the Europeans supplied their colonists with manufactured goods. Spain and Portugal regulated the trade of their colonies to keep other European nations out. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the British and French were too powerful to be kept out of these lucrative markets.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Drawing Conclusions What were the two key factors in determining status in colonial Latin America?

State and Church

GUIDING QUESTION How did Portugal and Spain govern their colonies to promote economic gain and exert their authority?

The Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires in Latin America lasted more than 300 years. Communication and travel between the Americas and Europe were difficult, making it impossible for the European monarchs to keep a close watch on their overseas empires. As a result, colonial officials in Latin America took liberties in carrying out imperial policies.

Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese monarchy attempted to assert its control over Brazil by creating the position of governor-general. The governor-general (later called a viceroy) headed a bureaucracy that governed the colony. Such an official was in the colony as a representative of the monarch. But it was not a perfect

system. At best, the governor-general had only loose control over the lesser officials who governed the districts into which Brazil was divided.

To rule his American empire, the Spanish king also appointed viceroys. The first was established for New Spain (Mexico) in 1535. Another viceroy was appointed for Peru in 1543. In the eighteenth century, two additional viceroys (colonies ruled by a viceroy) were added. Spaniards held all major government positions.

From the beginning of their conquest of the Americas, Spanish and Portuguese rulers were determined to Christianize the indigenous peoples. This policy gave the Catholic Church great influence upon the society and culture of the Americas.

Catholic missionaries—especially the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits—fanned out to different parts of the Spanish Empire. To make their efforts easier, the missionaries brought Native Americans together into villages, or missions. There, they could be converted, taught trades, and encouraged to grow crops.

Missions enabled missionaries to control the lives of the Native Americans and make them docile subjects of the empire. The Jesuits established more than 30 missions in the region of Paraguay. Well-organized, the Jesuits made their missions into profitable businesses.

Along with the missions, the Catholic Church also built cathedrals, hospitals, and schools in the colonies. These schools gave the Native American students a basic education in the Spanish or the Portuguese language and grammar while preparing them for a religious education.

The Catholic Church provided an outlet other than marriage for women. Women could enter convents and become nuns. Women in religious orders—many of them of aristocratic background—often lived well. Many nuns worked outside their convents by running schools and hospitals. Indeed, one of these women, the Mexican nun Juana Ines de la Cruz (WAHN • ah ee • NAYS de la KROOS), wrote poetry and prose and urged that women be educated.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Applying What role did the Catholic Church play in the colonization of Latin America?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

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| <i>peninsulare</i> | a person born on the Iberian Peninsula; typically, a Spanish or Portuguese official who resided temporarily in Latin America for political and economic gain and then returned to Europe |
| <i>creole</i> | a person of European descent born in Latin America and living there permanently |
| <i>mestizo</i> | a person of mixed European and Native American descent |
| <i>mulatto</i> | a person of mixed African and European descent |
| <i>encomienda</i> | a system of labor the Spanish used in the Americas; Spanish landowners had the right, as granted by Queen Isabella, to use Native Americans as laborers |
| <i>mita</i> | a labor system that the Spanish administrators in Peru used to draft indigenous people to work |