

## Topic 1.5

# Labor, Slavery, and Caste in the Spanish Colonial System

*Know ye that I have given permission . . . to take to the Indies, the islands and the mainland of the ocean sea already discovered or to be discovered, four thousand negro slaves both male and female, provided that they be Christians.*

Emperor Charles V of Spain, colonial charter, August 18, 1518

**Learning Objective:** Explain how the growth of the Spanish Empire in North America shaped the development of social and economic structures over time.

**S**panish dominance in the Americas was based on more than a papal ruling and a treaty. The new empire began with ambitious and skilled leaders in Ferdinand and Isabella. With its adventurous explorers and conquerors (called **conquistadores**) and the labor provided by Indians and enslaved Africans, Spain rapidly expanded its wealth and power.

## Spanish Exploration and Conquest

Feats such as the journey across the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the circumnavigation of the world by one of Ferdinand Magellan's ships (Magellan died before completing the trip), the conquests of the Aztecs in Mexico by **Hernán Cortés**, and the conquest of the Incas in Peru by **Francisco Pizarro** secured Spain's initial supremacy in the Americas.

The conquistadores sent ships loaded with gold and silver back to Spain from Mexico and Peru. They increased the gold supply in Spain, making it the richest and most powerful kingdom in Europe. Spain's success encouraged other states to turn to the Americas in search of gold and power.

**Indian Labor** In Mexico and Peru, the Spanish encountered the well-organized and populous Aztec and Inca empires. Even after diseases killed most natives, millions survived. The Spanish incorporated the surviving Indians into their own empire. To control them, the Spanish used the **encomienda** system in which Spain's king granted natives who lived on a tract of land to individual Spaniards. These Indians were forced to farm or work in the mines. The fruits of their labors went to the Spanish, who in turn had to "care" for the Indians.

**Enslaved African Labor** On their sugar plantations on islands off the African coast, the Portuguese had already shown that using enslaved Africans to grow crops could be profitable. They provided a model for other Europeans. The Spanish, to add to their labor force and to replace Indians who died from diseases and brutality, began trading with African partners who could supply enslaved people. The Spanish imported people under the **asiento** system, which required colonists to pay a tax to the Spanish king on each enslaved person they imported to the Americas.

As other Europeans established American colonies, they also imported enslaved Africans in large numbers. During the colonial era, more Africans than Europeans crossed the Atlantic to the Americas. Before the transatlantic **slave trade** ended in the late 1800s, slave traders sent between 10 million and 15 million enslaved people from Africa. Between 10 percent and 15 percent died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, called the **Middle Passage**.

**African Resistance** Though transported thousands of miles from their homelands and brutally repressed, Africans resisted slavery in multiple ways. They often ran away, sabotaged work, or revolted. Further, they maintained aspects of African culture, particularly in music, religion, and folkways.

## Spanish Caste System

The combination of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans made the Spanish colonies ethnically diverse. In addition, since most Spanish colonists were single men rather than families, many had children with native or African women. The result was that the Spanish colonies included many people with mixed heritage. In response, the Spanish developed a caste system that defined the status of people in the colonies by their heritage:

- At the top were pure-blooded Spaniards.
- In the middle were several levels of people ordered according to their mixture of European, Native American, and African heritage.
- At the bottom were people of pure Indian or Black heritage.

### REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

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1. How was the society and economy of North America affected by the expansion of the Spanish Empire?

#### KEY TERMS BY THEME

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**Labor Systems (WXT)**

encomienda  
asiento  
slavery

**Identity and Politics (POL)**

conquistadores  
Hernán Cortés  
Francisco Pizarro

**Atlantic Trade (WXT)**

slave trade  
Middle Passage

## MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

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Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“The province of Quivira is 950 leagues from Mexico. Where I reached it, it is in the fortieth degree [of latitude]. The country itself is the best I have ever seen for producing all the products of Spain. . . . I have treated the natives of this province, and all the others whom I found wherever I went, as well as was possible, agreeably to what Your Majesty had commanded, and they have received no harm in any way from me or from those who went in my company. I remained twenty-five days in this province of Quivira, so as to see and explore the country and also to find out whether there was anything beyond which could be of service to Your Majesty, because the guides who had brought me had given me an account of other provinces beyond this. And what I am sure of is that there is not any gold nor any other metal in all that country.”

Francisco Coronado, Spanish conquistador,  
*Travels in Quivira*, c. 1542

1. Which of the following best summarizes Coronado’s goal in exploring Mexico as expressed in this excerpt?
  - (A) To inform the natives about Spain and its culture
  - (B) To learn from the native inhabitants in the region
  - (C) To spread Roman Catholic Christianity in the region
  - (D) To find natural resources that might enrich the king
2. The activities described in this excerpt were similar to those of other Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the Americas in the 16th century because they depended primarily on the support of
  - (A) merchants and fur traders
  - (B) the Catholic Church
  - (C) monarchs
  - (D) impoverished Europeans
3. Based on the excerpt, one difference between Coronado and many European explorers was that he expressed little interest in
  - (A) enriching the king
  - (B) finding gold and silver
  - (C) converting the native people to Christianity
  - (D) increasing the power of his country

## SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

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Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. “I want the natives to develop a friendly attitude toward us because I know that they are a people who can be made free and converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force. I therefore gave red caps to some and glass beads to others. They hung the beads around their necks, along with some other things of slight value that I gave them. . . . I warned my men to take nothing from the people without giving something in exchange.”

Christopher Columbus, *Log*, October 12, 1492

Using the excerpt above, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- (a) Briefly explain ONE expectation about Native Americans that caused Columbus to issue this statement to his men.
  - (b) Briefly explain ONE effect that this statement by Columbus would likely have on a powerful group in Spain, other than the monarchy.
  - (c) Briefly explain ONE effect of contact between Europeans and the first inhabitants of America that is not consistent with the above passage.
2. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
- (a) Briefly explain ONE specific example of how the Spanish managed their American colonial empire during the 15th and 16th centuries.
  - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific example of how a non-Spanish individual or country influenced Spain’s American colonial empire during the 15th and 16th centuries.
  - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific example of the diversity that developed in Spain’s American colonial empire during the 15th and 16th centuries.
3. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
- (a) Briefly explain ONE specific example of a benefit that the Native Americans gained from the Spanish settlements during the 15th and 16th centuries.
  - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific example of a negative effect on Native Americans caused by the Spanish settlements during the 15th and 16th centuries.
  - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific factor that influenced the Spanish in their treatment of Native Americans during the 15th and 16th centuries.