

Encomienda

1493–1542

When the Spanish began their conquest and exploration of the New World of America, they brought many of their homeland traditions with them. One of the institutions they brought with them was the encomienda system, a system of forced labor. When the Spanish first came to the area, the Crown of Castile gave them a specific amount of land. In addition, they also were given control of the Indians on the lands. The Spanish would incorporate their system of encomiendas to the Indians. The Spanish would require the Indians to pay tributes. These tributes could be in the form of goods, money, or hard labor. In return, the Spanish promised to protect the Indians and teach them about Christianity. This encomienda system resembled a feudal system. The driving force behind helping the Indians was their conversion to Christianity.

The Spanish were able to conquer the Indians easily. The Indians had dealt with other people coming into their land in the past. The Indians just looked at the Spanish as another group of conquerors who would rule their land. One of the major concerns of the Spanish in the New World was Indian resettlement. The encomienda program had good intentions when it began with protection of the Indians and Christian instruction. The Indians even became accustomed to living in a world of Spanish traditions and Spanish rule. Spaniards were even encouraged to intermarry with Indians to speed the assimilation process. Offspring of Spanish and Indian couples were mestizos.

The Indians took many measures to accustom themselves to the change, such as learning Spanish and becoming Christian. Christianity was spread through the Indian territories. The native communities had been divided into different parishes, each with their own priests and churches. The Spanish believed if the Indians did not join their culture, in addition to the Christian faith, they would have been hard to control and would not assist the Spanish with trade.

Originally, the Spanish did not treat the Indians poorly. However, the encomienda system changed. The system eventually began to suffer. The rights of Indians were ignored because of the high demand of commerce in the area. The Indians were providing the main source of commerce, but the Spanish received credit. Indians lacked food and did not have money to buy food, since the money they made from working the land went to the Spanish tributes they were required to pay. Spaniards thought Indians could do all the labor, and the Spanish would be nobility. Spaniards in control of land decided the amount of their tribute. The Spanish used this to their advantage. Tribute prices increased with time.

Additionally, many Indians had been dying, causing a decrease in productivity.

The Spanish also had to pay their tribute to the crown. With many Indians dying, the number of tributes paid to the Spanish colonists declined. The Crown of Castile observed the Indians' treatment and did not approve. Legislation to prevent further abuse of the Indians was enacted. The Crown also sent its high court, the Audencia, to make sure there was no mistreatment of the Indians. They wanted to make sure the Indians were treated humanely. Other people also had spoken out against the harsh treatment of the Indians. One was Bishop Bartolome de Las Casas. He thought the encomienda system was exploiting the Indians. In 1539, Las Casas said he wanted a law to free the Indians and make their living conditions less harsh.



*Portrait of Bishop
Bartolome de Las Casas*

The Spanish did not want to abandon the encomienda system. Over the years, they had come to rely on it as a tremendous source of money and power. The Spanish also felt they would lose money without Indian labor. The Spanish enjoyed lifestyle and did not want change. A change did happen when the New Laws of 1542 were passed. These New Laws would considerably assist the Indians. They were now allowed to own property. In addition, the Catholic Church only had power over Christians, not Indians. Spaniards were permitted to trade with Indians but had to agree they would not harm the Indians. The goal of the New Laws was to provide an economic balance between the Indians and the Spanish.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Encomienda

1493–1542

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the purpose of the encomienda system? How did the system work?
2. Imagine you are an American Indian living in the New World. Spanish conquistadors move to your land and announce you will work for them. Would you work for the Spanish or would you resist their rule? Why or why not?
3. Why was Christianity important in resettlement of American Indians?
4. If you were a Spaniard and ran an encomienda, how much would you charge as a tribute for Indians to pay you? Why is that a fair amount?

