

First Encounters

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in the islands of the Caribbean. There he encountered the Taino people. They lived in villages and grew corn, yams and cotton, which were used for cloth. These people were friendly and generous to the Spanish. Columbus reported that, “they invite you to share anything they possess.” He also stated, “How easy it would be to convert these people to Christianity and make them work for us.”

Friendly relations soon evaporated. Streams of conquistadors, or conquerors followed after Columbus. They seized gold ornaments and then enslaved the natives to make them pan for gold. At the same time, the newcomers forced them to convert to Christianity. Those who resisted were met with harsh cruelty. Meanwhile, the Europeans brought with them diseases like smallpox, measles and influenza. The Native Americans were not immune to these diseases and suffered huge fatalities. Because of disease and Spanish brutality the Native American population plummeted.

Before Columbus the America’s was home to 12 million Native Americans. Four centuries later, it had been reduced by 95% (to around 237 thousand). When Columbus returned in 1493 he brought a force of 17 ships. He began to implement slavery and mass-extirmination of the natives. Within three years five million were dead. Not all Spanish men were butchers, Bartolomé de Las Casas, the primary historian of the Columbian era, writes of numerous accounts of the horrendous acts that the Spanish colonists inflicted upon the indigenous people, which included hanging them en masse, roasting them on spits, hacking their children into pieces to be used as dog food, and there is much more. Las Casas documented all of these atrocities and spoke out against them. He honestly cared about the Indians, he is one of the few men who went to the America to help and not destroy.

1. What is a conquistador? Why were the Native Americans being killed?
2. Who was Bartolomé de Las Casas?

New Lifestyle of the Spanish Empire

During the 1500s, the Spanish Empire in the Americas stretched from California to South America. It was responsible for bringing great wealth to the Spain. Spain was determined to maintain strict control over their new empire. To do this the king of Spain had to employ some measures that would ensure his rule. The government he set up was a model of Spain; he created the Council of the Indies to pass laws for the colonies. He also appointed viceroys or representatives who ruled in his name in each province.

Religion was also affected because the Catholic Church was very important to Spain. Church leaders help run the government and worked to convert thousands of Native Americans to Christianity. The Spanish closely controlled trade. The new colonies could only export goods to Spain and only import goods from Spain. The colonies could not trade with any other country or any other colony.

The most valuable resources shipped from the Americas were silver and gold and sugar cane which were used to make sugar, molasses, and rum. Sugar cane had to be grown on a plantation, which was a large estate that grew cash crops. These plantations needed a large number of workers. The Spanish were granted Encomiendas. This gave the Spanish the right to demand labor or tribute from the natives. This was a system of slavery and anyone who resisted was killed. But disease and cruel treatment led to worker shortages.

To deal with worker shortages the Spanish began to bring slaves from Africa. They were immune to tropical diseases and skilled in farming, mining and metalworking. These men and women worked the Encomiendas and began a whole new era in the Americas.

New Social Classes after the Spanish conquests the new world was going through some changes. The lives of the Spanish, Native Americans and the Africans were beginning to merge into new social classes. At

the top of society were Peninsulares, or people who were born in Spain. The Peninsulares filled the highest positions in both colonial governments and the Catholic Church. Next were Creoles, American born descendants of Spanish settlers. Creoles owned most of the ranches, plantations and mines. Other social groups reflected the mixing of populations. They included mestizos, people of Native American and European descent, and mulattoes, people of African and European descent. At the bottom of society were the Native Americans and Africans.

1. How did Spain govern the Americas? What are Encomiendas?
2. Draw a chart showing the new social classes.

The Columbian Exchange

The arrival of Columbus and the Spanish in the Americas had a drastic affect, not only on the Americas but on the entire world. The Columbian Exchange as it was known was the exchange of peoples, plants, animals, technology, and disease between the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

Crop/Animal	Origin	Destination	Significance
Corn (Maize)	Americas	Africa, Europe, China	Increase in food supply, led to a population increase
Potato	South America	Europe	Increase in food supply, led to a population increase
Sweet Potato	Americas	China	Increase in food supply, led to a population increase
Wheat	Europe	Americas	Remained a staple of European diets
Sugar Cane	Africa	Americas	fueled the sugar plantation culture, and started the African slave trade
Domestic Animals: Cattle, goats and chicken	Europe	Americas	Source of protein for Native American settled communities
Horse	Europe	Americas	Means of transportation, new way to hunt buffalo, helped deplete the buffalo herds

The impact of these foodstuffs had an amazing impact on the world as a whole. Most countries affected saw a dramatic increase in food supply and also saw their population increase as well. But not all contact was positive; disease was an unintended part of the global exchange. Infested ships carried with them yellow fever, malaria, smallpox and the measles to the Americas from Europe and Africa, and syphilis was brought to Europe. European and African diseases were responsible for wiping out large parts of the Native American populations.

1. What is the Columbian Exchange?

When the Spanish conquistadors were sent to the New World they were all given this message to read to the Native Americans. The Native Americans did not speak Spanish but this document was still presented to them as if they did.

“Wherefore, as best you can, I entreat and require you [the Native] to understand ...that you recognize the Church as Mistress and Superior of the universe and the High Pontiff, called Pope, in its name, the Queen and King, our masters, in their place as Superiors and Sovereigns of these islands and...you consent and give opportunity that these fathers and religious men, declare and preach to you as stated. If you should do so you will do well; as their Majesties, and I, in their royal name, will receive you with love and charity, relinquishing in freedom your women, children and estates without service, that with them and yourselves you may do with perfect liberty all you wish and may deem well; you shall not be required to become Christians, except when, informed of the truth, you desire to be converted to a Holy Catholic Faith, as nearly all the inhabitants of the other islands have done.

If you do not this, and of malice you be negligent, I protest you, that, with the help of Our Lord, I will enter with force making war upon you from all directions and in every manner that I may be able, when I will subject you to obedience to the Church and the yoke of their Majesties; and I will take these persons of yourselves, your wives and your children to make slaves, sell and dispose of you, as Their Majesties shall thus fit; and I will take your goods, doing you all the evil and injury that I may be able, as to vassals who do not obey but reject their master, resist and deny him: and I declare to you that the deaths and damages that rise therefrom, will be your fault and not that of His Majesty, nor mine, nor of these cavaliers who come with me.”

1. What do the Spanish expect the Indians to do?
2. What would happen to the Indians if they did not obey the Spanish?
3. How do you think the Indians reacted to this proclamation?

Below is an excerpt from the introduction of a song entitled “Christians Murdered Indians” by a band called Corporate Avenger. This shortened excerpt is a modern version of the above passage.

"We ask and require you to acknowledge the church as the ruler and superior of the whole world and the high priest called pope and in his name the king of Spain as lords of this land. If you submit we shall receive you in all love and charity and shall leave you, your wives and children and your lands free without servitude, but if you do not submit we shall powerfully enter into your country and shall make war against you, we shall take you and your wives and your children and shall make slaves of them and we shall take away your goods and shall do you all the harm and damage we can."