

# Early Latin America

## Spaniards and Portuguese: From Reconquest to Conquest

- The Christian reconquest of the Iberian peninsula shaped the monarchies of Spain and Portugal. Spain, formed by the unification of Aragon and Castile, emerged as a militantly Christian state. Persecution of the peninsula's Jews followed.
- Iberian traditions were transferred to conquered lands, including slaveholding and the patriarchal family. Portugal and Spain created centralized colonial governments, dependant on professional bureaucrats and the clergy.
- The first phase of conquest—from 1492 to 1570—saw the establishment of the administrative framework. **Encomiendas**, grants of Indian workers, were given to settlers. From 1570 to 1700, the framework was fleshed out as institutions took shape.
- The Spanish experience in establishing control of the Caribbean islands was formative. **Hispaniola** (1493), Puerto Rico (1508), and Cuba (1511) were settled by **encomenderos**. The Spanish developed a pattern of colonial urban design, and political institutions such as governors. By the 1520s, a shift to ranching and sugar plantations had taken place, with devastating results for the native populations.
- The conquest of the Americas was undertaken by individuals under royal authority. **Hernán Cortés** succeeded in taking Tenochtitlan and killing Moctezuma II. Spanish **New Spain** took the place of the Aztec confederacy. To the south, Francisco Pizarro conquered the Inca, whose capital at Cuzco fell in 1533. **Pedro de Valdivia** founded the city of Santiago, Chile in 1541. **Francisco Vásquez de Coronado** led an expedition into the southwestern United States.
- The men who undertook these expeditions, from a variety of backgrounds, hoped to become wealthy. Their superior military technology, disease, and existing division within the native empires led to their success.
- The morality of destroying Indian societies was questioned by many. Yet it was justified by most on the basis of natural inferiority. **Bartolomé de las Casas** was one of the most outspoken critic of abuses. Yet by the time he gained a hearing, the conquests were essentially accomplished.

## The Destruction and Transformation of American Indian Societies

- Population decline occurred in all of the American peoples. The small numbers of natives remaining were then more vulnerable to further disruption.
- While enslavement of Indians was generally stopped by about 1550, forced labor was common. For political reasons, the practice of granting encomiendas was stopped by the 1620s. The practice of *mita*, or forced labor, in Peru, used Indians

---

for mining and other state projects. In spite of widespread economic changes, indigenous culture showed great continuity.

### Colonial Economies and Governments

- In terms of revenue, mining was the most important colonial enterprise. The looted gold from the first decades of conquest was followed across the Atlantic by newly-mined gold and silver.
- Mexico and Peru held the greatest stores of silver. At **Potosí** in modern Bolivia, and Zacatecas, in Mexico, mining communities developed. Modernization of silver extraction, using mercury from **Huancavelica**, greatly increased silver exports. The mining industry led to the growth of other domestic industries, such as cloth manufacture.
- Indian traditional agriculture continued, along with the Spanish **haciendas**, rural estates. On the latter, crops such as sugar were grown for export.
- Although industries such as woolen cloth production made the colonies more self-sufficient, mining dominated the economy. Spaniards had the monopoly on trade with Spanish America. All trade passed through Seville, with its **consulado**, or merchant guild. Spain kept other nations out of its commercial sphere with **galleons** and the use of fortified ports such as Havana. In spite of the great wealth flowing into Spain, much of it flowed out to the rest of Europe. In any case, the revenue from taxation was greater.
- By the **Treaty of Tordesillas** in 1494, Spain and Portugal divided their conquests. Spain ruled its empire with the use of **letrados**, lawyers. The mass of colonial law was recodified in 1681 as the **Recopilación**. The **Council of the Indies** governed the colonies from Spain through two **viceroy**s. Their domains were further divided into 10 judiciaries each: the **audiencias**. The Catholic Church was a major component of rule. The religious orders were responsible for conversion and education, and sometimes for the protection of natives. The role of the orders was later assumed by the secular church hierarchy, controlled by the Spanish crown.
- European culture and thought was imported and disseminated largely through the church. Even offices of the Inquisition were established.

### Brazil: The First Plantation Colony

- The Portuguese first reached South America in 1500, at Brazil, but the territory was ignored for decades. Portuguese nobles were granted **captaincies**, nearly autonomous domains. They were followed by Jesuits, and a series of coastal settlements grew up.
- Sugar cane was by far the greatest commodity, demanding large amounts of capital and labor. A model plantation colony, Brazilian society started with white planters at the top, and ended with slaves. A governor-general represented Portuguese rule. Unlike Spanish America, Brazil was only part of the vast Portuguese empire. Its dependence on Portugal was great, and the colony was slow to develop its own cultural life.
- European political developments were echoed in the colonies. Competition in Europe was also played out in the colonies. However, Portugal's hold on Brazil was

---

extended when **Paulistas** explored the interior. Gold strikes in the region of **Minas Gerais** led to a gold rush. Massive importation of slaves led to their making up half the population. By the mid-18th century, Brazil was the world's greatest gold producer. Mining led to further development of the interior, and destruction of more native populations. **Rio de Janeiro** became the colony's capital.

## Multiracial Societies

- Three groups came together to form the complex Latin American society.
- Miscegenation, mixing of races, produced mestizos, who were neither native nor Spanish. The **sociedad de castas**—society of castes—used race, wealth, occupation, and place of birth to determine a person's place in society. Attempts to sort out the new categories had practical implications, as legal restrictions were applied to different groups. Although at the top of the hierarchy, whites were also subdivided into Spanish-born **peninsulares** and those born in the colonies: **creoles**. Considerations such as age, class, and gender carried over from Iberian traditions.

## The 18th-Century Reforms

- The intellectual climate of the Enlightenment had its impact on the colonies. Clubs of **amigos del país** met to discuss reform.
- Spain's hold on its colonies was threatened by piracy and the competition of other European nations. Spanish oversight of its colonial systems flagged, leading to corruption and loss of revenue. The **War of the Spanish Succession**, resolved by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, opened the Spanish trading empire to France and England.
- The Bourbon reforms of **Charles III** and his successors revived Spanish control of the colonies. The reforms did not recast the colonial structure, but sought to make it more effective. **José de Gálvez** investigated the administration of Mexico before taking over as minister of the Indies. He created a system of intendants that made the administration more effective. The loss of Florida and Havana led Spain to strengthen the colonial militia. Grants of monopolies increased the government's control over key commodities. Trade was opened to other nations, leading to a boom in some areas, such as the Buenos Aires ranching industry. However, some areas experienced economic decline. In the long run, the reforms led to widespread dissatisfaction as groups, such as creoles, lost their place in the government.
- Under the **Marquis of Pombal**, similar reforms were carried out in Brazil. He followed the English model of mercantilism, to make good the revenue loss due to declining gold production. He granted monopolies to develop agriculture, and the region of the Amazon in particular. To people the area, he encouraged mixed marriages. His reforms were only partially successful.
- Population growth in Latin America went along with exploitation of new areas and a higher volume of exports to Europe. Latin American society, disrupted by the reforms of the Bourbons and Pombal, was in ferment. The **Comunero Revolt** of 1781 nearly ended colonial rule in New Granada. The native rising of **Tupac Amaru** in Peru took three years to suppress. Brazil, on the other hand, experienced no major revolts. Deep divisions in colonial society made unified protest unlikely.

---

### Multiple-Choice Questions

1. An institution that had died out during Medieval Europe but survived in Iberia and was exported to the New World by Spain and Portugal was
  - (A) feudalism.
  - (B) serfdom.
  - (C) slavery.
  - (D) a militarized aristocracy.
  - (E) capitalism.
2. In order to administer its Latin American possessions, Spain
  - (A) permitted nobles to administer lands without royal interference.
  - (B) retained local Indian rulers as clients provided they were loyal to Spain.
  - (C) transferred political authority to Catholic bishops and priests.
  - (D) intermarried with Indian elites to create an administrative class.
  - (E) built capital cities staffed with trained bureaucrats and royal officials.
3. To furnish labor for their estates in the Americas, the Spanish
  - (A) imported peasants from Spain.
  - (B) utilized Indian labor or imported African slaves.
  - (C) began to use wage laborers.
  - (D) recruited European settlers.
  - (E) made land grants to immigrants, who worked the land and paid a percentage of their profit to Spain.
4. In regard to the atrocities and harsh treatment of the Indians by the conquistadors, the Spanish crown
  - (A) ignored complaints and supported the conquerors.
  - (B) appointed the Church protector of the Indians.
  - (C) often agreed with those who defended the Indians, but did not stop the abuses.
  - (D) created courts of inquiry and put the conquerors on trial for their crimes.
  - (E) stopped the conquests.
5. The dislocation of native plants and animals by European crops and domesticated animals, and the devastation of natives by European diseases is referred to as
  - (A) the Columbian Exchange.
  - (B) the Great Migration.
  - (C) an environmental disaster.
  - (D) ecological imperialism.
  - (E) the Great Die-Off.
6. Before 1800, the most profitable economic activity for Spain in its colonies was
  - (A) the export of finished goods to Europe.
  - (B) mining and smelting of metals.
  - (C) ranching and herding.
  - (D) agriculture.
  - (E) manufacture and processing of cottons and cloth.
7. The export of silver from the Americas led to all of these outcomes EXCEPT:
  - (A) discouraging foreign rivals and pirates.
  - (B) paying for Spain's religious and dynastic wars.
  - (C) causing a sharp inflation in Western Europe.
  - (D) exchange of silver for Chinese luxuries Europeans desired.
  - (E) the increasing impoverishment and bankruptcy of Spain.
8. Unlike Spanish Latin America, in Portuguese Brazil
  - (A) Indians retained their rights and properties.
  - (B) gold was the most important mineral extracted prior to 1600.
  - (C) Caucasian Europeans immigrated to settle the land.
  - (D) the Roman Catholic clergy administered the state.
  - (E) sugar and sugar refining provided the most important economic activity.

- 
9. When Portuguese domination of the sugar refining market ended in Brazil,
- (A) Holland seized control of the colony.
  - (B) gold and gold strikes continually brought in new settlers and opened new lands.
  - (C) France bought Brazil from Portugal.
  - (D) Brazil began to produce wines for export.
  - (E) Brazil stagnated and much of the colony reverted to Indian control.
10. Under the doctrine of mercantilism, Spain and Portugal encouraged their Latin American colonies to
- (A) buy manufactured goods only from the mother country.
  - (B) permit foreign merchants to trade within the empires.
  - (C) allow the free settlement of English colonists within the New World.
  - (D) practice free trade.
  - (E) become self-sufficient.

### **Free-Response Question**

*How did the features unique to Iberian history influence the development of Spanish and Portuguese colonies?*

---

## **ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS**

### **Multiple-Choice Questions**

- **1. (C) is correct.** Gone from most of western Europe, the practice of slavery continued in Iberia, and was soon extended to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.
- **2. (E) is correct.** A new bureaucracy was established to administer the colonies. Cities were founded as administrative centers, following the Iberian tradition of urbanization.
- **3. (B) is correct.** The Spanish relied on the forced labor of *encomiendas* or imported African slaves.
- **4. (C) is correct.** The Spanish crown was generally sympathetic with those who pleaded to halt the abuses of natives in the colonies, but only made minor changes, and only after the populations were largely decimated.
- **5. (D) is correct.** While the events described were an environmental disaster, the proper term is ecological imperialism. They are related to the Columbian Exchange as its outcome in Latin America.
- **6. (B) is correct.** All of the industries would become important, but initially mining unquestionably produced the most revenue for Spain.
- **7. (A) is correct.** Spanish imports of silver caused the results B through E, but encouraged rather than discouraged piracy and commercial rivalry.
- **8. (E) is correct.** Early in its development of Brazil, Portugal established sugar plantations, following its earlier colonial experiences.
- **9. (B) is correct.** The discovery of gold in the interior of Brazil made the extraction of gold the colony's primary commodity. The search for more deposits led to the exploration and development of new lands.
- **10. (A) is correct.** Mercantilism dictates that the mother country will use its colonies as markets for finished goods, while monopolizing the extraction of raw materials.

---

**Free-Response Essay Sample Response**

*How did the features unique to Iberian history influence the development of Spanish and Portuguese colonies?*

Three factors were key, all related to the Christian *Reconquista*: the role of the conquistadors, a militant Christianity, and a highly segmented society. The adventurers that won the Iberian peninsula for the Spanish and Iberian monarchs were used to gain new territories in the Americas. Acting independently, and for their own gain, they were extremely successful in conquering American empires. The Christian institutions of the Inquisition, the religious orders, and the secular hierarchy—bishops and archbishops—supported the civil administration. Just as the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula was accompanied by conversion or expulsion of Jews and Muslims, conquest of the Americas was followed by conversion of the native populations. The division of Iberian society along racial and religious lines was mirrored in colonial society, with the added dimension of two subject races: Indians and Africans.