

SPANISH COLONIZATION OF AMERICA: The Atrocity of The Spanish People on Native Americans in the Name of ‘*Encomienda*’

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ABSTRACT:

The Spanish colonization of the Americas, beginning with Christopher Columbus's voyage in 1492, saw Spain establish a vast colonial empire across the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. This colonization lasted for nearly 300 years, with Spain extracting valuable resources like gold, silver, and other commodities. While Spain gained wealth, the colonization also led to devastating consequences for indigenous populations, including disease outbreaks and forced labor.

Keywords: Spanish, colonization, America, empire, native people.

INTRODUCTION:

When Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in 1492, his letters back to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain move effortlessly from initial awe to plans for violent exploitation of the Arawak people he encountered.

“They are so artless and so free with all they possess,” he writes, “that no one would believe it without having seen it. Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts.

They brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned. . . They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They would make fine servants . . . with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

Christopher Columbus (between 25 August and 31 October 1451 – 20 May 1506) was an Italian explorer and navigator from the Republic of Genoa who completed four Spanish-based voyages across the Atlantic Ocean sponsored by the Catholic Monarchs. Christopher Columbus has long been exalted as a heroic figure in American history: the first explorer to establish the European presence in the New World. Americans have celebrated his arrival as far back as 1792, the 300th anniversary of his landing. Writer Washington Irving's: *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, published in 1828, is the source of much of the glorification and myth-making related to Columbus today and is considered highly fictionalized

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THE NATIVE AMERICANS:

Native Americans, also known as American Indians or Indigenous peoples of the United States, are the original inhabitants of the land that is now the United States. They represent diverse cultures, languages, and histories, with origins tracing back tens of thousands of years. The term can also encompass Indigenous peoples of the Americas more broadly, including those in Canada and other parts of North and South America.

Native American culture encompasses a wide array of diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices that vary significantly across the hundreds of federally recognized tribes in the United States. These cultures share some common threads, including a deep connection

to the natural world, a focus on community and family, and a reverence for elders. However, each tribe has its own unique history, language, customs, and artistic expressions.

Key Aspects of Native American Culture:

- **Spiritual Beliefs:**
Many Native American cultures hold animistic beliefs, attributing spiritual significance to natural elements like animals, plants, and landscapes. Ceremonies and rituals are often intertwined with these beliefs, serving as a way to connect with the spiritual realm and honor the earth.
- **Art and Expression:**
Native American art is diverse and reflects the unique cultural heritage of each tribe. This includes pottery, weaving, beadwork, basketry, music, dance, storytelling, and oral traditions.
- **Language:**
Many Native American languages are still spoken today, though some are endangered. Language revitalization efforts are crucial for preserving cultural identity and knowledge.
- **Relationship with Nature:**
Native Americans have a deep and enduring connection to the natural world, often viewing themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. Traditional practices often reflect this worldview, emphasizing sustainability and respect for the environment.

Various American Groups:

- Cherokee
- Five Nations
- Yakama
- Akimel O'odham
- Piegan Blackfeet
- Sioux
- Navajo
- Shoshone
- Houma People
- Lakota People
- Cheyenne
- Paiute
- Odawa
- Crow People
- Eel River Athapaskan Peoples

THE ANCIENT EMPIRES:

The Aztec Empire:

The Aztec Empire, also known as the Mexica, was a powerful civilization that dominated large parts of Mesoamerica from the 14th to 16th centuries. Their capital city, Tenochtitlan, was a major urban center with a population estimated to be between 200,000 and 400,000. The Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II, initially welcomed the Spanish into Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. But later on, the Aztec Empire, centered in Tenochtitlan, thrived and experienced its eventual conquest by the Spanish.

The people who would eventually create the Aztec Empire called themselves the Mexica (pronounced meh-SHEE-kah). They believed that they came from the mythical land of Aztlan, which is why later historians called these people the Aztec.

Around the year 1300, this nomadic group arrived in what's now central Mexico, traveling from perhaps as far away as modern-day Utah. The area was already well populated by other groups, so the Aztec settled on uninhabited islands in Lake Texcoco, establishing their capital city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the year 1325. (The Spanish later drained this lake.)

For the next hundred years, the Aztec lived under the region's ruling group, the Tepanec. The Aztec paid taxes to them and served as soldiers in their military. But this didn't last. In 1428, the Aztec joined two other city-states to overthrow the Tepanec. And soon, the Aztec took control of the alliance and became the region's rulers.

Over the next hundred years, Aztec kings conquered territory until the empire spanned about 80,000 square miles from the Gulf of Mexico in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. Dividing the territory into states, the Aztec ruled over a total of about six million people.

The local leaders of these states could govern without too much intervention from their Aztec rulers—but they had to pay tribute to the emperor back in Tenochtitlan. These tributes could be things like food, cotton textiles, feathers, and precious stones like turquoise.

But tributes could also be human sacrifices to the gods. Sometimes women and children were sacrificed, but most victims were warriors from these neighboring states who were taken in battle. These people were often sacrificed atop the Templo Mayor, meaning “Great Temple” in Spanish, at the center of Tenochtitlan.

The Inca Empire:

The year is 1475. It's wintertime, and the Inca (EENG-kah) royal family is vacationing in Machu Picchu, a small city that serves as their royal retreat in what's now Peru. The Inca capital city, Cusco, is now too cold, so the royals have traveled about 50 miles down the Andes Mountains.

Wearing golden jewelry and colorful ponchos made of alpaca wool, the royals, priests, and other high-ranking officials feast, hunt, worship their gods, and entertain guests. Meanwhile, the other 750 residents work to maintain the city, serving the royals and growing food like potatoes, corn, and beans on the hillside.

At their most powerful, the Inca had the largest empire in the world at the time—today, it's still the largest empire to ever exist in the Americas. Stretching from modern-day southern Colombia to southern Chile, they ruled over western South America from the Andes to the Pacific Ocean. Although Spain conquered the Inca Empire in 1533, many Inca people retreated into the mountains, where their culture, language, and practices remain today.

In 1438, Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (pah-chah-KOO-tee EENG-kah YOO-pahn-wee) became the ninth Inca emperor. With his sons as military captains, the emperor began a massive expansion of the Inca territory beyond the Cusco area. He gave government jobs to people who spoke Quechua, the Inca language. This king also ordered construction of Machu Picchu around the year 1450.

Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui gave power to his son Topa Inca Yupanqui in 1471. He expanded the empire more than any other Inca leader and eventually controlled most of western South America. At this time, the Inca ruled over 12 million people who spoke about 30 different languages.

The Inca demanded that conquered people who didn't speak Quechua, like the Chanka who spoke Aymara and the Chimú who spoke Mochica, had to serve in the army and build military outposts, temples, and roads. Those roads were impressive. Troops and Inca officials moved throughout the empire on a system that included two main highways, one along the coast and another along the Andes. Many smaller roads connected the two. The road system also included tunnels, bridges, and storehouses to provide travelers with supplies and rest stops.

Throughout the empire's history, small groups of conquered people often rebelled against the Inca, and rebellions were happening in the 1500s, too. Then around 1526, two sons of an Inca king fought over who should rule next, and a civil war began. At the same time, diseases like smallpox brought by European explorers killed around 65 percent of the population. This is when the Spanish encountered the Inca.

The Fall of Empires:

In 1519, Hernán Cortés landed on Mexican shores and began a campaign to conquer the empire. When Cortés first arrived at the gates of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519 with less than a thousand Spanish soldiers, his entire group could have been wiped out by the Aztecs, whose formidable warriors firmly controlled the central region of Mexico. Instead, they were welcomed in friendship and invited into the city to join a festive celebration.

The Spanish promptly betrayed their hosts' welcome and began slaughtering the singers and dancers, chopping off their hands and heads and disemboweling them with their swords. They then retreated from the panicked crowd to the royal palace where they took the Aztec ruler Montezuma as hostage.

Once the Aztecs realized their terrible mistake, they tried to fight back but it was too late. Cortés formed alliances with rival indigenous groups, such as the Tlaxcalans and within two years their empire was gone forever by 1521. Later on, Cortés claimed their territory for Spain, renaming the capital Mexico City. The Spanish conquest brought an end to the Aztec Empire and the beginning of Spanish colonial rule in Mexico. This event had a profound impact on the indigenous population, leading to cultural and societal changes.

Inspired by Cortés' achievement, Pizarro set out a few years later to emulate his conquest, targeting the Inca Empire of South America. With fewer than 200 soldiers facing an army of 80,000 Inca warriors, Pizarro also used the strategy of surprise and betrayal to meet the Inca leader Atahualpa face to face, and then began slaughtering Atahualpa's troops while taking him hostage. Within a year, the capital Cuzco was conquered and the Inca Empire was no more.

THE SPANISH QUEST:

The Spanish conquest of the Americas was one of the most brutal episodes in human history. Entire cultures of American natives were suppressed, murdered, raped, and enslaved by Spanish conquistadors on an incessant quest for precious metals and other material wealth. The devastation wrought upon the natives was so great that some Spaniards felt that what they were doing violated God's will and was naturally and morally wrong, but they were vastly outnumbered. The majority saw it as their right, duty, and privilege to conquer and subject these millions of people to Spanish rule. Since they were trying to justify their case to sovereigns and a public that were thousands of miles away, they had to convey their reports regarding the natives in a favorable light. This often resulted in grossly exaggerated or even outright false reports regarding the behavior and customs of the natives. The conquistadors were eager to prove that what they were perpetrating on the natives was in fact completely justified and morally acceptable. As a result, the Spanish conquistadors dehumanized and demeaned the natives in their accounts of the conquest with the goal of making their actions seem justified and morally correct. The search for gold was one of the main reasons that the Spanish wanted to explore and conquer the Americas. Led by Francisco Pizarro, a group of 180 Spanish went searching for a large city with temples covered in gold—it was Cusco. For years the Inca had mined gold and silver from the Andes Mountains to create beautiful pieces of jewelry and art.

The Spanish colonization drastically transformed indigenous societies through the implementation of systems like the *encomienda*, which forced labor upon native populations. Economically, many indigenous communities were exploited for their resources, leading to a collapse of traditional economies.

The system of *encomiendas* was accompanied by a great deal of violence. One Spaniard, Bartolomé de Las Casas, denounced the brutality of Spanish rule. A Dominican friar, Las Casas had been one of the earliest Spanish settlers in the Spanish Caribbean. In his early life in the Americas, he owned Indian slaves and was the recipient of an *encomienda*. However, after witnessing the savagery with which *encomenderos* (recipients of *encomiendas*) treated the native people, he reversed his views. In 1515, Las Casas released his native slaves, gave up his *encomienda*, and began to advocate for humane treatment of native peoples. He lobbied for new legislation, eventually known as the New Laws, which would eliminate the *encomienda* system.

Las Casas's writing about the Spaniards' horrific treatment of Indians helped inspire the so-called Black Legend, the idea that the Spanish were bloodthirsty conquerors with no regard for human life. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who held this view of the Spanish were Spain's imperial rivals. English writers and others seized on the idea of Spain's ruthlessness to support their own colonization projects. By demonizing the Spanish, they justified their own efforts as more humane. All European colonizers, however, shared a disregard for Indians.

Bartolomé de Las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, written in 1542 and published ten years later, detailed for Prince Philip II of Spain how Spanish colonists had been mistreating natives.

'Into and among these gentle sheep, endowed by their Maker and Creator with all the qualities aforesaid, did creep the Spaniards, who no sooner had knowledge of these people than they became like fierce wolves and tigers and lions who have gone many days without food or nourishment. And no other thing have they done for forty years until this day, and still today see fit to do, but dismember, slay, perturb, afflict, torment, and destroy the Indians by all manner of cruelty—new and divers

and most singular manners such as never before seen or read or heard of—some few of which shall be recounted below, and they do this to such a degree that on the Island of Hispaniola, of the above three millions souls that we once saw, today there be no more than two hundred of those native people remaining. . . .

Two principal and general customs have been employed by those, calling themselves Christians, who have passed this way, in extirpating and striking from the face of the earth those suffering nations. The first being unjust, cruel, bloody, and tyrannical warfare. The other—after having slain all those who might yearn toward or suspire after or think of freedom, or consider escaping from the torments that they are made to suffer, by which I mean all the native-born lords and adult males, for it is the Spaniards' custom in their wars to allow only young boys and females to live—being to oppress them with the hardest, harshest, and most heinous bondage to which men or beasts might ever be bound into'.

CONCLUSION

The Spanish were successful in colonizing the Americas due to a combination of factors, including superior military technology, the spread of diseases that devastated native populations. Also they were able to forge alliances with some indigenous groups who were enemies of powerful empires like the Aztecs and Incas. By aligning with these groups, they gained local knowledge, support, and manpower, making their conquests more manageable. Additionally, Spain's motivations of wealth, glory, and religious conversion fueled their expansion efforts. Their motto was: **“Gold, Glory, God”**

The end of Spanish colonization in the Americas was a process spanning several decades, culminating in the late 19th century. While Spanish holdings in mainland America were largely lost by the mid-1820s, the Spanish-American War in 1898 marked the end of Spanish colonial rule in the Caribbean and the Pacific, with the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States.

The Spanish colonization of the Americas involved both exploitation and attempts at governance and religious conversion, leading to a complex legacy of both positive and negative impacts on the indigenous populations. While some Spanish policies aimed to protect indigenous peoples and incorporate them into colonial society, others resulted in widespread suffering and death.

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