

AIM: What was life like in the Spanish colonies?

As you are reading through "Life in the Colonies," address the following tasks on a separate sheet of paper:

A) Define the following terms:

- Absolute monarch
- Viceroy
- Viceroyalty
- Mercantilism
- Peninsulares
- Criollos
- Mestizos
- Mulattoes
- Encomienda

LIFE IN THE COLONIES

When the conquest was over, the Spanish and Portuguese settled down to agriculture and mining. The shores of the area from Brazil to the West Indies were carved up into sugar plantations. On the highlands and grasslands the newcomers created vast cattle ranches. Toward the middle of the eighteenth century, coffee cultivation was introduced in the tropical highlands. Gold, silver, and diamonds were discovered and mined in Colombia and Brazil.

As in the rest of the world at the time, the greater part of the population of Latin America was rural. However, cities did arise. The largest city in South America in 1650 was the silver mining center of Potosí, which had a population of 160,000. Mexico City had a population of 200,000 at the close of the seventeenth century. By 1788, in Spanish America there were over thirty institutions of higher learning authorized to award college degrees. There were also several universities that awarded doctorates in medicine, law, and philosophy.

Source
The Regional Studies Series: Latin America

Government. The Spanish king was an **absolute monarch**. This means that the king was all-powerful. He made all decisions and approved all laws. His subjects owed him total and unquestioning loyalty.

The Spanish kings organized their empire for their own benefit. They wished to keep tight control over their colonies. However, the colonies were too far away for the king to govern directly. Therefore, he appointed a **viceroy**, or person who acted in the place of the king, to govern the colonies for him. Each viceroy governed a large area called a **viceroyalty**.

The king, assisted by a group of Spanish nobles called the Council of the Indies, made all the laws for the colonies. It was the viceroy's job to enforce these laws. An **audiencia**, or court, was appointed by the king to make sure that the viceroy carried out his orders. The only elected body was the town council, chosen by a small group of wealthy colonists.

The system of government in the Spanish colonies was very rigid. It took a long time to bring about change or to respond to new conditions. In many cases, this hindered colonial development.

Colonial governments were often corrupt. Wealthy landowners bribed officials to look the other way when they cheated or abused the Indians. The king himself could be bribed. King Carlos I, who reigned from 1516 to 1556, made laws to protect the Indians from slavery. However, the wealth of the empire, and thus of the king, depended on the forced labor of the Indians. Therefore, the laws protecting the Indians were frequently overlooked.

Settlement in Brazil. The government established by the Portuguese in Brazil was much less centralized. Most of the settlements in Brazil hugged the coast. Winds and ocean currents made transportation and communication among the various settlements very difficult. As a result, a much greater degree of local rule was allowed than in the Spanish colonies.

As you read, settlement of Brazil proceeded slowly at first. To encourage settlement, the king of Portugal divided Brazil into districts called **captaincies**. These captaincies were awarded by the king as favors to his friends, who became known as **captains**. The captains were given the right to build settlements, collect taxes, and govern their own districts.

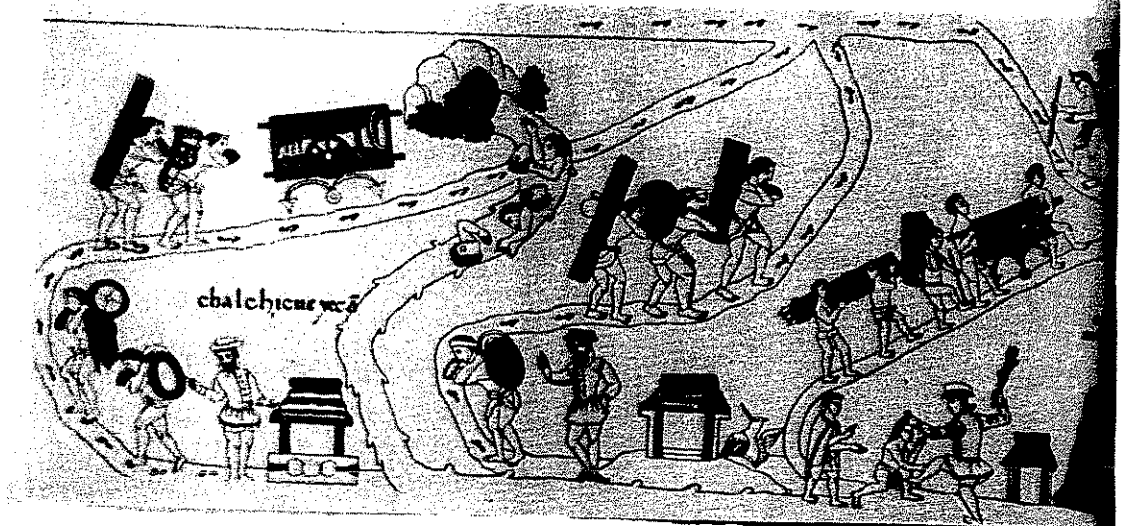
Colonial Economic Policy. The economic policy of Spain and Portugal regarding their colonies was known as **mercantilism**. Under this policy, which was followed by most European nations at the time, the

colonies were to provide the home nation with raw materials. They were also to serve as markets, buying the manufactured goods that the home country produced. All goods entering the colony had to be carried by the home country's ships. As a result of this mercantilist policy, Spain and Portugal's American colonies were forbidden to buy foreign manufactured goods or to sell raw materials to anyone but the home country. They were also forbidden to manufacture any products that would compete with those produced by the home country. Thus, Spain and Portugal became wealthy, while their American colonies remained undeveloped and dependent on imports. Except for minor industries such as pottery, weaving, and tanning, little opportunity was provided for industrial development.

The basis of Spanish wealth in the Americas were rich mineral deposits, mainly silver but also gold in what is now Bolivia and Mexico. Spanish treasure ships carrying cargoes of silver and gold back to Spain were frequently attacked by pirates who prowled the seas as well as by ships of other European nations. Late in the 1500s, the Spanish developed a convoy system to protect its ships. Under this system, Spanish warships escorted the treasure ships on the homeward voyage across the Atlantic.

Agriculture, while not as profitable as mineral resources, also played a role in the colonial economy. Wheat and maize were grown on a large scale in Mexico and Peru. Sugar cultivation, first introduced in the West Indies, spread rapidly to other colonial areas. Wine and olives were produced in the irrigated valleys of Peru. The colonists also produced important quantities of tobacco, cacao, and indigo. A particularly

The Spanish used the conquered Indians in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America as slave laborers. This picture shows the treatment the Indians received at the hands of their Spanish masters.



important Spanish contribution to American economic life was the introduction of various domestic animals, including chickens, mules, horses, cattle, pigs, and sheep.

Social Structure. Society in the American colonies of Spain and Portugal was divided into distinct and separate classes. A person was born into a social class and remained in that class for life. There was little or no chance to move from one class to another. At the top were those who had been born in Spain or Portugal. Because these countries are located on a piece of land called the Iberian Peninsula, the people who came from there were known as **peninsulares** (puh-NIN-suh-lar-us). The peninsulares were few in number, but they dominated society, controlling most of the power and wealth. Of the 170 viceroys that governed the colonies during Spanish rule, only four were not peninsulares.

Below the peninsulares were the **criollos** (kree-OH-yos), those people who were born in America but whose parents or grandparents were Spanish. The criollos managed the farms and directed the mining of silver and gold. However, although many criollos were wealthy, they could not hold any important positions in the government.

Below the criollos were the **mestizos**, people of mixed Spanish and Indian parentage, and the **mulattoes**, people of mixed Spanish and black parentage. At the bottom were the blacks brought from Africa as slaves, and the Indians, who were treated little better than slaves.

Indians and Blacks. In order to develop their colonial mining and plantation economies, the Spanish and Portuguese needed cheap and abundant labor. They turned to the native populations, forcing them to work in the mines and fields. At first, they developed a system known as the **encomienda** (en-KOH-mee-en-doh). Under this system, a colonist was granted a deed, or *encomendar*, assigning him a group of Indians who were to serve him as laborers. In return, the colonist, or *encomendero*, pledged to protect his Indians, pay their wages, and encourage their conversion to Christianity. However, the settlers often mistreated their charges, and the system turned out to be little more than a thinly disguised form of slavery. Indeed, the system was so harsh that its practice in the West Indies resulted in the almost total destruction of the Indian population there.

Protests against the encomienda were led by a Catholic missionary named Bartolomé de Las Casas (lahs KAH sahs). In 1542, the Spanish king proclaimed the New Laws of the Indies, which resulted in the eventual disappearance of the encomienda.

Name: _____

Global History and Geography I

AIM: What was life like in the Spanish colonies?

1. What natural resources were abundant to the Spanish and the Portuguese? How did the Spanish and Portuguese guarantee these resources would be utilized to their advantage?
2. How did the Spanish King manage his empire? Why did he operate in this way?
3. How were colonial governments corrupt? What evidence from the reading supports this notion?
4. Why was the government in Brazil set up differently? How did Brazilian rule differ from Spanish rule in the colonies?
5. How did the system of mercantilism restrict trade for the Americans? How did it benefit the Spanish and the Portuguese?
6. What type of crops and resources contributed to the colonial economy?
7. Describe the mobility that existed between the different social classes in the Spanish colonies. Which social class had the least amount of people? The most amount of people?
8. Was the system of encomienda similar to slavery? Why/why not? Use information from the readings to support your answer.

