

SPANISH COLONIZATION

1. Motives

Spain encouraged settlements in the New World to strengthen her claims to territory; to secure gold, silver, and valuable agricultural produce, such as sugar and indigo (a blue dye); and to convert the Indians to Catholicism. Spanish settlers were chiefly government officials, soldiers, noblemen, merchants, and missionaries.

2. Extent

The Papal decision and the subsequent treaty assigned the New World, except for Brazil, to Spain. The Spanish first settled in the islands of the West Indies: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola (Santo Domingo). From these bases, Spain proceeded to colonize Mexico, Central America, and most of South America.

Spain also established colonies in territory that today is part of the United States. In 1565, in Florida, the Spanish founded St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. In 1605, in New Mexico, they founded Santa Fe, the second oldest city in the United States. Other settlements were made throughout Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and California.

In 1600, before the English had made their first settlement, Spanish colonists in the New World numbered about 200,000.

3. Life in the Spanish Colonies

a. Culture

Spain gave the New World her culture, notably her language and religion. She permitted only Catholics to settle in her colonies. In the major cities, Spain built impressive cathedrals and church-conducted universities.

Missionaries labored, with considerable success, to convert the native Indians to Christianity. Also, Spanish settlers and Indians intermarried, and their offspring, called mestizos, were raised within the Spanish culture.

b. Economy

The Spanish introduced wheat, barley, domestic animals such as horses and cattle, and trees bearing fruits and nuts. They also introduced the feudal European system of landholding, in accordance with which the king granted large estates to Spanish noblemen. These estates were first worked by the Indians, who were practically enslaved and were often cruelly treated. Later, plantation owners also used Negro slaves imported from Africa, as well as mestizos, who were virtual slaves.

Colonial merchants were permitted to trade only with the mother country, Spain. This restriction accorded with the prevailing idea that colonies exist to enrich the mother country, an idea expounded in the economic doctrine of mercantilism. From her colonies, Spain obtained a treasure of gold and silver that helped maintain her, during the 16th and most of the 17th century, as a leading world power.

c. Government

The king of Spain permitted no self-government at home and none in the colonies. He exercised strict control over the colonies by giving absolute powers to the officials whom he sent from Spain to serve as royal governors, or viceroys.

4. Decline of the Spanish Empire

After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 by the English, Spain slowly declined as a world power. In the 19th century, Spain lost all her American colonies, most of them by revolution during the Napoleonic Era and the rest as a result of the Spanish-American War. Although Spanish political control ended, Spain left a heritage of wide social distinctions, concentrated land ownership, Roman Catholicism, and the Spanish language.