

## The Encomienda System

When the Spanish began their conquest and exploration of the New World, they brought many of their homeland traditions with them. One of the institutions they brought with them was the encomienda system. In many ways, the encomienda system resembled a feudal system: The Spanish monarchy granted conquistadors, soldiers, and other officials control over a specific number of Indians, as well as the lands on which those Indians lived. The person who received the grant, known as an **encomendero**, would require the Indians to pay tributes. The encomendero determined the amount of the tribute, which could be paid in the form of goods, money, or hard labor. In return, the encomendero promised to protect the Indians and teach them about Christianity.

The encomienda program had good intentions when it began. The Indians even became accustomed to living in a world of Spanish traditions and Spanish rule. Spaniards were encouraged to intermarry with Indians to speed the assimilation process. The children of Spanish and Indian couples were called mestizos.

The Indians took many measures to acclimate themselves to the change, such as learning Spanish and becoming Christian. As a result, Christianity spread throughout the Indian territories. The Spanish divided native communities into different parishes, each with their own priests and churches. The Spanish believed if the Indians did not assimilate to their culture, including converting to the Christian faith, they would have been hard to control and would not assist the Spanish with trade.

Originally, most Spaniards did not treat the Indians poorly. However, the encomienda system began to change. The rights of Indians were ignored because of the high demand to continually increase commerce in the area. By providing labor, the Indians played an important role in colonial society. However, when the encomienda prospered, it was the encomendero who received all of the credit. The Indians were soon trapped in a vicious cycle: they needed food, but did not have money to buy food because the money they made from working the land went to the Spanish in the form of tributes that they were required to pay. Many Indians were dying from disease, exhaustion, and starvation. This caused a decrease in productivity and reduced the number of tributes paid to encomenderos. Since the Spaniards also had to pay their own tribute to the crown, they needed to compensate for this loss. Over time, they increased the price of the tributes paid by the Indians.

The Spanish Crown was aware of the mistreatment and did not approve. Laws were passed to prevent further abuse. The Crown also sent its high court, the Audiencia, to enforce the legislation. Some colonists began to speak out against the harsh treatment of the Indians. Bishop Bartolome de Las Casas, for example, thought that the current laws did not go far enough to protect the Indians. In 1539, Las Casas said he wanted the government to abolish the encomienda system, free the Indians and make their living conditions less harsh. Nevertheless, the Spanish did not want to abandon the encomienda system. Over the years, they had come to rely on it as a tremendous source of wealth and power. Without Indian labor, the Spanish feared they would lose money. They enjoyed their lifestyle and did not want change.

A change did occur, however, when the New Laws of 1542 were passed. Under the New Laws, enslaved Indians were set free and future enslavement was forbidden. The role of the Audiencia was expanded and Spaniards who were found guilty of abuse could lose their encomiendas. The size of individual encomiendas was reduced if the number of Indians controlled by the encomendero was found to be excessive. Finally, Spaniards could no longer sell, donate, or inherit an encomienda. Instead, when an encomendero died, his grant was returned to the Crown. This provision was designed to phase out the encomienda system gradually. It led to a revolt in which the **Viceroy**<sup>1</sup> of Peru was overthrown and killed. In 1545, this provision of the New Laws was repealed, ensuring the continuation of the encomienda system for many more years. Although they failed to bring an end to the encomienda system, the New Laws liberated thousands of enslaved Indians.

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<sup>1</sup> A Viceroy was a person chosen by the King or Queen to run the entire colony.



4. Why did encomenderos increase the price Indians had to pay as tribute? How might this be viewed as a “vicious cycle”?
  
5. How did the New Laws of 1542 aid American Indians?
  
6. In what way did the New Laws fail?
  
7. What evidence from the article supports the following statement: Despite abuses, the Spanish recognized American Indians as human beings.