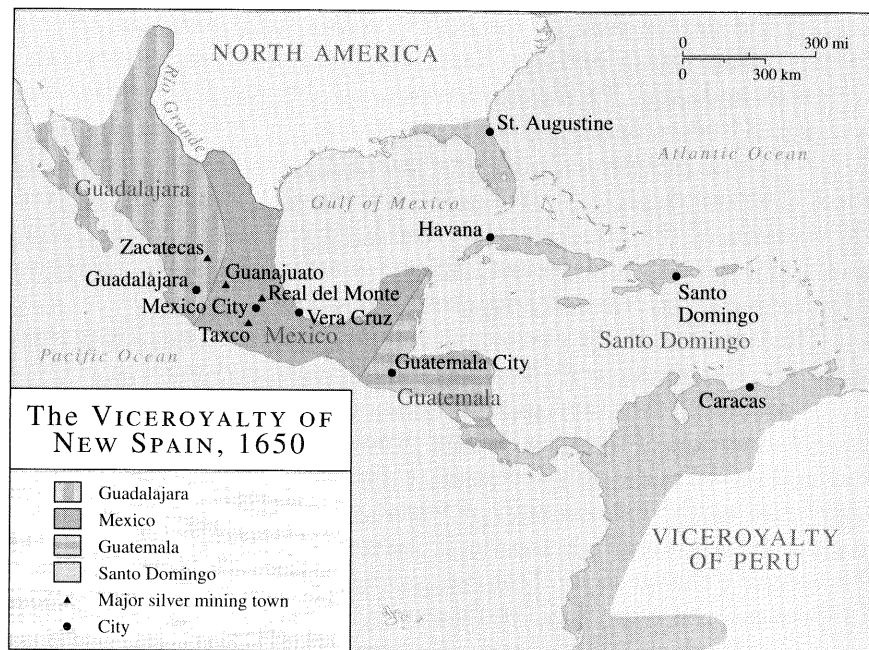


The largest of all the European colonies, New Spain quickly proved to be the wealthiest, with its silver mines, sugar and tobacco plantations, cochineal dyes, and general agriculture. As such it received the special attention of the king. Wheat provided the basis of the Spanish diet and served as the only acceptable source for communion wafers. As significant as the introduction of wheat proved to be, bread did not replace the corn tortilla in the diet of indigenous and other commoners. The primary change in food for the native peoples was the introduction of chickens and pigs; their meals came to include eggs regularly and meat from both animals occasionally, resulting in altered and enriched diets.

Perhaps even more significant were the natural products from Mexico that enriched the diets in Europe. Corn became the basic food source for horses and cattle, while chocolate became a delicacy and tobacco an addictive pleasure. Other food products included avocados and turkeys. Peru sent potatoes, and the plantations on the Caribbean coast, the islands, and Brazil provided Spain, Portugal, and eventually much of Europe with both sugar and rum. Nevertheless, the basic diet in Mexico, with the addition of eggs, remained corn, beans, and chilies.

Spaniards, as agricultural producers and miners, demanded enough workers for their enterprises. The combination of declining indigenous population because of continuing epidemics and escalating efforts to mine silver and to produce commercial agricultural products resulted in major changes in the management of Indian labor. Over the first century following the establishment of colonial administration, the institutions governing the indigenous workforce changed three times.

First, the Spaniards followed the homeland pattern of social organization devised during the seven centuries of the Reconquest, when Spaniards fought to drive the Islamic invaders called Moors out of Spain, concluding in 1492 at the Battle of Granada. They placed Indian heads of families in trust to Spanish conquistadors and nobles, just as



surviving peasant families reclaimed from the Moors were placed in feudal fiefdoms for the Spanish officers and noblemen. Called the *encomienda* system in Mexico, it mirrored the peninsular feudal arrangement of theoretical reciprocal responsibilities. The Spaniards oversaw the conversion of Indian families and provided for their minimal well-being with food and housing. In return, Indian peoples supplied labor, tribute in the form of cotton blankets or special products such as honey or chocolate, and loyalty to their lords.

The *encomienda* system became the target of missionaries who became advocates for the Indian peoples. Most notably, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas denounced the violence of the conquest and the exploitation of the colonial system. His propagandistic argument addressed to the king, entitled *A Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, described the situation in Mexico with these words in the introduction: “Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians [the Spaniards] have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time.” He continued, “It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies,” and followed with examples of tortures and



This engraving of the Spaniards enslaving Indians illustrated the accounts provided in *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* by Padre Bartolomé de Las Casas. Such pictures created a general view of the brutality of the Spanish conquest in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru, that was used by England, France, and the Netherlands to justify attacks on Spanish silver fleets. Snark/ Art Resource, NY

cruelties that he swore he had witnessed. This and other similar accounts were obtained by imperial rivals and used as attacks on the Spaniards. These works circulated in translation served to create the so-called Black Legend of Spanish colonialism used to justify French, English, and Dutch attacks against the Spanish Empire.<sup>10</sup>

The barrage of contradictory claims and charges took some time to evaluate, but eventually the monarch decided to change the relationship between Spaniards in the Americas and the Indian workers. Although his explanations focused on the issues of Christian behavior, his actions revealed a concern with international diplomacy and his clear commitment not to allow the formation of an autonomous nobility with economic independence from his authority that a system of permanent indigenous peons might allow. His first effort ordered the abolition of the system by means of the New Laws of 1542. *Encomenderos*, those

individuals who held the labor grants, collectively ignored the royal decree because it would leave them without workers unless they could afford to purchase slaves. Colonial officials in Mexico likewise made no effort to enforce the decree after learning that the viceroy of Peru's efforts to implement the law resulted in an uprising in which he was murdered.

The king's decree notwithstanding, the *encomienda* system ended when it no longer provided the labor necessary for agricultural production, especially of wheat, for the towns with growing Spanish populations. *Encomiendas* had been distributed as recognition of service to the crown or of noble status rather than specifically to those farming wheat. Faced with a system that no longer provided the workers necessary for the production of Spanish foodstuffs, the king in 1549 introduced the *repartimiento* system that recognized the significance of labor in the public interest. In practice this meant wheat production and silver mining across Mexico, and in Mexico City it meant work on the drainage system as flooding became an increasing problem in the colony's capital. In other colonies it often meant almost exclusively mining. Indian communities had to provide a fixed number of male workers each week; these men reported to a colonial official who divided them among Spaniards based on the area planted to wheat or the severity of the flooding. In mining regions, the workers went directly to the mines.

The system worked well as long as the population remained stable, but it did not. The number of Spaniards increased, and the number of Indians declined. Primarily disease, but also abuse and injury in the workplace, malnutrition (in some part caused by the elimination of *chia* as a major food item because of churchmen's belief that it was connected to blood sacrifices), and psychological depression all contributed to constant high death rates, in which some villages lost their entire population and in others it was greatly reduced. This forced labor system required communities to supply a fixed number of workers, so when the population declined, the labor demands became more onerous for the community. The *repartimiento* required workers to travel from their communities to a central location, and from there to an hacienda (plantation) or other work site. Travel exposed these workers to press gangs and robbers. Plantation owners soon complained to colonial authorities about workers who did not arrive. Officials in turn wrote the crown looking for a labor system that would provide needed workers and protect the individuals from attacks that destroyed any sense of personal security.

By the 1630s, the Indian workers subject to public service through the *repartimiento* suffered mounting insecurity because of epidemic diseases and other causes of population decline. Spaniards, in need of workers, or fearing they would soon be, became reluctant to trust the colonial officials to supply an adequate number of field hands. They turned to illegal ways of recruiting workers. Contract, or *gañan*, labor offered a solution welcomed by both parties. Hacendados (estate owners) gave contracts to workers that offered a small salary, a place to live, a patch for the family's subsistence farming, and protection from other labor contractors. In return, the hacendados got a reliable workforce. In this way, as the *gañan* system provided workers for large landowners, it also provided a more secure life for Indians for the first time since the conquest. With the emergence of this contract system, in 1632, the crown abolished the *repartimiento* system in Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

The search for personal and community security inspired some Indian leaders to master the Spanish legal and administrative system. This allowed them to utilize Spanish courts and the colonial bureaucracy to advantage. First, leaders turned to the legal system to conserve their lives in traditional fashion—their lands, their civic festivals, and their dress—insofar as possible by suing in the courts against Spaniards who came into their town to exploit the community or in efforts to regain lands taken from them. Second, community leaders recognized the legal protections given through municipal incorporation, so many sought and received incorporation as municipalities in which they preserved traditional governmental and economic patterns, including communal landholdings.

This mastery of Spanish law codes and bureaucratic procedures became a preoccupation of some indigenous leaders, who turned the legalistic colonial system to their account. The Spanish crown recognized the rights of incorporated local governments, whether they were Spanish or Indian communities, and protected them. Courts ruled against Spaniards who disrupted life in indigenous communities by trying to force them to sell their crops at ruinous prices, or pay imaginary taxes, or provide uncalled-for personal services. Judges sent them to fight on the northern frontier, ordered their transportation to the Philippines, or returned them to Spain. The crown increasingly recognized a responsibility to the indigenous peoples that included protecting them from unwarranted exploitation. The crown's concern showed clearly in the decision not to allow the Holy Office of the Inquisition to investigate Indians except in the cases of cannibalism and bigamy as well as a succession of court decisions to protect Indian community properties.