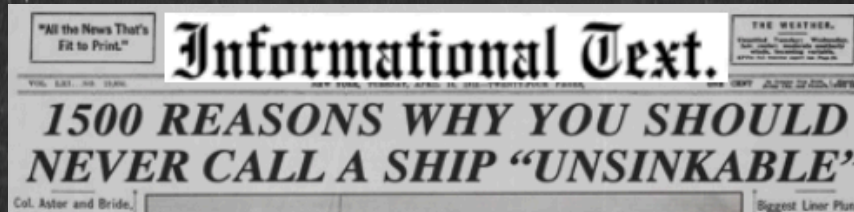


Understanding Who We Were



SOCIAL REALITY OF NEW SPAIN



2 Page Text and Comprehension

UNDERSTANDING WHO WE WERE

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Spanish Influence in the New World

In 1494, the Spanish and Portuguese signed the Treaty of Tordesillas which effectively divided the world into two different spheres of influence. With the Pope mediating between the two Catholic nations, they agreed that the Portuguese would gain influence primarily in Africa, while the Spanish would have precedence on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Both nations then began to pursue radically different colonization goals. The Portuguese focused on trade and the Spanish focused on conquest. Due to the fact that the *Reconquista* had just successfully expelled the Moors from Spain, Spanish culture glorified warrior activity, and granted a special status to conquistadors. For many, the conquest of the New World was just a continuation of the *Reconquista*.

The 3 G's: God, Gold, and Glory

Spaniards had various motivations for trying to come to the New World. For many, it was a chance to make a fortune. Conquistadors were often able to steal gold from the indigenous people and would keep some of it for themselves. A steady stream of gold and silver began to flow to Spain, quickly transforming them into the most powerful nation in all of Europe. Ironically, the fact that the wealth was largely dependent upon conquest and gold, rather than trade made the Spanish economy fragile, and it actually fell apart rather quickly due to the lack of long-term economic solutions.

Many other men came to gain glory. Men like Cortes were not the first-born son in their family, meaning that they would never get to inherit their father's wealth. The New World was an opportunity to make a name for yourself and have a fresh start.

Finally, missionaries began to come to teach the natives about Christianity. Since the Spanish Inquisition had targeted Protestants as well as Jews and Muslims, most of the Spanish missionaries were Catholics. This is the reason why the main religion of Central and South America continues to be Roman Catholic and they speak Spanish.

The Encomienda system

From the time that the Spaniards arrived in the New World, they had expected to become wealthy from the slave labor of the indigenous people. The social class system that placed conquered people at the low level of slaves was called the encomienda system. Dating all the way back to the Roman Empire, it had been standard practice in Spain of conquered people to be made into indentured servants, or *encomendados*.

In order to reward the faithful service to the Spanish Crown, successful conquistadors were elevated socially to a higher class, where they were granted not only land, but also a certain number of *encomendados* to work their land. Within the early Spanish empire, *encomendados* were



Conquistadores Pray Before Entering Tenochtitlan by Margaret Duncan Coxhead (1909). Many of the Spanish conquerors were religious and believed that God was helping them to win against the Aztec and Incan peoples.

considered to be the most valuable resource available, as the land was worthless to a Spaniard without laborers to work it. The *encomendados* might be prisoners, poor Spaniards, foreign enemy soldiers, or indigenous people.



Encomendados work mining gold for the Spanish encomendador.

An overwhelming number of men who came to the New World from Spain did so without money or families. In Spanish culture, the eldest son stood to inherit his father's estate, so the New World gave younger sons an opportunity to make their own fortune. Since these men normally came without families, intermarrying between local women and conquistadors was common. The children of these marriages were considered *mestizos*, because they had both indigenous and Spaniard descent.

Mestizos were exempted from being *encomendados*. Therefore, one of the easiest ways for a local woman to escape from indentured servitude was to marry a conquistador. *Mestizos* became an important and successful social class within the Spanish-American colonies, although they were not at the top of New Spain's society.

Social Classes in New Spain

The society of New Spain was essentially created to meet the primary Spanish goal of gathering and exporting wealth to Spain. Most conquistadors went to New Spain to gather enough gold to become wealthy, but normally they fully intended to return, buy an estate, and live as a wealthy citizen in Spain. For this reason, the legal system in New Spain automatically gave preference to native Spanish citizens. Anyone born in Europe was automatically higher in society, and enjoyed



Indigenous workers had very few rights in New Spain's society.

special privileges and rights not given to anyone else.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What were the three reasons why Spaniards came to the New World?
2. How did being a conquistador help one elevate themselves in Spanish society?
3. What groups of people were on the bottom of Spanish society in the New World?

Write about it.

Compare and Contrast the social classes in America to the social stratification that existed in the 16th century New Spain.

The middle classes in New Spanish society were those who were born in the New World but had at least one Spanish parent. Creoles had two Spanish parents, and normally were considered to be Spanish citizens. Since New Spain was considered their home, many creoles chose to remain in New Spain long-term. *Mestizos* were the middle class in Spanish society. Since they had one Spanish parent (usually the father) they normally enjoyed a better position in society than indigenous people.

The lowest classes were occupied by indigenous people, *encomendados*, and African slaves. In many cases, these classes were not allowed to own property and had very few options or ways to improve their futures. Even within the lower classes there was a hierarchy. Indigenous people had a lot more rights and a better life than the slaves and African slaves were lower than indigenous slaves.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Answer Key

1. The Spanish came to the New World looking to get rich, to spread their religious beliefs (Catholicism) or to gain status in Spanish society.
2. Being a conquistador normally gave the individual a special status in Spanish society as well as giving them the opportunity to get rich through conquest or ownership of an encomienda.
3. Indigenous people and slaves were on the bottom of the Spanish hierarchy in the New World.

Questions for Further Discussion

In what ways are social classes important for the structure of a society?

In what ways are social classes bad for the structure of a society?

Was life under Spanish rule any different than it was under Aztec rule for most tribes in Central America?

If you were to rank the importance of God, Gold, and Glory to Spanish society, what rank would you assign to each? Why?