

# Conquest and colonization of Latin America

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## Objective

To understand how and why:

- 'In the space of half a century, a few thousand men from the Iberian peninsula conquered an area perhaps 40 times the size of their homeland, and came to dominate a population of many million.'

## Pre-colonial societies

Latin America was quite isolated

- Not involved in inter-continental trade
- However Latin American society was quite advanced
  - Mayan civilisation (peaked in 250-900BC, urban city-states with sophisticated achievements in the arts and sciences, including architecture and astrology)
  - Aztec Empire (peaked in C15, involved in military conquest and the extraction of wealth from those they conquered)
  - Inca Empire (emerged in C15, politically centralised state, expansionist empire, advanced surplus producing economy, terraced agriculture and irrigation systems, roads and food distribution networks)
  - Other tribal societies

## Colonial expeditions

Timeline

- 1492
  - Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola, in search of alternate trade routes to Asia
- 1492-1519
  - Conquest of Caribbean islands, including Cuba
  - The rights to land and the right to use indigenous labour were granted to private individuals by the Spanish and Portuguese Crown
- 1500
  - Pedro Alvares Cabral establishes Portuguese claim over Brazil
- 1519-1542
  - Conquest of the mainland by the Spanish
    - Aztec Empire defeated by 1522
    - Inca Empire defeated by 1533
    - City of Santiago established by 1542
  - The entire continent was carved up
    - Brazil was under Portuguese control
    - The rest of the continent belonged to the Spanish

Dominant and alternate versions of history

- The Spanish and Portuguese were bringing civilisation and Christianity to Latin America
- The other side of this story was documented by priests who witnessed the violence with which this expansionism was achieved
- Indigenous accounts of conquest included in The Florentine Code, and 'An Inca Account of the Conquest of Peru by Titu Cusi Yupanaqui'

*How were so few able to conquer so many?*

- Militaristic advancements

- Horses
- Disease
- The locals honoured the spoken word, whereas the Iberians respected the written contract
- Backing from the pope
- Introduction of social hierarchy
- Spanish and Portuguese agreement
  - They were not fighting each other for territory
- Treachery
  - Use lesser cheats to band against the rulers
- Divide and rule
- The Aztec ruler thought that Cortez was the promised return of their most revered God
  - They unknowingly welcomed the foreigners
  - They weren't expecting violent onslaught
- Centralisation of native empires
  - When the city/leader fell, the entire empire fell
- (The Mayans or Incans were NOT backward, European society was not necessarily superior)

## Early impacts of colonialism

### Political impact

- Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Viceroyalty of Peru, divided at the Panamanian isthmus
- 'congregation and reduction' of surviving indigenous populations
- Settler colonial administration
- New towns and cities as local and regional centres of political control
- Role of the Catholic Church
  - One priest claimed to have saved 200 million souls by baptising them
  - The Jesuit order gained so much power that it threatened the Crown, so all the Jesuits were ordered to leave Latin America within 6 days
  - Priests saw their involvement in these missions as an opportunity to provide safety to some indigenous populations, others used natives as slaves to help maintain their missions
- Independence from Spain and Portugal
  - Current national borders of Latin America remain shaped largely by colonial divisions
  - Violent process of self-determination

### Demographic consequences

- Indigenous population decline: more than 95%
  - Systematic massacre
  - Disease
  - Overwork and ill-treatment
  - Disruption of traditional coping mechanisms

### Economic consequences

- Exploitation of natural resources
  - Spain: Gold and Silver
  - Portuguese: sugar production
- Land ownership patterns
  - Encomienda (indigenous labourers associated to a particular plot of land)
  - Mercedes/Sesmarías
- Internal trade routes

- Structure of production that associated Latin America to the world division of labour
- Monopoly of trade enforced with Spain and Portugal
  - Mercantilism
  - Development of local manufacturing is constrained
- After major deposits of gold and silver were found, the Spanish concentrated on the mining industry
  - This had major impacts on infrastructure, trade routes and main urban centres
  - Mita /Repartimiernto (created by the Inca empire, citizens must contribute to community projects for a certain period of time)
  - Quinto Real

## Late impacts of colonisation

### Demographic legacy

- Relative linguistic unity across the region
  - Spanish and Portuguese dominate
  - Indigenous languages persist
- Settler elite
  - Racialised inequalities
  - Land and income inequality
  - Poverty affects indigenous populations more than Europeans
- There are 40 million people in Latin America who would identify as belonging to one of 600 indigenous peoples
  - They are still concentrated in the rural areas of the region
  - According to the World Bank, 12.76% of the entire American population and approximately 40% of the rural population is indigenous

### Economic legacy

- Consolidation of nation states
- Specialisation in commodities
  - Liberalisation to trade
- Political and economic opportunity
  - Europe's industrialisation increases demand for commodities
  - Expansion of immigration
- The Latin American economy remains anchored on its primary sector
  - i.e. It concentrates on the production of raw natural resources

Table 3.2. *Export commodity concentration ratios, circa 1913*

Country	First product	Percentage	Second product	Percentage	Total
Argentina	Maize	22.5	Wheat	20.7	43.2
Bolivia	Tin	72.3	Silver	4.3	76.6
Brazil	Coffee	62.3	Rubber	15.9	78.2
Chile	Nitrates	71.3	Copper	7.0	78.3
Colombia	Coffee	37.2	Gold	20.4	57.6
Costa Rica	Bananas	50.9	Coffee	35.2	86.1
Cuba	Sugar	72.0	Tobacco	19.5	91.5
Dominican Republic	Cacao	39.2	Sugar	34.8	74.0
Ecuador	Cacao	64.1	Coffee	5.4	69.5
El Salvador	Coffee	79.6	Precious metals	15.9	95.5
Guatemala	Coffee	84.8	Bananas	5.7	90.5
Haiti	Coffee	64.0	Cacao	6.8	70.8
Honduras	Bananas	50.1	Precious metals	25.9	76.0
Mexico	Silver	30.3	Copper	10.3	40.6
Nicaragua	Coffee	64.9	Precious metals	13.8	78.7
Panama	Bananas	65.0	Coconuts	7.0	72.0
Paraguay	Yerba maté	32.1	Tobacco	15.8	47.9
Peru	Copper	22.0	Sugar	15.4	37.4
Puerto Rico	Sugar	47.0	Coffee	19.0	66.0
Uruguay	Wool	42.0	Meat	24.0	66.0
Venezuela	Coffee	52.0	Cacao	21.4	73.4

- 'The Commodities Consensus': Extractivism and the Eco-Territorial Turn
  - Extractivism refers to activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed, especially for export
  - Reproduces the colonial path in the region, based on the exploitation of natural resources
  - Emergence of a 'Commodities Consensus' at the turn of the century, that reinforces the focus on extractivism, and is connected to an increase in social spending and an increase on environmental conflicts, an 'eco-territorial turn' in social struggles
  - Latin America has consistently been ranked as the deadliest region in the world for environmental defenders
    - 197 environmentalists killed, most of them in Latin America
  - Resurgence of the Eco-territorial turn of social structures
    - Ecological and territorial grievances that started centuries ago
    - Mining conflicts are often situated at mining sites that were set up in the colonial area

#### Summary

- Historical legacies shaped socio-economic and political characteristics of the region
- Character and distribution of native population influenced the nature and pattern of European conquest
- Direct loss of resources
  - Human
  - Material
- Stunted development of regional economies
  - Trade
  - Industry
- Major cultural consequences
  - Religion
  - Language
  - Social norms
- Latin America contains heterogeneous societies:
  - Hierarchical and unequal societies
  - Multiracial societies and exclusion of afro-indigenous sectors still shapes