

## ***The Spanish in the Caribbean***

The Caribbean served as a Spanish base of operations for the next thirty years; it is here that they formed their first ideas about the Americas and its inhabitants. During these first years, the Spanish struggled to establish processes and policies by which they could gain wealth and power for themselves and the Crown, and converts for their faith. Sometimes these goals worked hand in hand; more often they worked against each other. This tension was summed up in by conquistador and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who wrote, "We came for the glory of God and to get rich!"

The colonial economy of Spanish America was an economy of exploitation in two senses. First, the organization of labor within the Spanish empire involved structures of highly servitude or slavery. Second, the resources of the continent were exploited for the economic advantage of Spain. The early conquistadors were interested primarily in gold; they soon devised a series of institutions to exploit Native American labor. The first and most important was the encomienda, a formal grant by the Crown of the right to the labor of a specific number of Native Americans for a particular time. It usually involved a few hundred Indians, but sometimes numbered in the thousands.

The practice began in the Caribbean and spread as lands were conquered and peoples subdued. As Indians died of disease and overwork, Spaniards resupplied their labor force through slave raids in Central and South America. Areas such as Nicaragua were especially hard hit by these raids, and were soon depopulated. The institution of encomienda was intended to harness Indian labor while simultaneously Christianizing and "civilizing" them; encomienda holders were granted labor, but in return they were charged with making sure that the natives were taught the Christian faith, baptized, and taught to live like Spaniards. Few encomienda holders were willing to spend the time and effort Christianizing their charges or the money to bring a priest to do it on their behalf.

Ultimately, encomienda became little more than a system of slavery. The Spanish Crown disliked the encomienda; the monarchy was distressed by the reports that Indians were mistreated, and feared the encomienda holders were attempting to transform themselves into a new, powerful nobility in the Americas. The king did not want any competition in the Americas.

<http://faculty.northgeorgia.edu/rwbyers/The%20Conquest%20of%20Mexicorevised811.pdf>

### ***The Spanish in the Caribbean – extended thinking questions:***

1. What does the text mean when it says the "economy of Spanish America was an economy of exploitation?"
2. What is the encomienda system? How did the Spaniards get people to work in the encomienda system?
3. What were the two main purposes for the encomienda system?
4. Why was the Spanish king threatened by the encomienda system occurring in the Caribbean?