

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—Native American Population Decline: Why and by How Much?

Background

When they first arrived in the Americas, the Spanish had just won a generations-long, ruthlessly-fought war against Muslim states in Iberia. Afterward, they expelled from Spain both those Muslims remaining and the approximately 200,000 resident Jews. Legal theory held that fighting to expand Christianity justified enslavement of infidels at will, taking over their lands, and disposing of them as the conquerors wished.

During increasing contact with Native Americans in the 1500s, there were heated discussions among Spanish political and religious leaders about whether the inhabitants of “the Indies” were even human and about how they should be treated. Opinion was divided on whether they were capable of becoming converted. To some, they were innocent, trusting lambs, with souls that would be receptive to the Christian message. To others, they were vicious beasts who practiced cannibalism, human sacrifice, and worship of Satan. To all, they were clearly inferior to the Spanish who had conquered them.

From the beginning, the Spanish crown was concerned for the welfare of Native Americans. It ruled that they were to be paid fair wages for work they freely undertook, be secure in their possessions and persons, and be treated well. Anyone who beat Native Americans or called them “dogs” was fined five gold pesos. However, if they refused to become Christians and submit to Spain’s rule, the Requirement (a document read to them, in Spanish, by the early explorers and conquistadors) told them the consequences: they could be attacked, enslaved, or put to death. And it would all be their own fault, no response being taken as refusal.

In 1542, the *New Laws* of Spain stated that it was illegal to enslave Native Americans under any circumstances whatsoever. Yet they were unfree in Spanish America under the *encomienda* system, an institution traditional in Spain and similar to serfdom. It assigned a group of natives in a neighborhood to a Spaniard, to whom they owed tribute and labor services in return for protection and instruction in Christianity. Senior royal and Church officials were appointed “Protectors of the Indians,” to supervise and inspect *encomiendas* so that Indians would enjoy justice and good government. The system, however, was open to widespread abuse, which officials mostly ignored. The *New Laws* were only spottily enforced.

In North America, the English were eager to convert and “civilize” the natives, whom they considered at best inferior, at worst barbaric, and little better than beasts. Nevertheless, they often allied with Native Americans against other Native Americans and against other European colonial powers. English settlers continually encroached on the lands of Native Americans, who resisted. In some places at some times, massacres occurred on both sides.