

Labor in Colonial Latin America

The economies of early Spanish colonial Latin American countries thrived under three different kinds of labor systems: the *Encomienda* System, *Repartimiento de Labor*, and the *Hacienda* System.

Encomienda System

Encomienda was a system used by Spanish colonies beginning in early in the colonization of the Americas. Encomienda means “to trust,” and the labor system was originally set up to protect indigenous people from forced labor. The idea was that powerful Spaniards in the New World were granted by the king control over a certain number of Native Americans in a certain area. In return for being able to collect taxes and use labor of the Native Americans, the *encomenderos* (Spaniards granted *encomienda*) were supposed to provide protection and a Christian education to the natives. Unfortunately, the Spaniards frequently abused the natives and treated them like slaves. Spain tried to reform this system several times, but it ultimately failed and gave way to the Repartimiento System.

Repartimiento de Labor

Repartimiento was a labor system that allowed countries ruled by Spain, such as Mexico and Peru, to force local indigenous people to work in the mines or on ranches and plantations. It first began around 1499, but became an official system of labor around 1575. The system was designed to give the colonial system, rather than the conquistadors, power over Native American labor. The idea was that the natives would provide a certain amount of labor each year in return for good treatment and wages; and the Spanish colonists could make requests for labor to the colonial government. The exact terms for the natives varied from place to place in the colonies. But, the system was frequently abused and, like the encomienda, it often resembled slavery. For

example, a common task asked of Peruvian natives was to work in the large silver mines, work that was so dangerous that natives frequently died. So the request for work was often a death sentence. Despite these problems, the system remained in effect almost up until the end of colonialism in the Americas in the early nineteenth century.

Hacienda System

The Hacienda System is most closely related to the slavery and indentured servitude systems that existed in the United States. Indigenous people were forced to work on large estates, called *haciendas*, throughout the Spanish colonies. The haciendas worked much like the plantations of the antebellum US South, but with one important difference. Whereas in the US South it was mostly slaves that worked the land, on the haciendas it was mostly paid laborers. But this difference is actually larger in theory than in practice. The paid laborers were often very poor and were kept in almost constant debt to the hacienda owner. This debt made it impossible for them to ever escape from the hacienda system, much like a slave. This system remained in effect in the colonies until well into the twentieth century.



Apply and Elaborate

Based on the text and the Media Gallery, complete the chart below.

Economic Labor System	Similarities	Differences
Encomienda System		
Repartimiento de Labor		
Hacienda System		

