

Read and Respond: Columbian Exchange, African Slavery, Spanish, and Portuguese Influence in Latin America

Directions: Read and highlight the answers to each section on African Slavery, Spanish and Portuguese influence in Latin America. Write out your answers to each question in complete sentences on your own sheet of paper.

Columbian Exchange

Christopher Columbus “discovered” the New World in 1492. This event started an exchange between the Old World (Europe) and the New World (the Americas). As the Spanish spread their empire, the indigenous population (or native people) began to decline. The Europeans introduced Africans in the New World as slaves. The Africans also became a part of this exchange. Today we know this as the Columbian Exchange, since it began as a result of Columbus’s discovery.

One important part of the Columbian Exchange was the exchange of food plants. Cocoa, corn, potatoes, peppers, and tomatoes grew in Central and South America. The Spanish and Portuguese discovered these foods and took them back to Europe. European crops brought from Europe and Africa to the New World included coffee, peaches, sugar, and wheat. Farming changed in the New World. Large plantations with slave labor were started. Sugar cane was one important plantation crop.

The indigenous population was defeated by diseases that were also part of the Columbian Exchange. The Europeans brought with them many diseases that the native people had not seen before. Their bodies did not have immunity (natural resistance) to the diseases, and their healers did not know how to treat the diseases. Some of the diseases brought to the New World were influenza, measles, smallpox, and typhoid fever. Between 50 and 75 percent of the population of some native tribes may have lost their lives to these diseases.

Europeans introduced certain animals to the New World. These included pigs, cows, goats, and bees. The horse was a culture-changing animal. It allowed native people to travel further and faster. The horse was useful in battle and hunting. Horses helped the indigenous people spread their territory and trade with other tribes.

African Slavery on the Development of the Americas

With the rapid expansion of European influence into the New World, the need for a cheap and steadily-available labor (work) force to establish and maintain colonies (land controlled by the Europeans) – particularly as relates to the cultivation (growing) and exporting sugarcane and coffee. Spanish and Portuguese landowners at first sought such a labor force among the conquered indigenous populations of Latin America; however, the arrival of Europeans in the New World brought with it a number of diseases (small pox and influenza) which decimated (killed) native populations. As such the Spanish and Portuguese began importing slave labor from West Africa in what became known as the transatlantic slave trade. Transatlantic slave trade was the enslavement and forced transportation of 12-15 million black Africans to the Americas between the 15th and 19th centuries; associated terms include the triangular trade and the middle passage across the Atlantic.

Sanitation and living conditions on the many slave ships, which brought black Africans to the Americas, were deplorable (very bad); the mortality rate (death rate) on such journeys was typically 25%. This black African slave labor force was forced to work on plantations throughout Latin America, as well as in gold and diamond mines in Brazil.

Although slavery was abolished (done away with) in Europe in the early 19th century, it continued in Latin America through the 1880s, most notably in Cuba and Brazil. Over time intermarriage among those of Spanish and Portuguese ancestry with indigenous peoples and black Africans gave rise to a new cultural identity which is seen today in Latin America.

Spanish and Portuguese Influence on Language and Religion in Latin America

In terms of language, both Spanish and Portuguese are classified as Romance languages, meaning they come from the Latin language once used throughout the Roman Empire in Europe. This is where the term Latin America comes from because Spanish and Portuguese languages come from Latin.

The influence of Spanish is mostly found throughout Mexico, Central America, northern and western South America, and the western Caribbean. There are more Spanish-speakers in Mexico today than there are in Spain itself.

Portuguese, meanwhile, is the official language of Brazil. Although Spanish is spoken in more individual countries throughout South America, Portuguese is the most-spoken language on the continent given Brazil's estimated 208 million population.

Both Spain and Portugal were officially Roman Catholic countries during the age of exploration and colonization, and as such both promoted the Catholicism throughout their Latin American colonies. As a result, the region remains heavily Christianized today.