

To what extent did the *repartimiento* system  
reduce the Spanish's exploitation of the Native  
Indian population from 1549 to 1632?

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## Section A: Identification and evaluation of sources

This investigation will explore the question “to what extent did the *repartimiento* system reduce the Spanish’s exploitation of the Native Indian population from 1549 to 1632,” as the *repartimiento* system was enforced during this period.

The first source is the “Draft of the Instruction of Prince Felipe to Don Luis De Velasco<sup>1</sup>,” a primary source from the book “Unpublished Documents of the 16th Century for the History of Mexico<sup>2</sup>” by Mariano Cuevas. Concerning the freedom and treatment of Indian labors, this document is relevant to my investigation as it shows how the *repartimiento* system should have improved Indians’ condition.

The purpose of this source is to instruct the Viceroy of New Spain to enforce the *repartimiento* system with specific details regarding the treatment of Indians. Its content provides valuable insights into how the crown legally prohibited mistreatments of Indians, such as “penalties for miners who took labor by force”, “moderate workloads”, and “fair wages.” However, the source is limited as it does not tell us if these instructions were carried out accordingly.

As regards its origin, Philip II might have limited understanding about Indians and their situation, which is evident by the fact he referred them as “vagabonds,” a misconception made by the conquistadors (Russell 75). However, as an instruction written by King Philip II to Velasco, Viceroy of New Spain, in 1552, the source is valuable for providing the monarch’s perspective in considering the treatment of Indian labors, and we can see the king was not

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<sup>1</sup> Draft of the Instruction of Prince Felipe to Don Luis De Velasco, first of this name, Viceroy of Nueva España about the freedom and good treatment of naturales who worked in the mines, ranches and mills. [*Borrador de la instruccion del Principe don Felipe a don Luis de Velasco, virrey de Nueva Espana, acerca de la libertad y buen tratamiento de los naturales que trabajaban en las minas, estancias, e ingenios, 1552.*]

<sup>2</sup> Cuevas, Mariano. *Documentos inéditos del siglo XVI para la historia de México*, México, Museo nacional de arqueología, historia y etnología, 1914, pp. 170-75. *Internet Archive*. Accessed 6 Apr. 2019.

sincere in improving the status of Natives from its content, which is useful when we speculate the extent of the enforcement.

The second source is “The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America” written by Andrés Reséndez, a Mexican historian and Ph.D. who specializes in colonial Latin America and the presence of labor coercion of indigenous Indians, in 2016 (UC Davis). This source is relevant to my investigation because it discusses other forms of forced labor beyond the *repartimiento* system, such as “slave hunting” and “naborias,” showing a valuable perspective of how Spanish’s exploitation continued with the *repartimiento* system.

As a credible scholar, Reséndez benefits from hindsight through analyzing a range of sources, including “judicial proceedings, official inquiries, and casual mentions of raids and Indian captives in letters and assorted documents (12).” However, the book is limited for it only focuses on the prevalence of slavery yet neglects how Indian’s living status had changed holistically. The content of the book focuses on Indian slavery in the Caribbean, northern Mexico, and southwest of the US, but not central or southern Mexico, which limits the value of the source in providing a comprehensive study of Indians’ status. Moreover, by covering the history of Indian slaves from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only part of the book provides useful information to my investigation.

## Section B: Investigation

Ever since Columbus asserted that Caribs “would make fine servants,” the Spanish colonists began a prolonged history of enslaving the indigenous population in the Americas (41). During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of humanist philosophy and severe declines in the indigenous population, the Spanish Crown replaced the *encomienda* system with the *repartimiento* system in 1549. The *repartimiento* system introduced a form of draft labor in which each Indian worked a fixed amount of time while receiving fixed wages. While Monteiro considers this a humanitarian act that promoted better treatment for the indigenous population and “protected its indigenous vassals (20),” others disagree with his assessment, many of whom claims that the system didn’t reduce Spanish’s exploitation and Natives were still subjected to slavery. By evaluating the changes *repartimiento* brought, the extent of its enforcement, and the crown’s intention of establishing the system, this essay is going to argue that the *repartimiento* only reduced Spanish’s exploitation nominally, while in reality, the crown and colonists continued to exploit Indians through the abuse of power, compulsory compensation, and reinterpretations of the law.

In one sense, the *repartimiento* system appeared to be protecting the indigenous population by limiting their working time and compensation. Before the replacement of *repartimiento*, Indians were subjected to longstanding, intolerable labor under the control of *encomenderos* according to las Cases’ account. Although las Cases might have exaggerated some facts as he wrote this account to persuade the Spanish King to act against the mistreatment of Indians, the *repartimiento* system theoretically subjected Indians to limited working time [maximum of two weeks or five weeks in the mines]. The government established specific laws regarding the kinds of work and conditions *repartimiento* Indians were subjected to, assigning *Juez repartidor* to make sure that Indians were receiving a fixed wage, adequate tools, diet, and housing (MacLeod 207). After the fulfillment of one’s obligation, the worker may return

to his home, and other workers would come to replace him. Compared to the *encomienda* system, as Monteiro suggests, the *repartimiento* system theoretically “abolished Indian slavery” as wages were remunerated and “protected the Indians from abusive treatment” by limiting the amount of working time (20).

However, Monterio’s argument may have been undermined as he overlooked the extent of enforcement of the system. The crown might have lacked the ability to enforce the system as he was “only an abstract concept” to the conquistadors though his intention of establishing the system is debatable (Nesvig 179). Spaniards frequently lacked incentives to follow the orders, since New Spain was experiencing famine and the system proved unable to draft enough labor to overcome it (Phelan 4). Colonists had to “abuse their rights, forcing villages to supply more laborers than the amount legally stipulated and requiring workers to continue working longer than the law required” to overcome the famine (Russell 34). Thus, Indians were still working beyond their limited working time. While Monterio suggests no significant impact was made on the indigenous population even when the viceroy drafted 6000 extra workers to construct a dike during the flood of 1555 (21), nevertheless, his argument is weakened when colonists continued to abuse this privilege and the *repartimiento* simply became another form of *encomienda*.

Moreover, local caciques might abuse their power by changing the alternation scheme of laborers. Affluent Indians could bribe the local caciques so that they would not be drafted (MacLeod 208). In this way, poor Indians were drafted repeatedly during the year, such that their working time was no longer limited as the *repartimiento* required. Therefore, in reality, the *repartimiento* system might not have reduced the amount of working time for the majority of lower-class Indians, making it more akin to a form of rotated slavery.

Although Philip II announced in his draft of 1552 that “[Indians] are free men, and not slaves or subject to any servitude<sup>3</sup>,” the crown might not have a good intention in improving the life of Indians. He claimed later in the draft: “they would still be required to work for their sustenance, and, if they didn’t wish to work, they would be compelled to do so as long as they were paid (Cuevas 170)<sup>4</sup>.” Although it was published three years after the system enacted, the presence of a compulsory work mentality suggests that the crown was not genuinely interested in protecting natives; rather, he used the system as a humanist justification for enslaving indigenous people, countering Nesvig’s viewpoint that the crown had a good intention in helping the natives. Possibly due to the increasing pressure from humanists after the Valladolid debate and the decline in the native population, the crown had to devise a strategy to preserve the indigenous population while maximizing labor productivities. The wage level of *repartimiento*, which was well below that of the free labor market, also signified the crown’s insincerity (Monteiro 22; Russell 76; Reséndez 103). Therefore, it was unlikely that the crown established the *repartimiento* system because Spaniards could not be trusted to treat the Natives fairly. The system was more likely to be a political justification for forced labor, just as Simpson concluded: “the Crown was now the only *encomendero* in the old sense (144).”

Phelan, however, argues “the stereotype that the white man found he could not bribe the Indian to work for a wage and so he resorted to one form or another of compulsion is false (191).” Phelan uses evidence from the increasing number of skilled Indian craftsmen in urban areas to prove that Indians were adequately compensated. Otherwise, they would not “earn a living in European fashion (191).” For those who lived in the countryside, Phelan attributes the fact that colonists were paying nominal wage to the economic crisis. Therefore, he concluded,

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<sup>3</sup> “ge les dará a entender que son hombres libres, vasallos de S. M. , e no esclavos ni sujetos a servidumbre alguna.”

<sup>4</sup> “pero que tengan entendido que han de trabajar para su sustentación e que no ha de quedar en su voluntad, sino que si no quisieren trabajar, que sepan que han de ser compelidos a ello, pagándoles su traba.”

“coercion was not feasible in the cities (191).” Phelan, however, neglects the fact that there was no more than 9% of the indigenous population were living in urban areas, which limits the extent of his argument (Russell 30). Coercion was still plausible for the majority of Indians under Spanish rule. Moreover, in the mines of Parral, for example, more than 225 instances of social unrest were recorded (Reséndez 104). In 1595, the discontent caused by the system was summarized when the Franciscans presented to the council of Indies that the *repartimiento* “were not only contrary to natural law but were contrary to common sense (Simpson 158).” The frequency of Indian revolts and the Franciscan’s objection both contradict Phelan’s notion of adequate compensations, suggesting that the colonists still exploited Indians.

Additionally, both Cuello and Reséndez suggests colonists used various methods to bypass the system altogether. Colonist routinely devised “slave hunting” expeditions to enslave Indians, as the government allowed Spanish to enslave captives in a “justified” war. Colonists would intentionally initiate conflicts with Indians and defeat them so that they could be justifiably traded as slaves, which was used in the conquest of Saltillo and Monterrey by Alberto del Canto in 1577 and Luis Carvajal’s conquest of Nuevo Leon in 1582 (Cuello 687). Reséndez also suggests that the colonist merely changed the terminology from “Indian slaves” to “rebels” or “criminals (72),” while the de facto position of the Indians subjected to these labels remained the same. Besides slave-hunting, many colonists retained *naborias*, life-long servants, in the Caribbean and Venezuela (Reséndez 71).

In conclusion, we can see that the *repartimiento* system only nominally reduce colonists’ exploitation on Indians. While Phelan’s view against coerced labor is limited to a minority of Indians, Monterio’s view is also discredited as he overlooked the extent of enforcement. Similarly, although the presence of “slave-hunting” and “naborias” signifies some degree of brutal treatment, the extent of Cuello’s and Reséndez’s argument are limited to the Caribbean and Northern Mexico. A more compelling view is made by McLeod and Russell who



investigates the enforcement of the system. Simpson's perspective that the crown became the sole *economero* is also more compelling than that of Nesvig after considering Philip II's compulsory work mentality. In the end, the system only reduced Spaniards abusive treatment nominally, while the abuse of privileges, mandatory compensation and reinterpretations of the law were used to continue Spanish's exploitation.

## Section C: Reflection

Through this investigation, I learned valuable insights about historians' common methodologies and challenges. For my research, I studied many secondary sources, mainly books and academic papers, and primary sources, including King Philip II's letters and las Cases accounts. I also learned the analyzing of sources, integration of perspectives, and justification of argument, all of which are critical skills used by historians.

One common challenge is that all historical events can be viewed from different perspectives supported by substantial evidence. Similarly, my research consists of contradictory sources: for example, whilst Phelan suggests Indians who lived in cities could not be coerced to work, other historians, such as Reséndez and Cuello, argued the coercion was possible through "slight reinterpretations" and "changes in nomenclature (65)." However, if the historian only looks at sources that support one's thesis, the investigation is likely to be limited. To evaluate different perspectives and arrive at a conclusion, historians may examine the underlying assumptions or overlooked evidence that can undermine the arguments. Even though Phelan's argument is discredited by Russell's calculation that only 9% of the Indian population lived in urban areas, I realized my investigation only made informed speculation of the past. Evaluating other historians' perspectives may gain knowledge of the past, yet no definitive "truth" may be proven with only secondary sources.

Even with relevant primary accounts, historians would often consider their perspectives in narrating the incident. When I found the letter of King Philip II, which contradicts with Nesvig's perspective that the crown had good intentions in improving the lives of the natives, I started to realize historical accounts may be limited by its perspective or context. Considering the pressure of Valladolid debate and humanists' objections, it was possible for Phillip II to fake such a good intention. Moreover, as I studied las Cases' primary account, I thought about his purpose of persuading the king to stop the brutal treatments in New Spain, which is taken

into the evaluation of the value of the source. Historians could evaluate the value and limitation of all primary sources in terms of its origin, purpose, and content, and thus, make a selection. Base on this selection, historians may arrive at a justified conclusion.

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