



[Spanish Colonization](#)

In A Nutshell

Beginning with Columbus in 1492 and continuing for nearly 350 years, Spain conquered and settled most of South America, the Caribbean, and the American Southwest. After an initial wave of conquistadors—aided by military advantages and infectious diseases that decimated the native populations—defeated the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas, Spain organized a huge imperial system to exploit the land, labor, and mineral wealth of the New World. The Spanish empire became the largest European empire since ancient Rome, and Spain used the wealth of the Americas to finance nearly endless warfare in Europe, protecting the Americas with a vast navy and powerful army and bringing Catholicism to the New World. The growth of a racially mixed society eventually caused rifts to develop between Spain and its American colonies, and by 1824, all of Spain's New World colonies except Cuba and Puerto Rico had fought for and won their independence.

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Spain's New World empire wasn't owned by Spain. Queen Isabella of Castile, not her husband King Ferdinand of Aragon, gave Columbus money and support for his voyages, and Castile owned the New World from then on. In fact, because of clauses in the marriage contract between Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469, even though they were all subjects of the "King of Spain," the Aragonese (Aragon was the eastern part of Spain, centered around Barcelona and Valencia) needed special passports and royal permission just to travel to the New World. That's quite a pre-nup. Between 1500 and 1650, the Spanish imported 181 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver from the New World. In today's money, that much gold would be worth nearly \$4 billion, and the silver would be worth over \$7 billion. This may not seem like a whole lot in a world with national budgets in the trillions of dollars, but during this span, prices in Europe rose by 500%; in other words, a loaf of bread was five times more expensive in 1650 than in 1500, thanks in great part to gold and silver imports.

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