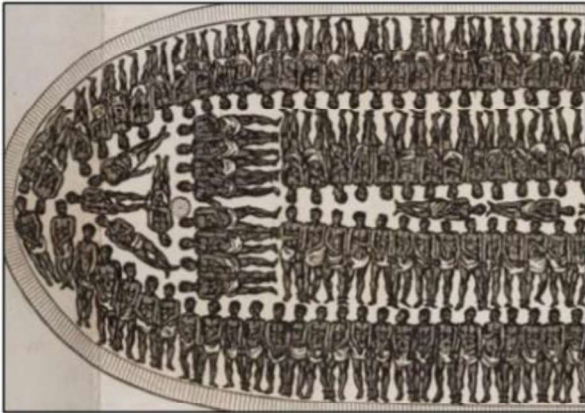


Latin American History Teacher Notes

African Slavery



With the rapid expansion of European influence into the New World, the need for a cheap and steadily available labor force to establish and maintain colonial industries and infrastructure – particularly as relates to the cultivation and exportation of sugarcane and coffee – was crucial. 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 virulent diseases (e.g., small pox) which decimated native populations.

As such the Spanish and Portuguese began importing slave labor from West Africa in what became known as the **transatlantic slave trade**. Sanitation and living conditions on the many slave ships, which brought black Africans to the Americas, were deplorable; the mortality rate on such journeys was typically 25%. This black African slave labor force was impressed into agricultural work on plantations and **haciendas** throughout Latin America, as well as in gold and diamond mines in Brazil.

Although slavery was abolished in Europe in the early 19th century, it persisted 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 in Latin America which prevails today.

Impact of Spanish and Portuguese

The **Colombian Exchange**, which began with Christopher Columbus in 1492, was not merely a question of agricultural **commodities** exchange between Europe and the Americas. This 15th century example of **globalization** was also cultural in scope. The diffusion of **Iberian** languages and religious beliefs throughout Latin America during the colonial period has had an indelible impact on the development of the region.

In terms of language, both Spanish and Portuguese are classified as **Romance** languages, meaning they derive from the Latin language once used throughout the Roman Empire in Europe. Although grammatically similar, the two languages are quite different from one another phonetically and structurally.

The influence of Spanish is most pronounced throughout Mexico, Central America (excepting Belize), 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** kingdoms during the age of exploration and colonization, and as such both promoted the Christian faith throughout their respective Latin American colonies. As a result, the region remains heavily Christianized today.

Latin American Greetings	
<u>Spanish</u> ¡Buenos días! <i>(bway-nohs DEE-us)</i>	<u>Brazilian Portuguese</u> Bom dia! <i>(bohm JEE-ah)</i>

Cuban Revolution

Prior to 1959, Cuba was a relatively American-friendly nation. Although the island had languished under the dictatorship of **Fulgencio Batista** since 1952, U.S. investment on the island was booming – particularly with regard to the sugar industry.

All of this changed on 1 January 1959 when Fidel **Castro** seized power and declared the island a **communist** state. All American-owned property on the island – as well as all Cuban-owned private businesses, factories, and farmland – was declared the property of the state. Basic personal freedoms of expression were suspended; media outlets were shut down; even churches were closed and their property seized. In response to **Castro's** repressive takeover, the United States placed an economic **embargo** on Cuba, which blocked the island's sugar exports to American markets. This action was countered by the **Soviet Union**, who became fast friends with the new Cuban leadership, agreeing to purchase its sugarcane as well as provide the Castro regime with weapons and military training.



Although the **Castro** regime did provide improvements to education and healthcare, civil rights on the island were severely restricted. And, as one might expect, having a **communist** state situated so close to American soil – there are only 90 miles lying between Cuba and Key West, Florida – did not sit well with the U.S. government. In a watershed moment of the **Cold War**, the Cuban government agreed to allow the U.S.S.R. to build a missile launching complex on the island, as well as house a substantial complement of intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles there. This was discovered by U.S. intelligence in 1962, sparking a thirteen-day standoff known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Soviet premier Nikita **Khrushchev** argued that the placement of missiles in Cuba was aimed at countering the presence of American Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey. The **Soviet** government also claimed the move was in response to the failed American-backed **coup** against Fidel **Castro** at the Bay of Pigs one year earlier.)

Although the **Kennedy** administration diffused the situation through diplomatic means, the **Cuban Missile Crisis** was arguably the closest the world – up to that point – had ever come to a Third World War.



U.S.-Cuban relations remained tense for the next half-century. Only recently have diplomatic relations been normalized between the United States and Cuba. Each nation reopened its embassy in the other's capital in July 2015. The U.S. eased trade restrictions on Cuba in January 2016. Two months later, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to

visit Cuba in 88 years. In addition, the decades-old American policy of permitting Cuban nationals to immigrate to the United States without a visa was suspended as of January 2017.

Current Events

There are several prevailing socio-economic issues which affect the lives and livelihoods of Latin Americans. These same issues have also had a dramatic impact on the development – or the underdevelopment – of the region as a whole.

Rampant poverty is a major concern throughout Latin America as a whole. Even in the case of Brazil – a **BRICS** nation and one of the region’s fastest growing economies – the level of **rural** poverty is over 50%. In a region of nearly 650 million people, one in five lives in chronic poverty. This is due largely to a regional lack of high-quality, high-skill employment opportunities as well as insufficient investment in and access to education. Over half of 15-year-olds in Latin America are functionally illiterate; math and science competency scores across the region are especially low. Such sobering statistics make it easy to understand why the region is struggling economically.

Most of Latin America was once dubbed the “Third World”; however, since the end of the **Cold War**, the term “developing nation” is more commonly used to describe many of the countries found in this region.

The war on drugs throughout Latin America is another issue depressing regional development. Cocaine production is most pronounced in the **Andean** region of South America (i.e., Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia), with Central America (particularly Guatemala) and Mexico serving as the corridor through which the trade is funneled into the United States.¹¹ U.S.-backed efforts to inhibit regional drug **trafficking**, such as the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and Plan Colombia, have only been marginally successful. This is due in large part to government corruption and collusion with the various drug **cartels** of the region. Civilian casualties in Latin America associated with **narco-terrorism** number in the tens of thousands.

Between the war on drugs and the general lack of economic opportunities in the region, many Latinos have **emigrated** to the United States in search of safer living conditions and more stable work environments. This pattern of mass migration to the U.S., particularly over the last two decades, has occurred both through legal **naturalization** as well as illegal immigration via the nearly 2,000-mile long U.S.-Mexico border. Government corruption, minimal job and education opportunities, and narcotics-driven gang violence have contributed to an unprecedented surge in unaccompanied Central American minors entering the U.S. since 2011. **Latinos** at present make up the largest minority group in the United States.

