European Treatment of Native Americans

The various nations that colonized North and South America used a variety of approaches for controlling or subjugating Native Americans. The Spanish approach was to conquer, rule, and intermarry with the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas. The English, on the other hand, occupied the land and forced the small, scattered tribes they encountered to move away from the coast to inland territories. The French, looking for furs and converts to Catholicism, tended to treat the Native Americans as economic and military allies.

In general, Europeans of all nationalities viewed Native Americans as inferiors who could be exploited for economic, political, and religious gain. Two long-term effects of European colonization were (1) the destruction by disease and war or large segments of the Native American population and (2) the establishment of a permanent legacy of subjugation.

Spanish Policy

In the American territories conquered and occupied by Spain, millions of Native Americans died as a result of both the conquistadores’ methods of warfare and, even more, European diseases such as measles for which Native Americans had no immunity. Spain incorporated the conquered peoples of Central and South America into a highly organized empire. Because few families came from Spain to settle the empire, the explorers and adventurers intermarried with Indians as well as with Africans. The latter group were captured in Africa and forced to travel across the ocean to provide slave labor for the Spanish colonists. A rigid class system developed that was dominated by pure-blooded Spaniards.

English Policy

Initially, at least in Massachusetts, the English and Native Americans coexisted, traded, and shared ideas. The Native Americans taught the settlers how to grow new crops such as corn and showed them how to hunt in the forests. They traded various furs for an array of English manufactured goods, including iron tools and weapons. But peaceful relations soon gave way to conflict and open warfare. The English had no respect for Native American cultures, which they viewed as primitive or “savage.” For their part, the Native Americans saw their way of life threatened as the English began to take more land to support their ever-increasing population.