

# Policies of expansionism during the colonial era



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More than four of Europe's grandest Empires placed all their efforts in colonizing and securing the west during the sixteenth century. The American Indians had their own sentiment of an Empire through the Comanche and their respective holdings of Comancheria. Regardless of their differences, they all had one similar desire, to better their own positions on a global scale and to secure the future for themselves and their peoples. However, Spain, Britain, France, and Comancheria each had vastly different methods and often differently desired outcomes of their expansionist and colonial policies. Spain wished to expand, plunder and convert the indigenous populations of America. Britain sought to expand their holdings and take advantage of America's vast resources. France attempted to coexist with the indigenous tribes of America by forming alliances and vast trade networks. Comancheria was still carving their Empire in the Americas and used aggressive policies to secure their territories.

The Spanish like all other European Empires at the time attempted to lift themselves on the global ' food chain' by rushing forward to colonize the New World. Spain, however, had a very unique approach to settling the Americas and what they would call " New Spain". Spain had only united itself nearly a century prior and attempted to unify its people through their common concept of being Spanish. The Spanish monarchs made many decisions and policies to promote Catholicism and suppress all other religions in an attempt to establish Spanish identity around being Catholic. As a result, the Spanish saw the indigenous people as savages who were in need of saving. According to " *Bartolome de las Casas on Spanish Treatment of the Indians, from History of the Indies*" (Foner), the Spanish took the

matter of converting the Native Americans very seriously and often handled it violently. The Native Americans that refused to convert were starved, compelled to work and severely underpaid. As a result, many of the natives who did not convert died. This was the Spanish's attempt to integrate the Native Americans into "New Spain" and their Spanish society. Much of Spain's history regarding converting the natives is bathed in blood, with various uprisings from the Native Americans which were quickly put down. In the end, the Native Americans in "New Spain" were second-class citizens as Catholics if not slaves as pagans. Besides the treatment of the indigenous peoples, Spain undertook many efforts to plunder and destroy the few threatening civilizations in Central and South America. Hernán Cortés led multiple campaigns against the Aztec Empire and the Mayan civilization in efforts to conquer the lands in the name of Spain and to take their vast amounts of gold and silver back to Spain. The Spanish Empire plundered enough wealth from the South American civilizations to deflate their currency and nearly collapse their economy.

Britain had one of the most successful ventures in the colonization of America, they established self-sustaining settlements and for a time coexisted with the Native Americans. Their initial experiences with Native Americans were fruitful, the colonist learned how to survive in the American climate and grow the local foods from the Native Americans. The colonists in return traded their more advanced tools and weapons. However, throughout the centuries the British expansionism throughout North America would spark conflict with various Native American tribes. Much of British policy and efforts during the colonial era was to conquer lands and to harvest its

resources to return home. Britain did not have plentiful amounts of living space in comparison to the French or the Spanish, and as a result, did not have suitable resources to maintain its ever-growing population. According to “ *Sending Women to Virginia*” (Foner) , there was such an abundance of land for farming, there weren’t enough people to maintain all of it. Servants and immigrants were paid to leave their homes and venture to America and work plantations and start families with the colonists there. The British colonies grew various cash crops to feed those back home and to further profit the British Empire, they grew tobacco, potatoes, corn, cotton, and dozens more mercantile-based crops or food. Essentially, Britain took America’s vast resources and spent it on strengthening their empire. Lumber for the British fleet was gathered in America and the construction of those ships was performed in America. Everything Britain lacked at home the British Colonies were able to provide via their abundance of land and natural resources.

France arguably had the most unique approach in order to colonize their territories of America. The French took various efforts to secure trade networks and to create alliances with Native American tribes instead of dominating or suppressing them similarly to the British or Spanish. Many of these alliances were forged by ‘ gift-giving’ as Native American tribes lacked the technology and quality of craft that the Europeans had. The French colonists used their alliances to secure their footholds amongst the native lands. However, this would prove to be a ‘ double-edged sword’ as not every tribe was friendly to each other, and if the French were allied with a tribes enemies they took it as an affront to themselves. France took a very soft

approach to convert the Native Americans in comparison to the Spanish. According to "*Father Jean De Brebeuf on the Customs and Beliefs of the Hurons.*" (Foner), the French made efforts to teach and educate the Native Americans about Catholicism and would reward those who made efforts to learn and eventually convert to Catholicism. Children were especially targeted by the Jesuits who would use them as a method to reach the more firmly devout parents. Despite all of these alliances and attempts to convert the local populace to Catholicism, the French still managed to carve themselves out a sizeable space from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. The French took a 'fort and factory' approach to colonize their lands which are the concept establishing inland settlements (forts) and then living amongst the native populace to trade amongst them (factory). These relationships of trade not only secured peace for the French within their 'sphere' of influence, but it allowed them to contribute to the wealth of their homeland. The French established a major trade network through the 'fur trade' using their 'fort and factory' method.

Comancheria is perhaps the only North American 'Empire' which was comprised of Native Americans and had interacted with the Spanish, French and Americans. The Comanche approach to expansionism was arguably the most successful in terms of integration. When the Comanche warred against another tribe they would absorb the survivors into their society, resulting in a surge of supplies, manpower and territory. The Comanche were able to survive and thrive alongside the Europeans, unlike many other Native American tribes because of their geography and the secured trade of horses. European Horses changed the foundations of many different Native

American societies and the Comanche were no different, they controlled vast amounts of grasslands and plains which allowed the Horses to thrive.

However, this too was a 'double-edged sword' as the Comanche struggled to secure territory that wasn't grassland due to their reliance on Horses. The Comanche relied on raiding and tributary policies in order to secure their foothold in the Americas. The Comanche-Mexican War was a series of large scale raids into northern Mexico which secured supplies and free range of the surrounding territories in Mexico. As a result, the Comanche thrived under areas that their Horses could dominate which would secure tribute from local settlements and supplies from their enemies.

In conclusion, the foreign and internal policies between these four great empires were similar in goal but vastly different in execution. The Spanish wished to dominate central and North America and subjugate the local populace through Catholicism, in contrast to the British who wished to push out Native Americans from their own lands and bleed the natural resources of America dry. The French wished to secure alliances and coexist with the Native Americans and base their empire around policies of trade. Lastly, the Comanche could arguably be seen as attempting to unite the Native American populace against the 'Old World' invaders, as the Comanche absorbed local Native American populations and often skirmished with the European powers. Regardless of their differences they all wished to expand their borders and secure the future for their peoples. Each of them respectively saw themselves as the rightful rulers of America whether it be through displays of power or through 'enlightening' the local populace.

Citations:

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