

## A History of American Indians in California: 1769-1848

Read the article. **Highlight main ideas that help to answer the following questions:**

**How did the Spanish expand their mission system in California?**

**How did this expansion impact the California population?**

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On July 16, 1769, the Spanish founded the first mission in California. It has been estimated that there were about 310,000 Indians living in California at the time. However, over the next 80 years, this number was to change drastically, along with the lifestyle and culture of the Indians. Spain's Indian policy at the time of the "invasion of California" was a mixture of economic, military, political, and religious motives. Indians were regarded by the Spanish government as subjects of the Crown and human beings capable of receiving the sacraments of Christianity. It was essential under 'missionization' that California Indians be settled into stable communities where they would become "good subjects of the King and children of God." Missionization required a brutal lifestyle akin in several respects to the forced movement of black people from Africa to the American South. Thus, some modern day historians assert, the missions of California were not solely religious institutions. They were, on the contrary, "instruments designed to bring about a total change in culture in a brief period of time."

The missions were built with Indian labor. This seems ironic given the devastating effect the mission system had on Indian population and culture, but it must be remembered that the Spanish saw the Indian neophytes (a neophyte is a new religious convert) as "little more than an energy source which cost nothing to acquire and nothing to maintain — they were an expendable resource. From 1769 to 1800, the California coast was under Spanish control from as far north as San Francisco to San Diego in the south. However, this was not accomplished without a certain amount of resistance. Within a month after establishment of the San Diego mission in 1769, the Indians "attacked the Spanish camp, attempting to drive the invaders from their territory. But the Spanish soldiers, using guns, defended their settlement and an uneasy peace ensued. Yet, it would be another two years before Mission San Diego could record its first baptism."

Throughout the mission period, Indians resisted Spanish rule. One of the earliest and most successful demonstrations of native resistance to colonization was the destruction of Mission San Diego on November 4, 1775. Not every resistance effort was violent, however. Some involved the retention of native religious activities. In general, the natives did their best to secretly preserve their ancient religion in the missions, although it became increasingly difficult to do so. Native revivals are known to have occurred as in the Santa Barbara area in 1801. Natives may simply try to escape missions as they did in San Francisco, but the Spanish leadership (which included military) did not tolerate any form of resistance. They responded by attempting to prevent escapes, sending out armed parties to capture runaways, and punishing recaptured runaways. Punishment included chains, the stocks, imprisonment, and hard labor. Punishment often just caused more rebellion. Rebellions continued into the 1800s.

During the mission period, disease played a significant role in the reduction of the native population. Three major epidemics broke out during the Spanish period. In 1777, there was a respiratory epidemic; in 1802, a pneumonia and diphtheria epidemic; and in 1806, a measles epidemic. However, diseases were not the only cause for the rapid decline of the Indian population while under mission rule. Much of the decline can be attributed to changes in diet and inadequate nutrition.

Not everything was negative under Spanish and Mexican rule. In 1824, the constitution guaranteed citizenship to "all persons." While neither the Spanish nor the Mexicans acknowledged Indian land ownership, they did provide the natives with the right to continue to occupy their villages. Indians were also introduced to farming, and although both farming and cattle grazing had a devastating effect on the native habitat, the farming experience itself provided Indians with the skills necessary to survive in the upcoming years. During this period, many native people also learned crafts that helped them find employment once the Americans arrived.

Following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, there was a shift in the entire approach to Indian policy taken by the government. In 1825 Lt. Col. Jose Maria Echeandia was appointed in Mexico to be governor of California and when he came north he brought with him new ideas of Mexican republicanism. . . . which led to the mission system being secularized and/or abolished.

As government emphasis changed from a mission approach to private enterprise, large land grants were given to Mexican citizens. This was necessary in order to put additional lands under Mexican rule. Many continued to mistreat natives as the power shifted from missions to wealthy landowners. However, disease had a much greater effect on Indians than any act of violence. During this period, smallpox and scarlet fever had a devastating effect on the native population, killing thousands.

With the ranchos came a need for a labor force. Much like the missions, the ranchos used Indians to meet this need. Major landowners took advantage of the lack of unity among Indian groups. For example, they would make pacts with one Indian group, then require them to bring in other Indians to serve as laborers. Once the landowners had organized their labor force, they would exchange labor with other ranchers. Thus developed a system of labor that was virtually cost-free.

Another example of how Mexican landowners worked this labor system to their advantage is the case of Charles Weber. In 1845, Weber purchased William Gulnac's interest in a ranch in the area now known as Stockton. For 200 pesos, Weber purchased the land which Gulnac could not settle because of Indian resistance. On his arrival, he employed the same system John Sutter had used and made a pact with an Indian leader, Jose Jesus, an ex-mission neophyte. Jesus provided Weber with labor in exchange for goods. This type of arrangement became increasingly advantageous to Indians, because if they did not enter into a pact, the landowners would raid their villages and take the labor they needed anyway.

In February 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded sovereignty of Mexican lands, including California, to the United States. However, before the constitutional ideology of the American government could take effect here, the discovery of gold turned California into a land of confusion. After James Marshall's initial discovery, John Sutter and Charles Weber used Indians to mine the precious ore. As news of the discovery spread and more Europeans arrived in California, the Indians were soon forced out of mining. Initially, a group of men from Oregon ran the Indians out of the mines because they believed the jobs rightfully belonged to White men. With the miners' search for gold, the Sierra and other remote areas where Indians had retreated became prime locations for establishing claims. The dramatic rise in the White population during this era all but ensured the end of the claim to California by the Indians.

Spanish speaking residents of California, regardless of their race, were called Californios. Indians were not part of this group because they were not native Spanish speakers. Californios often subjugated the natives in ways such as labor exploitation. Although discrimination and violence were rampant, Gold Rush California was also a place of cross-cultural communication and cooperation. Canadian merchant William Perkins described the mining town of Sonora in 1849: "Here were to be seen people of every nation in all varieties of costume, and speaking 50 different languages, and yet all mixing together amicably and socially." In mining camps and in the crowded streets of San Francisco, previously isolated groups came into contact for the first time. Race, language, religion, and class separated Californians but proximity forced groups to accommodate as well as compete. Multiracial even before it was a state, California would be continuously shaped by its diversity.

In 1848, California came under the authority of the United States, and just as the Indians were becoming accustomed to the rancho system, the gold rush brought about a new era of Indian-settler relations. The disruptions of the Gold Rush proved devastating for California's native groups, already in demographic decline due to Spanish and Mexican intrusion. The state's native population plummeted from about 150,000 in 1848 to 30,000 just 12 years later. As foreigners such as Russians, Chinese, Europeans, and Americans methodically mined, hunted, and logged native groups' most remote hiding places, natives began raiding mining camps for subsistence. This led to cycles of violence -- supported by the state government -- to organized war parties and sometimes slaughtered entire native groups.

In summary, the Revolutionary Era for the United States corresponded with the beginning of the mission period in California, which was to a great extent the continuation of Spanish colonial strategies from eras past. The system eventually is replaced with a more republican and capitalistic society by the time we get to the mid-1800s. Because of disease, homicide, and loss of their native environment and food sources, the Indian population in California decreased from 310,000 to approximately 100,000. With the secularization of the missions, the Indians were confronted with new problems of private ownership, as the cultural conflict between Europeans, Americans, Mexicans still clashed dramatically with most American Indian groups.

Note: In your framework, "bonded labor of the local Indians" is addressed. This is sometimes called debt bondage. A person becomes a bonded laborer when their labor is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan or to pay some sort of debt. This can lead to people (essentially slaves) being trapped into working for little or no pay, under meager conditions. The value of their work becomes invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed. Often the debts are passed on to next generations. Bonded Labor is different than the Encomienda System of early missions in New Mexico... but not by much.

Food for Thought How does Spanish use of Bonded Labor compare to modern era American use of illegal, migrant workers?