Twitter Thread by Erik Loomis

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This Day in Labor History: January 22, 1599. Spanish troops began their attack on Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. This incredibly violent incident and aftermath created a regime of labor under Spanish rule that would have devastating impacts on Native peoples! Let's talk about it!



From the moment Europeans came to the Americas, they had a pretty clear and consistent view of the labor regime they desired: people of color working for nothing or next to nothing.

Too often, our stories of American history downplay this because New England, which has played a huge part of national culture creation, was something of an exception, although not nearly to the extent that it gets portrayed.

But from New York to Argentina, the vast majority of colonial enterprises revolved in some way around this principle. It didn't really matter much who the colonizing power was–French, Spanish, English, Dutch, Portuguese.

Wealth depended on wresting labor out of people with extreme violence and that was much easier to do when the people were not your own.

There were some exceptions to all of this, but quite a few of those–say, indentured servitude in Virginia–did not work in part because of the basic instability of enforced labor from your own people was not going to build a financially successful economy

Quite often, the desired labor force was the people already there, but when the combination of violence and disease reduced the Native population, Africans were imported by the millions.

But Native slavery was a major reality of life for a very long time–including for at least a decade after the Civil War in the western United States, with slave raids taking place in California and court cases finally saying the 13th Amendment applied to Native people too.

The Spanish colony in what is today in Mexico was largely based around these principles and as the colony's boundaries expanded, these ideas came with it. When the Spanish decided to occupy a new part of the Americans, they put the contract up for a bid.

Some rich guy would fund the colony and recruit soldiers and settlers. Juan de Oñate won the colonization contract for what become New Mexico. He and 130 soldier-settlers marched north in 1598.

About half of these were from Spain and half were born in Mexico, as well as a few others from other parts of Europe or the Spanish empire. They arrived and immediately demanded free labor from the Native peoples there.

This was hardly surprising, as forcing Native peoples to give up their homes and food was standard procedure. Any resistance to this would be met with violence. The Spanish also used traditional rivalries to play different peoples off each other to stop united Native resistance.

In November 1598, Oñate's nephew went west of the major pueblos that were largely based on and around the Rio Grande to meet with the Acoma people. The Acoma had a unique defensive position.

They lived on top of a large rock and managed to collect enough water to make that work for them. He showed up and engaged in the typical violence–food and shelter for he and his 16 men, as well as women. At least one was raped.

This led to the men fighting back and at least 11 Spanish, including Oñate's nephew, were killed. In response, Oñate sent troops under another nephew to punish the Acoma. A brutal three-day battle followed that finally led to the destruction of the Acoma.

There were about 6,000 people living at Acoma at this time. Probably 800 of them were killed during the battle. The resistance led to utterly brutal punishments. Oñate ordered that all male warriors over the age of 25 would have their right foot cut off and enslaved for 20 years.

That was the fate of about 24 men. Nearly everyone else in the tribe was enslaved, mostly sent down to the mines of Mexico, and sometimes the convents for females.

Enough Acoma escaped or avoided capture to rebuild the pueblo, which is why it exists today. Oñate himself was stripped of his contract for this and other incidents of brutality and forced to return to Spain.

Too brutal for the Spanish in 1599 is....pretty brutal!

But while this particular incident may not have been repeated, the systemic violence in New Mexico against Native people continued unabated.

There were laws against routine forced labor and the church sometimes also opposed this, but in reality, Santa Fe was so far from Mexico City or Madrid that whatever the colony's leaders did was the effective rule of law.

In the years after the colony's establishment, 35 encomiendas were established. These were estates given to colonizers that demanded tribute from those unfortunate enough to live on them.

A 1549 law outlawed forcing people to serve as personal servants or slaves, but that was routinely ignored on the frontier. The standard tribute was either money, a cotton shirt, or a hide and a certain amount of corn per year.

But Native people became peasants bound to the land for generations. Local alcaldes, or government officials, also marshaled Pueblo labor to work in the fields or on ranches. When more effort was made to enforce encomienda law, the Spanish created the repartimiento.

This was a system of contract labor that in New Mexico meant that Puebloan peoples had to leave their homes to serve as ranch hands on Spanish estates or to labor as domestic servants.

This drastically undermined the ability of the Pueblos to survive, as their own subsistence economy required pretty constant labor for food production. Moreover, the repartimiento also applied to the missions, getting the church in on the semi-forced labor game.

Governors created workshops for forced Native labor. Native people were required to travel to the Plains to trade for bison, hides, and slaves. They had to gather piñon nuts for trade back to Mexico.

They built wagons for officials and acted as servants on exploratory trips, all of which took them very far away from their homes, families, and fields.

The Spanish also engaged in widespread slave raids against non-Puebloan peoples, including the Apache and Navajo, rounding up labor to send south into Mexico, or sometimes as gifts to friends.

Of course, the Apache and Navajo were doing the same thing and the entire modern Southwest was a huge slave-trading zone for hundreds of years, extending well into the nineteenth-century.

All of this was horrible. Over half of the Pueblos had disappeared entirely by 1643. Resistance from the Pueblos, Navajo, and Apaches began in earnest in the 1650s.

At least some of this resistance took place around religious issues, with outlawed Native religion making a big comeback by the 1670s.

The most successful Native revolt in history took place with the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when all the Pueblos but one rose up and violently evicted the Spanish, remaining free until 1692, when the Spanish came back.

There was a state of war off and on until 1696, but finally the Pueblos caved. Soon after, both Pueblos and Spanish faced a far stronger military power also engaged in heavy slave raiding–the Comanches.

The Hopis meanwhile, that far western outpost of the Pueblos, remained free until the Americans took over Arizona as part of the unjust Mexican War, when they stole half of Mexico to expand slavery, in the 1840s.

Too often, stories such as this have been left out of our labor history because they do not fit into the Marxist framework of industrialization and unionization that has defined the field.

This is a major error which must be corrected. Labor history should be about work, broadly construed, in its many iterations that combined help define the totality of human experience.

The attack upon the Acoma is still a hotly contested topic in New Mexico, with the Hispano population (the preferred term for people of largely Mexican or mestizo descent with long tenure in the state) see Oñate as a conquering hero and Native people see him as a murderer.

When a big statue of Oñate was placed near the first Spanish settlement in New Mexico, itself a Native village dispossessed by the Spanish, someone soon cut off its foot.

This thread is based in part on Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's 2007 book, Roots of Resistance: A History of Land Tenure in New Mexico.

Back tomorrow with a brand new thread on the supposed 1749 South Carolina slave conspiracy, which I guess I'd better start working on.