

Resistance in the Americas Graphic Organizer

List the adjectives the European colonizers used to describe the African people and Native people whose land they invaded.

Why is it difficult to come up with an example of African or Native resistance to Europeans?

How might the world be different if we had more information from an Indigenous and/or African point of view?

Resistance

The Tainos

From the moment Columbus arrived in the Americas, the Taínos interrupted. They challenged the image of Indigenous peoples as passive and easily conquered. Toward the end of his first voyage to the Americas, Columbus received a rather unpleasant Christmas present when the *Santa Maria*, the largest of the three ships he sailed to the Americas, sank off the coast of Hispaniola. Columbus and his men used some of the wood of the ship to establish the first Spanish fortress, Navidad, in the Americas. A few weeks later, Columbus left behind thirty-nine colonists while he sailed back to Spain with the two other ships. When Columbus returned eleven months later, he found that the Taíno chief Caonabo had burned the fortress to the ground and killed all the Spaniards left behind. This attack marked the beginning of an intense period of Taíno resistance across Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Cuba that lasted for over twenty years.

Maroons of Haiti and Dominican Republic

A local council official on the island wrote to the King of Spain in 1587 and painted picture that highlights far more interruption than conquest:

On this island there have rebelled various negros and there are many now and their numbers have grown such that they have made a settlement or settlements called the Bahoruco, where we have received word that there are a large number of people. Every day they come to the mills and steal negros, some are taken by force, others go willingly. They even communicate secretly with negros mansos. They continue building up and fortifying themselves, having so much temerity and imprudence that they now come to take us from our homes without our being able to resist them.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Spanish only controlled the southeastern corner of the island. Robert Schwaller argues “maroons, first indigenous and then African, occupied broad swaths of the island, establishing self-sufficient subsistence communities. The ability of maroons to free themselves from the bonds of slavery, claim suitable locations, construct a subsistence base, liberate other slaves from Spanish captivity, and defend their communities by force of arms must be understood as a unique form of conquest.”

Mesoamerican Resistance

The Mayans in the northern Yucatan Peninsula launched another large rebellion, known as the Cupul Uprising, that lasted from November of 1546 to March 1547. In 1550, an extended forty year conflict with the Chichimecas began in northern central Mexico. The Chichimecas were a nomadic people who were skilled warriors. They regularly avoided direct confrontation with the Spanish soldiers and focused more on ambushes and raiding Spanish settlements. Despite a prolonged attempt to defeat the Chichimeca, the Spaniards ultimately bought peace in 1590. They agreed to provide the Chichimeca with food and clothing and freedom from taxes.

The First Liberator of the Americas: Gaspar Yanga

Indigenous resistance in Mesoamerica was accompanied by resistance from enslaved Africans. During the sixteenth century, Spaniards began to import enslaved Africans to work in the silver mines in northern Mexico and the sugar plantations of southern Mexico. Just as enslaved Africans had escaped from the plantations on Hispaniola, they also escaped from those in southern Mexico. Many of these maroons established *palenques*,

simple agrarian communities of African and indigenous peoples, in the coastal highlands. Probably the most well known *palenque* in Mexico was set up by Gaspar Yanga.

In 1570, the story goes, Yanga and a sizeable number of enslaved blacks escaped from the sugar cane fields near the city of Veracruz, fled west from the control of their Spanish enslavers, and secreted themselves about eighty miles away from the city in the rugged mountainous region of Orizaba. Under the fearless leadership of Yanga, these cimarrones, as they were called, lived undisturbed for thirty years in an organized and developed palenque, a thriving maroon community, that also included a few persons of mestizo and indigenous ancestry.

However, the white owners of nearby haciendas viewed the cimarrones (maroons) as a threat to their own engagements in chattel slavery. And as the word spread about the black freedom fighters' alleged attacks on individuals and the transports of Spanish goods traveling the Camino Real from Veracruz to Mexico City, and as other blacks in the region increased their resistance to enslavement, the enslavers and other white residents became alarmed. It would not be long before whites would ask the Spanish Crown for military assistance to end reported acts of piracy and other forms of violence perpetrated by the cimarrones.

The Spanish Crown eventually answered, they thought, when, in 1609, Viceroy Luis de Velasco sent Capitán Pedro González de Herrera and a well-armed and trained militia, along with Padre Juan Laurencio and others, to destroy Yanga's palenque. In 1609, the militia destroyed the physical structure of the palenque, which Yanga and his followers choose to leave behind. The Spaniards' protracted military efforts against Yanga and his followers proved to be a failure; they could neither apprehend nor kill Yanga or the members of his community, his palenque.

What is most fascinating about the forays of González de Herrera's soldiers' into the mountainous region of Orizaba is that their military failure ultimately forced the Spaniards to seek a truce with Yanga and his followers. When they discovered the weakness of González de Herrera's soldiers, Yanga's freedom fighters—under the command of an Angolan warrior, Francisco de la Matiza—intensified their violent acts against the Spaniards and on any "free" person or persons from whom they could seize necessary goods to sustain their palenque. After all, González de Herrera's militia's threat had driven them from their self-sufficient palenque, where, Padre Juan observed, the Yangans "had already planted seedlings and other trees, cotton, sweet potatoes, chile, tobacco, squash, corn, beans, sugar cane, and other vegetables." What an embarrassment that the Spaniards' well-trained and mighty military force was defeated by a group of rebels.

Their plenitude of military weapons and training could not crush Yanga and his fellow freedom fighters, who had none of the firepower or the military training of the Spaniards. Realizing that he and his warriors had defeated the Spanish forces, Yanga and the other cimarrones continued to resist them, who, he said, reported a contemporary, "pretended to be owners of their (Yanga's and that of his followers) freedom."

The ultimate demonstration of that resistance was Yanga's terms of negotiating a peace settlement with the Spaniards. In fact, Yanga, with the upper hand as victor, dictated the terms for a peace settlement to Alonso de Benavides and Manuel Carrillo, both of whom the Viceroy sent on a diplomatic mission to meet with Yanga for peace. The peace treaty they obtained from Yanga listed demands that he expected the Spanish Crown to meet. In other words, what has come down to us as a peace settlement is not a document composed by two warring parties; the "treaty" is instead a list of eleven demands, which tell us as much about Yanga as it does about his

maroon community:

Yanga was a bold leader and a visionary who loved peace and freedom, and who was determined to articulate and reclaim the human rights of members of his community. They were resolved, as they told the emissaries from the Viceroy, to "free themselves of the cruelty and treachery of the Spaniards. The most important of the Yangans' eleven-item "treaty" was, of course, their demand for the right to be free and the right to make their settlement a free town, a site capable of securing Yangans from Spanish tyranny, exploitation, and domination. Thus was born the first free town in the Americas; the town of San Lorenzo de Los Negros, which would later be called Yanga.

Write a diary entry from the perspective of Gaspar Yanga after his eleven demands were accepted by the Spanish crown. (3-5 sentences)