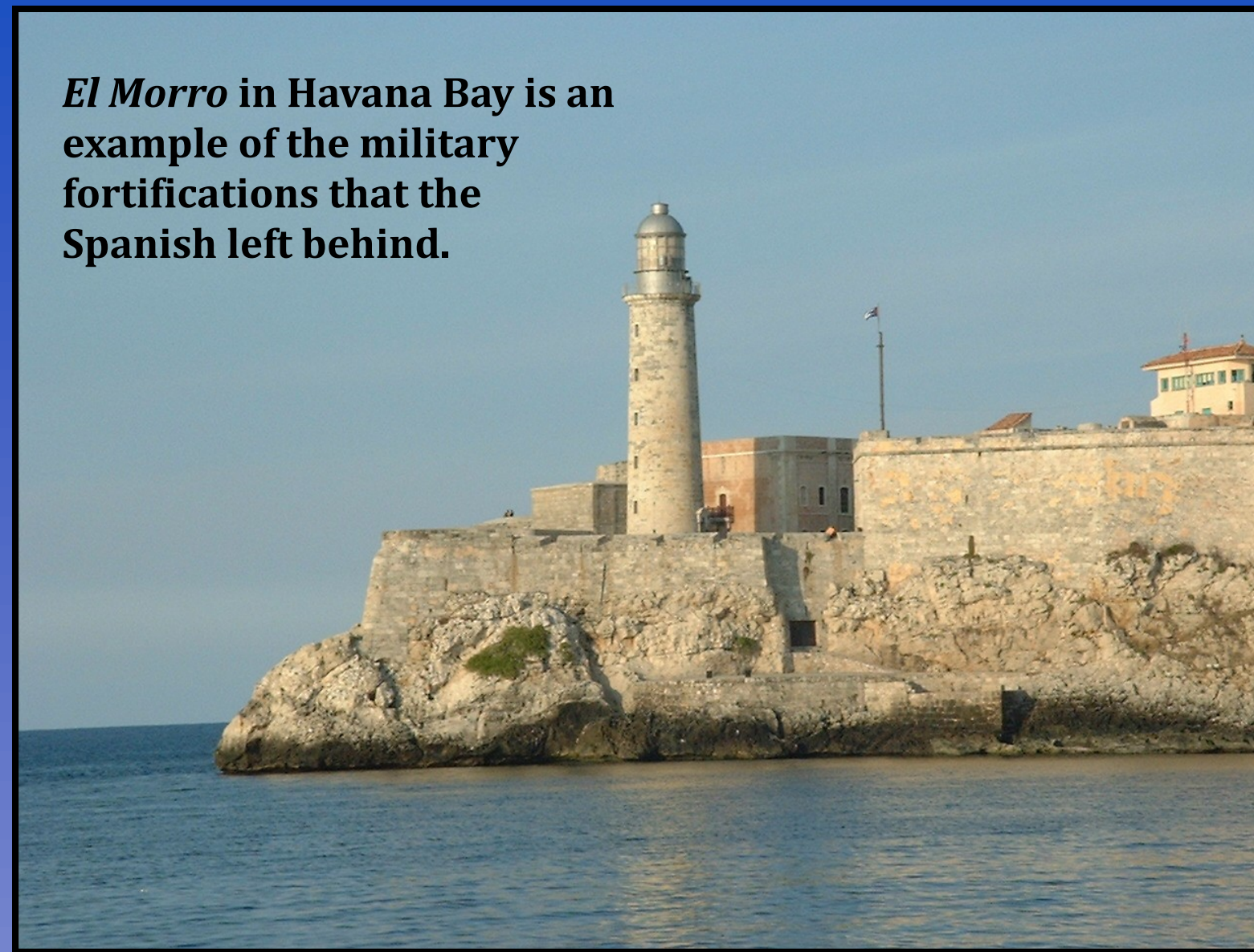


Many modern nations developed after the fall of the Spanish Empire.



*El Morro* in Havana Bay is an example of the military fortifications that the Spanish left behind.



## ABSTRACT

At the dawn of the seventeenth century the Spanish Empire reigned supreme in the Americas. In time, other European powers contended with Spain for significant natural resources in the Caribbean. Given its obsession with precious metal resources, Spain gradually lost control of many undefended but significant sugar producing islands. By the 1760s both the British and French, on Caribbean plantations, produced a surplus of sugar and competed with the Spanish in European markets. The competition proved disastrous for Spain and the European sugar markets. Prices plunged and sugar markets verged on the brink of collapse. Spain had taken sugar markets for granted and relied on its colonial precious metals resources, specifically gold, to finance both empire and state. Imperial officials did not introduce policies promoting commercial growth in agriculture and industry, but rather concentrated resources on the administration and reform of existing military institutions. Essentially those officials squandered an opportunity to solidify control over sugar production in the Caribbean. Such processes weakened and eventually bankrupted the Spanish Empire. As a result, the empire lost control of its American colonies through invasion but more often to revolution and commercial competition.

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# BITTERSWEET DEFEAT: Sugar and the Decline of Spanish Imperial Power

## INTRODUCTION

Following the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas Spain enjoyed the better part of three centuries as the dominate imperial power in the Americas. Explorers and priests roamed the remote regions of the Americas searching for gold and converts.

### GOD, GLORY, & GOLD

Spain hit the jackpot in the Americas. American Gold became Imperial Spain's major source of wealth and funded the empire's growth. Spain responded to colonial competition by strengthening its military. Most important were reinforced flotillas to escort the all important treasure fleets back to Spain. Efforts were redoubled after the British took Havana, Cuba in 1762. The Spanish Crown pursued military reform to guard its mineral resources but by and large ignored significant agricultural resources. Arguments that reform policies were needed to promote commercial agricultural production in the colonies were ignored.

### CARIBBEAN SUGAR

In the 1700s other European imperial powers, in particular the English, French and Dutch, began Caribbean colonization efforts and began to produce commercial crops—sugar being the most profitable. The Lesser Antilles, though not strategically important to Spain, provided an ideal climate for the commercial production of sugar. Those other imperial powers soon competed with colonial Spanish agriculture for both land and markets. The Spanish Crown enacted policies dealing with agriculture, but such policies, in particular the Spanish Royal Tobacco Monopoly, tended to restrict markets rather than promote trade. Such policies caused Spanish colonial agricultural production to lag behind other imperial powers and slowed migration to Spain's colonies.

The Papal Line of Demarcation decreed by Pope Alexander was moved significantly west by the Treaty of Tordesillas. Yet Spain reserved colonial rights to most of the Americas.



### EUROPEAN MARKETS

The Spanish utilized a strategy that emphasized precious metal extraction to the detriment of settlement and commercial agriculture. The end result of the empire's success in the Americas was the devaluation of gold in European markets and rampant inflation. Further, the Sugar Revolutions in the Lesser Antilles resulted in such an increase in production that European markets could not absorb the surplus. The end result was a collapse of sugar prices and economic troubles for many European nations. With a dwindling economic base in their colonies to support imperial endeavors and an economic collapse in Europe, the Spanish Empire began to falter in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## CONCLUSION

Because of its initial economic success in the Americas, Spain's policy agenda ignored commercial agriculture and favored military spending. As precious metal extraction dwindled, colonists began demanding policy (particularly legislation that favored commercial agriculture) that secured their economic future. The weakened state of imperial Spain encouraged the subsequent spate of revolutions that cost Spain the bulk of its empire. Nevertheless, Spanish influence continues. Spain may no longer exercise political or economic control but its approximately 400 years of imperial rule has left a lasting cultural influence on the Caribbean and Latin American world.

## SOURCES

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The above map shows the routs traveled and areas settled by the Spanish in the early years of exploration. (Orange shows earlier settlement)

