

Historians agree that the Incas strictly controlled the people within their vast empire. But attitudes toward this kind of rule have changed over time. In 1847 the American historian William H. Prescott published his classic *The Conquest of Peru*. Though he describes the routine and regimentation of the ordinary person in the Inca world, he finds some advantages in this life. More than a hundred years later, the archaeological historian Victor von Hagen took a different point of view. ♦ *As you read the two points of view, consider how changes in society may have influenced them. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Two Views of Life Under the Incas

William H. Prescott (1847) The great hardship in the case of the Peruvian was that he could not better his condition. His labors were for others rather than for himself. . . .

But this is the dark side of the picture. If no man could become rich in Peru, no man could become poor. No spendthrift could waste his substance in riotous luxury. . . . The law was constantly directed to enforce a steady industry and a sober management of his affairs. No mendicant [beggar] was tolerated in Peru. When a man was reduced by poverty or misfortune. . . the arm of the law was stretched out to minister relief. . . placing him on a level with the rest of his countrymen.

No man could be rich, no man could be poor in Peru, but all might enjoy, and did enjoy, a competence [adequate living]. Ambition, avarice, the love of change, the morbid spirit of discontent, those passions which most agitate the minds of men, found no place in the bosom of the Peruvian. The very condition of his being seemed to be at war with change. . . . It was the object of the Incas to infuse into their subjects a spirit of passive obedience and tranquillity—a perfect acquiescence in the established order of things. In this they fully succeeded.

Victor von Hagen (1956) The Incas ruled their people with an iron, but a just hand. Every detail of their life, from womb to tomb, was prescribed. The state was not for the people nor was equality the ideal. It was rather a blending of tribal communism and theocracy [rule by religious leaders], a perilously balanced fusion of two antagonistic systems.

The common people were manipulated like figures on a chessboard, becoming part of the decimal system of classification with division all along the social line. . . .

Everything was regulated in this welfare state. No one moved on the roads without permission; there was work-service for taxes; there were contributions to state and religion; and each man was automatically a member of an agrarian [farming] militia. If a section of the realm was underpopulated, a whole tribe was moved into it. Loyal subjects were settled in a newly conquered land, while the recently conquered tribes were moved out and transferred to a 'safe' community where they could be absorbed. . . . No tribe, no force, could resist the pressure of this benevolent despotism.

Source: (1) *The Conquest of Peru*, by William H. Prescott (New American Library, 1961); (2) *Highway of the Sun*, by Victor von Hagen (Gollancz, 1956).

Questions to Discuss

1. What advantages does Prescott find in the lives of ordinary people in the Incan empire?
2. How does von Hagen describe the situation of the common people? What positive quality does he find in Inca rule?
3. **Determining Relevance** From what Prescott admires in the Inca system, what faults do you suppose he found with the government and society of his own time?