

Title: The Black Legend

Author: Bartolomé de las Casas

Year: 1542

Type: book excerpt

Quotation: "Great atrocities are committed against the indigenous people"

Annotation:

Late in the eighteenth century, around the time of the three hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage of discovery, the Abbé Raynal (1713-1796), a French philosophe, offered a prize for the best answer to the question: "Has the discovery of America been beneficial or harmful to the human race?"

Eight responses to the question survive. Of these, four argued that Columbus's voyage had harmed human happiness. The European discovery of the New World had a devastating impact on the Indian peoples of the Americas. Oppressive labor, disruption of the Indian food supply, deliberate campaigns of extermination, and especially disease decimated the Indian population. Isolated from such diseases as smallpox, influenza, and measles, the indigenous population proved to be extraordinarily susceptible. Within a century of contact, the Indian population in the Caribbean and Mexico had shrunk by over 90 percent.

During the sixteenth century, when the House of Habsburg presided over an empire that included Spain, Austria, Italy, Holland, and much of the New World, Spain's enemies created an enduring set of ideas known as the "Black Legend." Propagandists from England, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands vilified the Spanish as a corrupt and cruel people who subjugated and exploited the New World Indians, stole their gold and silver, infected them with disease, and killed them in numbers without precedent. In 1580, William I, Prince of Orange (1533-1584), who led Dutch Protestants in rebellion against Spanish rule, declared that Spain "committed such horrible excesses that all the barbarities, cruelties and tyrannies ever perpetrated before are only games in comparison to what happened to the poor Indians."

Ironically, the Black Legend drew upon criticisms first voiced by the Spanish themselves. During the sixteenth century, observers like Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), the bishop of Chiapas, condemned maltreatment of the Indians. As a way to protect Indians from utter destruction, las Casas proposed an alternative labor force: slaves from Africa. Given the drastic decline of the Indian population and the reluctance of Europeans to perform heavy agricultural labor, African slaves would raise the staple crops that provided the basis for New World prosperity: sugar, coffee, rice, and indigo.

Las Casas would come to regret his role in encouraging the slave trade. Although he rejected the idea that slavery itself was a crime or sin, he did begin to see African

slavery as a source of evil. Unfortunately, las Casas's apology was not published for more than 300 years.

Text:

New Spain [Mexico] was discovered in 1517 and, at the time, great atrocities were committed against the indigenous people of the region and some were killed by members of the expedition. In 1518 the so-called Christians set about stealing from the people and murdering them on the pretence of settling the area. And from that year until this--and it is now 1542--the great iniquities and injustices, the outrageous acts of violence and the bloody tyranny of these Christians have steadily escalated, the perpetrators having lost all fear of God, all love of their sovereign, and all sense of self-respect. Even now, in September 1542, the atrocities get worse by the day, it being the case, as we have said, that the infernal brutality and utter inhumanity of the acts committed have readily increased as time has gone on.

Among other massacres was one which took place in Cholula, a great city of some thirty thousand inhabitants. When all the dignitaries of the city and the region came out to welcome the Spaniards with all due pomp and ceremony, the priests to the fore and the high priest at the head of the procession, and they proceeded to escort them into the city and lodge them in the houses of the lord and the leading citizens, the Spaniards decided that the moment had come to organize a massacre (or "punishment" as they themselves express such things) in order to inspire fear and terror in all the people of the territory. This was, indeed the pattern they followed in all the lands they invaded: to stage a bloody massacre of the most public possible kind in order to terrorize those meek and gentle peoples. What they did was the following. They requested the local lord to send for all the nobles and leading citizens of the city and of all the surrounding communities subject to it and, as soon as they arrived and entered the building to begin talks with the Spanish commander, they were seized without anyone outside getting wind of what was afoot. Part of the original request was they should bring with them five or six thousand native bearers and these were mustered in the courtyards when and as they arrived. One could not watch these poor wretches getting ready to carry the Spaniards' packs without taking pity on them, stark naked as they were with only their modesty hidden from view, each with a kind of little net on his shoulders in which he carried his own modest store of provisions. They all got down on their haunches and waited patiently like sheep. Once they were all safely inside the courtyard, together with a number of others who were also there at the time, armed guards took up positions covering the exits and Spanish soldiers unsheathed their swords and grasped their lances and proceeded to slaughter these poor innocents. Not a single soul escaped.

From Cholula they made their way to Mexico City. On their journey, they were showered with thousands of gifts from the great king Montezuma who also sent some of his men to stage entertainments and banquets for them on the way. When they reached the Great Causeway which runs for some two leagues right up to the city itself, they were greeted by Montezuma's own brother and many local dignitaries bearing valuable gifts of gold, silver and apparel from the great lord.

Yet that same day, or so I am reliably informed by a number of eye-witnesses, the Spaniards seized the great king unawares by means of a trick and held him under armed guard of eighty soldiers, eventually putting him in irons.

....The pretext upon which the Spanish invaded each of these provinces and proceeded to massacre the people and destroy their lands--lands which teemed with people and should surely have been a joy and a delight to any true Christian--was purely and simply that they were making good the claim of the Spanish Crown to the territories in question. At no stage had any order been issued entitling them to massacre the people or to enslave them. Yet, whenever the natives did not drop everything and rush to recognize publicly the truth of the irrational and illogical claims that were made, and whenever they did not immediately place themselves completely at the mercy of the iniquitous and cruel and bestial individuals who were making such claims, they were dubbed outlaws and held to be in rebellion against His Majesty.