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0521627303 - Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650

Noble David Cook

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

From the time of the great explorers of the Age of Reconnaissance, people have wondered how a mere few hundred Spaniards, with a small number of allies, were able to conquer two of the largest empires known at the time: the Aztec and the Inca. Why did some survive, whereas others succumbed so precipitously to the outsiders who reached the shores of the West Indies at the end of the fifteenth century? How were seemingly densely inhabited islands denuded of their aboriginal residents so quickly, to be replaced by foreigners who, after their own deadly seasoning period, multiplied marvelously? It seemed that everywhere in the New World, within three or four generations, a brief yet tragic period, strangers became the dominant force, ruling over an increasingly meager and weak native populace.

In the sixteenth century, two principal explanations were offered. One, best portrayed by the arguments of the “Protector of the Indians” Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), stressed the cruelty of the Spaniards as the main factor that led to European dominance and native subjugation. The Iberians killed, maimed, and in every way possible made miserable the Indians they enslaved. This so-called Black Legend of Spanish evil was a powerful explanation, one that other European nations seized on with relish, for it justified their own encroachments on the territories and peoples of an alien and “evil” Catholic empire. The counterexplanation for the demise of the Amerindian peoples was religious. Christian friars and theologians could not fathom the reason the Indians, once so prevalent, seemed to be doomed to extinction. The cause must be providential, in one way or another associated with God’s secret plan to foster the quicker spread of the Faith to all people or to punish the natives for presumed crimes

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against nature – cannibalism, human sacrifice, sodomy, even their frequent and unexplained rejection of the Word. Bartolomé de Las Casas, in diverse texts, provides a host of examples of the most horrendous acts of sadism imaginable. Cruelty was not limited to excesses committed against enemy warriors in the heat of battle; it extended to the young and innocent. For example, a pair of Spaniards, so-called Christians,

met two twelve-year-old Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the two and just for pleasure beheaded the boys. Another tyrant, angry at an Indian chief because he did not do what he ordered, hanged twelve of his vassals, and another one eighteen, all in one house. Another one shot arrows into an Indian following a public announcement that he was sentencing him because he was not quick enough in bringing him a letter that was sent to him. There are infinite cases and deeds of this nature that our Christians have ministered to these peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Adherents of the Black Legend argue that not only were the Spanish sadistic murderers, they also were notorious exploiters of human labor under conditions that were so dangerous that they led to the death of countless Amerindians. In the Greater Antilles, Indian men were forced to travel vast distances to toil in the mines, while their wives stayed at home and cultivated their cassava plots. When at last able to reunite, at intervals of every eight to ten months or more, “they were so exhausted and broken and ground down that they, [men] and women, had little inclination for marital communication; in this fashion they ceased procreation.” The shock of conquest and the cruel exploitation of the natives may have contributed to loss of the will to survive. Not only did parents abstain from intercourse; they at times resorted to infanticide to check the cycle of oppression. Las Casas remembered, “The newborns died soon, because their mothers, because of the hardship and hunger, had no milk in their breasts. For this reason, while I was in Cuba, 7,000 children died in three months. Some mothers even drowned the infants from sheer desperation. Others, when they felt they were pregnant, took herbs to abort, so they were expelled stillborn.” The tragic end for the island Arawaks came

1 Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 3 vols. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951), 2:206.

quickly, as Las Casas noted. He further mused, “And it is here that one has to contemplate what would have happened if this set of causes had coincided for the entire world, would not the entire human line have been wiped out in no time at all?”<sup>2</sup>

Were Las Casas the only observer to point out the ruthlessness of the invaders, then we might conclude that he was deluded or that he simply invented to promote his cause in defense of Indian rights. As a propagandist for the protection of the native American, he might have warped the truth when he thought it was necessary. The ultimate end, human justice, Las Casas and others of like mind might argue, justified the means. But other, contemporaneous observers also pointed out the malicious way the Europeans acted toward native peoples. Pedro de Alvarado, for example, left in charge of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, in early May 1520 when Hernán Cortés marched to face his enemy Pánfilo de Narváez, ordered the slaughter of masses of unarmed religious celebrants in the temple. The carnage was terrible. Native informants who supplied oral testimony to Friar Bernardino de Sahagún report the havoc as Spaniards fell on the packed throng, cutting off arms and legs and disemboweling their victims in a slaughter that continued until virtually everyone was dead: “So great was the bloodshed that rivulets ran through the courtyard like water in a heavy rain.”<sup>3</sup>

Farther south, Spanish slaving in Central America in the 1520s was especially costly in American lives. Licentiate Cristóbal de Pedraza, another Protector of the Indians and subsequently Bishop of Honduras, reported that Alonso de Solís had burned fourteen Indians in Canola, “which seemed to this witness the greatest cruelty in the world.”<sup>4</sup> If Indians tried to escape during forced marches, they were hunted down and run through with lances; war dogs too were used here with evil effect. Rodrigo de Castillo, a royal treasury official, reported to the Crown in 1531 that Spaniards on the march from Honduras to Nicaragua torched several neighboring villages and ripped recently delivered babies from their mothers’ breasts and tossed them to the ground. Furthermore, captured Indians were enchained and forced to march long distances; if they fell during the transport, their heads were cut

2 Ibid., 2:250–51.

3 Bernardino de Sahagún, *Conquest of New Spain* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), pp. 76–77.

4 William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 45.

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off to avoid wasting the time it would take to stop and unlock the shackles. “In Aguatega 200 Indians were punished: one-third of them were put in a large hut and burned to death; another one-third were torn to pieces by dogs; eyes were plucked out, arms were cut off, and other cruelties were practiced on the remaining one-third of the Indians.”<sup>5</sup> Rodrigo de Castillo pointed out that the best dogs receiving special training to hunt and kill native Americans became especially valuable, and they were sought out by those undertaking new expeditions.

Brutality seemed especially excessive during some of the lesser campaigns. Pedro Mártir reported that during Vasco Núñez de Balboa’s conquest of Panama “the Spaniards cut off the arm of one, the leg or hip of another, and from some their heads with one stroke, like butchers cutting up beef and mutton for market. Six hundred, including the cacique, were thus slain like brute beasts. . . . Vasco ordered forty of them to be torn to pieces by dogs.”<sup>6</sup> Similar accounts abound for the subjugation of the land of the Incas. In November 1536, during the rising of Manco Capac, a Spanish force under Alonso de Alvarado left Lima to engage rebels in the Jauja district. One soldier, Juan de Turuegano, later wrote to an associate in Seville that “the Christians captured a hundred alive and killed more than thirty. They cut off the arms of some they captured, and the noses of others, and the breasts of the women. And they then sent them back to the enemy, so that they could see that any who wanted to continue rebelling could see that they also would have to submit to the knife.”<sup>7</sup> Again, what caused such atrocities? Was it the heat of battle that led some to become almost inhuman, or was it fear that such a small number of outsiders would have to destroy the will of the enemy masses brutally in order to survive? But would the exigencies of warfare justify the atrocities committed?

Evidence presented by the Spaniards, especially by Bartolomé de las Casas in his polemical writings, and the reports of many others, either eyewitnesses or contemporary gatherers of hearsay, have provided more than adequate proof for generations to lay the blame for the catastrophic demise of Amerindians on the European conscience. The Spaniards were blamed for the quick disappearance of the peace-

5 Ibid., p. 46.

6 David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust. Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 83.

7 Raúl Porras Barrenechea, ed., *Cartas del Perú (1524–1543)* (Lima: Sociedad de Bibliófilos Peruanos, 1959), p. 272.

ful island Taino, encountered by the Columbus expeditionaries in 1492. Within fifty years the original islanders were virtually extinct. Central Mexico's population fell from nearly 15 million in 1519 to 1.5 million a century later, and there was a similar demographic collapse of Andean America.<sup>8</sup> A century after first contact the regions least affected by the disaster lost at least 80 percent of their people, 90 percent or more was more typical, and some regions became destitute of people. Las Casas wrote that 20 million Indians died in the encounter; the actual number may be close to Las Casas's estimate.

But the cause of the disaster was more than Spanish cruelty. Amerindians died wherever Europeans trod. They succumbed following contact with the Portuguese, then the English, the French, and the Dutch. Substantial numbers of deaths continued, no matter which European territory was involved, regardless of the location of the region. It seemed to make no difference what type of colonial regime was created; those who lived in the mission territories under the supposedly benign and caring administration of friars seemed to die as rapidly as those subjected to forced labor in dangerous silver and gold production.

Stories of Spanish cruelty in the New World fit perfectly with the evolution of early modern-European nationalism. The *Apologetic History* of Las Casas was translated and reissued many times during the sixteenth century. The inclusion of the descriptions of Las Casas in the illustrated editions of Theodore de Bry gave reality to what one might characterize as Spanish sadism in the popular mind of the century. The translations of the important texts of exploration and discovery by the English, especially Richard Hakluyt, opened the eyes of others to the wealth and opportunities for profit, and at the same time proved that because the Iberians were so reprehensible, their own actions could be justified easily. In a similar vein the translated narratives of de Bry provided the French with insight into the Spanish successes, as well as their weaknesses, in the Americas.

An equally vivid European depiction of the tragedy of conquest is

8 William M. Denevan, ed., *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492*, 2d ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), provides an excellent survey, with bibliography, of the estimates of the size of the native population at contact. See also a special issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992), on the question of "The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research"; and Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, *La población de América Latina desde los tiempos precolombinos al año 2025* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1994).

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Girolamo Benzoni's account of the disappearance of the Indians of Hispaniola. His text, alongside the plates of Theodore de Bry, provides a compelling picture of events in the Indies. Both Benzoni and de Bry conveniently ignored disease; both were filled with anti-Spanish hatred and became part of the group that disseminated the propaganda that formed the basis of the Black Legend. Benzoni was born in Milan in 1519. In 1541, driven by the same forces that compelled some of his young contemporaries to search out the New World, he traveled to Medina del Campo, then Seville, and finally set sail from Sanlúcar de Barrameda for the Indies. He was in the Americas until 1556, traveling from the Caribbean into Mesoamerica, Peru, then back to Nicaragua. The first edition of Benzoni's book *La historia del Mondo Nuovo* was published in Venice in 1565; a second edition appeared there in 1572. Theodore de Bry, who became a staunch Protestant, was born in Liège in 1528; he fled in 1570 and settled in Frankfurt am Main. De Bry is better known as a publisher and engraver than as the bookdealer he became. The first volume of his *Great Voyages* was printed in 1590. By the time he died in 1598 six volumes had been published. His heirs continued to publish travel literature, enlarging the series to thirteen volumes in 1634. Almost all were filled with anti-Spanish propaganda. The illustrations provided to even the most casual reader a visual image of Spanish depravity and greed.

Benzoni wrote vividly of the terrible exploitation of native peoples and their loss of will. The inhabitants of Hispaniola came to "feel oppressed by intolerable and insufferable miseries that were brought against them, and they believed there would be no way to recuperate their liberty. Giving way to sighs and lamentations, they longed for death." The chronicle of the despair of the Amerindians that Benzoni provided has been used over and over by the detractors of Spanish hegemony.

From here, many, giving up all hope, went into the woods and hanged themselves from the trees, having first killed their children. . . . The women, with the juices of some plants, interrupted their pregnancies, so as not to give birth, and then followed in the footsteps of their men, hanging themselves. Some threw themselves from a hilltop over a precipice; others jumped into the sea, or threw themselves into rivers, or starved themselves to death. . . . And in the end, concluding it, of the two million Indians that there were on this island, between those

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who committed suicide and those who died victims of Spanish cruelty, there do not remain today even one hundred fifty thousand.<sup>9</sup>

Yet cruelty explains only part of the reason for the conquest and disappearance of the Amerindian. Even in the late seventeenth century the Guatemalan chronicler Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, in the *Recordación Florida*, so angered by the insistent claims of Bartolomé de las Casas that the Indians had died largely at the hands of the conquerors, pointed out to readers that the Dominican friar had failed to mention Old World disease. Born around 1643, Fuentes y Guzmán held secular positions in Guatemala and died in Sonsonate in early 1700.<sup>10</sup> Referring in his history to the probable measles epidemic of 1533 that swept Guatemala, he noted that by not properly taking into account the impact of disease for the demise of Amerindians, the close link Las Casas made between European cruelty and the disappearance of Indians is not entirely accurate.<sup>11</sup>

Careful review of the extensive work of Bartolomé de las Casas indicates that he too knew of the impact European disease was having on Indian peoples. The most widely read text by the friar, and the only book-length work of his published during his lifetime, the *Brevísima relación* was written by a man trained as a solicitor, and in it he presented his case in defense of the Indians whom he saw as being at the mercy of the Europeans. That book and the multitude of translations and foreign editions became the cornerstone of the Black Legend. His writings were used time after time by Spain's enemies to justify their own encroachments on Iberian territory. As he pressed the Crown and Council of the Indies for decrees to protect the Indians, he could not give, as a trained lawyer, a truly balanced account of all the reasons for their demise. Elsewhere in his voluminous writings, particularly his multivolume history of the Indies, he did acknowledge disease. For example, the 1518 smallpox epidemic that swept Hispaniola, the Caribbean, and beyond was brought on "by

9 Girolamo Benzoni, *Historia del nuevo mundo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1989), pp. 144–45.

10 Francisco Esteve Barba, *Historiografía indiana* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1964), p. 281.

11 W. George Lovell, "Disease in Early Colonial Guatemala," in *Secret Judgments of God: Old World Disease in Colonial Spanish America*, ed. Noble David Cook and W. George Lovell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 69.

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the will or permission of God, in order to free the few Indians who remained from so much torment and the anguished life that they suffered from, in all types of labor, especially in the mines." Las Casas argued as well that the epidemic was God's way of punishing the Europeans who oppressed the native Americans. God had permitted disease and death to liberate the Amerindians from their sufferings.<sup>12</sup> Las Casas contemplated the multiple reasons for the disappearance of Amerindians, and although he attributed major losses to the excessive demands and greed of the conquerors, he also recognized that disease contributed to the rapid decimation of the native populations.

The guilt that Las Casas placed on the Spaniards incensed many of the friar's compatriots, even at the time. In 1555, Friar Toribio de Benavente, known as Motolinia, wrote a missive to his monarch Charles V to refute the arguments of the Dominican Protector of the Indians. Motolinia admitted vast population losses, two-thirds, or even seven-eighths in some districts of New Spain, but he offered as the principal cause the successive epidemics that swept the land, especially smallpox and typhus. Why did the Amerindians die so easily? He speculated that their earlier sins of drunkenness and idolatry might have led to retribution but admitted that it was impossible for anyone to fully fathom divine will. Nevertheless, the demise of Indian America should not be blamed on the settlers, as Las Casas had argued so vehemently.<sup>13</sup>

By the late sixteenth century, the Black Legend was the stuff of common belief of non-Iberian Europeans. The role of the Spanish Hapsburgs as the defenders of the True Faith against religious reformers to the north, and their frequent and willing use of the instruments of the Inquisition to search out heterodox beliefs, reinforced in the minds of many the idea that they were ruthless and bigoted. Philip II's attempt to invade England in 1588, and the subsequent efforts of the Iberian Hapsburg monarchy against Protestant nationalists in the Low Countries and Central Europe, compounded anti-Spanish feelings. If the Spanish were truly as barbarous and cruel as depicted in the popular literature, then any action taken against them in Europe or within their overseas territories could be justified. Reports of direct Spanish attacks against the newcomers, such as the massacres of the

12 Las Casas, *Historia de Indias*, 3:270–71.

13 David A. Brading, *The First America. The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State 1492–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 189.



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men of the fleet of John Hawkins at San Juan de Ulloa in 1563 and of the French Huguenots at Matanzas inlet on the Florida coast in 1565, reinforced ideas of Spanish brutality. The Black Legend was firmly rooted at the core of European nationalism by the late sixteenth century. It was commonly believed that the evils perpetrated on innocent and ill-armed natives by the Spaniards led to the natives' precipitous disappearance. There was no reason to invoke other causes, for there were available many "true" histories of destruction that had been written by the conquerors themselves.

The rhetoric changed little in subsequent centuries. The Black Legend was an accepted paradigm in non-Hispanic European communities. There were peaks of Hispanophobia during periods of heightened nationalistic fervor, and the main features of the Black Legend lingered well into the twentieth century. Anglo-Americans in the United States adopted the anti-Spanish biases of their motherland and carried them to a peak of jingoistic frenzy in the Spanish-American War of 1898. At critical junctures the dusty bottle of the Black Legend has been uncorked and its thick venom released with predictable regularity at each commemoration of a major anniversary of the historical confrontation. In the twentieth century we have initiated a re-evaluation of the creation of the Black Legend and have searched for other causal forces to explain the conquest and collapse of Indian America. This reexamination has led to a realization that the causative elements of the Black Legend cannot fully explain the demographic collapse of Indo-America.<sup>14</sup>

There were too few Spaniards to have killed the millions who were reported to have died in the first century after Old and New World contact.<sup>15</sup> If more native Americans died as a consequence of disease than as a result of warfare, then we need to identify the sicknesses, date their first and subsequent appearances, and ascertain the rates of morbidity and mortality. It is impossible to factor out and weigh precisely each of the causes that led to the collapse of Amerindian society. We might ask, Did the Spanish lance lead to the death of 2 percent of the Indians, the arquebus 5 percent, the dog 12? What percentage succumbed at the hands of their mothers who chose for their infants death rather than a life of pain and anguish later? And

14 Angel Rosenblat, "The Population of Hispaniola at the Time of Columbus," in Denevan, *The Native Population of the Americas*, p. 45.

15 T. S. Floyd, *The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean, 1492 to 1526* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973), p. 153.

what percentage were never born, because males and females, suffering profound “cultural shock,” had chosen not to procreate? Unfortunately, these questions are not amenable to historical research; we can only surmise on the basis of incomplete and flawed evidence.

The breakthrough in understanding the ecological disaster afflicting the Amerindian came with the revolution in modern medicine. Although natural causes of illness were suggested by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century physicians, a fuller and more complete understanding of human disease and the nature of its dissemination did not come until the twentieth century. One of the first to look in a systematic way at smallpox and its horrible impact on Amerindians was John Duffy in 1951.<sup>16</sup> In a trailblazing survey, Duffy documented that smallpox was one of the major killers and that its medical conquest was amazingly slow despite knowledge of the mode of control provided by Jenner in the late eighteenth century. In the late 1960s, in a succinct essay, Alfred W. Crosby took the next step, linking pestilence and conquest, cogently articulating the disease factor in New World conquest. His subsequent work expanded the theme to include other illnesses as well as plants and animals, and it spatially extended the argument from the Americas to the entire globe. He argued that largely European peoples have profoundly modified the world’s environment in a relatively brief temporal span coinciding with the age of exploration, conquest, and colonization, running from the sixteenth century to the present.<sup>17</sup>

Recent scholarship by Alfred Crosby and others such as Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, Francisco Guerra, Enrique Florescano and Elsa Malvido, Henry F. Dobyns, Russell Thornton, W. George Lovell, and Thomas M. Whitmore documents the impact of Old World diseases on New World populations.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, after a compel-

16 John Duffy, “Smallpox and the Indians in the American Colonies,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 25(1951):324–41; idem, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953).

17 Alfred Crosby, “Conquistador y Pestilencia: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empires,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 47(1967):321–37; idem, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); idem, “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33(1976):289–99; and idem, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

18 For a succinct bibliography of new contributions to the field, see William M. Denevan, “Native American Populations in 1492: Recent Research and a