

Bartolomé de las Casas

(1484–1566)

Bartolomé de las Casas, a priest, a Dominican missionary, and a prolific early Spanish historian, was a student of Latin and theology in Seville, Spain, when the news arrived in 1493 of Christopher Columbus's successful first voyage. A little more than a decade later, Casas took part in a journey to and exploration of Hispaniola (that is, Haiti and the Dominican Republic). But once he became a priest, probably in 1510, Casas increasingly came to regret his own moral blindness, and he called for an end to brutal exploitation and enslavement of the native peoples. The Spanish government named him "Protector of the Indians" and, in 1520–1522, he undertook a project off the coast of Venezuela to establish a model "town of free Indians." This venture, however, proved a failure, as Spain in the first decades of the sixteenth century extended its range of conquest and harsh rule.

Through appeal and negotiation, Casas did manage to gain support for reforms from the Pope and Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain. But these were nearly impossible to implement and sustain, and Charles V later revoked key laws and provisions on behalf of Indian peoples that Casas had argued for.

Below, is an excerpt from The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account (1542–1546, published 1552), in which Casas describes horrible tortures imposed by the Spanish on the natives they encountered in Hispaniola.

For biography and context, consult the following titles by Lewis Hanke: Bartolomé de las Casas: An Interpretation of His Life and Writings (1951); Bartolomé de las Casas: Bookman, Scholar, and Propagandist (1952); and Bartolomé de las Casas, Historian: An Essay in Spanish Historiography (1952). See also Henry Raup Wagner and Helen Rand Parish, The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas (1967); Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work, ed. Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (1971); Western Expansion and Indigenous Peoples: The Heritage of Las Casas, ed. Elias Sevilla-Casas (1977); and Gustavo Gutiérrez, Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ, trans. Robert R. Barr (1993).

From The Devastation of the Indies: Hispaniola

This was the first land in the New World to be destroyed and depopulated by the Christians, and here they began their subjection of the women and children, taking them away from the Indians to use them and

ill use them, eating the food they provided with their sweat and toil. The Spaniards did not content themselves with what the Indians gave them of their own free will, according to their ability, which was always too little to satisfy enormous appetites, for a Christian eats and consumes in one day an amount of food that would suffice to feed three houses inhabited by ten Indians for one month. And they committed other acts of force and violence and oppression which made the Indians realize that these men had not come from Heaven.¹ And some of the Indians concealed their foods while others concealed their wives and children and still others fled to the mountains to avoid the terrible transactions of the Christians.

And the Christians attacked them with buffets and beatings, until finally they laid hands on the nobles of the villages. Then they behaved with such temerity and shamelessness that the most powerful ruler of the islands had to see his own wife raped by a Christian officer.

From that time onward the Indians began to seek ways to throw the Christians out of their lands. They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. (Because of this, the wars of the Indians against each other are little more than games played by children.) And the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!" Other infants they put to the sword along with their mothers and anyone else who happened to be nearby. They made some low wide gallows on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen, in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles,² then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive. To others they

¹INDIANS REALIZE THAT THESE MEN HAD NOT COME FROM HEAVEN: Reports from early European voyagers relate that many native peoples believed the European sailors to be gods.

²THIRTEEN, IN MEMORY OF OUR REDEEMER AND HIS TWELVE APOSTLES: A reference to Jesus Christ and his twelve disciples.

attached straw or wrapped their whole bodies in straw and set them afire. With still others, all those they wanted to capture alive, they cut off their hands and hung them round the victim's neck, saying, "Go now, carry the message," meaning, Take the news to the Indians who have fled to the mountains. They usually dealt with the chieftains and nobles in the following way: they made a grid of rods which they placed on forked sticks, then lashed the victims to the grid and lighted a smoldering fire underneath, so that little by little, as those captives screamed in despair and torment, their souls would leave them.

I once saw this, when there were four or five nobles lashed on grids and burning; I seem even to recall that there were two or three pairs of grids where others were burning, and because they uttered such loud screams that they disturbed the captain's sleep, he ordered them to be strangled. And the constable, who was worse than an executioner, did not want to obey that order (and I know the name of that constable and know his relatives in Seville), but instead put a stick over the victims' tongues, so they could not make a sound, and he stirred up the fire, but not too much, so that they roasted slowly, as he liked. I saw all these things I have described, and countless others.

And because all the people who could do so fled to the mountains to escape these inhuman, ruthless, and ferocious acts, the Spanish captains, enemies of the human race, pursued them with the fierce dogs they kept which attacked the Indians, tearing them to pieces and devouring them. And because on few and far between occasions, the Indians justifiably killed some Christians, the Spaniards made a rule among themselves that for every Christian slain by the Indians, they would slay a hundred Indians.

[1542-1546, pub. 1552]