

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

1540s

Bartolomé de Las Casas

The Spanish quickly conquered the land and people of the Caribbean in the 16th century through military force and European diseases. In 1542, the Spanish missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote this description of the brutal treatment of Native Americans forced to mine gold for the Spanish. It was part of his attempt to convince the Spanish court to improve the treatment of native peoples under Spanish rule.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias

How does this account reflect de Las Casas's beliefs about the purposes of Spanish colonization of the New World?

The Indies were discovered in the year 1492. The year following, Spanish Christians went to inhabit them, so that it is since forty-nine years that numbers of Spaniards have gone there; and the first land, that they invaded to inhabit, was the large and most delightful isle of Hispaniola, which has a circumference of 600 leagues.

There are numberless other islands, and very large ones . . . that were all—and we have seen it—as inhabited and full of their native Indian peoples as any country in the world. Of the continent . . . more than 10,000 leagues of maritime coast have been discovered, and more is discovered every day; all that has been discovered up to the year 1549 is full of people, like a hive of bees. . . .

Among these gentle sheep . . . the Spaniards entered . . . like wolves, tigers, and lions which had been starving for many days, and since forty years they have done nothing else; nor do they otherwise at the present day, than outrage, slay, afflict, torment, and destroy them. . . . To such extremes has this gone that, whereas there were more than 3 million souls, whom we saw in Hispaniola, there are today, not 200 of the native population left.

The island of Cuba is almost as long as the distance from Valladolid¹ to Rome; it is now almost entirely deserted. The islands of San Juan [Puerto Rico] and Jamaica . . . are both desolate. The Lucaya Isles lie near Hispaniola and Cuba to the north and number more than sixty. . . . The poorest of these . . . contained more than 500,000 souls, but today there remains not even a single creature. All were killed in transporting them to Hispaniola, because it was seen that the native population there was disappearing.

1. Valladolid: a city in northwestern Spain

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

We are assured that our Spaniards, with their cruelty and execrable works, have depopulated and made desolate the great continent, and that more than ten kingdoms, larger than all Spain . . . although formerly full of people, are now deserted.

We give as a real and true reckoning, that in the said forty years, more than 12 million persons, men, and women, and children, have perished unjustly and through tyranny, by the infernal deeds and tyranny of the Christians. . . .

Two ordinary and principal methods have the self-styled Christians, who have gone there, employed in extirpating these miserable nations. . . . The one, by unjust, cruel, and tyrannous wars. The other, by slaying all those who might aspire to . . . liberty or to escape from the torments that they suffer, such as all the native lords and adult men. . . .

The reason why the Christians have killed and destroyed such infinite numbers of souls is solely because they have made gold their ultimate aim, seeking to load themselves with riches in the shortest time. . . . These lands, being so happy and so rich, and the people so humble, so patient, and so easily subjugated, they have . . . taken no more account of them . . . than—I will not say of animals, for would to God they had considered and treated them as animals—but as even less than the dung in the streets.

In this way have they cared for their lives—and for their souls; and therefore, all the millions above mentioned have died without faith and without sacraments. And it is . . . admitted . . . by all . . . that the Indians throughout the Indies never did any harm to the Christians; they even esteemed them as coming from heaven, until they and their neighbors had suffered the same many evils, thefts, deaths, violence, and visitations at their hands. . . .

Source: Excerpt from *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writings*, translated and edited by George Sanderlin. Copyright © 1971 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.