

Discussing History: The Treatment of Indians

“A View of the Spanish Conquest”

by Juan de Solorzano y Pereyra

I do not wish to excuse completely the wars that must have been fought against the Indian without reason in the early days of the conquest, nor the many injuries that have been and are still be done to them.

However, I still make bold to insist that these actions cannot wipe out all the good that has been accomplished in the conversion and instruction of these non believers by church people. Even less can these actions wipe out the great piety and zeal of our kings in this cause. With great care and without taking into account costs or difficulties of any kind, our kings have tried to provide for the conversion of the Indians in a kind and Christian manner.

In addition, in many places the Indians gave cause for their mistreatment or for war to be made against them. Either they practiced their savage customs or they attempted to commit treason against our people. Furthermore it is not the Spaniards who have killed them, but their own vices and drunkenness or the earthquakes and repeated epidemics of small pox and other disease, which God, in His mysterious wisdom, has seen fit to send to reduce their numbers.

"Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies"

Bartoleme de Las Casas

Among those gentle sheep [the Indians], the Spaniards entered like starving wolves, tigers, and lions. For the last forty years the Spanish have done nothing but slay, torment, and destroy the Indians with strange and new kinds of cruelty never before seen, nor heard of. To such extremes has this gone that, whereas once there were more than three million Indians in Hispaniola, there are today fewer than two hundred of the native population left.

The island of Cuba is now almost entirely deserted. The islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica are both empty. The Lucaya Isles [Bahamas] contained more than 500,000 Indians, but today not a single one remains. All were killed in transporting them to Hispaniola to work, because the native population there was disappearing.

The Christians have killed so many Indians solely because they have made gold their final aim, seeking to load themselves with riches in the shortest time.

"Concerning the Just Cause of the War Against the Indians"

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda Sepúlveda

The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men; for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate [lacking in self-control] and the moderate and temperate, and, I might even say, between apes and men.

Compare, then, these gifts of prudence, talent, magnanimity [generosity], temperance, humanity, and religion with those possessed by these half-men in whom you will barely find the vestiges [traces] of humanity, who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs. Well, then, if we are dealing with virtue, what temperance or mercy can you expect from men who are committed to all types of intemperance and base [morally low] frivolity [foolishness], and eat human flesh?