



The Destruction of the Indies

We live in a world that has become all too accustomed to the catastrophic loss of human life. In recent years, how often have we felt heart-wrenching pain at the multitudes of starving people in sub-Saharan Africa? Recall the anguish of Cambodia that left perhaps a quarter of its population dead. Consider the Holocaust that cost one-half of Europe's Jewish population their lives. Reflect upon the two disastrous world wars. The horror of these calamities is magnified insofar as they were all largely the consequence of human actions. As tragic as they were, their magnitude pales before the capacity of epidemic disease to ravage human populations. We are taught that the greatest of epidemics was that of the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe in the mid-fourteenth century, when perhaps one-third of all Europeans succumbed. We are not all taught that Chinese, Egyptians, Persians, and countless other peoples died in comparable numbers because of the same illness.

In this year of the quincentennial, whatever else we may remember about the contact initiated in 1492, it seems to me critically important that we internalize the fact that contact with Europeans led to losses greater than any of those other catastrophes. The loss of lives, measured either in raw numbers or in percentages, is staggering. The most conservative estimates suggest that some eleven million people died within 100 years of contact. More commonly accepted estimates put the loss at between 45 and 75 million. Unfortunately, the annihilation of indigenous populations continues to the present. It is estimated that the mortality rate for all tribes in the Americas is about ninety percent in the 500 years since contact. The greatest sustained loss of human life in history is part of the legacy of 1492.

A cold recitation of these numbers has the unfortunate capacity to soften their multiple meanings. Bartolomé de las Casas, an observer and chronicler of the destruction of the lands the Spanish called the Indies, recounted that

the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against [the Indians]. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant 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!'²³

Disease, however, and not cruelties, cost most natives their lives. Smallpox, influenza, typhus, the cold, and other illnesses ravaged the native peoples of America. A Nahua chronicler related that

great was the stench of death. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half the people fled to the fields. The dogs and vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grandfathers died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen. So it was that we became orphans, oh, my sons! So we became when we were young. All of us were thus. We were born to die!²⁴

Disease undermined the capacity of native people to resist, it caused many to lose their cultural bearings, and it facilitated the consolidation of Iberian rule in America. William McNeill, a dean of global history at the University of Chicago, helps to bring this into perspective. He notes that

a 90 per cent drop in population within 120 years (i.e., across five to six human generations), as happened in Mexico and Peru, carries with it drastic psychological and cultural consequences. Faith in established institutions and beliefs cannot easily withstand such disaster; skills and knowledge disappear. This, indeed, was what allowed the Spaniards to go as far as they did in transferring their culture and language to the New World, making it normative even in regions where millions of Indians had previously lived according to standards and customs of their own.²⁵

Demographic disaster served as the necessary foundation for the European empires in the Americas.



This introduction suggests several areas of inquiry into the meanings of the destruction of the Indies. The discussion must begin with a consideration of the spatial distribution and numbers of peoples who lived in the lands encountered by Europeans in 1492. An account of their fate and the Black Legend engendered in part by writers such as Las Casas follows. Next will come a brief examination of the role of disease in conquest. Finally, I will offer some insight into how native peoples reacted to conquest, disease, and the destruction of their worlds. In one sense, these topics can stand by themselves as facets of the contact period. My hope, of course, is that they will be joined in your minds as they relate to the "destruction of the Indies."

The Pre-Contact Demography of the Americas

The debate over the numbers of people who inhabited the Americas at the time of contact began in the early 1500s, and continues unabated to the present. The demography of the Americas is perhaps one of the most disputed and intractable problems of 1492. How can a reliable estimate be made in the absence of censuses, the first of which was not made until the

1570s? The lack of statistical information has resulted in population estimates that have ranged from as low as 8 to as high as 120 million people. At least initially, the Spanish treatment of the natives proved to be a mitigating factor in estimating initial population figures. Critics of Spanish policies tended to arrive at higher estimates than did supporters. In the early twentieth century the debate came to hinge upon the validity of different methodologies for the calculation of population estimates. Recently, the revived attention to the fate of native Americans has refocused concern upon the treatment of native peoples and has intertwined the techniques of demographic analysis with the advocacy of distinct ideological positions. Suffice it to say, estimating native populations is an unsure and contentious process.

The Spaniards noted that the islands of the Caribbean were "bien poblados," well populated, suggesting a considerable population density. Hispaniola and Cuba were estimated to have had large numbers of inhabitants, perhaps 1,000,000 on the former and maybe twice that number on Cuba. Early visitors to the lowlands of Central America reported dense populations, but Spaniards were unprepared for the significant populations of contemporary Mexico. The central Andes had large concentrations of people as well. Portuguese explorers encountered abundant populations in Brazil, though not in the magnitude of even the larger Caribbean islands.

Las Casas offered the first estimates in the 1550s, when he placed the original population between 12 and 15 million. Geographers and ethnographers working in the early decades of this century estimated a population of between 40 and 50,000,000 people, most of them concentrated in central Mexico and in the Andes. A second generation of demographers, who published in the 1940s and 50s, reached markedly different conclusions, estimating the native population in 1492 at between 8.5 and 13.4 million. The so-called Berkeley School, which dominated the 1960s and 70s, disputed these low estimates, figuring instead that about 25 million people had lived in Mexico alone, and that the total population probably ranged between 70 and 90 million. A noted anthropologist determined a 90 to 112 million range. I have come to accept the estimate of geographer William Denevan, who figures a range of between 43 and 72 million, with 57 million as the most likely figure.²⁶

Although the size of the initial population of the Indies cannot be known with any certainty, scholars agree on the relative distribution. The central plateau of Mexico, the site of the Mexica imperial capital of Tenochtitlan, contained the most densely populated lands in the Indies. The capital itself was inhabited by an estimated 200–300,000 people. Ten other major urban centers clustered around Lake Texcoco. The most reliable estimates suggest that some 25 million people inhabited Mexico in 1520, just under 40 per cent of the total population of the Indies. An estimated 10–13 million people were subject to the Inca in the Tihuantinsuyu empire. Lowland South America contained an estimated 8.5 million people. Both Central America and the Caribbean region are thought to have had almost six million inhabitants. The total population

of America north of Mexico numbered about 4.5 million. Quite significantly for the pattern of Spanish colonization, almost sixty per cent of the human inhabitants of the Indies, its greatest wealth, were concentrated in Mexico and in the Andes. These regions became the core zones of the Spanish Empire in the Indies.

Black Legend

Whatever the original population, it was clear to all contemporary observers that a massive reduction in the size of the aboriginal population occurred within decades of contact. For many, Spanish abuse provided the most plausible explanation for this decline. The so-called "Black Legend" of Spanish cruelties in the treatment of indigenous peoples has endured for hundreds of years. The "anti-Spanish judgment and interpretation" that constitutes the Black Legend is not limited to cruelties, however. Charles Gibson, a well-recognized scholar of Latin American history, notes that the legend involved at least eight issues: Spanish decadence, authoritarian government, political corruption, bigotry, indolence, cruelty in the American conquests, destruction of native American civilizations, and the maltreatment of natives in their colonial empire.²⁷ Although many Europeans expressed antipathy toward Iberians from the fourteenth century, it is clear from this list that the treatment of indigenous people during the conquest and colonial periods constitutes a basic element of the Black Legend.

Bartolomé de las Casas helped to spawn that legend by his writings of the mid-sixteenth century. Although Las Casas expressed sympathy toward native peoples in all his writings, his 1552 book, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, probably had the most long-term influence on the character of the Black Legend. He published *The Devastation of the Indies* shortly after his "debate" with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda over the treatment of native Americans. Contact with the peoples of the Indies who were not part of the Biblical world had stirred heated controversy regarding the nature of the creatures encountered by the Europeans. Given the sociopolitical hegemony of Catholicism in Europe, correct interpretations could only be resolved officially by the pope. The central questions concerned the humanity of the natives and their proper treatment. Both issues tended to divide those who sought to colonize the Indies. Most colonists desired to exploit the labor and land of indigenous peoples, while the crown and church expressed greater concern for the souls and taxes that new subjects would yield. Las Casas had been publicly identified as the "defender of the Indians" since the 1520s, and had played an important role in the mitigation of Spanish legal attitudes toward natives. His arguments, which I will examine in greater length in a later chapter, defended the humanity of Indians and proposed benign, non-exploitive treatment toward them.

Sepúlveda, by contrast, had emerged in the 1540s as the single most articulate defender of the “legitimate” aggression toward Indians in “just war.” The Christian kingdoms of Spain and their subjects had used the concept of just war against heathens as the principal rationale for the reconquest of Iberian lands from the Islamic Moors after 711. Through just war the victor earned the right to enslave and seize the property of unbelievers. This reconquest experience deeply influenced the mentality of Iberian adventurers who sought glory and gold in the Indies. In his advocacy of the doctrine of just war before King Charles V in 1550, Sepúlveda drew upon his status as a leading Aristotelian scholar to posit the existence of a natural aristocracy determined in large part by behavior. By inference, a naturally servile people existed as well. Those servile peoples could justly be ruled by their superiors. Sepúlveda claimed that even the most advanced societies of the Indies were coarse, barbaric, and innately servile. He wrote that

war against these barbarians can be justified not only on the basis of their paganism but even more so because of the abominable licentiousness, the prodigious sacrifice of human victims, the extreme harm that they inflicted on innocent persons, their horrible banquets of human flesh, and the impious cult of their idols. Since the evangelical law of the New Testament is more perfect and more gentle than the Mosaic law of the old Testament ... so also ... wars are now waged with more mercy and clemency. Their purpose is not so much to punish as to correct evils. What is more appropriate and beneficial for those barbarians than to become subject to the rule of those whose wisdom, virtue, and religion have converted them into civilized men ... , from being impious servants of the Devil to becoming believers in the true God?”²⁸

Sepúlveda thus justified Spanish treatment of the indigenous population on four grounds: the idolatry and sins against nature of the Indians; the “natural rudeness and inferiority” of Indians which predetermined them to servitude; that military conquest was the most effective route toward the eventual Christianization of natives; and, finally, the conquest of tyrannical Indians enabled the Spaniards to protect weaker Indians.²⁹

Las Casas refuted these arguments in a three-day oration, the basic tenants of which were contained in *The Devastation of the Indies*. In this volume Las Casas levels a bitter attack on the brutality of the conquistador and colonists against the native population. Las Casas here inspired what some have called the “homicide theory” to account for the dramatic loss of native lives in the post-contact period. Indicative of his charges was the claim that Pedro de Alvarado had killed some five million Indians in the pacification of Guatemala. Similar horror stories were told of the settlement of the Caribbean islands and the elimination of their inhabitants. All told, Las Casas alleged that some 12–15 million Indians had died in the conquest of America. Translated into all major European languages, complete with graphic woodcuts illustrating the torture and brutality of the Spanish, the volume became a potent weapon in the arsenal of Spain’s enemies.

Apologists for Spain were quick to refute Las Casas's numbers, although they seldom challenged his fundamental points. Much of the debate over the population of the Indies in 1492 originated in this polemic. Numerous critics attacked Las Casas, but even they often admitted that cruelty and torture were commonplace. In time, the impact of disease on native populations came to moderate the brutal image of the Spanish conquest of America, although the essential truths remain undisturbed. With few exceptions, Spanish treatment of Indians was inhumane and fundamentally cruel.

English and other European authors were quick to employ that truth in their struggle to weaken Spanish power. An Italian was the first to fuel the fire started by Las Casas. Girolamo Benzoni published *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* in 1565. Benzoni had lived in the Indies for 14 years, learning much of the region first hand. The Italian author had little good to say of the Spanish treatment of the Indians. For the most part, it was inhumane, cruel, and brutal. Only the actions of the Dominicans earned praise from Benzoni. The family of Theodore de Bry did more to spread the belief in Spanish atrocities through Europe than anyone else. In the 1580s they translated Las Casas into four languages, published in English as *Grand Voyages*. While they did not include the text of Las Casas in the early editions, they did use the woodcuts, supported by text from other sources. The manipulation of these images in England was logical and extreme. One author has noted that "Reproduced various times in different editions of the pamphlet, they and their content became so familiar that men came to believe that these pictures summed up the whole work of Spain in America." The Black Legend was in place in Western Europe, a belief that has been lessened only in the present century.

The Great Killers

However persuasive Las Casas's accounts were in shaping the thinking of generations of readers, the homicide theory cannot account for the tremendous loss of native lives that it claims. Instead, the greatest destruction was caused by the introduction of viruses and bacteria into a defenseless population. The long isolation of the Americas from the Afro-Eurasian disease-pool produced devastating results.

It is very difficult for a person from the twentieth century to internalize the meaning of an epidemic. No such disease has ravaged our times, leaving thousands upon thousands of dead, driving the likelihood of death and suffering into everyday consciousness. The closest sense of this reality that I can grasp is in a grim comment by a gay man from Boston, in which he related that all his friends had died of AIDS, that he had been left alone. AIDS, however, is a difficult disease to transmit. A cold is not. Fifteenth-century Europeans knew the reality of epidemics. Precautions such as quarantines

were taken to inhibit their spread. Mexicas, the people of the Aztec empire, knew epidemic disease as well, although their own disease pool seems to have been less virulent than that of the Old World. In any case, the European familiarity with disease accounts, in part, for the limited attention paid to it in accounts of the conquest period.

The first great killer was smallpox. Although smallpox was common during the late fifteenth century, it did not cross the Atlantic for 26 years after contact. Its short incubation and contagious periods required an exceptionally fast voyage and a newly infected carrier. These "ideal" conditions occurred toward the later days of 1518, when the disease appeared on the island of Hispaniola. Within months royal officials noted that indigenous populations had been devastated by the disease. Smallpox accompanied the Spaniards to Mexico the next year, where it spread like wildfire, killing perhaps one-half of the population of Tenochtitlan. Soon all of Mesoamerica was afflicted. The disease spread to South America by the mid-1520s, where the Inca Huayna Capac was among its countless victims. The Columbian exchange brought measles to the Caribbean in 1529. What is thought to have been either typhus or influenza followed in 1545. Influenza spread in pandemic magnitude in 1557. The plague, the cold, and numerous other illnesses also decimated native peoples.

Verified pandemics ravaged Mexico in 1520–24, 1529–35, 1545–46, 1558, 1576–77, 1588, and 1595. Smaller epidemics were more frequent. Other regions experienced a similar disease pattern. Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz describes the results in his comments:

The recurrence of epidemics at such short intervals causes an immediate drop in the native population and profoundly affects its reproductive capacity, thus also endangering its future. Each outbreak simultaneously attacked all ages. It pruned out the aged and the sick, but children and those of reproductive age were not spared. Before the children had reached marriageable age and had a chance to breed offspring of their own, it was more than likely that new epidemics would have thinned out the group. The new generation was thus affected twice, by the losses experienced by their parents and by the additional ones suffered in their own childhood. And so it went on, epidemic after epidemic, and generation after generation.³⁰

By this process, the people of the Indies suffered millions of losses. Not all regions were affected equally, however. The Caribbean's native population was almost eliminated within 100 years. Central Mexico's declined by 85 per cent. The densely populated Andean region was reduced by half, although the less densely populated lowlands only experienced a one-third reduction. Eastern South America suffered even smaller losses. Through disease, once populated lands were cleared for the establishment of European colonies.

Disease and Conquest

Two distinct phases characterized the conquest of the peoples of the Indies by the Spanish Europeans. The Caribbean phase, which began in 1492 and was essentially complete by the early 1510s, was accomplished by the force of arms, treachery, and concentrated power. We must recall that the Spaniards operated under a unified political hierarchy and shared a common cultural background, unlike the disparate cultures and politics of the Caribbean peoples. The Spanish conquistadores learned in their dealings with natives that hostile reactions by tribes could be inhibited if their chiefs were captured. The seizure of chiefs under a flag of truce thus became part of the Spanish conquest repertoire in the Caribbean. Although countless Arawaks and others died of illnesses associated with the invasion, disease was not a crucial factor in the Caribbean phase of conquest.

Disease did play a fundamental role in the mainland phase of conquest, which extended from 1519 until the 1570s, although the great civilized powers had been subjugated by 1537. Hernando Cortés launched his invasion of Mexico in February 1519 with approximately 620 soldiers and sailors. His bold march to the interior, during which he gained the crucial alliance of the Tlascalalan enemies of the Mexica, culminated in the entry into Tenochtitlan as guests of the emperor on November 12. Shortly thereafter Cortés seized Moctezuma, holding him hostage as a puppet as the Spaniards tapped the wealth of the Mexica imperial system. An ill-conceived attack by Pedro de Alvarado on Mexica nobles during a ceremony in June 1520 led to a city-wide uprising, the so-called "Sad Night," that cost scores of Spaniards their lives. Cortés and his men fled to the coast, where their military might was augmented by more soldiers and by the disease smallpox. Smallpox reached the Mexica capital before the Spanish returned, with devastating results. A native chronicle records the trauma.

While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It began to spread during the thirteenth month and lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot.

The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.

Some people came down with a milder form of the disease; they suffered less than the others and made a good recovery. But they could not escape

entirely. Their looks were ravaged, for wherever a sore broke out, it gouged an ugly pockmark in the skin. And a few of the survivors were left completely blind.³¹

Moctezuma's successor, numerous Mexica generals, and many members of the priestly hierarchy fell victim to the disease. When the Spaniards and their native allies returned to the capital in late December 1520, they found a city traumatized by disease. Still, Mexicans ferociously resisted the assault on their capital until August 13, 1521, when the city's defenders finally surrendered.

The conquest of Tiwantinsuyu, the empire of the Incas, proceeded quite differently from that of the Mexicans, but disease played an equally critical role. The Tiwantinsuyu empire had been extended very rapidly by a succession of Incas. Pachacuti Inca initiated the expansion of the empire in 1438, which by the 1520s stretched 4,000 kilometers from north of Quito, Ecuador, to Santiago, Chile. The Spaniards learned of Tiwantinsuyu in 1523 and mounted several unsuccessful invasions before Francisco Pizarro left Panama in December 1531. Again, disease arrived before the conquerors. What seems to have been smallpox had spread southward into the Andes, probably in 1526 or 1527. The emperor Huayna Capac and many members of the Inca clan died from the disease, leading to a struggle for power and civil war between two of his sons, Atahualpa and Huáscar. Atahualpa had defeated Huáscar shortly before Pizarro's arrival but had not fully consolidated his imperial control. The Inca did not fear the march of the small band of Spaniards, who reached the city of Cajamarca on November 16, 1532. In a supreme act of confident aggression, Pizarro seized Atahualpa, holding him captive until he was executed. One year later the Spaniards won the imperial capital of Cuzco, but they were unable to secure effective control of the empire until 1537.

The Defeat of the Gods

Humans develop their cultures, philosophies, cosmologies, and societies—indeed, all of their shared characteristics—only very slowly. Many observers of the conquest and post-conquest period commented upon the apparent ease with which Spanish missionaries were able to convert indigenous people to Christianity. The degree to which native peoples fully understood or accepted Christianity is of course open to discussion, but the superficial acceptance of that doctrine cannot be questioned. Nor *could* it be questioned. This was not a peaceful conversion by words, but a violent conquest by arms amid unparalleled ravages of disease. Native peoples who continued to openly practice their own beliefs faced the death by fire afforded to heretics.

Among the numerous explanations for the post-conquest mass conversion, it seems that the shock of conquest must be considered as quite important. In very real and in symbolic terms the combat between the invading Europeans

and native peoples turned on the brute strength of social, economic, political, and religious structures. Gods struggled to prove their superiority. It is perhaps difficult for most twentieth century humans to appreciate a struggle between gods. Religious wars are less a part of our reality now than they have been in the past. But for those dwelling in the central valley of Mexico, or for those who grew up on the meseta of Castille, religious wars were deeply understood. The centuries-long conflict between Christianity and Islam embedded these understandings deep within their mentalities. So too for the residents of Mexico, who had experienced conflicts between gods for equally as long.

When the Spaniards conquered the Nahua people of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan, they conquered their gods as well. This must have been a fundamentally unsettling psychic blow. Imagine the thoughts of the survivors as they tried to come to grips with conquest. Nahua peoples resisted the creation of colonial rule in both thought and deed, as individuals and as groups, but with conquest their fates were clear. Their gods had lost. Their leaders had been defeated. Their societies would change. Their world had ended.

We are privileged to have the reactions to these events by several *tlamatinime*, the religious thinkers and leaders of the Mexica empire. Twelve Franciscan friars sent to New Spain in 1524 recorded their efforts to convert these Mexica officials to Christianity. By converting religious leaders, it was thought that conversion of the mass of Nahua peoples would be made easier. However, these *tlamatinime* did not question their own belief systems. The fact of conquest could not be altered, but resistance to the conquerors took many guises. The message of the *tlamatinime* captures many facets of the reaction to conquest.

Our lords most esteemed most high
 your journey has been hard and long
 to reach this land

we who are humble
 we who are ignorant
 look at you

what is it that we should say?
 what is it that your ears want to hear?
 can there be meaning in what we say to you?

we are common people
 because of our god-of-the-near-and-far
 because of him
 we dare to speak
 we exhale his breath and his words
 his air
 for him and in his name
 we dare to speak to you
 despite the danger

perhaps we will be taken to our ruin
we are ordinary people
we can be killed
we can be destroyed
what are we to do?

allow us to die
let us perish now
since our gods are already dead

wait — be calm — our lords
we will break open
 a little
we will open
 a little
the secret of our god-who-is

you say
that we do not know
the right god
the god who owns the heavens
and the earth

you say
our god is not a true god

we are disturbed
we are troubled by these words

our people
who lived upon the earth before us
did not speak
in this way
they taught us their way of life
the rules of worship
and how to honor the gods
 to burn incense
 to offer sacrifices

this is our way
and the way of our ancestors

they believed that the gods
provide our sustenance
 all that we eat and drink
 corns
 beans
 amaranth
 sage

therefore we pray
to the gods for water
and rain
for the earth to be green
and the gods to give us courage
and the ability
to rule

for a long time it has been so
at Tula
at Huapalcalco
at Xuchatlapan
at Tlamohuanchan
at Yohuallichan
at Teotihuacán

and now must we destroy
the ancient order
of the Chichimec?
of the Toltec?
of the Acolhua?
of the Teopanec?

we know our god
he gives us life
he continues our race
we know how it is that we must pray

hear us — o lords
do not harm our people
do not destroy them
be calm and friendly
consider these matters — o lords

we cannot accept your words
we cannot accept your teachings as truth
even though this may offend you
we cannot agree
that our gods are wrong

is it not enough that we have already lost
that our way of life has been taken away?
is that not enough?

this is all we can say
this is our answer
to your words — o lords

do with us
as you please³²

These are facets of the legacy of 1492. Contact with Europe resulted in horrific and unsurpassed loss of human lives. This was a brutal conquest in which natives were treated with the cruelty thought to be deserved by servile peoples. This cruelty, like the behavior of Pol Pot, Idi Amin, or Adolf Eichman, was a chosen way of behavior. The diseases that accompanied Europeans to the Indies were natural. They were the great killers. They wiped out the peoples of the Indies. With the destruction of the Indies, the cultural and social cement for hundreds of bands, tribes, nations, and states was lost. Worlds were destroyed. On the ashes of those worlds, a New World was constructed by the Spaniards, Portuguese, French, English, and other Europeans. We are the inhabitants of that world.

