

Conflicting Spanish views concerning the Indigenous People of Central America Early 1500's

Bartolomé de las Casas, Spanish Catholic priest who freed his Indian slaves before writing his *History of the Indies*, 1528.¹

In that year of 1500..., the King determined to send a new governor to Hispaniola, which at the time was the only seat of government in the Indies. The new governor was fray Nicolas de Ovando, Knight of Alcantara, and at that time *comendador* [Spanish title granted to an individual with authority to rule an *encomienda*] of Lares.

At first, the Indians were forced to stay six months away at work; later, the time was extended to eight months and this was called a shift, at the end of which they brought all the gold for minting. The King's part was subtracted and the rest went to individuals, but for years no one kept a single peso because they owed it all to merchants and other creditors, so that the anguish and torments endured by the Indians in mining that infernal gold were consumed entirely by God and no one prospered. During the minting period, the Indians were allowed to go home, a few days' journey on foot. One can imagine their state when they arrived after eight months, and those who found their wives there must have cried, lamenting their condition together. How could they even rest, since they had to provide for the needs of their family when their land had gone to weeds? Of those who had worked in the mines, a bare 10 per cent survived to start the journey home. Many Spaniards had no scruples about making them work on Sundays and holidays, if not in the mines then on minor tasks such as building and repairing houses, carrying firewood, etc. They fed them cassava bread, which is adequate nutrition only when supplemented with meat, fish or other more substantial food. The [official in charge of the mine] killed a pig once a week but he kept more than half for himself and had the leftover apportioned and cooked daily for thirty or forty Indians, which came to a bite of meat the size of a walnut per individual, and they dipped the cassava in this as well as in the broth.

I believe the above clearly demonstrates that the Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom when they are allowed to graze in the fields. But our Spaniards gave no such opportunity to Indians and truly considered them perpetual slaves, since the Indians had not the free will to dispose of their persons but instead were disposed of according to Spanish greed and cruelty, not as men in captivity but as beasts tied to a rope to prevent free movement... When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless, giving them some cassava for the twenty- to eighty-league journey. They would go then, falling into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry." And this was the freedom, the good treatment and the Christianity that Indians received.

¹ Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*, 4th Edition, 2014.

About eight years passed under the *comendador's* rule and this disorder had time to grow; no one gave it a thought and the multitude of people who originally lived on this island...was consumed at such a rate that in those eight years 90 per cent had perished. From here this sweeping plague went to San Juan, Jamaica, Cuba and the continent, spreading destruction over the whole hemisphere.

JUAN GINÉS DE SEPÚLVEDA: CONCERNING THE JUST CAUSE OF THE WAR AGAINST THE INDIANS (1547)

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? And do not believe that before the arrival of the Christians they lived in the pacific [peaceful] kingdom of Saturn [ruler of the Golden Age in Classical mythology] which the poets have invented; for, on the contrary, they waged continual and ferocious war upon one another with such fierceness that they did not consider victory at all worthwhile unless they satisfied their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their perfect enemies.

Furthermore these Indians were otherwise so cowardly and timid that they could barely endure the presence of our soldiers, and many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered in flight like women before Spaniards so few that they did not even number one hundred. . . . Although some of them show a certain ingenuity [skill] for various works of artisanship [craftsmanship], this is no proof of human cleverness, for we can observe animals, birds, and spiders making certain structures which no human accomplishment can competently [adequately] imitate. . . . They have established their nation in such a way that no one possesses anything individually, neither a house nor a field, which he can leave to his heirs in his will, for everything belongs to their masters whom . . . they call kings (chiefs), and by whose whims they live, more than by their own, ready to do the bidding and desire of these rulers and possessing no liberty. And the fulfillment of all this, not under pressure of arms but in a voluntary and spontaneous way, is a definite sign of the servile [slavish] and base soul of these barbarians. . . .

They live as employees of the king, paying, thanks to him, exceedingly high taxes. . . . And if this type of servile and barbarous nation had not been to their liking and nature, it would have been easy for them, as it was not a hereditary [by right of birth] monarchy, to take advantage of the death of a king in order to obtain a freer state and one more favorable to their interests; by not doing so, they have stated quite clearly that they have been born to slavery and not to civic and liberal [free] life. Therefore, if you wish to [subdue] them . . . to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the ones they had, who were barbarous and impious [wicked] and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith.

(Sepulveda, Juan Gines de, "Democrates II, or Concerning the Just Causes of the War Against the Indians.")