

"Were the Spaniards That Cruel?"

by Gregory Cerio
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For the Spanish, the Columbus Quincentennial stirs an ambivalent nostalgia, blending pride and pain. Spain's shining memories of its Golden Age, when the nation stood at the summit of world power, have been tarnished by critics who call the 1492 arrival of the Spanish in the New World "an invasion" fueled by greed and leading to "genocide." In their words, Spaniards hear echoes of age-old malevolence: a body of anti-Spanish prejudices they know as *la leyenda negra*, the Black Legend, that tarred the Spanish as incomparably savage and avaricious. It created a national image that Spain is still trying to dispel.

The Black Legend was born in the 16th century, when Spain controlled the greatest empire the West had ever known, stretching from Holland to Austria to Italy, and westward across the Atlantic to the Americas. The Spanish were prosperous, powerful and smug. And almost everyone else in Europe hated them.

Fearful and envious of Spain but poorer and militarily inferior, rival European nations resorted to a paper war, the first modern propaganda campaign. Throughout the century and beyond it, pamphleteers from London to Frankfurt made malice toward the Spanish a byword of patriotism. Their tracts depicted the Spanish as a people inherently barbaric, corrupt and intolerant; lovers of cruelty and bloodshed. "Tyranny," one 1597 French scree began, "is as proper and natural to a Spaniard as laughter is to a man." Others warned that if Europeans had been outraged by the Inquisition, or by Spain's expulsion of the Jews in 1492 (two centuries, it should be noted, after they were expelled from England), these were kindnesses compared to what Spain did in the Americas. William of Orange, the Dutch nobleman who led the Protestants of Holland in revolt against Spanish authority, railed in 1580 that Spain "committed such horrible excesses that all the barbarities, cruelties and tyrannies ever perpetrated before are only games in comparison to what happened to the poor Indians."

Were the Spanish that bad? Well, there's no reason to print up I LOVE THE CONQUEST bumper stickers. As with most legends, *la leyenda negra* has some basis in fact. Like many invaders, the Spanish committed horrifying atrocities. But savagery was not the norm for the Spanish, or even commonplace. To understand their conduct in the Americas, one must look at the world as the Spanish did in the 15th century. By their standards, they acted with moderation. When the English and French arrived in the Americas, they systematically drove the natives from their land. The Spanish accepted the Indians into their society—however rudely--and sought to provide a philosophical and moral foundation for their actions in the New World.

If that isn't the history presented in many American schoolbooks, novels and films, it is perhaps because the attitudes of most North Americans are a cultural legacy from the same people--English, German, Dutch, French--who fought Spain for 300 years. Varnished and repeated through those centuries, the Black Legend continues to distort our vision of the past, as well as the present, in repugnant stereotypes of Hispanics in both hemispheres, from the vicious cholo to the "lazy wetback."

Politics and religion, those two tinderbox subjects, gave the Black Legend its momentum and its staying power. Rivals like France--where even today Spain is sometimes dismissed with the jeer "Africa begins at the Pyrenees"--resented Spanish domination and coveted its empire. Religion added a more visceral animus. Charles V began his reign as King of Spain in 1517, the same year that Martin Luther



launched the Protestant Reformation. He was also Holy Roman Emperor, the anointed protector of Christianity, and saw it as his duty to purge the heresy from the Continent. Leading the bloody Counter-Reformation, Spain fought in Germany in the 1540s, began an 80-year war with Holland in 1568 and sent the disastrous Armada against England in 1588. Protestants saw Spain as the agent of the Devil; its extermination was an article of faith. Opening Parliament in 1656, Oliver Cromwell called Spain the "enemy abroad, who is head of the Papal interest, the head of that anti-Christian interest, that is so described in Scripture ... and upon this account you have a quarrel with the Spaniard. And truly he hath an interest in your bowels."

Ironically, it was Spain's sense of religious mission, and the broad freedom of speech it permitted in its colonies, that helped foster the Black Legend. From Ferdinand onward, Spanish monarchs encouraged candid reports, favorable or unfavorable, on conditions in the Americas. One of the most tireless critics of Spanish rule was a Dominican bishop, Bartolome de Las Casas, who worked for 50 years to improve the treatment of the Indians. A skilled politician, in 1552 he published a passionate tract called "A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies." In graphic and sometimes exaggerated detail, he recounted Spanish cruelties to the Indians, describing, in one instance, how Spaniards hanged natives in groups of 13, "thus honoring our Redeemer and the twelve apostles," then lit fires beneath them.

Spain's enemies ate it up. In the next 100 years, 42 editions of Las Casas's "Brief Account" appeared in Germany, France, Holland and England, some illustrated with lurid engravings by the Dutch artist Theodore DeBry, who had never crossed the Atlantic. One English edition was subtitled "A Faithful Narrative of the Horrid and Unexampled Massacres, Butcheries, and all Manner of Cruelties that Hell and Malice could invent, committed by the Popish Spanish." A U.S. edition of Las Casas was even published in 1898, to bolster support for the Spanish-American War.

Yet, as historian William Maltby points out, "the most powerful indictment of Spain's cruelty and avarice is at the same time a monument to its humanitarianism and sense of justice." Las Casas, other Spanish clergy and their sympathizers were not lonely do-gooders. They embodied a Spanish moral impulse that led the royal court to conduct a soul-searching ethical inquiry into the Spanish Conquest throughout the 16th century. "Spain was constantly debating with itself: 'Am I right, am I wrong? What is it I'm doing with these peoples?'" notes Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in his television documentary "The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World."

From the beginning of their conquest, the Spanish recognized the need to mediate between the conflicting demands of Christianity and profit. Bernal Diaz, a soldier in the army of Cortes who later wrote a history of the conquest of Mexico, explained the motives of the conquistadors: "We came here to serve God, and also to get rich." It is easy to view the former as a rationale for the latter. But the 16th-century Spanish lived in an age of devotion, when every aspect of life was examined through the lens of religious faith. Spaniards believed they offered the Indians a gift worth any earthly pain: eternal life in heaven.

God had ordained a social hierarchy, most Renaissance Spaniards thought. They accepted Aristotle's concept of "natural slavery"--that large masses of humanity are simply born to serve. The papacy sanctioned slavery and was a large slaveholder. But where the Indians fit in the ranks of mankind baffled the Spanish.

Early on, Isabella of Castile established the policy that Indians who accepted Christianity were free crown subjects. (Those who didn't could be sold into slavery.) But like other subjects, they were expected to pay royal tribute, which could be extracted in the form of labor. With so few colonists, Indian labor was a necessity, but one which, Isabella's counselors reasoned, could teach the natives useful habits of industry. The Spanish devised the *encomienda*, a labor system intended as a sort of trusteeship. A deserving Spaniard was given Indians to use for mining gold or silver or growing cash crops. In return, he would feed the Indians, provide for their instruction in the faith and defend them.

That was the theory. In practice the *encomienda* varied with the agenda of each Spaniard. Most conquistadors were ex-soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, ex-convicts--"nobodies who wanted to become somebodies," as historian L.B. Simpson put it. Those who wanted to get rich quick and return to Spain drove the Indians hard. Others saw the New World as a permanent home and the Indians as future

clients who should be treated well. The encomienda was always, if sometimes only marginally, better than outright slavery. "The people remained in a community even if they were exploited," explains Yale historian David Brion Davis. "They had a certain cultural integrity; their family structure and customs weren't, for the most part, interfered with."

Out of Christian duty, and to keep a close rein on its New World colonies, the Spanish throne consistently ordained that the natives be treated with humane respect. In 1512, Ferdinand's Laws of Burgos provided, among other things, that "no Indian shall be whipped or beaten or called 'dog' or any other name, unless it is his proper name." These and later laws were often ignored or watered down, but under them many Spaniards were punished for mistreating Indians.

Spanish monarchs were also willing to experiment with new systems of government and labor. Las Casas was given a chance to convert an area of Guatemala without the interference of soldiers and met with mixed success. There were four separate, failed experiments on Caribbean islands to see if, given the tools, Indians could live alone like civilized people--that is, like Spaniards. In 1530, Vasco de Quiroga, a Mexican bishop, established a cooperative society in Michoacan, with communal property and what we would call social-welfare benefits.

If these experiments treated the natives as naive children, that is perhaps no more offensive than today's tendency to believe the Indians were helpless before the Spanish. In fact, they were quite resourceful, argues historian Steve Stern: "Indigenous peoples shaped everyday life and social structures much more than our stereotyped imagery would have it." Cortes could not have conquered Mexico without the aid of tribes dominated by the Aztecs. For their help, these natives happily accepted titles, coats of arms and encomiendas from the Spanish crown. The encomienda itself was molded by tributary labor practices long established among the Indians. In many regions, Indians dictated to Spaniards the form and amount of payment to be given. A group of Peruvian Indian chiefs hired a lawyer and sailed to Spain in the 1560s to make a case before Philip II for curtailing the encomienda. In the best political tradition, they even offered him a bribe. "Indians entered into the Spanish legal system to use it for their own purposes," says Stern. "And to some effect."

Always a legalistic people, the Spanish created General Indian Courts where the natives aired their grievances. As historian Philip Wayne Powell wrote, "Spaniards did not try to impose upon America something hypocritically foreign or inferior to what they live with at home." Spain's rulers taxed the New World colonists less heavily than their European subjects. In America, the Spanish built schools--23 universities in the New World--that graduated white, mestizo and Indian alike, along with some blacks. They established hospitals to provide the Indians with medical care, such as it was in the era of barber-surgeons and leeches.

If only for economic reasons, the Spanish cared deeply for the welfare of the natives. "Genocide," in fact, may be the unfairest of all the accusations leveled at Spain--if the term is used in its proper sense, to describe the intentional, systematic eradication of a race. Millions of Indians died after the arrival of the Spanish. But a host of pestilences brought from Europe wiped out the vast majority, not war or abuse (page 54). The whole of Spain's treatment of the Indians seems almost beneficent compared with the way other colonial powers dealt with natives. "The Spanish made a place for the Indians--as part of the lowest order, but at least they had a place," says Woodrow Borah of the University of California, Berkeley. "North Americans in many cases simply exterminated the Indians." The Spanish mingled with the Indians, at times with the encouragement of the crown. "The Spanish were conquered in turn by those they conquered," says Mexican poet Homero Aridjis. The marriage of blood and cultures created la raza--the new mestizo people who compose most of today's Latin Americans. North America, where the natives were excluded, driven off their land and eventually hunted down, remained white. The United States elected several presidents--Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor--who first made a name for themselves as Indian fighters. It is a piece of our heritage that may help explain the potency of U.S. racism.

Today, Spain has invested \$20 billion worldwide in Columbus Quincentennial projects, still hoping to escape the distortions of the Black Legend. But if the 16th-century Spanish can be granted motives beyond profit, they appear no worse--and often far better--than the nations who castigated them for their

sins. Spain committed terrible deeds while bringing "the light of Christianity" to the New World. But history offers no shortage of acts of cruelty performed in the service of religious, social, political and economic ideals. Susan Milbrath, a Florida museum curator whose recent Quincentennial exhibit was greeted with pickets, asks why people concentrate on the morality of Columbus and the Spanish: "The big question to me is, are human beings good?" The Black Legend casts a shadow on us all.