

CHAPTER 14 Primary Source

A Bishop and a Spanish Official Disagree

The question of how well the Indians of the Americas were treated by their Spanish conquerors has long been debated. Missionaries like the Catholic Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas believed that colonization was destroying the Indians (~~textbook page 306~~). In the early 1600's, many Spanish officials in the Americas disagreed. Read the passage written by Las Casas, and the passage written by a Spanish official who served in Peru. On a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Las Casas

Among these 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 [the 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.

Spanish Official

I do not wish to excuse completely the wars that must have been fought against the Indians without reason in the early days of the conquest, nor the many injuries that have been and are still being 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 nonbelievers 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 smallpox and other diseases, which God, in His mysterious wisdom, has seen fit to send to reduce their numbers.

First passage from Bartolomé de Las Casas, by Francis Augustus MacNutt. Copyright © 1909 by Francis Augustus MacNutt. Reprinted by permission of The Putnam Publishing Group. Second passage from "A Seventeenth-Century Defense of Spanish Treatment of the Indians," by Juan de Solorzano Y Pereyra in History of Latin American Civilization, edited by Lewis Hanke (Little, Brown and Co., 1973).

Comprehension

1. (a) According to Las Casas, how had the Spanish treated the Indians? (b) What reason did he give for that treatment?
2. What did the Spanish official say was the chief benefit of Spanish rule for the Indians?
3. What evidence did Las Casas cite to support his claim that the Indians were disappearing?

Critical Thinking

4. *Detecting bias.* (a) According to the Spanish official, how had the Indians caused their problems with the Spanish? (b) What does the Spanish official say is responsible for the declining Indian population? (c) What words in the official's statement reveal his bias?
5. *Recognizing points of views.* (a) To what extent did both writers acknowledge a problem? (b) How did their viewpoints differ?