

Atrocities of the Spanish Conquistadors in the West Indies c. 1513

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484 – July 17, 1566) was a 16th century Spanish priest. He became famous for his advocacy of the rights of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, whose cultures, especially in the Caribbean, he described with care. His book *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, published in 1552, gave a vivid description of the atrocities committed by the conquistadors in the Americas – most particularly, in the Caribbean, Central America, and what is now Mexico – including many events to which he was a witness. In one of his last works before his death, *De thesauris in Peru*, he vigorously defended the rights of the natives of Peru against the slavery imposed on them by the early Spanish Conquest. The work also questioned the right Spain had to take the treasures found and taken from the burial sites of the Indios population. Las Casas explained that he had supported the acts of barbarism when he first arrived in the New World, but that he soon became convinced that the horrendous acts would eventually lead to the collapse of Spain itself in an act of Divine retribution. Largely due to his efforts, the New Laws were adopted in 1542 to protect the Indians in colonies.

The Spaniards with their horses, their spears and lances, began to commit murders and other strange cruelties. They entered into towns and villages, sparing neither children nor old men and women. They ripped their bellies and cut them to pieces as if they had been slaughtering lambs in a field. They made bets with each other over who could thrust a sword into the middle of a man or who could cut off his head with one stroke. They took little ones by their heels and crushed their heads against the cliffs. Others they threw into the rivers laughing and mocking them as they tumbled into the water. They put everyone they met to the edge of the sword.

One time I saw four or five important native nobles roasted and broiled upon makeshift grills. They cried out pitifully. This thing so troubled our Captain that he could not sleep. He commanded that they be strangled to end their misery. The Sergeant (I know him and his friends from Seville) would not strangle them but put bullets into their mouths instead.

I have seen all these things and others infinite. Most tried to flee. They tried to hide in the mountains. They tried to flee from these men. Men who were empty of all pity, behaving like savage beasts. They are nothing more than slaughterers and enemies of mankind. These evil men had even taught their hounds, fierce dogs, to tear natives to pieces at first sight.

AND, when, although rare, the Indians put to death some Spaniards upon good right and law of justice; the Spaniards made an agreement that for every one Spaniard killed they had to slay one hundred Indians.

One time the Indians came to meet us and receive us with food and good cheer! Instead, the devil, which had put himself in the Spaniards, put them all to the edge of the sword in my presence, without any cause whatsoever, more than three thousand souls. I saw there such great cruelties, that never any man living either have or shall see the like.

In three or four months (myself being present) there died more than six thousand children, which the Spanish had sent into the Gold mines.

The Bottom Line:

- 1. Why are the Spanish committing such brutal acts toward the Indios?**
- 2. Why do you think Las Casas wrote about this topic in such detail?**
- 3. Do you think Las Casas was the only one who felt troubled by this situation? Why don't we have many books written by many Spaniards about this topic?**
- 4. Do you think modern Americans would be capable of such brutality? Under what circumstances?**