

# **The Conquest of America: The Largest Demographic Catastrophe in Human History**

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In a sense, it all began with 1492 and with Columbus, and that’s why I start with that date and with him. It was the time when the last Islamic state in Iberia fell to the Catholic Reconquista, multiculturalism in Spain ended and tolerance for Jews was destroyed. In fact, writes the historian David Stannard, “On the very day that Columbus finally set forth on his journey that would shake the world, the port of the city he sailed from was filled with ships that were deporting Jews from Spain. By the time the expulsion was complete between 120,000 and 150,000 Jews had been driven from their homes.” (Stannard 1993, 62)

These events back in Spain were a portent of much worse to come both in the Americas and in Africa. What was triggered there by Columbus’s so-called discovery was the largest demographic catastrophe in human history.

In his 1993 book *The Conquest of America* (Koning 1993), a follow-up to his 1976 book *Columbus: His Enterprise* (Koning 1976), the late Dutch-American author Hans Koning describes Columbus as a “false hero,” who was nevertheless “turned into a kind of founder-hero for the New World, a symbol of white civilization bringing light to a dark continent,” as a person enshrouded in a myth that many people felt difficult to let go. Conscious of how difficult it is to really face the awful truth, he appeals to his readers:

“Those of you who had trouble with *Columbus: His Enterprise* will have even more trouble with this sequel. But I’m dealing in facts; please give them a chance.” (Koning 1993, 10)

Let’s now turn to the particular set of facts I am intending to give you here.

The number of people who lived in the Americas on that fateful day when Columbus landed on one of today’s Bahama Islands on October 12 cannot be safely established, but a considerable amount of historical research has led historians to move from a figure as low as 8.4 million (one million of them in North America) to figures as high as 145,000,000, with 18 million North of Mexico. (Stannard 1993, 266, 11 & 267-68, Fn. 23), based on historians Kroeber (Kroeber 1939) and Dobyns (Dobyns 1983), respectively).

One of the foremost experts in the field, David Stannard, writes in his book *American Holocaust. The Conquest of the New World* (Stannard 1993) that “today, few serious students of the subject would put the hemispheric figure at less than 75,000,000 to 100,000,000 (with approximately 8,000,000 to 12,000,000 north of Mexico).

In what follows, I will assume a somewhat arbitrarily low estimate taken from yet another classic in the field, namely Russell Thornton’s 1987 book *American Indian Holocaust and*

*Survival. A Population History Since 1492* (Thornton 1987). Summarizing the state of research in the mid-1980s, he arrives at an estimate of 72+ million for the Western Hemisphere and 7 million in North America, with two million of the latter in what is today's Canada and 5 million in the contemporaneous United States. (Thornton 1987, 36, 42)

This conservative number offers the advantage to enable us to compare it to the numbers Thornton gives for the other continents: Asia, 315 million, Europe, 70 million, Africa, 55 million, Oceania, 1.5 million, which, together with the two Americas, makes for a world total of around 513 million. Of this, the Americas made up something like 15 percent.<sup>1</sup>

As we will see in a moment, this latter percentage was soon to drop dramatically. Even Columbus himself made a personal contribution to this. After his return to Spain from his first voyage in 1493, he set sail again in that same year and became the governor of an island he called Hispaniola, the island that today consists of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, from 1493 to 1500. When he first landed there in 1492, he wrote to the Spanish Court that "Hispaniola is a miracle ... both fertile and beautiful. The inhabitants are so tractable, so peaceable, astonishingly shy ... They are so free with their possessions, when you ask for something they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone. They are of great intelligence." But he also ominously added: "If your Majesties so wish, all can be carried to Spain or made slaves on their island." Hans Koning, who quotes all this, comments: "This was the first and last time that Columbus would write admiringly of the local people, the Arawaks (or Tainos, as other writers call them). From then on, they were 'savages.'" (Koning 1993, 20)

The problem for the people on the island baptized Hispaniola was that Columbus had promised the Spanish crown gold, a lot of gold, and that only a trickle of the expected amount was found after he landed there after his second voyage. The Indians there were not abducted to Spain but enslaved right on the island and treated with extraordinary brutality.

Based on the reports of Bartolomeo de las Casas, a friar who at first had gone along with Columbus's project, but then turned into a furious opponent of Spanish colonialism and its cruelties, Koning describes the practices of Columbus's regime in the following way:

Columbus had promised mountains of gold to his king and queen, and his obsessive need to fulfill this promise led to the death of half the population during his rule. At least half a million people died, perhaps more. The Indians were sent to collect gold from the streams and to bring it to the Spanish fort. Those who met their quota—a tiny bell full of gold dust every three months—were given a kind of dog tag to hang around their necks. Those who were found without such a tag had their hands cut off. Those who fled into the mountains were hunted with dogs. The chiefs, or caciques, were burned alive to quench any taste for rebellion; they were hanged in rows of thirteen above fires of green wood. (Why thirteen? That was "in honor of our Redeemer and His twelve apostles," as de las Casas tells us.) (Koning 1993, 20)

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from the figures given in (Thornton 1987, 37), who quotes widely varying figures for the non-American population of the world from (Durand 1977, 259); I have taken the approximate medium figures for these estimates.

Thus Columbus himself set into operation something what is perhaps best described, in the phrase of the author of a book on the plundering of Africa in this and the last century, Tom Burgis, as a “looting machine,” (Burgis 2015) and a looting machine of unspeakable cruelty at that.

The population of Hispaniola at the time of Columbus’s arrival has at various times been estimated at 3 to 4 million (de las Casas), one million (many authors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including, apparently, Koning), and eight million (a conventional estimate today). What happened to them? They suffered the same fate as all of the population in the Caribbean, geographically within what came to be called the “Spanish Main.” As David Stannard writes, “Just twenty-one years after Columbus’s first landing in the Caribbean, the vastly populous island that the explorer had re-named Hispaniola was effectively desolate; nearly 8,000,000 people – those Columbus chose to call Indians – had been killed by violence, disease, and despair.” (Stannard 1993, x, based on historians of the “Berkeley School.”) Eight million people had virtually disappeared between 1492 and 1513. Bartolomeo de las Casas gives a number of 200 survivors for 1543.

While Columbus was a cruel but relatively ineffectual looter, the latter an aspect that contributed to his eventual fall from grace at the Spanish Court, it is well known that other looters were much more successful. Hernando Cortez and Francisco Pizarro successfully plundered Mexico and Peru, and the Spanish and, simultaneously, Portuguese conquest and domination of South America went on from there.

And here comes a reason into play why the absolute numbers of the population of the Western Hemisphere at the time of Columbus’s arrival – 72 million, as Russell Thornton assumes, 100 million, as David Stannard assumes as within the realm of likelihood, or 145 million, as other authors assert – is not even all that crucial to grasp the cataclysm that befell the peoples, tribes and nations that lived there: Among those authors, there is much unity about the extent, or percentage, of the decline that happened between 1492 and 1892.

In his book, Russell Thornton writes,

I estimated in Chapter 2 a total population of 72+ million American Indians in the Western Hemisphere in 1492. This 72+ million declined in a few centuries to perhaps only about 4 to 4.5 million (Dobyns, 1966: 415; Thornton and Marsh-Thornton, 1981: 48). This was a population about 6 percent its former size. It represents a tremendous population decline over the centuries. (Thornton 1987, 42)

In terms of percentages, David Stannard (Stannard 1993, x), summarizing what was the latest research in 1993, gives a very similar account:

Within no more than a handful of generations following their first encounters with Europeans, the vast majority of the Western Hemisphere’s native peoples had been exterminated. The pace and magnitude of their obliteration varied from place to place and from time to time, but for years now historical demographers have been uncovering, in region upon region, post-Columbian depopulation rates of between 90 and 98 percent with such regularity that an overall decline of 95 percent has become a working rule of thumb.

Before we turn to what happened on the current territory of the United States, I think two remarks need to be made lest the historical perspective is distorted. The vast majority of the people who died in the Americas as a result of their contact with the European conquerors did not die through direct violence, but from diseases brought with them by the invaders. Curiously, in my research I was not able to find any direct estimate of the ratio, one reason being that this ratio could vary enormously. Sometimes whole populations would disappear from illnesses without a shot being fired or, at least, without much in the way of direct violence, and sometimes, actually quite often, there would be episodes, sometimes quite protracted, of deliberate genocide. Actually, in a curious way the European conquerors remind one of King Midas in the Greek mythology who turned everything into gold by merely touching it (only to discover that one cannot eat gold). The Europeans who invaded the Americas in ever greater number could not fail to note that everywhere they went, they brought death and destruction with them. It is quite obvious though, that they rarely if ever did much to try to help the people they had, at first at least unwittingly, turned into their victims, and often, in North America in particular, they saw the destruction of the Indians there by a whole variety of diseases against which they had no antibodies as a god given and welcome event that made room for them to settle the land they desired. Both the books already cited and Ben Kiernan's relevant chapters in his 2007 comparative study *Blood and Soil. A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (Kiernan 2007) give a number of quotes to that effect. My own guess of the relation between direct violence and other causes of the population decline such as disease (the number one killer, particularly smallpox), destruction of the traditional way of life, despair, alcoholism and so on) would be something like 1 to 9.<sup>2</sup>

Even so, David Stannard's remark in the introduction to his book seems quite appropriate:

From almost the instant of first human contact between Europe and the Americas firestorms of microbial pestilence and purposeful genocide began laying waste the American natives. Although at times operating independently, for most of the long centuries of devastation that followed 1492, disease and genocide were interdependent forces acting dynamically-whipsawing their victims between plague and violence, each one feeding upon the other, and together driving countless numbers of entire ancient societies to the brink-and often over the brink-of total extermination. (Stannard 1993, xii)

The second remark on historical perspective: The destruction of the native population, brought about by the desire for riches and land, first in the Caribbean, then in the Spanish Main, then onwards to South America and later also to North America, was so extreme that it set into an operation a second looting machine; this time a looting machine that did not steal and plunder raw materials and land, but human beings.

Research summarized by David Stannard seems to suggest that 12 to 15 million slaves captured in Africa survived, first, what in effect were death marches from the interior of Africa to the West coast, then the transport on the slave ships, and finally, another highly destructive process of being "seasoned," sold and set to work in the Americas themselves. The estimates

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<sup>2</sup> In the preface to his own book, Russell Thornton gives as "the general causes of this collapse: disease, including alcoholism; warfare and genocide; geographical removal and relocation; and destruction of ways of life," with the order these causes are given reflecting relative importance. (Thornton 1987, xvi)

Stannard gives for the respective death toll are 50 percent for the death marches, 10 percent for the transport across the Atlantic, and another 50 percent for those that survived that transport. Projecting backwards from the number of survivors he reaches a number of “anywhere between 36,000,000 and 60,000,000” Africans who did not survive the slave trade that went on between, mainly, the early 16 and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stannard 1993, 317 Fn. 9), operated mainly by the Portuguese, the British, the French, the Spanish, and the Dutch.

Let us now finally take a closer look at what happened in today’s U.S. The title of a book that I couldn’t find in the University Library in Heidelberg and of which only 5 copies seem to exist in the German Fernleihe system, Henry Dobyns’s *Their Number Become Thinned*, and a graph at the beginning of Russel Thornton’s book say it all: According to Thornton, the population there dropped from 5 million to a mere 250,000 between 1492 and 1892.

If we take a closer look at the first population graph in Thornton, we must ask, where does the drastic population decline in the years up to 1600 come from, cutting the assumed population of five million almost in half? The answer is, the Spanish Main, and the brutality, violence and “pestilence” (Stannard’s expression) they brought with them. Spanish marauders, slave-hunters and plunderers had come as far North as Florida and Southern Georgia, and there according to Stannard (Stannard 1993, 101),

for every ten Timucuan Indians who were alive in 1515 only one was alive in 1607. And by 1617, a short decade later, that number was halved again. According to the most detailed population analysis of this region that ever has been done, in 1520 the number of Timucuan people in the area totaled over 720,000; following a century of European contact they numbered barely 36,000. Two-thirds of a million native people – 95 percent of the enormous and ancient Timucuan society – had been obliterated by the violence of sword and plague.

This is even without counting California at that time, which was also under Spanish domination. To this must be added another fact, namely that the newly European diseases often spread like wildfire among the Native Americans themselves. Direct contact with the conquerors was no precondition for dying from these diseases.

So we can divide the demographic cataclysm of the Native Americans in today’s U.S. into three periods:

- From the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where the contact with and the violence by the Spanish was mainly responsible.
- A period that roughly begins with the first real English colony in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, which later on gave rise to unspeakable Pocahontas stories Monika Seiller will be talking about, and reaches until 1776 – the period of British rule.
- The period of U.S. rule from 1776 to roughly the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Native American population had reached its absolute nadir.

I have briefly talked about the catastrophic effect of the Spanish period; the 170 years or so under the influence of the British brought more havoc. Thornton writes: “The 5+ million American Indians in the conterminous United States area, estimated in Chapter 2, had de-

clined to but 600,000 by 1800, the first date for which we have any reasonably good population data on American Indians of the United States.” (Thornton 1987, 43)

This is all the more remarkable if one looks at the small slice of territory that the British colonists actually controlled at the beginning. All the 13 states that formed the U.S. in 1776 are situated on only a small fraction of today’s U.S. territory. But these were exactly the territories from which almost all the members of the tribes who once lived there were ethnically cleansed, often by means of the threat of genocide or actual genocide. Another factor were, as usual, diseases brought by the English, and a third one that the Indians, towards the end of the British colonial rule, were drawn into the battles, first between the British and the French, and then between the British and the American colonists.

I will not describe in detail how these battles went, but will note an important characteristic here that distinguished the Spanish colonial enterprise from the British one. In the beginning at least, the Spanish enterprise cannot aptly be described as settler colonialism. Cortez, Pizarro and other such men terrorized their victims with just a few hundred men who relied on their superior weapons, and even by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after one hundred years of conquest, only “perhaps 200,000 Spaniards had moved their lives to the Indies, to Mexico, to Central America, and points further to the south,” that is, a very vast area (Stannard 1993, 95).

In the U.S., the relatively small area of the new country in 1776 was already home to 2 and a half million people (with the Natives, until 1860, counting as non-people). Taking the land away from the Indians became a major motive, and as Ben Kiernan describes in his *Blood and Soil*, the process was undergirded by an ideology, based not least in writings of the enlightened philosopher John Locke, that a right to the land of a region is due only to those who put it to productive use, with the Indian way to treat the land not counting as such.

This then rapidly led into the proper American period of destroying the Native American community on what became U.S. territory, with the accompanying campaigns of ethnic cleansing and genocide such as the trail of tears, the Sand Creek massacre, the massacre at Wounded Knee in today’s Pine Ridge reservation, and many, many more. A particularly nasty episode is the protracted, but very little known genocide of many of the Californian Indians.

In California, as late as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Native population collapsed from 250,000 in 1800 to 18,000 in 1890. As the immune systems of the Natives had had a long time to adapt to the challenges posed by the brought-in diseases, it is unlikely that the latter played the major role in this collapse. And indeed, RT approvingly quotes an earlier researcher, Mooney, a classic source, who wrote (Mooney 1910, 286): “In California, the enormous decrease from about a quarter of a million to less than 20,000 is due chiefly to the cruelties and wholesale massacres perpetrated by the miners and early settlers.” (Thornton 1987, 49) The reference to the “miners” is mainly, but not exclusively to the (in-)famous Californian gold rush romanticized in many films.

I could add here evidence from Stannard (Stannard 1993, 142-45) that all of this was accompanied by an abominable and ultra-racist campaign in part emanating from the Californian government itself that often crossed the threshold to calls for genocide. A large part of the collapse of the Native American population in the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century happened right

there, in California and Southern Oregon. 400 years after the beginning of the conquest of the Americas, the Native population in what was now the United States had reached its all-time low.

But miraculously, the low point turned out to be a turnaround. There are now ten times as many Native Americans in the U.S. than there were in 1892. So this tremendously sad story is also a story of resistance, resilience, and hope, and the same is true South of the Rio Grande and North of the Canadian border. After a hard and shaky start I had with all this difficult material which is not only sad but where very much is still uncertain, it is tempting to try to add much more, but I feel this is a good point to stop. Not everyone likes the Indian author Sherman Alexie, but to me, he was an eye-opener, and so I will quote from his *Reservation Blues*: “Big Mom taught them a new song, the shadow horses’ song, the slaughtered horses’ song, the screaming horses’ song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived.” (Alexie 1995, 306)

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