

## Module 01: Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?

### Evidence 4: Las Casas Berating the Spaniards

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#### Introduction

The "demographic catastrophe" that beset the New World peoples started on the island of Cuba, with the arrival of Columbus's second expedition in 1493. Although there were no epidemics reported during these years, the population of the island declined dramatically within two decades of Spanish settlement, falling from several million to 29,000.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was acutely aware of the dimensions of the tragedy. Las Casas began his tenure in the New World as part of the problem, participating in the conquest of Cuba. As one of the colonizers, he was granted an *encomienda* by the Spanish governor of the island. In theory, the *encomienda* system gave individual Spaniards jurisdiction over a group of Indians who were to supply the colonists with tribute and labor. In return, the *encomiendero*, or the Spaniard receiving an *encomienda*, assumed responsibility for protecting the Indians, supporting a parish priest, and defending the colony. In practice, the *encomienda* became a brutal form of slavery, as *encomienderos* forced native peoples to work in mines to enrich the Spaniards.

Las Casas repented his ways, and in 1514 he gave up his *encomienda* to become a Dominican friar. In his *History of the Indies*, he raised an angry voice against the *encomienda*, which he thought destroyed the humanity of the Indians and often destroyed their lives as well. In so doing, he joined a group of reformist clergy who valorized the native peoples and demonized the Spaniards and their imperialist enterprises. Las Casas stipulated that his manuscript was not to be made public until forty years after his death (he died in 1566). It is known, however, that the *History of the Indies* circulated in Spain beforehand. While analyzing the excerpt below from the *History*, be sure to keep in mind the friar's perspective.

#### Questions to Consider

- In this excerpt, how did Las Casas account for the demise of the native peoples of Cuba?
- What role did he attribute to disease?

## **Document**

The Indians of each region [of Hispanola] were allotted to the Spanish residents; and every Spaniard, according to the degree of his thirst for gold and the laxness of his conscience, not considering that Indians were people of flesh and blood, heaped them in the mines, where their untimely and massive extermination is proof enough of the kind of inhuman treatment they received. The perdition of these people was more vehement and accelerated here than elsewhere because the Spaniards were engaged in pacification - as they call it - and they were accompanied by a multitude of Indians taken in the villages to serve them. Thus, they consumed the island resources and did not bother to reseed them, and the whole island was quickly left unattended and unproductive, since when the Indians were not caught or killed, they deserted their villages to find a hiding place away from the Spaniards.

As I said, then, greed kept the Spaniards from cultivating the land while they marched on to harvest the gold they had done nothing to produce. The price of scant nourishment was endless scavenging; thus they forced men and women, with a diet well below sustenance level, to the most arduous labor. As it is true, as I have already mentioned, that in my presence someone told us, as if recounting an exploit, that he had made his Indians dig and form thousands of cassava mounds by sending them out into the hills every third day for a bellyful of fruit that digging cassava mounds a whole day is much more toilsome than hoeing vineyards in our country since it consists of digging enough earth to form a heap 3 or 4 feet square and deep, not with hoes but with cudgel-shaped sticks.

So then, death made speedier ravages among Indians here than in other places, starvation and hard labor helping. Since all able-bodied men and women were away at the mines, only the old and sick stayed in town with no one to look after them. So they died of illness, anguish and starvation. I was traveling the Cuban roads then and it happened that entering a town I sometimes heard crying in the houses. I would inquire and was greeted with the words "Hungry, hungry." Anyone strong enough to stand on his

feet was sent to work, including nursing mothers whose milk dried up in their breasts from lack of food and excessive labor, which caused infant mortality at the rate of 7,000 in three months, as someone who investigated the situation informed King Ferdinand [the Spanish monarch]. Once too, 300 Indians allotted to an official of the King were reduced by nine-tenths in three months because they were driven relentlessly.

Greed increased everyday and every day Indians perished in greater numbers and the clergyman Bartolomé de las Casas, whom we mentioned earlier, went about his concerns like the others, sending his share of Indians to work fields and gold mines, taking advantage of them as much as he could. [Las Casas referred to himself in the third person whenever he meant to speak of his life before becoming a friar.] He always tried to maintain them well, treat them mildly and pity their misery but, like everyone else, he neglected the fact that they were infidels in need of indoctrination into the Christian fold. . . .

As I said, he began to consider the suffering and servitude of these people and he remembered having heard that the Dominican friars of Santo Domingo could not own Indians with a clear conscience and would neither confess nor absolve Indian owners, which the said clergyman disapproved. [Las Casas goes on to describe how he renounced his ownership of Indians and how he conveyed his decision to the Cuban governor.]

Source:

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, Andrée Collard, ed. and trans. (New York: Harper and Row Torchbook Library, 1971), 207-208.