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Credibility and Incredulity: A Critique of Bartolomé de Las Casas's A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies

Abstract

A fierce advocate for the indigenous people of the New World, Bartolomé de Las Casas sought to promote awareness and enact legal change. Born in 1484, Las Casas grew up as exploration of the New World began. After embarking on several voyages to the New World, he saw firsthand the injustices committed against the natives. Years later, following a religious conversion, he began elucidating the actions of the Christians in an effort to draw awareness to the Indians plagued by the Spanish presence and to compel the Spanish Crown to take action in order to maintain its religious legitimacy in the New World. Las Casas used *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* as a medium to this end. Despite its efficacy in producing a gruesome picture of slaughter and deceit, it leaves several questions unanswered. These unanswered questions and the excessive exaggerations, call into question the facts of the *Short Account*. In many contexts, Las Casas highlighted the innocence and purity of the Indians and the brutality of the Spaniards in order to draw attention to the magnitude of deaths incurred by the natives. Because he failed to present an adequate analysis of the factors contributing to the natives' deaths and failed to provide a complete description of the natives' actions and traditions, the legitimacy of his work must be questioned.

Keywords

Bartolomé de Las Casas, New World, indigenous people, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies

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Alex Allen

A fierce advocate for the indigenous people of the New World, Bartolomé de Las Casas sought to promote awareness and enact legal change. Born in 1484, Las Casas grew up as exploration of the New World began. After embarking on several voyages to the New World, he saw firsthand the injustices committed against the natives.¹ Years later, following a religious conversion, he began elucidating the actions of the Christians in an effort to draw awareness to the Indians plagued by the Spanish presence and to compel the Spanish Crown to take action in order to maintain its religious legitimacy in the New World. Las Casas used *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* as a medium to this end. Despite its efficacy in producing a gruesome picture of slaughter and deceit, it leaves several questions unanswered. These unanswered questions and the excessive exaggerations, call into question the facts of the *Short Account*. In many contexts, Las Casas highlighted the innocence and purity of the Indians and the brutality of the Spaniards in order to draw attention to the magnitude of deaths incurred by the natives. Because he failed to present an adequate analysis of the factors contributing to the natives' deaths and failed to provide a complete description of the natives' actions and traditions, the legitimacy of his work must be questioned.

To convey his point effectively, Las Casas divided his account into sections and clustered the horrors geographically. He presented a similar overall trend in each section: natives met the Spaniards peacefully only to die through slavery and subjugation. Las Casas began by describing the kingdoms of Hispaniola. In Cibao, Las Casas characterized the indigenous people, particularly King Guarionex, as dutiful and virtuous – a people devoted to the Spanish monarchs.² Each householder under the king made annual contributions of gold and supposedly filled the entirety of a hollow gourd. When the availability of gold declined, Las Casas stated that the king suggested, in order to better serve the Spanish monarchs, that his people cultivate a vast expanse of the kingdom to produce crops.³ The Spaniards did not endorse this potentially

¹ Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. Anthony Pagden (New York: Penguin Group Inc, 1992), xviii.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*

fruitful plan; one European raped the king's wife.⁴ In terms of character, Las Casas noted that, though the king could have "easily...exact[ed] revenge" on the Spanish, he chose to go into exile.⁵ The Spaniards subsequently butchered and killed his people.

Las Casas presented similar accounts in the kingdoms of Marien and Xaragua. Claiming to have met several high-ranking officials of King Guacanagari of Marien, Las Casas recounted how the kind and caring individuals cared for Columbus and his men after their ship crashed, and treated them as though they were "part of the same family."⁶ Las Casas later stated that the same king died when attempting to escape the massacre. Regarding Xaragua, the "heart" of Hispaniola, Las Casas observed "no where were people of such quality and breed," and compared them to nobles and high lords, "handsome and "easy on the eye."⁷ He also mentioned King Behechio and Queen Anacaona, who provided excellent services to the Europeans and allegedly saved their lives. However, even after they summoned 300 important locals to welcome the European governor, the arriving army ravaged the area and burned people alive.⁸ This kingdom met a similar fate as Cibao: the caring and hospitable natives died solely, allegedly, at the hands of the Spanish.

News of these events spread and many of the indigenous people of Cuba retreated from their villages in fear. Those who remained attempted to greet the Spanish with gifts, yet the Christians, a word Las Casas used frequently and deliberately, slaughtered the natives without provocation.⁹ Several days after this incident, Las Casas reported having regained the natives' trust. He gathered the nobles of the Havana province and promised that the people would not be harmed. However, the rapacious European commander broke the promise Las Casas made, seized the indigenous people, and burned them alive the following day.¹⁰ Once again, Las Casas illustrated the docile and saintly characteristics of the natives; after all, he implied, how could such a gentle people understand the treachery of the Spanish?

This trend characterized the subsequent events Las Casas described. The generous indigenous people made gifts to the Spaniards and were subsequently tortured by the heartless Christians who sought additional tribute and sometimes went so far as to burn villages to the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Ibid.,

ground.¹¹ Even the great Montezuma, who “showered the Europeans with thousands of gifts” and entertained them at banquets, fell to the Spaniards after they took him hostage in his own city.¹² In Trinidad, amiable natives welcomed a group of seventy Spaniards into their establishment “as though they were their own flesh and blood” and showered the Spaniards with food.¹³ These natives, who Las Casas characterized as extremely generous people that rushed to give the Spaniards all they possessed, met the same fate as the other indigenous peoples. However, he mentions that one European commander who participated in this slaughter spoke to him. This commander allegedly admitted to feeling at home among the indigenous people and acknowledged that they treated him well.¹⁴ Taken by itself, this account suggests that hundreds of thousands of natives, millions even, died hopelessly; that is to say, it made no difference that they greeted the Spanish amiably, gave all they had, and submitted to Christianity.

However, Las Casas conveniently omitted several important details to heighten the severity of the Spaniards’ actions, particularly in his discussion of how the natives died. In any section of his account, he noted deaths ranging from thousands to tens of thousands, even to millions in some cases. Though it goes without contention that the Spanish killed many people, the factor of disease seems far too important not to address. In particular, “Old World diseases” like smallpox decimated the populations of Mexico and allowed the Spanish to conquer Tenochtitlan. Disease also served as the catalyst for weakening Peru before the arrival of the conquistadores.¹⁵ Without addressing disease or factoring it into his numbers, one could argue that the thousands of people who died because of slaughter actually died due to disease. Given that Las Casas omitted this critical detail, one may question what else he omitted to suit his purposes.

Additionally, Las Casas worked to establish the character of the indigenous people, yet he presents a superficial and one-sided view of the natives. He stated that the indigenous people sympathized with the Spaniards, gave the conquistadores all they had, and treated them as brothers. Though these details make the natives seem like saintly, “poor innocent peoples,” his

¹¹ Ibid., 34-36.

¹² Ibid., 48.

¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵ Ronald Fritze, *New Worlds: The Great Voyages of Discovery 1400-1600* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 231.

ignorance of the natives' more aggressive side slanted his argument and rendered it less credible.¹⁶

For instance, in Cabeza de Vaca's account of his disastrous voyage to Florida, he described numerous customs of the indigenous people. Cabeza de Vaca dispelled the myth of weak native innocence and established them as cunning, strong, and, in some ways, cruel. As Cabeza de Vaca and the other survivors made their way from village to village, they encountered numerous tribes of Indians and were often captured and beaten.¹⁷ In his discussion of indigenous arms and tactics, Cabeza de Vaca described their facility with the bow and arrow and eventually grew to respect that, in their particular environment, they had developed formidable ways to fight.¹⁸ Cabeza de Vaca even pointed out that, as he and the four survivors traveled from village to village, bands of Indians would follow them and, taking advantage of the Spaniards' supposed abilities as healers, would loot the villages.¹⁹ Cabeza de Vaca rightfully implied that the natives had a dark side; that they were human. Conversely, and very importantly, he posited "these people, in order to be attracted to becoming Christians...need to be treated well...indeed, there is no other way."²⁰ For a time, Cabeza de Vaca genuinely lived alongside the Indians and gained their respect. When he worked to deliver Christianity, they received it willingly and enthusiastically. Cabeza de Vaca certainly had a motive for his account, and while his attempt to rationalize the disastrous voyage may call some of his details into question, his account painted a more holistic picture of the indigenous people than Las Casas's account.

Furthermore, Jean de Léry, in his *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, noted that the indigenous people of the area fought with one another, took prisoners, and engaged in cannibalism. He stated that a village would take excellent care of a captured individual and later ritualistically kill and consume the prisoner.²¹ He stated that the purpose of these practices was to instill fear into enemy tribes.²² Though his account focused on drawing a comparison between previously-unconsidered similarities in European and New

¹⁶ Bartolomé de Las Casas, 126.

¹⁷ Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Relación*, ed. Martin A. Favata and José B. Fernández (Houston: Arte Público, 1993), 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

²¹ Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, trans. and ed. Janet Whatley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 122-125.

²² *Ibid.*, 128-130.

World practices in an effort to criticize the Europeans, Léry's work, alongside Cabeza de Vaca's, shows that the native people of the New World had the capacity to engage in savage acts, akin to those of the Europeans. Las Casas failed to address this.

Taken together, Las Casas presented a slanted view of the New World people in an attempt to arouse sympathy. His omission of details regarding deaths, along with his seemingly obvious over-exaggerations regarding the indigenous people's kindness, detracted from the credibility of the document and makes it difficult to trust the other incidences discussed, namely the gruesome incidences of cruelty committed by the Spaniards. It goes without saying that the Spanish committed unspeakable atrocities in the New World. However, if Las Casas presented an impartial view of the Indians and considered all aspects leading to the deaths of the indigenous people, he would still have had considerable moral and religious ground to speak from. Though intended as a polemic to rouse emotions, Las Casas may have made the account more reliable if he did not avoid integral details.