

Activity 2: Destruction of the Indies (1542)

Source: <http://www.chss.montclair.edu/~landwebj/105/1casas.htm>, accessed December 13, 2009

Instructions: Read the edited excerpts from *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* by Bartholomé de las Casas. Answer the questions following each section. As a final activity, write a letter to King Ferdinand V of Spain describing what Spaniards are doing to the native people of Hispaniola.

1. Into this land of meek outcasts there came some Spaniards who immediately behaved like ravening wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days. And Spaniards have behaved in no other way during the past forty years, killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before, and to such a degree that this Island of Hispaniola once so populous (having a population that I estimated to be more than three million), has now a population of barely two hundred persons. The common ways mainly employed by the Spaniards who call themselves Christian and who have gone there to extirpate [exterminate] those pitiful nations and wipe them off the earth is by unjustly waging cruel and bloody wars. Then, when they have slain all those who fought for their lives or to escape the tortures they would have to endure, they enslave any survivors.

Questions

1. According to de las Casas, how did the Spanish behave toward the native people?
2. What happened to the people of Hispaniola as a result of Spanish actions?

2. Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. The millions I mentioned have died without the Faith and without the benefit of the sacraments. And never have the Indians in all the Indies committed any act against the Spanish Christians, until those Christians have first and many times committed countless cruel aggressions against them or against neighboring nations. In the beginning the Indians regarded the Spaniards as angels from Heaven. Only after the Spaniards had used violence against them, killing, robbing, torturing, did the Indians ever rise up against them.

Questions

1. According to de las Casas, why are the Spaniards acting this way toward native people?
2. As a priest, why is de las Casas particularly upset by Spanish actions?
3. From that time onward the Indians began to seek ways to throw the Christians out of their lands. They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. And the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a

single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them head first against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!"

Questions

1. Why did the native people finally fight back against the Spaniards?
2. According to de las Casas, what did the Spaniards do when the native people rebelled?