



The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account

Bartolomé de Las Casas

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Five hundred years after Columbus's first voyage to the New World, the debate over the European impact on Native American civilization has grown more heated than ever. Among the first--and most insistent--voices raised in that debate was that of a Spanish priest, Bartolome de Las Casas, acquaintance of Cortes and Pizarro and shipmate of Velasquez on the voyage to conquer Cuba. In 1552, after forty years of witnessing--and opposing--countless acts of brutality in the new Spanish colonies, Las Casas returned to Seville, where he published a book that caused a storm of controversy that persists to the present day. The Devastation of the Indies is an eyewitness account of the first modern genocide, a story of greed, hypocrisy, and cruelties so grotesque as to rival the worst of our own century. Las Casas writes of men, women, and children burned alive "thirteen at a time in memory of Our Redeemer and his twelve apostles." He describes butcher shops that sold human flesh for dog food ("Give me a quarter of that rascal there, " one customer says, "until I can kill some more of my own"). Slave ship captains navigate "without need of compass or charts, " following instead the trail of floating corpses tossed overboard by the ship before them. Native kings are promised peace, then slaughtered. Whole families hang themselves in despair. Once-fertile islands are turned to desert, the wealth of nations plundered, millions killed outright, whole peoples annihilated. In an introduction, historian Bill M. Donovan provides a brief biography of Las Casas and reviews the controversy his work produced among Europeans, whose indignation--and denials--lasted centuries. But the book itself is short. "Were I t describe all this, " writes Las Casas of the four decades of suffering he witnessed, "no amount of time and paper could encompass this task."

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