

Conquest by the Spaniards brought hardships and slavery for the original inhabitants of the Americas. Most Spanish colonial officials, like the one quoted below, backed official policy, but one missionary, Bartolomé de las Casas, became the Indians' strongest defender, both in Spain and in the colonies. ♦ *As you read, consider the different attitudes these excerpts reveal. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Two Views of the Treatment of Indians

Juan de Solorzano y Pereyra I do not wish to excuse completely the wars that must have been fought against the Indian without reason in the early days of the conquest, nor the many injuries that have been and are still being done to them.

However, I still make bold to insist that these actions cannot wipe out all the good that has been accomplished in the conversion and instruction of these nonbelievers by church people. Even less can these actions wipe out the great piety and zeal of our kings in this cause. With great care and without taking into account costs or difficulties of any kind, our kings have tried to provide for the conversion of the Indians in a kind and Christian manner.

In addition, in many places the Indians gave cause for their mistreatment or for war to be made against them. Either they practiced their savage customs or they attempted to commit treason against our people. Furthermore it is not the Spaniards who have killed them, but their own vices and drunkenness or the earthquakes and repeated epidemics of smallpox and other disease, which God, in His mysterious wisdom, has seen fit to send to reduce their numbers.

Bartolomé de Las Casas Among those gentle sheep [the Indians], the Spaniards entered like starving wolves, tigers, and lions. For the last forty years the Spanish have done nothing but slay, torment, and destroy the Indians with strange and new kinds of cruelty never before seen, nor heard of. To such extremes has this gone that, whereas once there

were more than three million Indians in Hispaniola, there are today fewer than two hundred of the native population left.

The island of Cuba is now almost entirely deserted. The islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica are both empty. The Lucaya Isles [Bahamas] contained more than 500,000 Indians, but today not a single one remains. All were killed

in transporting them to Hispaniola to work, because the native population there was disappearing.

The Christians have killed so many Indians solely because they have made gold their final aim, seeking to load themselves with riches in the shortest time.

Sources: (1) "A Seventeenth-Century Defense of Spanish Treatment of the Indians," by Juan de Solorzano y Pereyra, in *History of Latin American Civilization*, ed. Lewis Hanke (Little, Brown, 1973); (2) *Bartolome de Las Casas*, by Francis A. MacNutt (1909).

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Questions to Discuss

- For Juan de Solorzano, what “good” outweighs the harsh treatment of the Indians? What other justifications does he find for their treatment?
- According to Las Casas, what has happened to the Indian populations of the Caribbean islands?
- What does Las Casas believe motivated the Spanish to treat the Indians as they did?
- Recognizing Ideologies** What beliefs do you think may have motivated Las Casas to take this stand? How might other Spanish clergy and officials have responded to his point of view?