

Is christopher columbus a real hero?

Government, Colonialism



Christopher Columbus is a well-known figure in history because of his discovery of America in the fifteenth century which eventually led to the expansion and colonization of what we know today as Latin America. Most historians can agree that Columbus indeed discovered the New World with the help and permission of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, however, what is still debated and unclear is Columbus's personality or his morality. There are many diary entries from his voyages that have been retrieved and translated but there are still many questions as to how Columbus treated the natives that he encountered in America. Many historians claim that Columbus was violent towards the native americans and that his discrimination towards them was left out of his diary so that he could maintain a good reputation with the Queen of Spain. Because of this, I believe that although Columbus's diary is a strong primary source, it is most likely exceptionally biased. On the other hand, what historians say about Columbus and his actions in America towards the natives are presumably less reliable and may lack accuracy since the historians were obviously not there to experience the events that took place and they are viewing the events from a completely different time period.

It is believed that Columbus was promised 10% of all the worth of the treasure that he was to find in the New World. April 17, 1492 a contract between him and the Queen and King of Spain made this promise official;

“ that of all and every kind of merchandise, whether pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and other objects and merchandise whatsoever, of whatever kind, name and sort, which may be bought, bartered, discovered, acquired and obtained within the limits of the said Admiralty, Your

Highnesses grant from now henceforth to the said Don Cristóbal [Christopher Columbus] ... the tenth part of the whole, after deducting all the expenses which may be incurred therein.” (Bourne 79)

It is easy to see why Columbus’s main goal in the New World would not have been to treat the natives with respect, but rather to take from them and bring back as many goods as possible to Spain. Columbus may not have seen this as an act of cruelty, but rather one that was necessary for the growth of Spain. Christopher Columbus was also believed to have been a very religious man, and another one of his main goals was to implement Christianity in the New World regardless of what it took. “ I shall forget sleep, and shall work at the business of navigation, so that the service is performed.” (Bourne 90) , words from Columbus’s diary to the Queen of Spain regarding his efforts in spreading religion throughout the Americas. It can be argued based on these two passages that Columbus did have good intentions, but his way of reaching his goals may have been extreme and his methods harsh towards the natives. Another argument that is often made is that although Columbus was respectful and kind towards the Queen of Spain, this was only to maintain her alliance and ultimately inherit the promised 10% of what goods he was able to return to Spain. His negative personality and characteristics were not visible through his diary, but rather in how he dealt with the Native Americans that he encountered. Oddly enough, these actions towards the Natives were not mentioned in his diary, but rather in the research conducted by historians. This presents the main problem with history, how can one decide which information is most credible? The primary sources from the fifteenth century, presenting Columbus as a hero? Or

modern opinions from many historians, claiming that Columbus did more harm than good during his excursions?

Historical accounts, whether from personal diaries, second-hand opinions of historians or other spoken or written forms will always be at least slightly biased. For this time in history, there are no personal accounts written by Native Americans on how Columbus seized their land. The only side of the story that we have is from Columbus and his men, and their main goal was obviously to conquer as much land and goods as possible and bring back slaves to Spain. From that point of view, Columbus may have thought that treating the Natives harshly was justified since it was his duty. On the other hand, the point of view of modern historians is that Columbus committed many crimes and unjust actions during his time in the Americas, and for that he should not be such a glorified historical figure. “ Singularly focused on his mission to find riches and conquer new lands, Columbus and his teams treated the indigenous groups they came across as obstacles to their greater mission” (Columbus Controversy). Both accounts are biased. Columbus firmly believed that his actions were justified and that the ‘ right thing’ to do was to please his queen and king in Spain. Therefore, what he chose to mention in his diary and his reflection on his actions will not necessarily coordinate with the ideas of what is right in our modern society. Historians will unconsciously depict a figure as morally correct or incorrect based on how they view their current society. In today’s society, Columbus was a harsh man whose acts towards the Natives were immoral. Contrarily, in the fifteenth century, Columbus was a hero, at least to the people of the East. His discoveries brought change and wealth to Spain and undoubtable

progress to the New World over time. Because of this, both sources will contradict. this is inevitable considering cultural as well as time differences present.

It is not possible for a human to give their opinion even if it's a professional one, without previous knowledge or thoughts associated with the topic. The debate on Columbus's personality is very tricky because the people that were alive and worked with him at the time cannot share their information with us. Also, different individuals will have different opinions on the same person. No two relationships are the same. Columbus's voyage is a very important time in history and most historians can agree more or less on how the voyage took place, the name of the ships, and what was accomplished through these voyages. However, the foggier information such as what happened during these voyages, how Columbus treated his crew, the Queen of Spain, the native Americans in the ' New World' are very subjective. Many historians argue that Columbus was rude to his crew but to authority, for example the Queen of Spain, he was respectful and kind. Through my research I can see why both opinions are valid, but I cannot say which I agree with. Is it safe to assume the Columbus expressed his personality freely in his entries? Or did he know that they would eventually be read by the Queen of Spain and did that impact his voice throughout the entries? Did he treat his crew with respect? Since the diary entries never expressed conflict on board is it safe to assume that the voyages all ran smoothly? All of these questions are impossible to answer and even with primary and secondary sources the truth may seem further away when they contradict themselves. Based on what I have found, I believe that Columbus's personal

entries are the most biased source I could have used even though they may seem to be the most accurate since they were written at the time and place of the historical event being studied. On the other hand, historians' opinions are obviously less accurate as they cannot speak of an event they did not personally experience, also their points of view are greatly impacted by how they live in today's society. Historians cannot judge Columbus in the same way that he was judged in the fifteenth century, and because of this, we cannot come to a decision as to what kind of a person Columbus was, and whether or not he did more harm than good to the 'New World'.

However, another form of medium that can be taken into account are paintings about Columbus from around the time that he reached the New World and also from later on in history. When looking up images of Christopher Columbus, I found that images of oil paintings after the time of his discovery presented him as a hero, always standing tall in front of helpless Natives, leading his crew onto land.

Figure A: 'Landing of Columbus' John Vanderlyn

Source: Vanderlyn, John. Landing of Columbus. 1847. N. p.

As you can see in Figure A, this oil painting portrays Columbus as a hero, bearing a flag to mark his new discovery, one that would greatly benefit Spain. This image, painted in 1847 depicts how people thought of Columbus during this time. After all, he did bring many goods into Spain and allowed for a great expansion of the West that would lead to the growth of America as well.

On the other hand, as I searched woodcuts that represented Columbus, still very close to his time, the images seemed to contain more violence and a different overall representation of Columbus's discovery.

Figure B: woodcut Fr Bartolomeo de Las Casas, OP

Source: De Las Casas, Bartolomeo. N. d. N. p.

In Figure B, the violence of the Spanish towards the Natives is obviously shown in this woodcut. By simply searching " Christopher Columbus woodcut" many violent images appeared (appendix 2, 3), whereas under the search " Christopher Columbus oil painting" there were no images showing the violence towards the Native Americans, instead they were individual portraits of Columbus or many versions of the famous " Landing of Columbus" (appendix 4). Some say that the oil paintings represent the ' Western Myth' (appendix 1) while the woodcuts uncover the harsh reality of Columbus's actions.

These results highlight the importance of medium in history. Two very different forms of art will present the same event in two very different ways. In schools, children will be shown paintings such as the " Landing of Columbus" which can be found in almost all textbooks. If these children were to be shown woodcuts of Christopher Columbus, their opinions on his heroic status may change. Medium plays a very large role in how we perceive history. From the diary entries of Columbus to the woodcuts created by Bartolomeo De las Casas, we can see why multiple perspectives of the same historical event have arisen over time. One's opinion depends greatly on

what kinds of writing, images and social environment we are exposed to. Based on what I have found, I cannot say which opinion I agree with, Columbus' accomplishments were incredible and they led to great things, however, his methods of obtaining what he wanted, although not completely clear seemed to be extreme and immoral, regardless of which time period they are viewed from.