

A short account of the destruction of the indies essay



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David Warren December 10, 2010 CMLT277 The Contributions and Perceptions of Bartolome de Las Casas After reading Carlos Fuentes' book, "The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World", he devoted a section to Bartolome de Las Casas which allowed the reader to capture his unique perspective (32-38). In the introductory text before the reading of "The Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies" (as read in class), Bartolome de Las Casas is viewed as a devoted Saint and missionary that was an activist for the Indian's human rights and against Spain's military conquest of the New World" (Briffault).

However, Fuentes illustrated Bartolome in a different perspective; even though Bartolome tried to stop the obvious brutal treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards, he ultimately became the Spaniard's "most useful tool" in an evolved attack to the Indian's humanitarian values in a newly "disguised" method of slavery. This was a very unique perspective because of the fact that after discussing and reading about him, Bartolome is largely perceived as a good Saint that brought about great awareness of the injustice of the Indians. So how could he contribute to the Crown's corrupt rule over the land?

As a result, in order to understand the true ultimate historical value of Bartolome de Las Casas, we will take an in-depth look into his life, what he believed, what he did for the Indians, and discuss the general opinion of Bartolome de Las Casas versus Fuentes impression of him. I will then prove that Bartolome de Las Casas did not impact the Indian community as beneficially as many people thought he did - and in fact, he indirectly and unintentionally contributed to the very image of the original corruption of both the private and public life in Spanish America.

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Bartolome de Las Casas was born in 1474 in Seville, Spain to Pedro de Las Casas who was a small business merchant. He immediately sent his son to The Academy at the Cathedral of Seville in 1497 for his education. As a missionary, in 1502 he leaves Spain with the Spanish governor, Nicolas de Ovanda, and his father to the “ New World” to evangelize to the Indians. While he was there on the island of Hispaniola, he helped resolve a native revolt that rewarded him an encomienda (land and labor of the native population) where he always treated his workers humanely.

In 1506, he then returns briefly to Europe to become ordained as a deacon in Rome. Eventually, in 1512, he becomes the first ordained priest in the New World. He began to be disturbed by Spanish abuses at the massacre of natives at Caonao, Cuba when he saw a stream of Indian blood running “ as if cows had been killed. ” Then, in 1514 while preparing his sermon for church, he read a scriptural passage that stated “ Tainted are his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods! ” which convicted Las Casas as an encomendero. He realized that his own property and goods were “ ill- otten and tainted”.

With this conviction, he freed the Indians that he had in his encomienda and returned to Spain to begin a fight against the Spanish oppression of the native peoples. In 1516, Las Casas was appointed the “ Protector of the Indians” by the archbishop of Toledo, Cardinal Jimenez de Cisneros, and began to devise a scheme to replace the encomienda system. This resulted in some success. He continued to travel back and forth across the Atlantic in his process to repeal the laws of the mistreatment and the rights of the oppressed Indians.

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He was able to get overnment officials to collaborate with this attempt to end the encomienda system because they feared that a new class of feudal lords would arise in the colonies. The Spanish colonists were outraged at his interference as Las Casas then set up a colony on the coast of Venezuela in 1520, where the native people would be treated humanely and in peace. However, this setting failed because their neighbor Spanish slave masters continued to harass the natives and the natives retaliated by killing their monks and torching their monasteries.

This made a bad example of Las Casas' deal semblance that Spanish and free Indians could live at peace together. At this failure, Las Casas traveled to a Dominican monastery in Hispaniola in 1523 and became a monk for eleven years, studying theology and law, where he wrote his " Historia de las Indias". This work illustrated his perception and account of the history of the Natives. Afterwards, beginning in 1534, he started to push forward legislative reforms that led to laws that prohibited further Indian slavery in 1542.

However, these new laws were deemed unenforceable due to the Crown's lack of control in the New World and the laws were repealed. Thus, the encomienda system was restored - in a more detrimental blow as they evolved into a new form, called the " hacienda system". He later returned to Spain and brought about the " Great Debate of 1550". At the Spanish capital of Valladolid, he went against the advocate for the colonists, Juan Gines de Sepulveda. It was about the Justification of the war against the peoples of the New World.

This debate was published as “ En defensa de Los Indios”. It is unclear who won the debate, although there is some evidence that Las Casas persuaded most of the panel’s theologians, Jurists, and Sepulveda. One thing or sure is that this was the first thorough modern debate on human rights in the history of the world. In the final years of his life, Las Casas continued to fight for the Indian’s rights and their Justice in the Spanish courts until he died in Madrid, Spain in 1566 (Welch: 209-211, Uzgalis).

Therefore, in history, Bartolome de Las Casas was a man largely viewed as a righteous priest and activist that spent his life aggressively pursuing and fighting for the rights and Justice of brutally mistreated Native Americans. To further understand the man and what he stood for during his time of activism, e will discuss the principles and ideals that he believed in. He was a man that was first and foremost a Christian involved in missionary work to spread Christianity all over the world.

He came to the ultimate stance that the only way of attracting all people to the “ true faith” is through peaceful persuasion rather than armed conquest which he described in his writing “ De Unico Vocationis Modo” (Welch: 210). He was against military conquest of the New World and believed that it was possible to convert the Indians to Christianity and that Spaniards could live with them in peace. He believed that the Indians had the “ capacity’ and the ability to receive the faith, and did not have to be forced.

Also, he held a firm standpoint against any and all slavery systems such as the encomienda, repartimiento, and hacienda systems. He viewed these institutions as “ more unjust and cruel than Pharaoh’s oppression of the Jews

and deprived both masters and subjects of their freedom and their lives” (Fuentes: 131). These systems basically were designed to exploit Indian labor into quick riches and a right to land in the New World. It was considered by the onqueror to be his “ Just reward” from the Crown for his services at arms at his own expense during the original conquest.

These systems as the “ encomienda” were a formal grant of designated Indian families, usually living in the town(s) put in the hands of a Spanish colonist, thus receiving the title of “ encomendero”. In turn, the encomendero was required to convert the Indians on his “ property’ to Christianity and hold a tight reign on his land in arms and order. An encomendero was not only allowed the right to own land, but to do whatever he saw “ fit” for the land, such as deploying Indians in mines and agricultural tasks. This gave him political power in whatever established government there existed in the New World.

The ironic aspect of this whole corruption, is that the Spanish Crown had little to do with it nor did they have much control due to the vast amount of land and large population of Indians and left it to the conquistadors to figure it out for themselves. This was the Crown’s best temporary solution to the settlers’ demands at the time. Subsequently, the Indians that lived in the lands of these systems had to be forced to work, more so as slavery, to provide food and gold for the Spaniards. They were overworked, mistreated, and dying in large numbers from diseases, rebellion, or suicide.

The only difference between this slavery system and blunt Indian slavery was the manner in which they had been acquired, although they were being

used in the same manner. Therefore, this brutality and mistreatment in this slavery system is what caused much-needed activism for the Indian's human rights by Bartolome de Las Casas (Kramer: 1-2). Furthermore, Bartolome had much compassion on the Indians and did not view them as unworthy beings nor savages, but rather, they were very capable human beings that could possibly function in peace with Spanish society.

He describes this beautiful ideal in his "Historia de Las Indias" (Beckjord: 87-88). He believed that there was a need to publicize and make awareness of the Indian's abuse and exploitations during the conquest as portrayed in one of his most famous works, "The Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies" (Welch: 210). Thus, this attention was all part of his pursuit of justice and human rights for the Indians in his lifetime. Therefore, we have a better understanding of what he believes, and can see why he was so motivated to move swiftly and effectively for the Indians.

Moreover, to understand the significance of such a pivotal character in history for Indian rights, we will discuss what he directly did for the Native Americans in his lifetime. First of all, he was quite the novelist in his day as he depicted his perception of the Indians as a beautiful and capable race in "Historia de Las Indias" in 1523. He also wrote "De Unico Vocation's Modo" in 1537 where he further proved his belief that the Indians can be converted to Christianity in a peaceful method rather than by brutal force.

In addition, he wrote "The Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies" more formally, "Brevisima Relacion De La Destruccion de Las Indias" in 1540, which he narrated the mistreatment, abuse, and exploitation of the

Indians under corrupt Spanish rule and the encomienda system. Last, in 1550, he took part of the first published modern debate on human rights – of the Indians, “ En Defensa Indios”, in which it brought forth the debate of the century. Most importantly, he briefly legally abolished encomienda systems in 1542 though it was largely ineffective to be enforced in the New World.

Therefore, in his contributions, though primarily from the pulpit and the Spanish Courts, he desperately fought in compassion for the Indians for their human rights, justice, awareness, and restoration. After taking a look at his life, beliefs, and beneficence, Bartolome de Las Casas is a Saint that fought long and hard for the Indians (religiously and politically) and largely in part, viewed as a character that contributed to the good of the Indians from many texts, including the introductory text for the excerpt from “ The Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies” (as read in class).

However, Fuentes points out that Las Casas was used as the “ Crown’s most useful tool” in an evolved attack to the Indian’s humanitarian values in other “ disguised” methods of slavery (Fuentes: 134, 136). This was a very unique perspective because of the fact that after discussing and reading about him, he was a good man doing great things for the Indians. So how could he contribute to the Crown’s corrupt rule over the land? Due to Bartolome’s great activism for Indian’s rights and against the encomienda system, the Spanish Crown was losing control of his advantageous corrupt system of slavery in the encomienda system.

As a result, in silent fashion, the Crown sneakily developed a cleverly disguised alternative slavery system called a “ hacienda”. This system was

derived from the encomienda system, however, instead of focusing on labor, it's real attention was toward the land because land was needed to increase the Spanish and mixed populations as the Indians decreased in number. This was assured through land grants given by the Spanish Crown to be purchased in multiple small amounts by the colonial rulers and then esold many times to their inhabitants until it developed into a huge, over-priced estate - for the colonial ruler to own it all.

Since this land was " granted", in other words, " loaned" to many people, Spaniards and Indians alike, gained huge debts and ties to their piece of the " colonial ruler's" land as they tried to pay back their dues in crops and money. Where as before, in the encomienda system, it was through brutal labor and gold. However, this system was just as merciless because it was the basis for political corruption on which the economic system became firmly established in the New World. Having large estates of land became a form of substantial political power because colonial rulers were always rich since they always had their inhabitants owing them money.

This system corrupted everyone, from the church to highly positioned politicians, because as many people could not pay off their over- priced land in their lifetime, their descendents were born into debt as well, thus creating a history of in-debted people to the land. And with the combination of the corruption and the decline of Spain's economy (due to the Crown's distance and inability to directly benefit from the colonies), the Crown stopped paying salaries to the colonial rulers.

So they in response, found other means of income through very “ shady proceedings” and scams that turned the local officials of the Crown into provincial “ caciques”, or political bosses. They created economic monopolies in their districts by combining their corruption with that of the local merchants on the land. The officials continued to receive their salaries by forcing cash advances onto the Indians. Since they couldn’t pay it back (they were already in debt), the Indians in return had to give up their crops at fixed prices.

When the Indians failed to pay, their debt dramatically increased which has led to and developed the very image of the original corruption of both the private and public life in Latin America (Fuentes: 131-136). Therefore, even though Bartolome de Las Casas was a passionate activist for the Indians, he indirectly and unintentionally contributed to the corrupt image of Latin America. Because of his efforts to destroy the encomienda system, which was one of the Spanish Crown’s last and scarce form of control, they became desperate over their foreign rule.

With no choice but to think innovatively - the hacienda system came to fruition. And as a result, this created a resurging history of an indebted society to a corrupt system in Latin America. In conclusion, as we have taken an exclusive look at Bartolome de Las Casas’ life and contributions to the Indians, we know that he was a good man that cared for and brought much awareness of the Indians mistreatment and exploitation in Latin American history. Though we cannot say that the Indians would be treated any better without his efforts in history,