Chapter 2

The Spanish Conquest of the New World, 1492–1600

If Christopher Columbus’s discovery of the New World recharted the globe, the ensuing Spanish conquest of the Caribbean basin and Mexico transformed it. Heavily armed columns of troops devastated the most populous islands and destroyed the most powerful kingdom of the New World, dispatched massive quantities of plunder back to the Old, opened up the Americas to other European powers and settlers, and established grim new precedents for their murder of indigenous peoples. This in turn sparked lasting controversies in Spain and abroad. Domestic critics like Bartolomé de Las Casas called the Spanish record into question, provoking apologists to defend it and laying the first groundwork for a modern discourse of human rights.

The arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean in 1492 quickly led to one bloody conquest after another. In 20 years the islands of Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Cuba all fell into Spanish hands. Their large indigenous populations declined dramatically at the hands of the conquistadores and the enslavement, deportations, and diseases that came with them. The conquests of Mexico from 1519 and Guatemala from 1523 inflicted even more catastrophic losses on much larger populations, though in each of these cases many indigenous people survived, unlike on some of the islands, whose populations soon disappeared forever.

From the Old World to the New

Ancient Rome’s republic and empire offered many models for the expanding power of early modern Spain. Its explorers and conquistadores, their apologists...
and opponents—all cited classical precedents for their actions and arguments. While planning his voyages of discovery, Columbus drew on ancient, medieval, and more contemporary sources. These included not only a 1477 work by Aeneas Sylvius (Pope Pius II) and a Latin edition of Marco Polo’s *Travels*, but also another item in Columbus’s small personal library: the 1491 Castilian translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, including his biography of Cato the Censor.¹

Columbus was not unique in consulting such sources. By the time Hernán Cortés, conqueror of Mexico, left for the New World in 1504, he may have read Caesar’s *Commentaries*, which had appeared in Spanish by 1498. A battlefield command he gave his troops in Mexico resembled an order of Caesar’s.² Cortés had studied Latin and, according to his soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, had a law degree.³ He was familiar with Castilian legal codes, which referred frequently to Aristotle and antiquity. A leading scholar has suggested that Cortés had also read Livy.⁴ Another, skeptical, still finds in Cortés “Latinate constructions and even distant echoes of Roman historians.”⁵ Twenty years after Livy’s text that briefly noted the destruction of Carthage was first printed in 1531, his complete extant corpus appeared in Spanish translation.⁶ In the 1560s, Díaz wrote, “the name of Cortés is as famous in our day as was that of Caesar among the Romans, or of Hannibal among the Carthaginians.”⁷

Before marching inland to conquer Mexico in 1519, Cortés told his men to “rely on our own good swords and stout hearts,” and then “went on to draw many comparisons and relate the heroic deeds of the Romans.” Díaz added: “One and all we answered him that we would obey his orders, that the die was cast for good fortune, as Caesar said when he crossed the Rubicon.” In one of his Mexican battles, Cortés again addressed his troops: “As for your observation, gentlemen, that the most famous Roman captains never performed deeds equal to ours, you are quite right.”⁸ The night before his attack on the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, Cortés once more recounted to his men the achievements of the Romans “to encourage them in their deeds.”⁹ In his sixteenth-century study of the Conquest, Bernardino de Sahagún pursued Cortés’s comparison in reference to other Mexican cities: “This famous and great city of Tula, so rich and fine, so wise and brave, ultimately suffered the wretched fate of Troy,” while for their part, “[t]he Tlaxcaltecs seem to have succeeded the Carthaginians.”¹⁰

Mexico became the stakes in what historian Anthony Pagden calls “a competition for universal monarchy.”¹¹ The Spanish king Charles V became the Holy Roman Emperor in June 1519. In a letter to him the next year, Cortés portrayed his captive Moteucçoma (Moctezuma) as handing over a second empire to Charles, on the model of the Emperor Constantine’s putative donation of the empire to the see of Rome.
tion” of Rome’s western empire to the pope. Cortés addressed Charles V as “the Most High and Powerful Caesar.” Of course, the classicisms served the contemporary cause and its geographical ambition. Cortés frequently compared the Aztecs not only to ancient barbarians but also to Spain’s closer enemies, the Moors. Indeed, with Spain in the role of Rome, the term Barbaria came to specify Islamic North Africa, playing the part of its ancient overlord, Carthage.

But the cult of antiquity plumbed intellectual depths. The Spanish overseer of Indian labor in the mines of Hispaniola, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, portrayed the Indians as descendants of the barbarian Visigoths, comparing them with ancient Thracians and Ethiopians, and adding that God “consented to their extermination.” The major intellectual apologist for Spain’s conquests, the Córdoba rhetorician Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573), argued that Indians were barbarians because unlike the Romans they had failed to preserve “any monument to their history.” Sixteenth-century European accounts of supposed Indian cannibalistic rituals resemble Livy’s portrayal of the Bacchanalia and compared Caribbean Indians with Homer’s Laestrygones, who ate Ulysses’ men.

Sepúlveda deployed Aristotelian concepts of superiority and “natural slavery” to argue that Spanish offensives against Indians were just wars. The thousands of natives “who scattered in flight like women before Spaniards so few” were inferior even to those other cannibals, the Scythian barbarians of Rome’s ancient frontiers. Only the more courageous Mexicans, “the most human” of the Indians, bore comparison even to the Scythians, traditional enemies of the church. Sepúlveda added that “the Romans justly subjugated the other nations of the world,” just as, for their sins, “the Amorites and Perizzites and other inhabitants of the Promised Land were exterminated by the Children of Israel.” Yet Sepúlveda also condemned the Jews, whose “extermination God desired because of their crimes and idolatry.” A just war, Sepúlveda argued, can be undertaken “to punish evil-doers,” like “the many wars waged by the Greeks and Romans for this reason, with much approval from the people, whose consensus must be considered to be a law of nature.” Sepúlveda concluded of the Indians: “And if they refuse our rule, they may be compelled by force of arms to accept it. Such a war will be just according to natural law. Such a war would be far more just than even the war that the Romans waged against all the nations of the world in order to force them to submit to their rule.”

Sepúlveda’s nemesis, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), the major pro-
ponent of the view that Spanish treatment of the Indians was unjust, cited further examples from antiquity, in his case not to justify but rather to denounce the Spanish practices they had prefigured. He called Aristotle “a pagan now burning in hell.” Choosing a local precedent calculated to impress his audience, Las Casas highlighted Rome’s mistreatment of Spaniards following its victory over Carthage. Thus, “after the Romans had defeated Spain, they bought a great number of slaves to send to the mines (in all likelihood many, if not all, were Spaniards) and they were an incredible source of wealth, although at the cost of anguish and calamities suffered from excessive work and only the strongest could survive the labor and the blows: otherwise death was a more desirable state, as Diodorus says.” Terming gold “the cause of death,” Las Casas added with irony that similar calamities now “occur wherever the Spaniards send Indians to the mines.” Another defender of Indian rights, the theologian Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1492–1546), cited the Aeneid to highlight the barbarity of—the Italians who had initially refused welcome to Aeneas’s ships.

To some extent, then, the two sides in the Spanish debate over who the Indians were and how to treat them both shared the premise of classical precedent. By the sixteenth century, Aristotle in particular enjoyed widespread popularity in Europe. The second quarter of that century alone saw the publication of 116 editions of his works. Many scholars speciously attributed to Aristotle the notion that “barbarians and slaves are by nature one,” following the thirteenth-century revival by St. Thomas Aquinas of Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery. But in sixteenth-century Spain, identifying the “natural slaves” proved intellectually fraught since Aristotle had not only failed to nominate the “barbarians” for this title, but he had even advocated freedom for “all slaves” who worked well.

Moreover, though Aristotle had anticipated some of the agrarianist views of Cato the Censor, his progressive vision of freedom envisaged the city-state not as a danger or as prone to corruption, but as a development of cultivator communities, a “partnership finally composed of several villages,” which “has attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency.” To Aristotle, town and country were complementary. The city was not a peril but the pinnacle of human achievement. At first the city-state, as he put it, “comes into existence for the sake of life,” and then “it exists for the good life.”

Conquistadors who thought to bring European agriculture to the New World would gape at the cities they found there. Cortés described at length “the magnificence, the strange and marvelous things of this great city.”
titlan, with its flourishing markets, temples, and “many large and beautiful houses.” He compared it to Córdoba and Seville, asserting that “these people live almost like those in Spain, and in as much harmony and order as there.”²⁸ No reading of Aristotle would help to justify destroying all that. Nevertheless, by the early seventeenth century Spanish Dominican and Franciscan authors propounded theories that the Indians of the Americas were descended from the Carthaginians.²⁹ At any rate, they had met a similar fate.

**Conquest and Cultivation in the Caribbean**

Estimates of the native population of the island of Hispaniola when the Spanish arrived in 1492 range from under 500,000 to more than 1 million.³⁰ Bartolomé de Las Casas, who landed there a decade later, initially suggested the 1492 population was “more than three million.”³¹ But in his *Historia de las Indias* (1560), Las Casas said the archbishop of Seville “told me one day” that Columbus claimed to have counted 1,100,000 “heads.”³² In 1535, Las Casas’s opponent Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo offered the same apparently official estimate for 1492 in his *Historia general y natural de las Indias*. Just 17 years later, only 60,000 natives remained alive on Hispaniola.³³ Both Spanish writers agreed that by 1510, only 46,000 Indians survived there, a figure also apparently derived from the colonial authorities.³⁴

Las Casas estimated that by 1542, “our Spaniards” in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America had “devastated the land and exterminated the rational people who fully inhabited it,” killing “more than twelve million men, women, and children.” Their methods included “unjustly waging cruel and bloody wars,” killing “all the native rulers and young men,” and enslaving the survivors. The five indigenous kingdoms on Hispaniola, Las Casas wrote, were the first victims. There the Spanish “began their subjection of the women and children, taking them away from the Indians to use them and ill use them. . . . They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged.”³⁵

Direct killing caused only a minority of the Indian deaths, however. From the outset a major goal of their oppressors was enslavement. On the first day of his landfall, October 12, 1492, Columbus predicted in his journal that the Indians “should be good servants.” Two days later, he reported to the king and queen of Spain: “When your Highnesses so command, they can all be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with fifty men they would all be kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished.” Likening
Columbus had in mind agriculture and precious metals. Writing to the Spanish king and queen on March 4, 1493, he said that “the trees and fruits and grasses are extremely beautiful” on the many islands he had discovered, including fertile Hispaniola and Cuba, “delectable lands for all things, and for sowing and planting and raising livestock.” While Cuba had “large valleys and meadows and fields,” Columbus wrote, Hispaniola had “the advantage in every respect,” with its “very fruitful and broad” trees and “marvelous meadows and fields incomparable to those of Castile.”³⁷ Jamaica, for its part, had “gold in immeasurable quantities.”³⁷ Hispaniola, Columbus went on, would also provide Spain’s sovereigns with “so many slaves that they are innumerable; and they will come from the idolaters.” He envisaged enslaving the inhabitants of the island of Caribo as well. “And when Your Highnesses give the order for me to send slaves, I hope to bring or send these for the most part.”³⁸

Columbus’s other goals included territorial and military expansion. Having befriended Guacanagari, ruler of Marién, one of the five kingdoms on Hispaniola, “who prided himself in calling me and having me for a brother,” Columbus sailed back to Spain with about 20 Taino captives. He informed the Spanish sovereigns that in their names he had taken possession of “innumerable people and very many islands.” He had left a garrison in Hispaniola adequate “to subjugate the entire island.” Columbus assured the monarchs that “this beginning of the taking of the Indies and all that they contain” would bring him such wealth that within 10 years, he would “be able to pay Your Highnesses” for 10,000 cavalry and 100,000 infantry, all to be deployed “for the war and conquest of Jerusalem.”³⁹

Columbus was also the first in a long line of colonists to advance the claim that indigenous Americans failed to farm the land. Noting the suitability of the Caribbean archipelago for both agriculture and stock raising, he quickly added, “of which I have not seen any kind on any of these islands.”⁴⁰ The bishop of Santa Marta in Colombia later described Indians as “not men with rational souls but wild men of the woods.”⁴¹ The view that “these are men” was espoused by the theologian Francisco de Vitoria, who actually omitted agriculture from his modified list of Aristotle’s features of a civilization. Vitoria’s more positive judgment of the Indians was that although they lacked “a dili-
gent system of agriculture,” nevertheless “they have properly organised cities, a recognizable form of marriage, magistrates, rulers, laws, industry, commerce … [and] a form of religion.”

Most upholders of Spain’s lawful conquest denied or denigrated Indian agriculture, but those defending Indian rights and capacities rarely accorded such importance to cultivation. Las Casas, the major opponent of Spanish colonial practice, did hope to establish farming colonies in the Indies, and he used agrarian metaphors to condemn opposing commentators on the treatment of Indians: having “failed to till the field of this dangerous material with the rake of Christian discretion and prudence, they sowed an arid seed, wild and unfruitful.” Yet when Las Casas discussed “barbarians,” like Vitoria he did not dwell on their supposed failure to cultivate the land. Indeed, he wrote, “a people can be called barbarians and still be wise, courageous, prudent and lead a settled life.” By contrast, Las Casas’s early opponent Palacios Rubios, who considered Indians natural slaves, stressed their lack of property and their small communal plots, which failed to qualify as authentic agriculture. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda admitted in 1547 that the peoples of Mexico “have cities” and “carry on commercial activities in the manner of civilized peoples,” but argued that this was a secondary matter. It “only serves to prove that they are not bears or monkeys.” Mexicans’ real inferiority lay in their lack of private property and yeoman agriculture, revealed by the fact that “no one possesses anything individually, neither a house nor a field.”

When Columbus returned to Hispaniola in November 1493, he brought seeds from Spain to plant new crops. He discovered that warriors of the kingdom of Maguana, apparently responding to Spanish attacks on their property and women, had killed his garrison and destroyed the fort. Employing a ruse, Spanish soldiers arrested Maguana’s king, Caonabo, whom Columbus dispatched to Spain. Caonabo died en route. More chiefs from Maguana revolted in March 1495. In a Spanish offensive, 200 heavily armed soldiers and cavalry attacked and routed tens of thousands of warriors. The Maguana chiefs were killed. Columbus sent a shipload of their followers to Spain as slaves, but the crown freed them and returned them to Hispaniola.

The largest of the island’s five kingdoms, Maguá, occupied the central region of Hispaniola from its northern to its southern coast. According to Las Casas, “The Christians fell upon them suddenly, at midnight … [with no] time to get their weapons … [and] did them great damage. The Christians captured the King Guarionex and many others; they killed many of the captured leaders
... burning them alive."\(^{52}\) They put the chained captive Guarionex on a ship bound for Spain, which went down in the Atlantic. Meanwhile, King Guacanagarí of Marién, who Columbus noted in 1493 had offered him “much friendship,” died in the hills, according to Las Casas, after “fleeing to escape the cruel persecutions meted out to him and his people by the Christians.”\(^{53}\)

With Columbus on his 1493 voyage was Las Casas’s father, who had left the nine-year-old Bartolomé behind in Seville. Columbus gave the father land in the New World, and he established a provisioning business.\(^{54}\) At the age of 18, Bartolomé joined him, arriving in the fleet of Hispaniola’s new governor, Nicolás de Ovando (1502–9).\(^{55}\) Ovando had instructions from the Spanish queen Isabella that the Indians were “to be well treated as our subjects.”\(^{56}\) However, that same year a Spanish fighting dog killed a chief of the island’s fourth kingdom, Higüey, provoking Indians there to revolt. “Ovando rounded up six or seven hundred of them, put them in a chief’s *bohío*, or house, and had them knifed to death. He then ordered their bodies to be dragged into the adjoining plaza and publicly counted.” Spaniards hanged the elderly queen of Higüey. Then, in 1503, Ovando set out with 300 troops and 60 horses, according to Las Casas, to attack the fifth kingdom, Xaraguá, “the best ordered and the most circumspect” on the island. Ovando’s forces hanged the queen of Xaraguá, burned alive “three hundred Indian nobles,” and killed “a countless number of the common people.” Some nobles who had briefly escaped to an offshore island were sold into slavery. “I had one given me as a slave,” Las Casas wrote later.\(^{57}\)

Spain’s Queen Isabella decreed in 1504 that should any Caribbean Indians “continue to resist,” refusing either to “receive my captains and men,” to be instructed in Catholicism, or “to be in my service and obedience,” they may be captured and are to be taken to these my Kingdoms and Domain and to other parts and places to be sold.” Historian Neil Whitehead notes “the wide-ranging license given for the hunting down of *caribes*.”\(^{58}\) When Isabella died in late 1504, she left a will calling for the Indians to be “well and justly treated” and compensated for their losses, but King Ferdinand maintained the crown’s right to enslave them. Las Casas, who lived in Hispaniola until 1506, asserted that “the worst depredations” against Indians followed the news of Isabella’s death. “And there were countless people that I saw burned alive or cut to pieces or tortured. . . . They also made slaves of many Indians.”\(^{59}\) Las Casas wrote that “the Spaniards, their slave-drivers and masters did not care, treating them like some stupid animals. Natives perished, working in the gold mines as well as in agri-
cultural work. The colonists exploited them without compassion or consider-
ation, and the iron discipline, oppression and fatigue killed native workers."⁶⁰

After returning to Europe in 1506, Las Casas was back within four years, having entered the priesthood in Rome and obtained degrees in canon law.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Juan Garcés, a Spanish settler in Hispaniola who had "slaughtered and tortured natives," also murdered his own wife, a native chief. Las Casas wrote that Garcés, fearing retribution, "took to the hills for three or four years."⁶²

Meanwhile, in 1509 the Spanish launched their conquests of the neighboring islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica. Their population, Las Casas wrote, numbered “more than six hundred thousand souls, it has been stated.” This may have been an official figure; Las Casas himself estimated “more than one million.” After initial massacres, the conquistadors forced these Indians into "hard labour of the mines, thus eradicating them from the earth." Survivors numbered “no more than two hundred” in 1552.⁶³

In what is now Panama, a small Spanish settlement run from 1511 by Vasco Núñez de Balboa initially coexisted with local Indians. But Balboa turned to a ruthless search for gold.⁶⁴ On January 20, 1513, he wrote to the king advocating genocide: “These Indians of Caribana have well deserved death a thousand times, because they are very bad people and have at other times killed many Christians and some of ours at the time we lost the ship there, and I do not say make them slaves according to their evil breed but even order them burnt to the last, young and old, so that no memory remains of such evil people.”⁶⁵

During Balboa’s march to the Pacific, an Indian village defied his forces, who opened fire. “More than six hundred Indians were slain, along with the cacique Torecha, who is said to have had his head torn off by a dog.” Occupying the village on September 23, 1513, the Spaniards found over 40 “male patricians attired as females,” led by Torecha’s brother. Condemning them for sodomy, Balboa loosed his dogs on the whole group—all were quickly torn to pieces.⁶⁶

Returning from his discovery of the Pacific, Balboa tortured and murdered Indian chiefs who denied possessing any gold. Oviedo added that “the cruelties were not stated, but there were many.” The crown later withdrew its support for such violence by distinguishing wars against Indians from those against Moors. The region’s Spanish governor had Balboa executed in 1519.⁶⁷

The struggle for justice was many-sided, like the motives of the perpetrators. Las Casas implicated even the first missionaries in the New World, the Franciscans who landed in Hispaniola in 1502, in the ill-treatment of natives. He described an official grant of land and labor to the Franciscans, which they
assigned to a Spaniard in return for daily supplies of food for their friars. Using this Indian labor, the Spanish settler mined 22,750 grams of gold, “not to mention his profits from husbandry,” while “incidentally killing his natives in the process.”⁶⁸ Here and elsewhere Las Casas makes clear that the motive of the Spanish slave drivers was generally not to exterminate the Indians but to exploit their labor. “I do not say that they want to kill the Indians directly, because of the hatred they bear for them. They kill them because they want to be rich and get a lot of gold, which is their sole aim, through the labor and the sweat of the tortured and the unfortunate.”⁶⁹ Yet these “incidental” deaths were not accidental, but clearly intentional. In the modern legal sense, regardless of their aim or motive, the colonists possessed intent to destroy the Indians, at least in part.

Strong dissension over the treatment of Indians emerged under Columbus’s son Diego de Colón, who served as governor of the Indies from 1508 to 1515. On returning there from Spain, Las Casas celebrated his inaugural High Mass in Hispaniola in 1510, becoming the first priest to do so in the New World. In the same year, the first Dominican missionaries arrived on the island. According to Las Casas, the Dominican friar Pedro de Córdoba soon delivered the first sermon ever addressed to Indians on Hispaniola. At his request the Spanish settlers sent their servants and workers to his church to hear the sermon. Las Casas, who was in the audience, wrote that Indian “men and women, old and young, saw the friar sitting on a bench, a crucifix in his hands,” preaching to them through interpreters.⁷⁰ This impressed both Indians and settlers.

Meanwhile, the Dominicans received an inside account from a perpetrator of atrocities against Indians. Stealing down from his refuge in the hills, the former killer Juan Garcés secretly visited the friars, repented, asked to join their order, and then, according to Las Casas, “gave the brethren detailed information of the cruelties committed against innocent natives in peace and in war.” The Dominicans also received other “reports of the deaths of so many natives and witnessed the decrease of the native population.” So they “decided to go public with their feelings in the pulpits.”⁷¹

In December 1511, the friars invited Governor Colón and all Spanish residents of Santo Domingo to attend Sunday Mass.⁷² With the blessing of the other 12 Dominicans on the island, Fray Antonio de Montesinos preached a pre-Christmas sermon that outraged both the Spanish authorities and the settler community. Montesinos became “the first friar to accuse the conquistadors and settlers of the exploitation, nay even destruction of the native popu-
lation.”³³ In his Historia de las Indias, which Las Casas began writing a decade later, he praised Montesinos as “a fine friar and excellent preacher.”³⁴ In the sermon to the Spaniards, Montesinos denounced “the cruelty and tyranny you practice on these innocent natives,” and their “atrocious and horrible slavery,” with their masters “not even feeding them properly.” He added: “They once flourished in large communities, but a great many are now dead and forgotten as a result of your actions. They die as a result of the dreadful burdens you impose on them . . . you kill them by compelling them to work in gold mines.”³⁵ Again, this comprised not outright slaughter, but the intentional infliction of life-threatening conditions, informed by knowledge of the previous outcome of such practices.

Diego de Colón and the colony’s leading officials met immediately and demanded a retraction, saying that “these Indians had been granted to them by the Crown, and the monarch was the owner of all the Indies.” But the next Sunday, Montesinos reiterated his charges, and “the members of the congregation left the Church in utter fury.”³⁶ They complained to the king of Spain, dispatching a Franciscan to make their case to him. Montesinos followed him back and was able to present the king with a memorandum. Las Casas records: “Fray Antonio carried a file containing a document, divided into chapters and listing the atrocities in war and peace inflicted on the Indians of the island, all well authenticated and all perpetrated by Spanish colonists. The document listed everything: the destruction of the Indians, the war against them, the slavery and death in the mines.”³⁷

The king appointed a commission to investigate the charges. The opinions of only two of its dozen members have survived. One was written by “the king’s preacher,” Don Gil Gregorio. He quoted Aristotle’s Politics, “where it appears that through the barbarity and wicked disposition of the people of the Antilles they may, and should be, governed as slaves.” Gregorio recommended what he called “qualified slavery,” apparently referring to their continued virtual servitude in the system of Spanish-run estates known as encomiendas. “It is beneficial for them,” he wrote, “to serve their lord without any payment or reward, for total liberty is harmful to them.” Tyranny was required to govern “these Indians, who it is said, are like talking animals.”³⁸

Perhaps because of his royal position, Don Gregorio’s view carried weight. The full commission recommended in 1512 that the Indians “should be treated as free citizens,” but added six further recommendations, beginning: “Your Majesty should order the natives to work.” They should have convenient “rest
periods" and receive “an adequate wage,” possibly “in clothing and/or objects.” The Indians’ labor must not impede their “instruction in our faith.” The authorities should provide the natives “proper housing” and allow them to “own plots of land,” and they “should be allowed sufficient time to till their own land.”⁷⁹ Dissatisfied with this ruling, Montesinos returned to Hispaniola in 1513. His pessimism proved justified, for in that year the new Laws of Burgos proclaimed that the Indians were to be rounded up and concentrated near the Spanish towns, and their homes destroyed so they could not avoid “communication with the Christians and flee into the jungle.” These new laws denounced the Indians, whose “sole aim and pleasure in life is to have the freedom to do with themselves exactly as they pleased.”⁸⁰ Las Casas would later write that the commission’s recommendation of continued servitude without eliminating the prevalent “despotic” conditions “led, inevitably, to the extinction of the Indians.”⁸¹

By then Las Casas had already participated as a chaplain in the invasion of Cuba in 1511. He witnessed “such terrible cruelties done there as I had never seen before nor thought to see.” In one unprovoked massacre, he wrote, Spanish forces led by Diego de Velázquez and Pánfilo de Narváez “put to the sword more than three thousand souls.” Another Spaniard whom Las Casas knew, Roderige Albuquerque, worked 270 Indians to death in three months, and then another 500.⁸²

Agricultural slavery was a major cause of the death toll, as Las Casas later explained: “The men were sent to the mines as far as eighty leagues away while their wives remained to work the soil, not with hoes or ploughshares drawn by oxen, but with their own sweat and sharpened poles that were far from equaling the equipment used for similar work in Castile. They had to make silo-like heaps for cassava plants, by digging 12 square feet 4 palms deep and 10,000 or 12,000 of such hills—a giant’s work—next to one another. . . . As for the newly born, they died early because their mothers, overworked and famished, had no milk to nurse them, and for this reason, while I was in Cuba, 7,000 children died in three months.” Massive death tolls could only have been a predictable result of the intentional removal of parents from children and the dispersal of entire communities. Anthony Pagden writes: “The dissolution of tribal unity and of the group’s sense of social cohesion . . . contributed, of course, to the dramatic decline of the native population of the Antilles after the Spanish occupation.”⁸³

Las Casas broke with this system of death only gradually. For his service
in Cuba, he received land and was able to exploit its conquered people as servants, “sending his share of Indians to work fields and gold mines,” which he later regretted. But around 1513, he became disillusioned with the conquistador regime. He later traced his conversion to reading Ecclesiasticus (34:21–22): “The bread of the needy is their life. He that defraudeth him thereof is a man of blood. He that taketh away his neighbour’s living slayeth him.” Las Casas had neatly identified the responsibility of the Spanish for the Indians’ destruction. In modern legal terms, the conquistadors demonstrated criminal intent, even though in many cases their motive was theft rather than murder. In some cases, this deliberate, purposeful violence rose to the level of genocide; in others, genocidal massacres and extermination. After a year of misgivings, Las Casas “went public.” In his sermon on Pentecost Sunday, 1514, Las Casas condemned the ill-treatment of Indians and freed his own slaves soon afterward. He began a lifelong career dedicated to exposing injustices of the Spanish colonial system.

However, opponents of Las Casas’s views were gathering strength. In Spain the previous year, Martí Fernández de Enciso, a prospective settler in the New World, presented a memorial to the king’s confessor and the secretary of the Royal Council. Enciso argued that “when the people of Jericho did not give up their land Joshua surrounded them and killed them all except one woman who had protected his spies.” On this precedent, therefore, he argued, idolatrous Indians could be required to “hand over their land,” which the pope had given the king of Spain. “If the Indians would not do this, he might justly wage war against them, kill them and enslave those captured in war.” The king ordered the drawing up of a proclamation stating these principles, to be read to Indians before hostilities commenced. This document, known as the Requirement (requerimiento), warned Indians who did not acknowledge their new masters: “We shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them . . . and shall do all the harm and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey . . . and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault.” Spain could then blame its genocidal activities on the victims.

In 1514, Spain imposed a repartimiento, dividing the native lands and peoples among settlers and forcing the Indians to remain on their lands as virtual serfs in encomiendas. This apparently formalized the status quo. At that time, just 32,000 Indians survived on Hispaniola. Over 90 percent had perished in just 22 years. A Spanish census revealed that only 22,726 were able
to work.⁸⁸ According to Las Casas: “After the wars and the killings ended, when usually there survived only some boys, some women, and some children, these survivors were distributed among the Christians to be slaves.” The higher the rank of the Spaniard, the more Indians were assigned: hundreds in some cases. The settlers put men to work in gold mines and sent women “into the fields of the big ranches to hoe and till the land,” preventing them from cohabiting and having children. Men and women died “from the same causes, exhaustion and hunger.”⁸⁹ Cruelty, violent greed, and the imposition of agricultural serfdom all took their continuing genocidal toll.

Mexico

Hernán Cortés arrived in the Indies in 1504, two years after Las Casas. He had been heading off to a military career in the Italian wars when he learned of Columbus’s discovery of a New World. Making his way to Hispaniola, Cortés became a notary there. Along with Las Casas, he participated in the conquest of Cuba in 1511 and acquired gold mines on the island.⁹⁰

In April 1519, Cortés landed a small Spanish army on the coast of Mexico, to begin the conquest of the kingdom then known as Anahuac, which was ruled by the Mexica monarch Moteucçoma (Moctezuma) from his inland capital, Tenochtitlan.⁹¹ Anahuac was a relatively recent political empire, whose religious rituals demanded human sacrifice of infants, foreign victims, and, in most cases, captured prisoners of war. After repressing a Huaxtec revolt on the northern coast in 1487, for instance, Mexica authorities brought back to the slaughter four processions of sacrificial captives, possibly 20,000 victims.⁹² Mexica domination provoked enmity among groups like the Tlaxcalans, whom the Spaniards would recruit.

A Nahua account, composed 20 years after the conquest, records the first indigenous contact with the Spanish invaders, “who came to the seashore . . . going along by boat.” Five local officials “went out on the water; the water folk paddled for them. When they approached the Spaniards, they made the earth-eating gesture at the prow of the boat(s) . . . . They went as if to sell them things, so that they could spy on them and contemplate them. They gave them precious cloaks, precious goods, the very cloaks pertaining to Moteucçoma which no one else could don.”⁹³

In Tenochtitlan, according to the Nahua account, lord Moctezuma soon
grew “greatly afraid and taken aback” when officials reported news of this meeting to him. “It especially made him faint when he heard how the guns went off at [the Spaniards’] command, sounding like thunder, causing people actually to swoon, blocking the ears. And when it went off, something like a ball came out from inside, and fire went showering and spitting out.” The ball could make a hill seem “to crumble,” or turn “a tree to dust.” The Spaniards rode “deer that carried them,” which were “as tall as the roof,” and their huge dogs “went about panting, with their tongues hanging down,” and “eyes like coal.” Hearing all this, Moctezuma “seemed to faint away, he grew concerned and disturbed.”

The future was indeed ominous. The contemporary population of what is now Mexico has been estimated at 12 million. After Cortés’s conquistadores took over Anahuac in 1519–21, that population fell by 85 percent, to as low as 1 million by 1600, in what historians call “one of history’s greatest holocausts.”

Cortés pursued his conquest of Anahuac by means of what Pagden calls “spectacularly brutal campaigns.” First, marching inland in August 1519, Cortés’s army of 400 Spaniards and their coastal Indian allies confronted the Otomi people. The Nahua account composed two decades later records that “the Otomis met them with hostilities and war. But they annihilated the Otomis of Tecoac, who were destroyed completely. They lanced and stabbed them, they shot them with guns, iron bolts, crossbows. Not just a few but a huge number of them were destroyed.”

Cortés next faced a large opposing force in the province of Tlaxcala, which had rebelled against the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. Bernal Díaz describes several fierce battles with the Tlaxcalans, including an engagement on September 5, in which “we were killing many of them.” Cortés later represented to Charles V that at first he had attempted to read the royal proclamation of conquest: “I began to deliver the formal requerimiento through the interpreters who were with me and before a notary, but the longer I spent in admonishing them and requesting peace the more they pressed us.” The Indians withdrew after a day of fighting. “I had done them much harm without receiving any,” Cortés reported. The next day he rode ahead with cavalry and infantry: “I burnt five or six small places of about a hundred inhabitants.” The violence quickly escalated. The following day, Cortés went on, “I burnt more than ten villages, in one of which there were more than 3,000 houses, where the inhabitants fought with us, although there was no one there to help them.” Several days later, Cor-
tés reported: “I attacked two towns where I killed many people, but I did not burn the houses, lest the fires should alert the other towns nearby. At dawn I came upon another large town. . . . As I took them by surprise, they rushed out unarmed, and the women and children ran naked through the streets, and I began to do them some harm.”⁹⁹

The brutality was succeeded by a credible threat of genocide. Cortés now sent messengers to the rulers of Tlaxcala urging a peace. According to Díaz, the messengers were ordered “to say that if they did not now come to terms, we would slay all their people.” Another message soon followed, announcing that unless peace was concluded “within two days we should go and kill them all and destroy their country.”¹⁰⁰ The Tlaxcalans naturally sued for peace, and 5,000 of them joined the Spanish campaign against their enemies in Tenochtitlan.¹⁰¹ The eventual victory of Cortés owed much to his success in enlisting rebel Indians to fight the Mexica. In this major case, he did so by threatening genocide.

A convincing threat required demonstration of its seriousness. The Spaniards reached the city of Cholula, a rival of Tlaxcala, in October. Cortés claimed he soon learned of a plot to destroy his army encamped there. “I decided to forestall an attack,” he later informed Charles V.¹⁰² A Nahua account, by contrast, ascribes treachery to the Spaniards: “When they arrived, there was a general summons and cry that all the noblemen, rulers, subordinate leaders, warriors, and commoners should come, and everyone assembled in the temple courtyard . . . . They did not meet the Spaniards with weapons of war.” However, “[w]hen they had all come together,” the Spanish “blocked the entrances.”¹⁰³ In his account Cortés wrote: “I sent for some of the chiefs of the city, saying that I wished to speak with them. I put them in a room and meanwhile warned our men to be prepared, when a harquebus was fired, to fall on the many Indians who were outside our quarters and on those who were inside. And so it was done.” Cortés shackled the chiefs and told them, according to Díaz, “that the royal laws decreed that such treasons as those should not remain unpunished and that for their crime they must die.”¹⁰⁴ Cortés’s captain, Andrés de Tapia, quoted him as telling the 30 Cholulan dignitaries in his custody, “you shall all die, and as a sign that you are traitors I shall destroy your city so that no edifice remains.” Díaz continued: “Then he ordered a musket to be fired, which was the signal that we had agreed upon for that purpose, and a blow was given to them which they will remember for ever, for we killed many of them.”¹⁰⁵ The Nahua account blames the Tlaxcalans for inciting the Spanish to attack the
Cholulans. “Thereupon people were stabbed, struck, and killed ... stealthily
and treacherously” (see fig. 2).¹⁰⁶

Tapia confirms that Cortés “ordered most of those lords killed, leaving a
few of them fettered, and ordered the signal given the Spaniards to attack the
men in the courtyards and kill them all, and so it was done. They defended
themselves ... [but] most of them died anyway. ... This done, the Spaniards
and Indians in our company went out in squads to different parts of the city,
killing warriors and burning houses.” Cortés, who attacked on horseback,
claimed that the Cholulans were “well prepared” but “easy to disperse,” as they
were taken by surprise without their leaders. The result was a massacre. Cortés
wrote: “We fought so hard that in two hours more than three thousand men
were killed.”¹⁰⁷

At this point the Tlaxcalan allies arrived, having fought their way into the
city. Some 5,000 of them now joined the Spanish.¹⁰⁸ Tapia reported that they
“looted the city and destroyed everything possible.” Díaz described the Tlaxca-
lans “plundering and making prisoners and we could not stop them.”¹⁰⁹ Cortés
continued the assault on the Cholulans: “I ordered some towers and fortified
houses from which they were attacking us to be set on fire. And so I proceeded
through the city fighting for five hours or more.”¹¹⁰ Many Cholulan priests
who refused to surrender were incinerated when the Spanish burned down
what Tapia called their “principal idol’s tower.” Tapia concluded: “So everything
possible was done to destroy this city, but [Cortés] ordered us to refrain from
killing women and children. The destruction took two days, during which
many of the inhabitants went to hide in the hills and fields.”¹¹¹ Years later Cortés’s
secretary Francisco López de Gómara wrote that the Spaniards “were dripping
with blood and walked over nothing but dead bodies.”¹¹² Most estimates put
the Cholulan death toll at 6,000, some as high as 20,000.¹¹³

Cortés allowed the city to be repopulated and freed surviving chiefs. The
terror had had its desired effect. The Nahua account states: “And all the com-
mon people went about in a state of excitement; there were frequent distur-
bances, as if the earth moved and (quaked), as if everything were spinning
before one’s eyes. People took fright.”¹¹⁴ Díaz concurred. “This affair and pun-
ishment at Cholula,” he wrote, “became known throughout the provinces of
New Spain and if we had a reputation for valour before, from now on they took
us for sorcerers.” Cortés blamed Moteucçoma for the conflict. He informed
Mexica royal envoys that “now I intended to enter his land at war doing all
the harm I could as an enemy, though I regretted it very much as I had always
wished rather to be his friend and ask his advice on all the things that must be done in this land."¹¹⁴

Hoping to awe the Spaniards with the magnificence of his capital, Mo-teucçoma admitted them to Tenochtitlan. Cortés surprised his host, arresting him as a hostage and taking over the city in his name.¹¹⁵ When a rival Spanish force approached, however, Cortés marched out to confront it, leaving Pedro de Alvarado in command of Tenochtitlan. In early May 1520, Alvarado attacked and murdered a large number of the Mexica nobility during a ceremonial feast (see fig. 3).¹¹⁶ This provoked an uprising in the city. In the eyes of the population, Moteucçoma had by now lost his authority. Cortés returned to a maelstrom of Mexica opposition. A crowd assaulted and killed Moteucçoma, whose brother assumed the throne. The Spaniards had to retreat from the city.

In January 1521, Cortés’s troops approached Tenochtitlan once again. They attacked the lakeside town of Ixtapalapa. Cortés considered that city’s 10,000 inhabitants “ill-disposed to us” and, he reported, “I determined to march against them.” He went on: “[W]e drove them back into the water, some up to their chests and others swimming, and we took many of the houses on the water. More than six thousand of them, men, women, and children, perished that day, for our Indian allies, when they saw the victory which God had given us, had no other thought but to kill, right and left.”¹¹⁷

The toll escalated in the battles for the capital itself, in part because of relentless Indian attempts to capture Spanish soldiers alive for ritual torture or sacrifice rather than kill them on the battlefield. Massive numbers of Indians perished in these asymmetrical engagements, ideologically and militarily unequal. The Spaniards enjoyed the clear advantage of a preparedness to kill indiscriminately. They destroyed much of the city and reduced its people to “human wreckage.”¹¹⁸ Inga Clendinnen writes of the end of the Mexica capital: “As they filed out of the wreckage which had been Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards were waiting. They took the prettier women and the young boys, branding them on the face to mark them as possessions, and set the men to raising a Spanish city on the ruins of their own.” They had Aztec priests torn apart by dogs. In 1523, Cortés hanged the defeated emperor Cuauhtemoc, along with the lords of his allied kingdoms. A Mexica lament begins:

Broken spears lie in the roads,
We have torn our hair in our grief.
The houses are roofless now, and their walls
Are red with blood . . . our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.¹¹⁹
A new militaristic, agrarian slave state succeeded the Mexica empire. His secretary Gómara wrote that Cortés quickly imported from the Caribbean both warhorses and draft horses as well as brood stock and agricultural items: “sugar cane, mulberry trees for silk, vine cuttings, and other plants.” Cortés sent to Spain “for arms, iron, guns, powder, tools, forges for fabricating implements, and for olive pits, seeds, and nuts, which do not yield in the islands.”¹²⁰ By October 1524 he was able to report to Charles V: “In the whole territory, from one sea to another, the natives serve without complaint.” But there were two exceptions, the provinces Zapotecas and Mixes, “very rich in mines.” Cortés sent two expeditions against them. The second, comprising 150 Spaniards with four artillery pieces, set out in February 1524. Cortés wrote to the king: “When these people have been conquered, the men who are going there say they will lay waste the country and enslave the inhabitants for having been so rebellious.” Cortés concurred with this ambition. “I ordered that those who were taken alive should be branded with Your Highness’s mark, and that once those belonging to Your Majesty had been set aside the rest should be distributed amongst the men on the expedition.”¹²¹

Like Columbus in Hispaniola before him, Cortés not only sought precious metals and slaves but also made efforts to foster agriculture in Mexico, even during the height of his war of conquest. As he recalled in a letter written in 1520 to Charles V: “According to the Spaniards who went there, that province of Malinaltebeque was very well provided for setting up farms. I therefore asked Mutezuma [Moteucçoma] to have a farm built there for Your Majesty; and he was so diligent in all this that in two months about ninety-five bushels of maize were sown, and fifteen of beans and two thousand cacao plants.” Cortés informed the emperor that the new farm included four houses and a water tank, 2,000 ducks and chickens, “and other things for dairy farming, which the Spaniards who saw them many times valued at twenty thousand pesos de oro.”¹²² These agricultural projects multiplied, but after Moteucçoma’s death local rebellions brought them to an end, as Cortés told the emperor in 1522. “I ordered, as I informed Your Majesty in a previous account, that certain farms should be built for Your Majesty, in two or three of the most suitable provinces, and that each farm should produce grain and other things.” For this purpose Cortés had sent Spaniards to various provinces. With one exception, he now wrote, “all those provinces were in revolt.” Rebels had “killed the Spaniards on the farms.”¹²³ In April 1521, the two survivors in the single pacified province
wrote for help, stating that “it is time to harvest the cacao and the Culuans hinder us with the fighting.”¹²⁴

Agriculture remained “a matter of great concern for Cortés,” according to Pagden. Cultivation was a key aspect of his vision for Mexico.¹²⁵ A member of Cortés’s household became one of the first farmers in New Spain and built one of the first sugar mills near Mexico City. Each Spanish cavalryman who had brought his own horse received enough land to plant 100 “hills” of potatoes.¹²⁶ Cortés reported to Charles V in 1524 that many indigenous people “have their own plantations where they grow all the vegetables grown in Spain of which we have been able to obtain seeds. I assure Your Caesarean Majesty that if they could but be given plants and seeds from Spain, and if your Highness were pleased to command them to be sent to us, as I requested in my earlier report, there would in a very short time be a great abundance of produce, for these Indians are much given to cultivating the soil and planting orchards.”¹²⁷ He reiterated “the need we have of plants of all sorts, for this land is well suited to all kinds of agriculture.” Yet, Cortés complained, “until now nothing has been sent.” He implored the Spanish sovereign to ensure “that every ship shall bring a certain number of plants and shall be forbidden to sail without them.” He issued ordinances to Spaniards in Mexico to “oblige them to settle on the land.” They were also to marry or to bring their wives from Spain within 18 months. From the beginning, Cortés had set out to “people” (poblar) the new land with Spanish colonists. As Pagden writes, he aimed “to establish a European agricultural economy.” Thus, as well as a victim of genocide, Mexico became the New World’s first European settlement.¹²⁸

Guatemala and Colombia

As noted in the introduction, Las Casas called the conquest of Guatemala a “holocaust.”¹²⁹ In late 1523, Cortés dispatched his lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado, butcher of the Mexica nobility, to subjugate the kingdoms to the south. Alvarado took 120 cavalry, 300 infantry, and four artillery pieces.¹³⁰ The Annals of the Cakchiquels, composed in the 1570s by a Mayan noble who witnessed the ensuing campaigns, corroborate many of Las Casas’s accusations. For instance, Las Casas claimed in 1552 that the Quiché monarch and nobles of Ultatlán “came out to welcome” Alvarado, “borne in litters, accompanied by trumpets.” But the next day, Alvarado unsuccessfully demanded gold from them, and in “a
The annals, written later in Cakchiquel Maya, stated that in February 1524, “all the Quiché who had gone out to meet the Spaniards were exterminated. Then the Quichés were destroyed before Xelahub.” According to the annals, Alvarado “tortured” and then “burned” the Quiché kings. He confirmed this in his own report to Cortés: “And seeing that by occupying their land and burning it, I could bring them into the service of His Majesty, I decided to burn the lords . . . for the good and benefit of this country, I burned them and ordered that the city be burned to its foundations.”

The annals also report that Alvarado quickly summoned the Cakchiquel Maya to “come to kill the Quichés” and collect their tribute for him. In April–May 1524, Alvarado marched against and “destroyed” the Zutuhils, then turned and “killed those of Atacat.” He returned in two months, demanding that the Cakchiquel lords pay him 1,200 gold pesos: “If you do not bring with you all of the money of the tribes, I will burn you.” At this the Cakchiquel lords demurred, and they later wrote: “Half of the money had already been delivered when we escaped. . . . Ten days after we fled from the city, [Alvarado] began to make war upon us.” In September 1524, “they began to make us suffer. We scattered ourselves under the trees, under the vines, oh, my sons. All our tribes joined in the fight.” More Spanish attacks in 1525 “killed many brave men.” Seizing Yximché, the Cakchiquel capital, Alvarado “burned the city” on February 7, 1526.

Cortés wrote to Charles V in 1526 that the regions of “Utlatan and Guatemala” had “rebelled on account of certain ill treatment they received, [and] have never again been pacified.” Pedro de Alvarado, Cortés continued, “makes constant war against them” with 700 Spanish troops, and “at times as many as ten thousand of our Indian allies,” but still he had not defeated the Guatemalans: “rather each day they grow stronger through the people who come to join them.” On March 27, 1527, according to The Annals of the Cakchiquels, “our slaughter by the Spaniards began. The people fought them, and they continued to fight a prolonged war. Death struck us anew, but none of the people paid the tribute.” Finally, in 1528, some Cakchiquels began to submit. The next year their monarchs surrendered, after five years of resistance “under the trees, under the vines.” Alvarado imposed “heavy tribute,” including gold; “four hundred men and four hundred women were delivered to him to be sent to wash gold. All the people extracted the gold.” A Cakchiquel king died in 1532 while “washing gold.” Alvarado put 800 more men and women to work building Guatemala City. Meanwhile, Spanish forces conquered Honduras and Nicaragua as well.
Alvarado marched into Honduras and “destroyed . . . the people of Tzutzampan and those of Choloma,” along with other towns.¹³⁶ Pagden writes that enslavement of Indians now became “the chief economic activity of the otherwise impoverished region of Nicaragua.”¹³⁷

For Guatemalans, at least, some relief was in sight. The Royal Audience of Mexico sent Alonso de Maldonado in May 1536 to head the Municipal Council of Guatemala and to impeach Alvarado, who fled to Spain. The Cakchiquels welcomed this. “Soon there was no more washing of gold; the tribute of boys and girls was suspended. Soon also there was an end to the deaths by fire and hanging, and the highway robberies of the Spaniards ceased. Soon the people could be seen travelling on the roads again as it was before the tribute commenced.”¹³⁸ However, in September 1539, Alvarado arrived back from Spain, unimpeached. Maldonaldo left “at once.” On May 19 the next year, fearing another revolt, the Municipal Council of Guatemala asked Alvarado to deal with the imprisoned Cakchiquel and Quiché monarchs: “to take them away in your fleet or, if they have given cause, to punish them.” Alvarado quickly hanged the kings, and executed other lords in 1541. He died in July of that year.¹³⁹ The death toll during his rule remains unknown. According to Las Casas, Alvarado had described Guatemala in 1524 as “even more populous than Mexico,” which had 12 million inhabitants. Las Casas estimated that by 1540 “he and his brothers and other Spaniards have slain four or five million souls.”¹⁴⁰ That would almost constitute a holocaust in scale as well as in name. The death toll in Mexico did exceed half its population, while Alvarado’s depredations in Guatemala seem yet more brutal, but there is no way to establish an accurate figure.

Meanwhile, in South America, in what is now Colombia, other settlers had founded the town of Cartagena, naming it for the Spanish city established by the ancient Carthaginians. Cristóbal Guerra initiated conflict there by staging what Las Casas called “particularly fierce” attacks that provoked bitter Indian resistance. Then, in 1504, Queen Isabella had named Cartagena in her decree that authorized “capture” and sale into slavery of those who “continue to resist.”¹⁴¹ Then, Las Casas added, “the king gave permission to declare an all-out war against them and capture them as slaves.” According to the writer Cristóbal de la Tovilla, as quoted by Las Casas, the slave-trading Spanish governor Alonso de Hojeda dropped anchor in Cartagena “at the King’s order to make war against the Indians” for their retaliation against Spanish slave raiders.¹⁴² Las Casas wrote that Hojeda attacked the village of Calamar, “knifing, killing
and capturing right and left,” burned eight Indians alive, and carried off 60 in
his slave ships. He then raided the town of Turbaco, whose inhabitants fled
but “ran straight into the Spaniards who disemboweled them and cut them to
pieces. If they fled to their huts, the Spaniards burned them alive. . . . [They]
committed incredible slaughter there, sparing neither women nor children, old
nor young.” Hojeda was thus “the first to assault the continent and kill, plunder
and enslave.”¹⁴³

He set a 30-year pattern there. The bishop of Cartagena, Fray Tomás de
Toro, wrote to the king on May 31, 1535: “The whole land is in turmoil and
the Indians greatly aroused because of the cruelties and maltreatment of the
Christians. . . . Their hands are bloody with slaying and cleaving asunder chil-
dren, hanging Indians, cutting off hands, and roasting to death certain Indian
men and women . . . all because they will not tell them where to find gold.”¹⁴⁴

In the Wake of Genocide

The genocide in Mexico ended only gradually, beginning with the crown’s ap-
pointment in 1535 of the first viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, who
became known as “the good viceroy” during his term in office (1535–51). Gó-
mara reported Mendoza establishing “several towns, after the fashion of Ro-
man colonies.”¹⁴⁵ Violence persisted, and on several occasions, Mendoza al-
legedly had Indians thrown to dogs as he watched. In 1546 the report of a secret
inquiry into his conduct stated: “After the capture of the hill of Mixtón, many
of the Indians seized in its conquest were put to death in his presence and by
his orders. Some were placed in line and blown into bits by cannon fire; others
were torn to pieces by dogs, and others were given to Negroes to be put to
death, and these killed them with knife thrusts while others were hung.”¹⁴⁶

Placed in context, however, this was only one of a list of charges inspired
by Cortés and leveled at his successor, Mendoza. In most of their complaints
recorded by the 1546 inquiry, conquistadores accused the viceroy of “favor-
ing some more than others” in his assignment of the ownership of land and
its inhabitants. Legal suits proliferated over the transfer of estates, including
their Indian populations. Mendoza allegedly “had not seen fit to provide the
present keeper of the arsenal,” a Cortés partisan, “with Indian districts.” In one
case, “he should have given all the Indians in encomienda to the said Juan En-
ríquez.” Another complaint asserted that “the viceroy gave the said Indians in
encomienda to Juan Guerrero, who married a bastard mestiza.” Mendoza was

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in fact exonerated of these charges and advised his successor: “Treat the Indians like any other people and do not make special rules and regulations for them.”¹⁴⁷

Pope Paul III’s papal bull of 1537 had reiterated that Native Americans were rational beings with souls whose lives and property should be protected. Two years later, the leading Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1492–1546) noted reports of “so many massacres, so many innocent men despoiled and robbed.”¹⁴₈ The Cortés of Valladolid appealed to the king of Spain in 1542 to “order an end to the cruelties committed in the Indies against the Indians, for God will be served thereby and the Indies preserved instead of being depopulated as is happening at present.”¹⁴⁹ Spain passed the New Laws in 1542, to abolish Indian slavery and the encomienda system.¹⁵⁰

But the damage was done. As Las Casas and others made clear, without access to the modern term, genocide had occurred, as well as extermination. Despite some exaggerations, Las Casas’s main charges had been proved substantially correct.¹⁵¹ Other contemporary sources concurred. In 1541, even his critic Toribio de Motolinía wrote: “He alone Who counts the drops of rain water and the sands of the sea can count all the deaths and the devastated lands” of the Caribbean. In the Bahamas, for instance, “[m]any of these people the Spaniards killed and consigned to perdition. . . . I have seen and known many in this land and have confessed some of its people, who are very intelligent and conscientious. Now, why would not the others have proved to be the same, if the Spaniards had not been in such a hurry to kill them and get them out of the way?”¹⁵² In Hispaniola, only 200 Indians survived in 1542, and the population decline continued. Gerónimo de Mendieta wrote in his Historia Eclesiástica Indiana that by 1595 the natives of the Caribbean had been “completely wiped out.”¹⁵³ While this was not totally accurate, and although most of the Spanish had no genocidal motive to exterminate the Indians, they nonetheless for extractive purposes deliberately and consciously imposed violent measures that they knew would have that deadly effect.

Just three years after the New Laws abolished encomienda in 1542, a counteroffensive by encomenderos threatened the laws’ enforceability and convinced the emperor to repeal most of their provisions. In this atmosphere, in 1544, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda wrote his dialogue Democrates secundus sive de justis causis belli apud Indios. Having previously urged Charles V to launch a new crusade against the Turks, Sepúlveda now advocated “solid glory” for Spain in “just wars” against Indians.¹⁵⁴ He added a strong voice to Spanish
“More than any other country,” Sepúlveda wrote, Spain “hates and detests depraved individuals.” He proclaimed “the absence of gluttony and lasciviousness among the Spaniards. Is there any nation in Europe that can compare with Spain in frugality and sobriety?” Like Cato the Censor in republican Rome, Sepúlveda feared that mercantile activity would corrupt Spain’s ethnic purity: “through commercial dealings with foreigners extravagance has invaded the tables of the mighty . . . one must hope that in a short time will be reestablished the pure and innate parsimony of our native customs.”¹⁵⁵

As much as Spanish superiority, Sepúlveda emphasized Indian inferiority. He wrote in Ciceronian Latin, with his literary mouthpiece Democrats speaking “the language of a Roman moralist”—to a Lutheran interlocutor.¹⁵⁶ One modern author has defended Sepúlveda against charges of “recommending enslavement and destruction of the Indians,” asserting that he favored only their “serfdom” rather than slavery; he notes that Sepúlveda’s refusal to depart from classical Latin prevented him distinguishing “slave” from “serf.” His classical term servus (slave) had to encompass both meanings. It had come to clearly denote “serf” only in the medieval Latin that Sepúlveda abjured, in which esclavus meant “slave.”¹⁵⁷ He avoided the latter term, but apparently considered it more important to write only in classical Latin than to make this distinction (which Aristotle made).¹⁵⁸ Sepúlveda’s thinking is nevertheless clear. He considered the Indians slaves or serfs “by nature” (natura servus). He described them as “barbarous and inhuman peoples abhorring all civil life, customs, and virtue.” They were “as inferior to Spaniards as children are to adults, women are to men, . . . and finally, I shall say, almost as monkeys are to men.” Distinguishing “beasts” and “barbarians” from “human men” (humani), Sepúlveda termed Indians homunculi, a Latin term denoting biologically unnatural creatures of magic origin, “in whom hardly a vestige of humanity remains.” He likened Indians to “pigs with their eyes fixed always on the ground.” Only with “the passage of time,” rule by “our laws and customs,” and Christianity, could they “become more human.”¹⁵⁹

The two sides of Sepúlveda’s argument merged in his discussion of Indian and Spanish violence. In the case of the Mexica, Sepúlveda was right to denounce their “prodigious sacrifice of human victims, the extreme harm that they inflicted on innocent persons, their horrible banquets of human flesh.”¹⁶⁰ Yet given what he must have known of Spain’s record in Mexico by 1544, Sepúlveda’s claim that unlike the Indians, “our soldiers, even in their personal vices and sins, are not accustomed to act contrary to the laws of nature” con-
stituted a cover-up and deliberate denial. He preferred to praise the sack of Rome by a mixed European force in 1527: “There was scarcely a single Spaniard among those who died from the plague who did not order all the goods he had stolen from the Roman citizens returned in his last will and testament.” Neither Italian nor German troops did that, Sepúlveda claimed. Nor would Indians merit compensation, he went on to assert, given “the gentleness and humanity of our soldiers, who, even in battle, after the attainment of victory, expressed great concern and care in saving the greatest possible number of the conquered.”¹⁶¹ Questioned by members of the Council of the Indies and condemned by two Spanish universities, Sepúlveda’s book was not published.

However, the contending claims of Sepúlveda and Las Casas led to their famous debate at Valladolid in 1550. Las Casas argued that “impious bandits” had devastated the Indies, leaving them “by the death of thousands of peoples almost like a desert.” The majority of the judges agreed with him but declined to make their verdict public.¹⁶² Though proven wrong, Sepúlveda deployed his scholarship and stature to minimize both public debate and remedial action.

The Franciscan missionary Pedro de Gante predicted in 1552 that deportations of Indians from their homes would destroy them all within 40 years. The Council of the Indies received detailed reports of significant population losses that followed the deportations.¹⁶³ Mexico’s demographic decline reached such a rate that by 1600 only 1 million Indians survived, a loss of about 11 million in 80 years of Spanish rule. Yet Luis Sánchez, a colonist of Nueva Granada who had participated in five expeditions of conquest during his 18 years in Spanish America, suggested that other regions may have suffered even more than Mexico. In 1566, Sánchez wrote to the president of the Council of Castile exploring the “destruction and extinction, which has been and is going on daily” in the New World. He charged that Spaniards “have for the greater part left not a living creature [in] lands which were once full of Indians,” where “millions of people . . . have been killed.” In an ominous comparison, Sánchez added: “I do not speak of Mexico, for I understand that there has always been in Mexico a show of justice and favor toward the Indians.”¹⁶⁴

Despite Las Casas’s efforts, his victory in the Valladolid debate, and the outcry from other missionaries, the cult of antiquity, imperial ideology, and race prejudice of Spanish court intellectuals like Sepúlveda helped legitimize extraordinary colonial cruelty, contributing to the genocidal outcome. But so had the expansionist aims of the crown and the agrarian impositions of the settler regime. In 1534 the crown attempted to reconcile Spanish interests with those...
of the Indians by urging Cortés to import more cattle into Mexico, so that the Indians “may have meat to eat.”¹⁶⁵ But the Spanish judge (oidor) Alonso de Zorita summed up the situation in Mexico 30 years later: “The Indians have also been laid low by the labor of making sheep, cattle and pig farms, of fencing these farms, of putting up farm buildings, and by their labor on roads, bridges, water courses, stone walls, and sugar mills. For this labor, in which they were occupied for many days and weeks, they were taken away from their homes, their accustomed tempo of work and mode of life were disrupted; and on top of everything else they had to supply the materials for these projects at their own cost and bring them on their own backs without receiving any pay or even food. Now they are paid, but so little that they cannot buy enough to eat.”¹⁶⁶ Zorita also revealed that even a fellow judge could mingle blood and soil: “I knew an oidor who said publicly from his dais in a loud voice, that if water were lacking to irrigate the Spaniards’ farms, it would be done with the blood of the Indians.”¹⁶⁷

Though the conquistadores were brutal, the major killers were the new diseases they brought—measles, influenza, typhus, pneumonia, tuberculosis, diphtheria, pleurisy and, in 1518, smallpox. Spaniards did not deliberately spread these diseases to destroy Indians. Yet their massacres, enslavement, separation of families, and forced labor not only took their own toll but also made the Indian population far more vulnerable to the introduced diseases than if their societies had been left intact. Tzvetan Todorov explains that the deliberate mass murder, the maltreatment, and the “microbe shock” were by no means discrete causes, but mutually reinforcing. Of sixteenth-century Mexico, Todorov writes: “If the word genocide has ever been applied accurately to a case, this is it.”¹⁶⁸