What does Bartolome de Las Casas’ *The Devastation of the Indies* and the context of Spanish colonisation reveal about relations between the colonisers and Native Americans during the early years of Spanish settlement?

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MHIS305 America and Europe from Colonization to Coca-Colonization

Bartolome de Las Casas’ *The Devastation of the Indies: A brief Account* and the context of Spanish colonisation reveal that the colonisers were repressive and exploitative towards the Native Americans during the early years of Spanish settlement. After witnessing decades of destruction in the Americas, Fray Bartolome De Las Casas deemed the Spanish colonists’ actions as unjust and contrary to their mission of converting the Natives. To contest the brutality, which decimated an entire population, Las Casas wrote *The Devastation of the Indies* to convince the Spanish Crown to intervene and call for the peaceful conversion of the native people to the Catholic faith.

Las Casas came from a privileged background; his father was a wealthy merchant thus allowing Las Casas the luxury of gaining an education in letters and law. He inherited a large estate from his father in Santo Domingo, which made him the richest planter of the island. He was also a man of faith and became the first ordained priest living in the Americas in 1510.\(^1\) However, Las Casas led the life of a typical Conquistador in the New World, fighting against the Caribs and gaining fortunes through conquests.\(^2\) He was described as ‘no more cruel than any other, but as greedy as the rest for power and wealth, and in any event very little concerned for morals and law.’\(^3\) In 1513, Las Casas had participated in the brutal

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conquest of Cuba and in recognition received an Encomienda for his services.⁴ The Encomienda was a system where colonisers would be charged with the conversion of the Natives who lived on their property and would receive tribute, often in terms of labour to show their dominion.⁵ Las Casas fails to mention this in The Devastation of the Indies, but emphasises that he tried to assist the Natives, and his disapproval over the conquistadors’ brutal treatment of them.

Las Casas’ conversion to becoming the defender of Native rights was gradual as he became increasingly aware of their mistreatment by the Spanish colonisers.⁶ Las Casas had been a typical Encomiendero living off the proceeds of unpaid Indian labour.⁷ However in 1514, due to the influence of Dominican Fray Antonio Montesinos, he preached a sermon severely condemning the Spanish relations with the Native population.⁸ Soon thereafter, he released his ‘slaves’ and strived in defending the Native population as the Crown-appointed ‘Universal Protector of all the Indigenous in the Indies.’⁹ As David Brading suggests, it was the refusal of his Dominican confessor to grant him absolution, which affected his conscience and prompted Las Casas to act as the defender of the Natives.¹⁰

Bartolome De Las Casas’ Devastation of the Indies is a compilation of several eyewitness accounts of Spanish mistreatment of the Native American people from the time of the European discovery in 1492. Published in 1552, the aim of Las Casas’ manuscript was to plead with King Charles V of Spain to regulate actions in the colonies and provide fair and just treatment to the Indigenous people who lived in them.¹¹ Las Casas deemed this as necessary to ensure the Natives’ willingness to convert to Catholicism, as they were already questioning the sanctity of the Church and claimed they would rather go to hell due to the terrible actions committed by the Catholics.¹² The text outlines the plight of the Native Americans and positively describes them with humanistic traits. It challenged the colonists’

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⁴ Ibid., p. 119.
⁹ Ibid., p. 326.
¹¹ de Las Casas, The Devastation of the Indies, p. 17.
¹² Ibid., p.45.
notion that the Natives were subhuman and better suited as a source of labour.\(^{13}\) Las Casas describes the Natives as ‘The most humble, patient and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments neither excitable nor quarrelsome...And because they are so weak and complaisant, they are less able to endure heavy labour and soon die of no matter what malady.’\(^{14}\) The text depicts the horrific and unwarranted actions by the Spanish in various accounts of conquest. Las Casas explains ‘The people were killed by the sword, by fire, by being torn into pieces by the fierce dogs kept by the Spaniards, and by being tortured to death in various ways.’\(^{15}\) His manuscript highlights the tyrannical rein of the Conquistador and claims that their actions were not in line with the Catholic faith or the Spanish Crown.\(^{16}\) Las Casas also suggests that these acts by the colonists displayed disobedience to royal authority. This argument is evident throughout the text to emphasise the need for control over the conquistadors.\(^{17}\)

The context of Spanish expansion during the Medieval Period provides insights into the exploitative relations between the Spanish colonisers and the Native Americans in the fifteenth century. Prior to the discovery of the Americas, the Iberian Peninsula’s population was ethnically and religiously diverse. Since Antiquity, the peninsula was constantly under control by different groups including the Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Visigoths and then Muslim Arabs and Berbers from the eighth Century A.D.\(^{18}\) Since Islamic occupation, Catholic efforts and campaigns had sought to reclaim the peninsula and struggled over eight centuries to assert religious control.\(^{19}\) Those fighting against the Islamic Moors were not a homogenous group. The sole factor that united opposing groups in the Iberian Peninsula was a religious affiliation to the Catholic Church.\(^{20}\) Religion in Europe provided a strong basis for prejudicial distinctions. European Christians disliked pagans and expressed strong contempt for Jews and Moors, as they believed these people had rejected Christ.\(^{21}\)


\(^{14}\) de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, p. 29.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 48.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 57.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.


\(^{19}\) Ibid.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 53.
consequence of the prolonged struggle against Islam intensified the Catholic’s faith to the point of fanaticism, which led to the crusades against non-believers.\textsuperscript{22} This was the ‘Reconquest’ of Hispania. The main justification of the claims of dominion over non-Christian peoples was the \textit{Requerimiento}. The \textit{Requerimiento}, or the Requirement, was an order read aloud to non-Christians to accept the temporal dominion of their Catholic Majesties and embrace Christianity.\textsuperscript{23} It warned that resistance would be met with forceful actions and the Crown could legally kill or enslave them.\textsuperscript{24} During Reconquest efforts, many conquered Muslims and Jews in Hispanic kingdoms were permitted to retain their faith and property as long as they accepted and paid tribute to the dominion of Christian princes in a legally bound system called the \textit{Repartimiento}, which were the divisions of booty.\textsuperscript{25}

Two important monarchs emerged in the fifteenth century who further propelled religious unity and territorial expansion. These monarchs were Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon who united their Kingdoms through marriage and strove to legitimise their expansion and reign of Spain with the support of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{26} As they expanded their territory, ideologies and forceful colonisation methods arose which would later be seen over the Atlantic in the colonisation of the New World. In 1477, Queen Isabella determined to finalise the centuries of conquest and colonisation of the Canary archipelago and used the principle of the Requirement to justify a war against the Natives and the seizure of their land. She sent out her captains to govern the land they pacified and gave them the authority to make \textit{Repartimientos}.\textsuperscript{27} Political and religious motivations were indistinguishable in fifteenth-century Europe. The Crown’s advance into new territory served religion by extending religious dominions and in turn, religious expansion strengthened the political position of the Crown.\textsuperscript{28} Religious control thus meant a great deal for the Spanish monarchs as it provided a means of governance. The Reconquest of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Western Europe, was a symbolic feat for the monarchy and the Catholic Church. It reinvigorated religious morale which had slackened

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 39.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.64.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.32.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p.32.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.56.  
\textsuperscript{28} Lewis Hanke, \textit{All Mankind Is One} (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974) p. 5.
since the loss of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, to Muslim occupation in 1453.29

The wars against the Islamic Moors in Granada and the expulsion of Moors and Jews following the Reconquest resulted in a crusading zeal amongst Castilian Catholics and engendered a universal sense of mission.30 The Monarchy was greatly esteemed due to its actions and in 1492 Pope Alexander gave the royal couple the title of the Catholic Kings.31 It was this militant religious fervour that the Spanish colonisers took with them to the Americas. The methods used in expanding the Spanish Empire in Europe created the foundations of Spanish and Native relations in the Americas, which Las Casas described as tyrannical acts against God and the Crown.32 After the return of Christopher Columbus and on news of lands discovered in the West, the Catholic monarchs sought to legitimise their claims and drew on their religious mission of expansion.33 The Queen, pleased with the discoveries, directed that Columbus’ enterprise with ‘the aid of God be continued and furthered.’34 On their request, Pope Alexander VI, who was a Spaniard himself, issued a series of bulls that assigned to the Crown of Castile ‘all islands and mainlands discovered or yet to be discovered, sighted or not yet sighted to the west and south of the line set and drawn from the Arctic to the Antarctic.’35 The influence of the Catholic Church gave the Crown the rights to ‘evangelise the Indians’ and placed the Natives’ welfare under their protection.36 However, disputes between colonists and the Crown over the validity of Natives’ rights continued even after they were formally determined in 1500 as human beings by virtue of possessing souls.37 The question over how to treat the Native Americans arose several times throughout the early period of settlement. The colonists were in favour of the exploitation of Native labour for their benefit. Policies were set in place for their salvation and dignity but the measure of how these policies were enforced varied.38

30 McAlister, Spain and Portugal in the New World, p. 58.
31 Ibid., p.59.
32 de Las Casas, The Devastation of the Indies, p. 57.
33 Ibid., p.74.
34 Ibid., p.74.
36 McAlister, Spain and Portugal in the New World, p. 78.
38 Ibid., p.5.
The Catholics who colonised the Americas were not necessarily of noble heritage. Expeditions were mostly privately organised ventures, licensed by the Spanish Crown. Many of the first colonists were from disadvantaged and impoverished families looking to make names for themselves and gain incredible fortunes. Spaniards in the Indies claimed that the papal bulls gave them the right to raid and use just wars to convert the Native population who refused to accept Christianity. To outline these atrocities Las Casas described how the Spaniards read out the Requirement out of earshot of the local Natives. It was often read in Spanish or Latin, unintelligible to the Natives, thus rendering those wars as unjust. The Spanish Crown never condoned such excessive brutality from the conquerors and from the very beginning attempted to safeguard the rights of its new subjects. Both the Crown and Church were opposed to the actions made by the conquistadors, they specified that unlike the Moors of Europe, the Native population of the Americas had no knowledge of Christianity before Columbus and needed time to learn and accept the religion.

As in Granada and the Canary archipelago, subjects who accepted Christian dominion were entitled to justice and good government. The Queen, known as the protector of her subjects, extended these rights to the newly converted Natives. Upon conversion, the Natives were not to work against their will and were entitled to good governance and freedom, as long as they demonstrated their submission with an annual tribute made to the Spanish Crown. However, the conquistadors had no intention to protect the Native population. They exploited the Natives by claiming that their labour was a form of tribute, as they had no possessions of value to give. When Governor Nicolas de Ovando was sent to the New World in 1501 to establish royal authority, he received royal instructions detailing the desire for the conversion of the Native population to the Catholic faith and expressing how the Natives should be treated. The Crown instructed Ovando ‘to

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40 Ibid., p.80.
41 de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, p. 16.
42 Ibid., p.16.
43 Ibid., p.16.
45 de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, p. 17.
46 McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World*, p. 79.
take great care in ensuring that the clergy so inform them and admonish them with much love, without using force, so that they may be converted as rapidly as possible.\textsuperscript{48} Ovando had protested these instructions, claiming that the Natives did not pay tribute, refused to work and thus were unable to convert to Catholicism.

This led to the legalisation of forced labour of free Indians but at the same time, they were to receive protection from uncontrolled exploitation.\textsuperscript{49} Along with these laws, the Natives were ordered to live in villages under the administration of a patron or protector and were provided with a school and a missionary priest. Authors such as Brading suggest that Ovando interpreted these orders as a form of \textit{Repartimiento}, later known as the \textit{Encomienda}.\textsuperscript{50} Conquistadors would receive an \textit{Encomienda} as a reward for their services and were entrusted with land and the patronage of Native subjects. Any resistance by the Natives led to massacres and enslavement as was permissible with the laws of the Requirement.\textsuperscript{51} This was a disastrous event for the Natives for if they were not murdered they were kept as slaves. They were overworked, malnourished and subject to diseases brought in by the Spanish, which contributed to the decline in their population.\textsuperscript{52}

De Las Casas was against the system of the \textit{Encomienda} and aimed in abolishing it with the help of the Spanish Crown, who also questioned the legality of such a system.\textsuperscript{53} He argued that the \textit{Encomienda} was a form slavery that violated natural rights and laws.\textsuperscript{54} In \textit{The Devastation of the Indies}, he described the working conditions that the Native Americans had to endure which ultimately led to their death. Las Casas explained ‘...the care they took was to send the men to the mines to dig for gold, which is intolerable labour, and to send women into the fields of the big ranches to hoe and till the land, work suitable for strong men.’\textsuperscript{55} He also mentioned that they were malnourished and not very well looked after. Las Casas stated that the only food the Natives were given were herbs and legumes.\textsuperscript{56} Despite various efforts from the Crown to diminish such actions, Las Casas emphasised the

\textsuperscript{48} Hanke, \textit{All Mankind Is One}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{49} David Brading, ‘Prophet and Apostle,’ p. 120.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} McAlister, \textit{Spain and Portugal in the New World}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{54} Orqiue, ‘The Life, Labor, and Legacy of Bartolomé de Las Casas,’ p. 328.
\textsuperscript{55} de Las Casas, \textit{The Devastation of the Indies}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
disobedience of royal authority throughout his manuscript and claimed that the Spanish in the New World no longer feared God or the King and had ceased to understand right from wrong. His writings were important to the Crown as they felt threatened by the entrenched, hereditary aristocracy beginning to form from the Encomienda and were interested in keeping the Conquistadors in order. Thus the Crown determined that the Encomienda was to be abolished but a negative response and opposition from the colonists ensued. Las Casas claimed that the tyrannical actions had started from the very beginning of the discovery of the New World and had gotten worse as time went on, especially after the death of Queen Isabella. Las Casas stated in his manuscript, ‘And be it noted that the worst depredations on these islands in the New World began when the tidings of the death of her most Serene Highness, Queen Isabel.’

Between 1550 and 1560, royal instructions forbade the use of war to control the Native Americans and convert them to Christianity. However the colonisers paid little attention to royal authority, and conquests continued in the same brutal manner until the seventeenth century. McAlister argues that by the 1560s the Spanish colonisers had control over all major Native civilisations in the New World and their territories, thus the value of their instructions were unenforceable. Another contributing factor to the demise of the Native population was the introduction of European diseases, to which the Spanish colonisers had a high degree of immunity. Diseases such as smallpox broke out in the Antilles in 1519 but spread in the New World before the conquerors could reach the Indigenous communities. McAlister claims that this contributed to the decline of as much as fifty percent of the population and diminished the Indians’ will and capacity to resist. Bill M. Donovan argues that Las Casas overlooked the role biological attacks had on the native population and attributes this as the most important component of the Spanish

57 Ibid., p. 57.
60 de Las Casas, The Devastation of the Indies, p. 42.
61 McAlister, Spain and Portugal in the New World, p. 103.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p.105.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
conquest. Donovan proposes that without the aid of disease, the relations between the Spanish colonisers and Native Americans would have been very different and would resemble those of Britain’s occupation of India.

Bartolome de Las Casas’ *The Devastation of the Indies: A brief Account* and the context of Spanish colonisation demonstrates the repressive and exploitative actions made towards the Native Americans during the early years of Spanish settlement. The Spanish colonisers went to the Americas with the experience of using religion as a means to fight and conquer people in Europe. They expanded their territory through war and religion and had done so over several centuries. However, in the Americas, they encountered a native population ignorant of Christianity and their actions were deemed far more brutal and unjust. Las Casas, perhaps to clear his conscience, described the atrocities committed by the Spanish and fought to defend the Natives’ rights. He claimed they were a peaceful and innocent people in need of peaceful conversion to Catholicism. Both the colonisers and religious figures such as Las Casas radically changed the lives of the native population. The colonists contributed to the murder and enslavement of the Natives to achieve rapid gains of territory and wealth. Religious figures went to the Americas to fulfil a spiritual conquest in which they aimed to change the Natives’ culture, religion and way of life. This was achieved by forcing Natives into villages, and by using scriptures and missionaries to serve the Catholic God and King. Las Casas was against the use of brutal force in conversion but agreed with colonisation as a way of expanding the Catholic faith. The Spanish ultimately contributed to the destruction of the Native Americans through violent and unwarranted massacres, and the introduction of religion and disease. Overall, the relations between the Spanish colonisers and the Native Americans were oppressive and focused on territorial and religious expansion for the Spanish Empire.

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67 Ibid., p. 19.
Bibliography

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