

Submission Guidelines

Collaborate with your team on your case study presentation. When it is complete, the team leader is responsible for submitting it in the Assignment Lab, or for making sure that another team member submits it. Please note that all learners should visit the assignment lab and provide feedback on at least 2 other team presentations, before the deadline.

As a reminder, your presentation should:

1. Be limited to no more than 750 words
2. Engage the materials in the case studies, lectures, and text.
3. You are free to import material from outside the course, but this is not necessary and may detract you and teammates from the task. Don't go overboard!

Instructions

Step 1: Read the case study introduction, background information, and the primary sources below.

Step 2: Work with your team to answer the challenge question for this case study.

Step 3: Go to the Assignment Lab to post your response, and to read and comment on other learners' submissions.

Track A, Case study 6: Las Casas on the rights of Native peoples.

STEP 1

Case Study Introduction

Did conquered peoples of the Americas have rights? In this case study, we look at the sixteenth century work of Bartolomé de Las Casas about the excesses of Spanish colonizers in the Americas and his arguments on the rights of indigenous communities. Las Casas raised awareness in Spain of the abuse and exploitation of native peoples by greedy Europeans. While European settlers in the Americas felt that they had 'discovered' a new world full of resources and opportunities (for God, gold and silver, and glory), to the people of that world the encounter was a catastrophe, an overturning of space and time, ('Pacha Kuti,' in the Quechua language of the Incan people). Las Casas wrote to defend the very humanity and dignity of native peoples. This case asks us to think about the rights and expectations of original peoples and of settlers, of the meeting of different societies with contrasting value systems, and of how rights were only won for native peoples when settlers themselves petitioned their cause with the colonizing power. Through looking at the first continental map of the Americas we consider how Europeans envisioned newly 'discovered' populated lands. We also consider how Las Casas' writings about the Spaniards got used by opponents of Spain within Europe. Finally, how do we bear witness to atrocity and injustice?

Background Information

On December 4, 1511, Antonio de Montesinos delivered a scathing sermon about the Spanish colonists and their treatment of the people of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. De Montesinos and five fellow Spanish Dominican Friars had been posted to the 'New World' in August 1510 and were appalled by the behavior of the colonists there. In his sermon of 1511, de Montesinos asked the slave-owners of Hispaniola, "Tell me, by what right or by what interpretation of justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority have you waged such detestable wars against people who were once living so quietly and peacefully in their own land?"¹

One of these early colonists was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484 -1566). Las Casas, a priest and later Dominican friar and then Bishop of Chiapas, was a participant in and early witness to European settlement in

the Americas. He directly witnessed and benefited from Spanish cruelties to the Taíno, and Guanahatabey people. However, he was a thoughtful man, and a man of conscience, and concluded that the Spanish were acting unjustly and unjustifiably in the 'new' world. By 1515 he had given up his slaves and entitlements as an *encomendero* and petitioned the Spanish king on the rights of native people.

Las Casas was appointed an administrator of Spanish colonies and Protectoría de los Indios (Protector of the Indians) in 1516 after reporting to the Church on the severe demographic decline of native peoples in the 'new' world. This Las Casas ascribed to the terrible treatment and exploitation meted out by the Spanish colonizers.

In 1522 Las Casas wrote, "Not only have [the Indians] shown themselves to be very wise peoples and possessed of lively and marked understanding, prudently governing and providing for their nations (as much as they can be nations, without faith in or knowledge of the true God) and making them prosper in justice; but they have equalled many diverse nations of the world, past and present, that have been praised for their governance, politics and customs; and exceed by no small measure the wisest of all these, such as the Greeks and Romans, in adherence to the rules of natural reason."²

For the next two decades Las Casas spent much time travelling between the 'new' world and Spain, petitioning the Spanish powers on behalf of the native populace of the areas Spain claimed as colonies. In 1542 he wrote *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (*A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*) which he sent to Prince Philip II of Spain to further raise awareness about the mistreatment of indigenous Americans. In this history Las Casas claimed both moral legitimacy and direct experience in support of his account.

In a series of hearings from 1542 on, Las Casas presented to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, a detailed narrative of the atrocities perpetrated against indigenous people of the West Indies by Spanish settlers. Las Casas argued for the abolition of the encomienda system of grants. Through the Spanish Crown the encomienda system authorized colonists to exact tributes and unpaid labor from people indigenous to the newly conquered areas. Las Casas argued that native people should rather be treated as royal tribute-paying subjects under the Crown. In November 1542 the New Laws were passed. These granted rights to and abolished slavery of indigenous people and protected them from some of the abuses that Las Casas had protested against.

In the ensuing Valladolid debate of 1550-51, Las Casas argued against the position of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda that 'Indians' were sub-human and in need of civilizing through subjugation by Spanish masters: to Las Casas the original people of America were fully human and entitled to respect and good treatment, religious ministrations, and freedom equal to that of the colonizers. Importantly, Las Casas argued that Indians did indeed possess souls, civilization, and morality, and were entitled to the rights accorded humankind.

In the year following the Valladolid debate, Las Casas' 1542 writings were published in Spanish as *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (Seville, 1552), and thereafter in multiple translations and with new titles (to suit political purposes). The Latin edition of 1598 used 17 copperplates by Theodore De Bry to illustrate the atrocities against native peoples. The more widely distributed edition of 1664, *Regionum indicarum per Hispanos olim devastatarum accuratissima descriptio, insertis figuris æneis ad vivum fabrefactis*, (Heidelbergae : Typis Gvilielmi VValteri), MDCLXIV (Once the Indian regions, devastated by the Spaniards: the most accurate description inserted in brass in the manner of figures of life), had a significant impact in rousing anti-Spanish sentiment in Europe.

The cruelties inflicted by Spanish colonizers on the people of the 'new' world linked directly to the changing circumstances of Spain itself. Christopher Columbus' journal of his first voyage in 1492 opens with paragraphs dealing first with the conquest and expulsion of the Moors from Spain and an explanation of the Spanish Crown's support for his voyage to India (his intended destination when he arrived in the Americas) as part of its program against the 'sect of Mahoma' and to seek converts to Catholicism. Columbus then writes on the expulsion of Jews, "Thus, after having turned out all the Jews from all of your kingdoms and lordships, ... your Highnesses gave orders to me that with a sufficient fleet I should go to the said parts of India..."⁴ In 1478 the *Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición* (Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition), commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition, was established in an effort to discover, interrogate, and punish Spanish Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity who were still believed to be heretics. In 1492 and 1502 Royal

decrees ordered Jews and Muslims to convert to Catholicism or to leave Castile. Spain was also engaged in protecting its imperial and religious influence in Europe, for example in Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), also known as the Dutch War of Independence. Thus, Spain's colonial project in the 'new' world took place at a time of increased intolerance for diversity and a narrow idea of what it meant to be Spanish and Christian and therefore worthy of rights.

Sources

1. Antonio de Montesinos, from "I am a voice crying in the wilderness," 1511, in Lewis Hanke, *History of Latin American civilization: sources and interpretations*, Volume 1 (Little, Brown, 1967), 119-122.
2. Bartolomé de Las Casas quoted in Victor N. Baptiste, *Bartolomé de las Casas and Thomas More's Utopia: Connections and Similarities* (Labyrinthos: 1990), 14.
3. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologetic and Summary History Treating the Qualities, Disposition, Description, Skies and Soil of These Lands; and the Natural Conditions, Governance, Nations, Ways of Life and Customs of the Peoples of These Western and Southern Indies, Whose Sovereign Realm Belongs to the Monarchs of Castile (Known as Apologetic History of the Indies)*, (Madrid, 1909), translated for *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
4. Cristóbal Colon, *Journal of the First Voyage of Columbus*, Document No. AJ-062 (Wisconsin Historical Society Digital Library and Archives, 2003), 89-90.

The Case Study

This case study asks you to think about the first European colonial projects, the encounter between indigenous peoples and colonizing settlers, and the rights and responsibilities of each. It raises questions about land and place, ownership and entitlement. While these events took place in a time when states as we know them were just beginning to emerge, the events are unique in that the settlers and outsiders arriving in the Americas deprived the native peoples of their rights and liberty.

Primary Sources

Please refer to these primary sources, provided below, for this case study:

1. Bartolomé de Las Casas *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies*. (1542)
2. Images of engraved plates by Theodor and Johann Theodor de Bry; after Joos van Winghe, from Bartolomé de las Casas, *Regionum indiarum per Hispanos olim devastatarum accuratissima descriptio, insertis figuris æneis ad vivum fabricatis*, 1664.
3. Sebastian Münster, *Variants of the First Map of the American Continent*, Basel, circa 1550, circa 1572.

Primary Source One: Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1542), translated into English as *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies*.

The Indies were discovered in the year one thousand four hundred and ninety-two. In the following year a great many Spaniards went there with the intention of settling the land. Thus, forty-nine years have passed since the first settlers penetrated the land, the first so claimed being the large and most happy isle called Hispaniola, which is six hundred leagues in circumference. Around it in all directions are many other islands, some very big, others very small, and all of them were, as we saw with our own eyes, densely populated with native peoples called Indians. This large island was perhaps the most densely populated place in the world. There must be close to two hundred leagues of land on this island, and the seacoast has been explored for more than ten thousand leagues, and each day more of it is being explored. And all the land so far discovered is a beehive of people; it is as though God had crowded into these lands the great majority of mankind.

And of all the infinite universe of humanity, these people are the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient and faithful to their native masters and to the Spanish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments, neither excitable nor quarrelsome. These people are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world. And because they are so weak and complaisant, they are less able to endure heavy labor and soon die of no matter what malady. The sons of nobles among us, brought up in the enjoyments of life's refinements, are no more delicate than are these Indians, even those among them who are of the lowest rank of laborers.

They are also poor people, for they not only possess little but have no desire to possess worldly goods. For this reason they are not arrogant, embittered, or greedy. Their repasts are such that the food of the holy fathers in the desert can scarcely be more parsimonious, scanty, and poor. As to their dress, they are generally naked, with only their pudenda covered somewhat. And when they cover their shoulders it is with a square cloth no more than two varas in size. They have no beds but sleep on a kind of matting or else in a kind of suspended net called bamacas.

They are very clean in their persons, with alert, intelligent minds, docile and open to doctrine, very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs, and to behave in a godly fashion. And once they begin to hear the tidings of the Faith, they are so insistent on knowing more and on taking the sacraments of the Church and on observing the divine cult that, truly, the missionaries who are here need to be endowed by God with great patience in order to cope with such eagerness. Some of the secular Spaniards who have been here for many years say that the goodness of the Indians is undeniable and that if this gifted people could be brought to know the one true God they would be the most fortunate people in the world.

Yet into this sheepfold, into this land of meek outcasts there came some Spaniards who immediately behaved like ravening wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days. And Spaniards have behaved in no other way during the past forty years, down to the present time, for they are still acting like ravening beasts, killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before, and to such a degree that this Island of Hispaniola once so populous (having a population that I estimated to be more than three million), has now a population of barely two hundred persons.

The island of Cuba is nearly as long as the distance between Valladolid and Rome; it is now almost completely depopulated. San Juan [Puerto Rico] and Jamaica are two of the largest, most productive and attractive islands; both are now deserted and devastated. On the northern side of Cuba and Hispaniola are the neighboring Lucayos comprising more than sixty islands including those called Gigantes, beside numerous other islands, some small some large. The least felicitous of them were more fertile and beautiful than the gardens of the King of Seville. They have the healthiest lands in the world, where lived more than five hundred thousand souls; they are now deserted, inhabited by not a single living creature. All the people were slain or died after being taken into captivity and brought to the Island of Hispaniola to be sold as slaves. When the Spaniards saw that some of these

had escaped, they sent a ship to find them, and it voyaged for three years among the islands searching for those who had escaped being slaughtered, for a good Christian had helped them escape, taking pity on them and had won them over to Christ; of these there were eleven persons and these I saw. More than thirty other islands in the vicinity of San Juan are for the most part and for the same reason depopulated, and the land laid waste. On these islands I estimate there are 2,100 leagues of land that have been ruined and depopulated, empty of people.

As for the vast mainland, which is ten times larger than all Spain, even including Aragon and Portugal, containing more land than the distance between Seville and Jerusalem, or more than two thousand leagues, we are sure that our Spaniards, with their cruel and abominable acts, have devastated the land and exterminated the rational people who fully inhabited it. We can estimate very surely and truthfully that in the forty years that have passed, with the infernal actions of the Christians, there have been unjustly slain more than twelve million men, women, and children. In truth, I believe without trying to deceive myself that the number of the slain is more like fifteen million.

The common ways mainly employed by the Spaniards who call themselves Christian and who have gone there to extirpate those pitiful nations and wipe them off the earth is by unjustly waging cruel and bloody wars. Then, when they have slain all those who fought for their lives or to escape the tortures they would have to endure, that is to say, when they have slain all the native rulers and young men (since the Spaniards usually spare only the women and children, who are subjected to the hardest and bitterest servitude ever suffered by man or beast), they enslave any survivors. With these infernal methods of tyranny they debase and weaken countless numbers of those pitiful Indian nations.

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient, so easy to subject, that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts. And I say this from my own knowledge of the acts I witnessed. But I should not say "than beasts" for, thanks be to God, they have treated beasts with some respect; I should say instead like excrement on the public squares.

And thus, they have deprived the Indians of their lives and souls, for the millions I mentioned have died without the Faith and without the benefit of the sacraments. This is a well-known and proven fact which even the tyrant Governors, themselves killers, know and admit. And never have the Indians in all the Indies committed any act against the Spanish Christians, until those Christians have first and many times committed countless cruel aggressions against them or against neighboring nations. For in the beginning the Indians regarded the Spaniards as angels from Heaven. Only after the Spaniards had used violence against them, killing, robbing, torturing, did the Indians ever rise up against them....

On the Island Hispaniola was where the Spaniards first landed, as I have said. Here those Christians perpetrated their first ravages and oppressions against the native peoples. This was the first land in the New World to be destroyed and depopulated by the Christians, and here they began their subjection of the women and children, taking them away from the Indians to use them and ill use them, eating the food they provided with their sweat and toil. The Spaniards did not content themselves with what the Indians gave them of their own free will, according to their ability, which was always too little to satisfy enormous appetites, for a Christian eats and consumes in one day an amount of food that would suffice to feed three houses inhabited by ten Indians for one month. And they committed other acts of force and violence and oppression which made the Indians realize that these men had not come from Heaven. And some of the Indians concealed their foods while others concealed their wives and children and still others fled to the mountains to avoid the terrible transactions of the Christians.

And the Christians attacked them with buffets and beatings, until finally they laid hands on the nobles of the villages. Then they behaved with such temerity and shamelessness that the most powerful ruler of the islands had to see his own wife raped by a Christian officer.

From that time onward the Indians began to seek ways to throw the Christians out of their lands. They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. (Because of this, the wars of the Indians against each other are little more than games played by children.)

And the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike.

They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!" Other infants they put to the sword along with their mothers and anyone else who happened to be nearby. They made some low wide gallows on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen, in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles, then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive.

To others they attached straw or wrapped their whole bodies in straw and set them afire. With still others, all those they wanted to capture alive, they cut off their hands and hung them round the victim's neck, saying, "Go now, carry the message," meaning, Take the news to the Indians who have fled to the mountains. They usually dealt with the chieftains and nobles in the following way: they made a grid of rods which they placed on forked sticks, then lashed the victims to the grid and lighted a smoldering fire underneath, so that little by little, as those captives screamed in despair and torment, their souls would leave them....

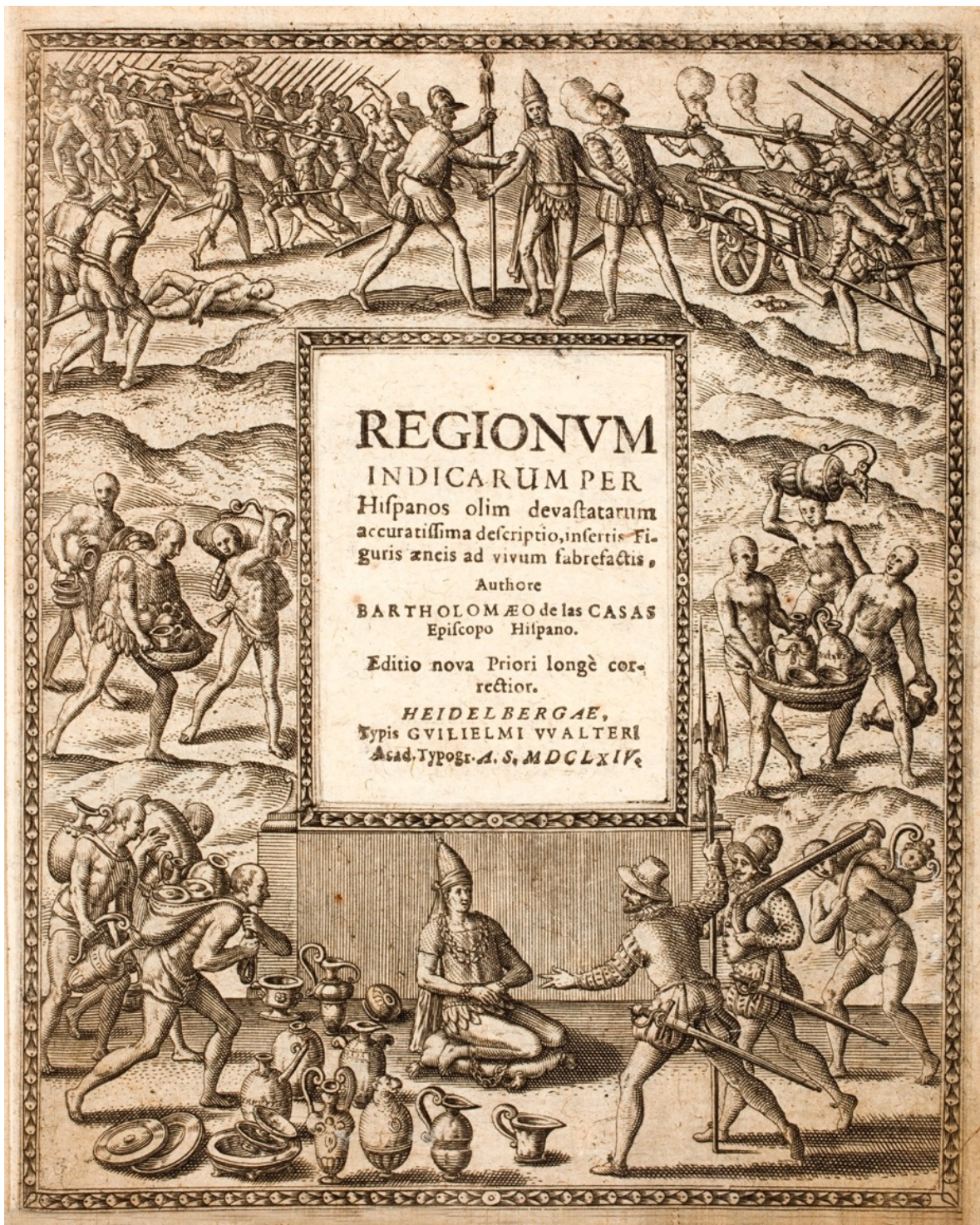
After the wars and the killings had ended, when usually there survived only some boys, some women, and children, these survivors were distributed among the Christians to be slaves. The *repartimiento* or distribution was made according to the rank and importance of the Christian to whom the Indians were allocated, one of them being given thirty, another forty, still another, one or two hundred, and besides the rank of the Christian there was also to be considered in what favor he stood with the tyrant they called Governor. The pretext was that these allocated Indians were to be instructed in the articles of the Christian Faith. As if those Christians who were as a rule foolish and cruel and greedy and vicious could be caretakers of souls!

And the care they took was to send the men to the mines to dig for gold, which is intolerable labor, and to send the women into the fields of the big ranches to hoe and till the land, work suitable for strong men. Nor to either the men or the women did they give any food except herbs and legumes, things of little substance. The milk in the breasts of the women with infants dried up and thus in a short while the infants perished. And since men and women were separated, there could be no marital relations. And the men died in the mines and the women died on the ranches from the same causes, exhaustion and hunger. And thus was depopulated that island which had been densely populated.

COMPASS POINTS

- Notice the level of details that Las Casas offers with regards the history of conquest, the islands and land of the 'new' world.
- Note how Las Casas treats Hispaniola as a land that God may have populated: remember that this was a time of increasing Catholic religious fervor and intolerance of non-Christians. By emphasizing God's hand in creating the people of Hispaniola Las Casas appealed to the religious beliefs and compassion of Spaniards.
- Look at the language used to describe the native people, to Las Casas the 'Indians.' Contrast this with the words used to describe the behavior of the Spaniards in paragraph 5. The words to describe the 'Indians' are positive whereas those that describe the behavior of the Spaniards describe barbarism.
- Las Casas sees greed, the sin of avarice to Catholics, as the primary motive of the colonizers (look at paragraph 9).
- Note how Las Casas not only petitions on behalf of the native peoples, but also records the history of Spanish settlement of the Indies and the changes that have occurred in those forty-nine years.

Primary Source Two: Bartolomé de las Casas, *Regionum indicarum per Hispanos olim devastatarum accuratissima descriptio, insertis figuris æneis ad vivum fabrefactis*, 1664, with 17 engraved plates by Theodor and Johann Theodor de Bry after Joost van Winghe.
Hanging, burning, and clubbing of Indians by Spanish soldiers. Select folios.











Source: “Bartolomé de las Casas: *Regionum indicarum per Hispanos olim devastatarum accuratissima descriptio, insertis figuris æneis ad vivum fabrefactis*, (Heidelbergae: Typis Gvilielmi VValteri, MDCLXIV). First published in Latin with engravings by Theodor and Johann Theodor de Bry after Joost van Winghe (Frankfurt, 1598). A translation of *Tyrannies et cruautez des Espagnols* (Antwerp : Ravelenghien, 1579), itself a translation of, *Brevissima relacion* (Seville : Sebastian Trugillo, 1552).

COMPASS POINTS

- This edition of Las Casas’ writings on the New World was published after Las Casas’ death. The accompanying images by Theodor de Bry are depictions of Las Casas’ descriptions of the actions of Spanish settlers towards native peoples. De Bry no doubt empathized with the plight of the non-Catholics: as a Protestant and in consequence of the Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), De Bry had to flee his home in the Southern Netherlands. Think about how this might have influenced his depictions of the treatment of native peoples.
- This edition of Las Casas’ writings in fact forms part of a larger group of anti-Spanish literature called *La leyenda negra* (The Black Legend). This was a style of writing critical of the Spanish Empire, which tended to present it as uniquely evil. With this in mind, the images may be exaggerating the types of atrocities perpetrated by the Spanish. Note that Las Casas’ intentions in drawing attention to the maltreatment of native peoples were no doubt very different than the later motivations of De Bry and others. Consider how the images compare with the text translation of Las Casas’ (Primary Source One).

Primary Source Three: Sebastian Münster, Variants of the First Map of the American Continent, Basel, circa 1550, circa 1572.

Sebastian Münster (1488-1552) was a cosmographer and professor of Hebrew, later ordained as a Franciscan priest. As an intellectual working with a wide range of scholars he had access to information on geography and cartography and developed an interest in map making. In 1540, he published *Geographia universalis vetus et nova*, an attempt to amend and add to Ptolemy's eight volume *Geographia* of 150 CE.

Münster's map of America was the first to depict both North and South America in continental form. After its first publication in 1540, the map appeared in various books, with changes made to updated editions. The two versions provided here, from 1550 and from 1572, show the discretion that printers and artists could use when coloring in maps by hand.



Source: Münster, Sebastian. *Die neuwen Inseln, so hinder Hispanien gegen Orient bey dem land India ligen*. [Basel, Switzerland: Sebastian Münster, 1550?] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2005630224/>.



Source: Münster, Sebastian. *Die neuwen Inseln, so hinder Hispanien gegen Orient bey dem land India ligen*. [Basel, Switzerland: Sebastian Münster, 1572?]

COMPASS POINTS

- Note the mention of *Mare pacificum* on Münster's map, one of the first namings of the Pacific Ocean. Think about how places come to be named, and who decides what they are called. You can also see *Americam* in the depiction of South America.
- Pay attention to how people are depicted on this map. It seems that they are part of nature and that America is not very populated. There are no cities depicted, even though there were vibrant cities throughout the Americas at the time.
- Note the size and motion of the ship, and its prow brightened with the colors of the Spanish flag in the 1572 edition of the map. This suggests Spain's ascendant role in the encounter with the Americas.
- Note Münster's adaptation of the Royal Standard of Spain of the Kingdom of Castile and León (the flag) as a demarcator of the Spanish claim to Hispaniola and the Caribbean.
- Think about how colonization shaped the conventions of place naming and land claims.

Case study challenge question

Please answer the following question (750-word response):

How did religious beliefs get used both for and against the rights of native peoples?