

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—Native American Population Decline: Why and by How Much?

Background

When they first arrived in the Americas, the Spanish had just won a generations-long, ruthlessly-fought war against Muslim states in Iberia. Afterward, they expelled from Spain both those Muslims remaining and the approximately 200,000 resident Jews. Legal theory held that fighting to expand Christianity justified enslavement of infidels at will, taking over their lands, and disposing of them as the conquerors wished.

During increasing contact with Native Americans in the 1500s, there were heated discussions among Spanish political and religious leaders about whether the inhabitants of “the Indies” were even human and about how they should be treated. Opinion was divided on whether they were capable of becoming converted. To some, they were innocent, trusting lambs, with souls that would be receptive to the Christian message. To others, they were vicious beasts who practiced cannibalism, human sacrifice, and worship of Satan. To all, they were clearly inferior to the Spanish who had conquered them.

From the beginning, the Spanish crown was concerned for the welfare of Native Americans. It ruled that they were to be paid fair wages for work they freely undertook, be secure in their possessions and persons, and be treated well. Anyone who beat Native Americans or called them “dogs” was fined five gold pesos. However, if they refused to become Christians and submit to Spain’s rule, the Requirement (a document read to them, in Spanish, by the early explorers and conquistadors) told them the consequences: they could be attacked, enslaved, or put to death. And it would all be their own fault, no response being taken as refusal.

In 1542, the *New Laws* of Spain stated that it was illegal to enslave Native Americans under any circumstances whatsoever. Yet they were unfree in Spanish America under the *encomienda* system, an institution traditional in Spain and similar to serfdom. It assigned a group of natives in a neighborhood to a Spaniard, to whom they owed tribute and labor services in return for protection and instruction in Christianity. Senior royal and Church officials were appointed “Protectors of the Indians,” to supervise and inspect *encomiendas* so that Indians would enjoy justice and good government. The system, however, was open to widespread abuse, which officials mostly ignored. The *New Laws* were only spottily enforced.

In North America, the English were eager to convert and “civilize” the natives, whom they considered at best inferior, at worst barbaric, and little better than beasts. Nevertheless, they often allied with Native Americans against other Native Americans and against other European colonial powers. English settlers continually encroached on the lands of Native Americans, who resisted. In some places at some times, massacres occurred on both sides.

In Their Own Words**Documents Reporting and Explaining Large-Scale Native American Deaths, 1512-1666****Document 1**

The Spaniard Peter Martyr, official government chronicler of events in the New World, gave an account of Vasco Núñez de Balboa's expedition to the Pacific. He wrote about the behavior of expedition members towards Native Americans in 1516.

The Spaniards cut off the arm of one, the leg or hip of another, and from some their heads at one stroke, like butchers cutting up beef and mutton for market. Six hundred, including the cacique [chief], were thus slain like brute beasts. ... Vasco [Balboa] ordered forty of them to be torn to pieces by dogs.

Source: Qtd. in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 141.

Document 2

Soon after 1520, Bernardino Vázquez de Tapia, one of the Spaniards with Cortés in Mexico, gave his eyewitness testimony. Note that a "mosque" is a Muslim place of worship. Vázquez de Tapia refers to the Aztec temple as the "Main Mosque," even though the indigenous peoples of Mexico were not Muslims and had no knowledge of Islam at that time.

This witness saw Pedro de Alvarado [Cortés' second in command] go to the Main Mosque [the Temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital] with a certain number of Spaniards where they found the Indians getting ready for their dances. ... Alvarado had [four of] them seized and ... tortured to find out if they were to take arms against [the Spaniards]. ... [They] confessed to anything ... under torture. ... Later Alvarado decided to go to the Main Mosque to kill them. ... [He] called all his people to arms and ... went with his men fully armed to the Main Mosque where three or four hundred Indians were dancing, holding each other's hands ... and another two or three thousand sitting down watching them. ... [N]one of them moved; they remained still, and Alvarado began to surround them ... as soon as they were surrounded, he began to hit them and cry "die" and all those with him did the same. ... [T]hey killed four hundred noblemen and chiefs. ... Alvarado must take the blame for it in the opinion of this witness.

Source: Qtd. in John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith, ed., *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early 17th Century*, Vol. III: *Central America and Mexico* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 290-1.

Document 3

In the late 1520s, Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico, wrote to the Spanish king in concern about the drop in Native Americans' birthrate. In 1542, Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas gave different reasons for the same problem.

They no longer approach their wives, in order not to beget slaves. (Zumárraga)

[Because of enforced labor services], husbands and wives were together [only] every eight or ten months, and when they met they were so exhausted and depressed on both sides that they had ... ceased to procreate. (Las Casas)

Source: Qtd. in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row), 134.

Document 4

In 1533, the Spanish official Castañeda wrote to the king about his concern for the Native Americans in his territory.

The Indians of this province [Nicaragua] are becoming extinct, and if something is not done quickly, there will be none left in four years. ... [T]hey are made to work in the mines, which labor by itself would be enough to destroy and extinguish them all, because the nearest of the mines are forty leagues [160 miles] away, and though the Indians who work in this province are well fed by their masters with bread, meat, and fish, as well as the other local food crops ... this is not enough to keep them from dying from the work. ... [T]he land where the mines are is very cold and rainy. ... The Indians who go to the mines work at extracting gold in the cold and rain and in great exhaustion, and since they come from the hot land of these plains, where they are accustomed to plenty of fruit, fish, and other delicacies they have among them, when they are taken ill there with the coldness of the land and the absence of the [foods] they have been raised on, even though their masters ... take good care of them, this is not enough to keep them from dying, since [they also] have a very weak constitution. ... The Indians who ... transport maize to the labor gangs have to set to work as soon they arrive after traveling forty leagues; thus, if they are taken sick, the illness catches them when they are worn out and exhausted, and in order not to die there, such people leave for their homes, where they never arrive, since they die on the way.

Source: Qtd. in John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith, ed., *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early 17th Century*, Vol. III: *Central America and Mexico* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 118.

Document 5

The sixteenth-century Spanish newcomers in the Americas were used to fencing their fields and leaving their livestock free to range at will. Native American farmers, having no livestock, did not fence their fields. Unsurprisingly, Spanish livestock ranged into and through their unprotected fields, eating and trampling their crops. Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain, wrote to the Spanish king in the 1530s.

May your Lordship realize that if cattle are allowed, the Indians will be destroyed.

Source: Qtd. in Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 99.

Document 6

Spanish explorer and conquistador Pascual de Andagoya heard about the rich land to the south called “Biru” or “Piru” when he was governor in the area that is now Colombia. Having unsuccessfully tried conquest in Inca territory, he wrote in 1539 as follows.

The Indians [there] are being totally destroyed and lost. ... [The soldiers are] killing all the llamas they want for no greater need than to make tallow candles. ... The Indians are [also] left with nothing to plant, and since they have no cattle and can never obtain any, they cannot fail to die of hunger.

Source: Qtd. in David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 88.

Document 7

Toribio de Motolinía, one of first Franciscan missionaries to Mexico, wrote around 1540 in his *History of the Indians of New Spain* about a smallpox epidemic.

[In most provinces of Mexico], more than one half of the population died; in others the proportion was little less. ... They died in heaps, like bedbugs. ... Many others died of starvation, because since they were all taken sick at once, they could not care for each other.

Source: Qtd. in Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 52-3.

Document 8

Father Bartolomé de las Casas was an energetic activist on behalf of the native peoples of the Americas among whom he worked. He realized his aim of inspiring legislation to protect Indians by his frequent reports detailing Spanish atrocities and abuses. He did not, however, succeed in getting these laws consistently enforced. The following are from his 1542 book, *Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

a) [In Cuba in 1512, a hundred or more Spaniards, eager to compare the sharpness of their swords], began to rip open the bellies ... [of] men, women, children, and old folk, all of whom were seated, off guard and frightened, watching the mares and the Spaniards. ... not a man of all of them there remains alive. ... [I]n the same way, with cuts and stabs, [they killed all in a house nearby. The massacre then spread to other villages. Well over 20,000 were killed during this rampage].

b) [T]he Spaniards determined on a massacre [in the Mexican town of Cholula, in 1519] or, as they say, a chastisement [punishment] to sow terror and the fame of their valor throughout that country. ... [T]hey first sent to summon all the lords and nobles of the town ... and when they came ... they were promptly captured. ... They had asked for five or six thousand Indians to carry their baggage all of whom immediately came. ... Being all collected and assembled in the courtyard ... some armed Spaniards were stationed at the gates ... [and] all others seized their swords and lances, and butchered all [the Indians], not even one escaping. ... More than one hundred of the lords whom they had bound, the [Spanish] captain commanded to be burned, and impaled alive on stakes stuck in the ground. ...

c) On Hispaniola ... in the mines [where the islanders enticed there from the Bahamas] were forced to work ... life was short for them. Full of despair at finding themselves duped [into mining for the Spaniards] they poisoned themselves with yucca juice; or died of hunger and overwork, delicate as they were.

Sources: Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, quoted in a) David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 71; b) Marvin Lunenfeld, ed., *1492: Discovery, Invasion, Encounter* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1991), 208-9; c) Thomas Christensen and Carol Christensen, eds., *The Discovery of America and Other Myths: A New World Reader* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), 183-4.

Document 9

The Franciscan friar Toribio de Motolinía, between whose order and that of the Dominicans (to which Las Casas belonged) there was traditional rivalry and enmity, wrote to the Spanish king in 1555 about the latter's campaign against Spanish behavior in the Indies, as follows.

Las Casas ... thinks that all err and he alone is right, [making statements such as] "All the conquerors have been robbers and ravishers, the most qualified in evil and cruelty that there ever have been, as is manifest to the whole world." All the conquerors, he says, without making a single exception. Your majesty already knows the instructions and orders that those who go to new conquests carry ... and how they work to observe them, and are of as good a life and conscience as Las Casas ... [who seeks] to exaggerate and make worse the evils and sins that have occurred. ...

During the last ten years the natives of this land have diminished greatly in number. The reason for it has not been bad treatment, because for many years now the Indians have been well treated, looked after, and defended; rather the cause has been the great diseases and plagues that New Spain has had. ...

Source: Qtd. in Marvin Luenfeld, ed., *1492: Discovery, Invasion, Encounter* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1991), 212-4.

Document 10

Domingo de Santo Tomás, a Spanish Dominican friar who spent time in Peru in the mid-sixteenth century and learned the Quechua language, wrote about Spanish explorations in search of gold to the Amazon.

Some two or three hundred Spaniards go on these expeditions, [but] they take two or three thousand Indians to serve them and carry their food and fodder. ... Few or no Indians survive, because of lack of food, the immense hardships of the long journeys through wastelands, and from the loads themselves.

Source: Qtd. in David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 88.

Document 11

Andrés Chacón, an *encomendero* of Peru, wrote in 1570 in a letter to his brother in Spain as follows:

The Indians give me nothing, that is, I take little from them and have expenses for priests and other things for them and ... since they are on the main highway and have been mistreated and destroyed, few of them remain. Once there were more than 2,000 Indians, and now there are about 200. I consider them as if they were my children; they have helped me earn a living. ... I have given them 220 pesos in income [and] I will leave them free of tributes when I die, so that whoever enjoys the tributes will not mistreat the Indians to get his revenue. Probably you there will say that it would be better to give this to my relatives than to the Indians. But I owe it to these children who have served me for thirty-odd years; it is a debt of life, and if I did not repay it I would go to hell. I am obliged to do what I can for my relatives, but if I don't, I won't go to hell for it. ... I have sheep, goats, and pigs here, and I did have cows, but recently I sold them because they damaged the Indians' crops.

Source: Qtd. in James Lockhart and Enrique Otte, trans. and ed., *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 67-8.

Document 12

A member of Francis Drake's expedition to Florida in 1585 reported.

The wilde people ... died verie fast and said amongst themselves, it was the Inglishe God that made them die so fast.

Source: Qtd. in Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 40.

Document 13

Thomas Hariot, hired by Raleigh for his astronomical and **cartographic** expertise, traveled to Virginia where he learned the Algonquin language. He wrote in 1588.

[Within a few days of our departure from their towns] the people began to die very fast, and many in a short space; in some towns about twenty, in some forty, and in one six score [120], which in truth was very many in respect to their numbers. ... The disease ... by report of the oldest men in the country never happened before. ... All the space of their sickness, there was no man of ours known to die, or that was especially sick. [Also], some of our company towards the end of the year, showed themselves too fierce, in slaying some of the people, in some towns, upon causes that on our part, might easily enough have been borne.

Sources: Qtd. in Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 66-7. Language modernized by Anne Chapman.

Document 14

José de Acosta, a Spanish Jesuit missionary writing before 1600, claimed that by the 1580s, most of the peoples of the Antilles and the lowlands of New Spain, Peru, and the Caribbean shores had been killed or driven off, due to disease and Spanish brutality.

Of thirty parts of the people that inhabit it, there wants twenty-nine; and it is likely the rest of the Indians will in short time decay.

Source: Qtd. in Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 38.

Document 15

Hernández Arana, descendant of the last ruler of the Guatemalan Maya Cakchiquels, wrote this in his *Annals of the Cakchiquels* in the second half of the sixteenth century.

[During 1519] the plague began, oh my sons! ... It was truly terrible, the number of dead there were in that period. ... [In 1521] the plague began to spread. ... The people could not in any way control the sickness. ... Great was the stench of the dead. ... The dogs and the vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grandfathers died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen. ... [In 1560] the plague which had lashed the people long ago began [again] here. ... [A] fearful death fell on our heads ... Now the people were overcome by intense cold and fever ... then came a cough growing worse and worse ... and small and large sores broke out on them. The disease attacked everyone here. ... Truly it was impossible to count the number of men, women, and children who died this year. My mother, my father, my younger brother, and my sister, all died. ...

Source: *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, qtd. in Marvin Lunenfeld, ed., *1492: Discovery, Invasion, Encounter* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1991), 312-3.

Document 16

After the Spanish conquest, an anonymous Mayan of Mexico wrote, probably in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century, about his people before the coming of the Spaniards in the *Book of Chilam Balam*.

There was then no sickness; they had no aching bones; they had then no high fever; they had then no smallpox; they had then no burning chest ... they had then no consumption; they had then no headache ... The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here.

Source: *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, qtd. in Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 36.

Document 17

In 1622-23, authorities of the Virginia colony had the following to say about the local Native American tribes.

[We recommend that, children being spared, soldiers should pursue the adults], surprising them in their habitations, intercepting them in their hunting, burning their Townes, demolishing their Temples, destroying their canoes ... carrying away their Corne, and depriving them of whatsoever may yield them succor or relief ... rooting them out for being longer a people upon the face of the Earth. [Virginia Company of London, 1622]

[Against] these barberous and perfidious enemys, wee hold nothing injuste, that may tend to their ruine. [Virginia Council of State, 1623]

Source: Qtd. in Alden T. Vaughan, "'Expulsion of the Salvages': English Policy and the Virginia Massacre of 1622," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, 1 (January 1978), 77-8.

Document 18

Increase Mather, a New England colonist, clergyman, and first president of Harvard College, saw Indian disease as divine intervention. He wrote this in 1631. Elsewhere, he observed that entire towns of New England Indians were destroyed by smallpox, with not even a single survivor.

About this time [1631] the Indians began to be quarrelsome touching the Bounds of the Land which they had sold to the English, but God ended the Controversy by sending the Smallpox amongst the Indians ... who were before that time exceedingly numerous.

Source: Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 75.

Document 19

Two English colonial governors in North America during the seventeenth century wrote.

a) For the natives, they are neere all dead of small Poxe, so as the Lord hathe cleared our title to what we possess.

(John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony)

b) [Thank God for sending] smallpox &c. to lessen their numbers: so that the English, in Comparison with the Spaniard, have but little Indian blood to answer for.

(A governor of South Carolina)

Sources: a) Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 208; b) Alfred W. Crosby, "The Columbian Voyages and their Historians," in *Islamic and European Expansion*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 158.

Document 20

In 1641, Miantonomo, a Narragansett chief from Long Island, tried to talk the Montauks into a coordinated attack upon the English, as follows.

[Y]ou know our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkies, and our coves full of fish and fowl. But these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our clam banks, and we shall all be starved. [Therefore, let us] fall on and kill men, women, and children, but no cows, for they will serve to eat till our deer be increased again.

Sources: Qtd. in James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 119-20; chief's name from Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 60, epigraph.