
A Report
by Robert F. Petrone, Esquire,
to City Council of the City of Philadelphia

on

HISTORY OF THE INDIES
BOOKS II AND III (OF III)

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The Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas wrote the original primary source of the history of the West Indies, *Historia de las Indias*, originally intended to be a six-volume work, but ending after the third volume. The edition of *History of the Indies* that has been the subject of this report and my previous report to this Council, was translated into English, edited and published in 1971 by Andrée M. Collard (1926 -1986), a professor and writer, who also wrote an Introduction to the book.

De las Casas's *Historia* is the predominant, first-hand account of the governorship of Christopher Columbus, whose policies protecting the indigenes from enslavement and exploitation prompted gold-mongering Spanish *hidalgos* to depose and replace him. De las Casas, appointed Protector of the Indians by the Church and the Crown of Spain, personally knew Christopher Columbus, whom he described as "good-natured, kind, daring, courageous and pious" and "the most outstanding sailor in the world," and lived through his benevolent gubernatorial administration, which he characterized in no uncertain terms as driven by the governor's "unusual insight into human and divine affairs" (Book I, 15).

De las Casas's *Book I*, the subject of my first report to this Council, recounted the early life, first three trans-Atlantic expeditions and gubernatorial administration of the West Indies of Christopher Columbus. As recorded therein, Francisco de Bobadilla, in league with the resentful *hidalgos*, falsified charges against Columbus and his two brothers as a pretext to send them back to Spain so that Bobadilla could usurp the hereditary title of Governor of the West Indies. *Book I* and my report on it end with Christopher Columbus's letter to Doña Juana de Torres of the court of the Crown of Spain – written with his hands in shackles on board the prison ship shuttling him back to Cádiz – protesting Bobadilla's accusations as unfounded slander. This report commences where the preceding ended, with an account of Christopher Columbus's victory in the Spanish court over Bobadilla's calumnious charges, and his fourth and final voyage to the West Indies, funded by the Spanish Crown.

Christopher Columbus: The Father of American Civil Rights

Spanish *hidalgos*, the low noblemen of the burgeoning Spanish empire, rushed to the West Indies to establish settlements in the wake of Admiral Christopher Columbus's news of having discovered a populated land of indigenes while *en route* to Asia. Many of the *hidalgos* were criminals in their homeland, and escaped imprisonment by responding as volunteers to the Crown's call for settlers. After only seven-years, during which time the Crown of Spain had appointed Christopher Columbus governor of the Indies, the *hidalgos* repeatedly rebelled and eventually deposed Columbus in retaliation for his (1) refusal to allow them to enslave the

indigenes; (2) requiring the *hidalgos* to toil in construction of habitable settlements; and (3) thwarting the imposition upon the indigenes of the iniquitous *encomienda* system, the centuries-old tribute system of the Spanish Crown that rewarded the *hidalgos* with the labor of subject people (Book I, 47-50, 53-58; Book II, 78).¹

The repeated rebellions of the *hidalgos*, under the seditious leadership of *Alcalde Mayor* (local jurist and administrator) Francisco Roldán and his cohort, the aristocrat Adrián de Moxica, prompted Governor Columbus to beseech the Crown to send an agent to “administer justice” (Book I, 72). The Crown sent Francisco de Bobadilla, a knight of the Order of Calatrava – soldiers of the *Reconquista*, the successful military campaign reclaiming Spanish land from the Moors. The Crown instructed Bobadilla to investigate the competing claims of Governor Columbus and the greedy and resentful *hidalgos* the governor kept bridled. With the promise of acquiring the hereditary title of Viceroy of the Indies should he find any expulsionable wrongdoing on the part of Governor Columbus, Bobadilla fabricated wrongdoing where he could find none. While Governor Columbus was engaged in an inland expedition to build a fort in La Vega, Hispaniola, Bobadilla arrived at the seaside settlement of Santo Domingo and, without notifying the Crown, collected the gold of the settlement for himself, gathered rebels, hired slavers, and shackled each of the Columbus brothers, one by one, as they returned to the settlement (Book I, 72-76).

As Columbus remained in manacles in the bowels of a caravel serving as his prison ship back to Cádiz, the ship’s master, André Martín, sympathetic to the governor’s unjust suffering, attempted to remove the shackles from Columbus’s wrists. So incensed by Bobadilla’s treachery was Admiral Columbus, that he defiantly and righteously insisted that the shackles remain, and be unfastened only in the presence of the King and Queen, that “only the monarchs could do this” (Book I, 69). There, clapped in irons and confined in the brig, Christopher Columbus fervently and determinedly penned his epistles to the Court of Spain, informing them of Bobadilla’s treachery and depravity – of only the least of which he was, in fact, aware – and presenting a detailed defense of his benevolent, seven-year governorship of the Indies (Book I, 69-75).

Columbus recounted in his letter the events that turned the proverbial tide against him among the settlers, commencing with his hiring of the occupants of Paria, Venezuela, to fish for pearls. He writes that “they violated their contracts and stole the pearls by the bushel” (Book I, 70). Their treachery was only the beginning. “Then [conquistador Alonso de] Hojeda arrived and

¹ The *encomienda* system was established in Spain during the Roman Empire. Del Mar, Alexander. *A History of the Precious Metals: From the Earliest Times to the Present*. New York: Cambridge Encyclopedia Co., 1902, 89. Print.

upset everything.” Hojeda warred with the tribes of Paria, joined by those criminals who had evaded imprisonment in Spain and acquired *hidalgo* status by agreeing to settle the New World – whom Columbus described as “little else but vagabonds” without “wi[ves] or children,” – causing, in turn, the Paria tribes to attack Columbus’s settlement “most seriously” (Book I, 70-71).

Hojeda was only the first of a series of troublemakers to follow. “Then [conquistador] Vicente Yáñez [Pinzón] arrived with four caravels” – Pinzón had captained the *Niña* on Columbus’s first voyage. Columbus writes that Pinzón “caus[ed] excitement and suspicions” among the settlers and the indigenes, “but no damages,” perhaps because Pinzón knew Columbus well from having sailed as one of his ship captains. This, in turn, likely engendered a respect for the governor that rendered Pinzón immune from the resentful *hidalgos*’ solicitations for rebellion and conquest.

But as more and more nobles arrived, the *hidalgos* persisted. “A certain Adrián [de Moxica]” – who had initiated atrocities against the tribes in defiance of Columbus’s prohibition – “tried to rebel again.” Columbus attests, “I had determined never to touch a hair on anyone’s head,” but laments that he “could not save” Moxica from arrest and hanging for his deeds. Columbus writes with sorrow, “I would have acted in the same way toward my own brother” had he committed the same misdeeds (Book I, 71).

Governor Columbus’s constant efforts to restrain the greed of the *hidalgos* and overcome their slothful resistance to labor, and the perpetual state of rebellion in which this conflict kept the settlers, prompted him to seek assistance from the Crown. “I wanted to escape from governing these dissolute people...full of vice and malice,” he writes, “and begged Their Highnesses...to send someone at my expense to administer justice” (Book I, 71). In evil hour, the Crown heeded the governor’s request, and sent for Comendador (Knight Commander) Francisco Fernández de Bobadilla.

Bobadilla, a highly ranking member of the Order of Calatrava – *Reconquista* soldiers who participated in the recapture of Spanish lands from the Moors – accepted the position. The monarchs instructed Bobadilla to investigate the competing claims of Governor Columbus, who wrote of the *hidalgos*’ refusal to toil and their constant attempts to exploit the indigenes, vis-à-vis those of the *hidalgos*, who portrayed their low-born Genoese governor “as a cruel man hateful to all Spaniards” (Book I, 49). Envoys on behalf of the *hidalgos*, such as Fray Bernardo Buil and Captain Pedro Margarite of the Fort of Santo Tomás, falsely told King Ferdinand “that he should not entertain any hopes of acquiring wealth in the Indies, for the whole affair was a joke, there simply was no gold on the island.” Tellingly, however, Buil and Margarite withheld that, being busy with constructing the settlement, no one had yet, in fact, mined for any gold, and that

Governor Columbus had prohibited the settlers from stealing gold from the tribes. Fearing that “Columbus’s enterprise [w]as a waste of money,” (Book I, 56-57), the Crown included a provision in Bobadilla’s mandate that he could assume governorship of the Indies – and take on the hereditary title of Viceroy, which he could maintain for life and pass down to his heirs and assigns – should he find enough evidence of wrongdoing by the governor.

Bobadilla conducted no investigation at all. Instead, seduced by the tantalizing promise of dominion over a newly discovered land of yet-undetermined vastness and populated by helpless, naked inhabitants he could subjugate with little effort and without restraint, Comendador Bobadilla executed a perfidious plan the moment he arrived in Hispaniola. Governor Columbus had embarked on an overland expedition seventy miles north of Santo Domingo, to construct a fort in La Vega, Hispaniola. Bartolomé Columbus, Christopher’s younger brother whom the Crown had appointed *adelantado* of Hispaniola,² was in Xaraguá, on the western coast (modern-day Haiti) when the *comendador* arrived. Only the third Columbus brother, Giacomo (Diego in Spanish), youngest of the three, was present in Santo Domingo upon the disembarking of the *comendador*. Bobadilla immediately arrested, shackled and imprisoned Giacomo in the brig of a caravel that Bobadilla intended to use as a prison ship to shuttle the three brothers back to Spain.

With this act, and without permission from the Crown – though ostensibly under the authority of his noble title and the pretense of acting with the Crown’s imprimatur – Comendador Bobadilla assumed authority over the Santo Domingo settlement. His “first concern was to take the gold while [Governor Columbus] was away; he said he wanted it to pay the people,” but, in fact, “he kept the first part for himself and sent for new traders.”

Bobadilla then quickly extended his control over the rulership and pecuniary interests of all the settlements. “The day after he arrived he constituted himself governor, appointed officials, performed executive acts, and announced gold franchises and the remission of titles...for a period of twenty years, which is a man’s lifetime” (Book I, 72).

Rumor of some of Bobadilla’s decrees reached Governor Columbus in La Vega. Unaware of the extent of it, however, Columbus “thought it was only something mild like the Hojeda affair” (Book I, 72). Acting the diplomat, and unsuspecting of his brother’s imprisonment, Governor

² During the Spanish *Reconquista*, the *adelantados* were military *caudillos* -- leaders -- who commanded the advance of the troops of the Crown of Castile through the Moor-occupied territories. The Crown granted the *adelantados* authority to govern any reconquered districts. During the colonization of the Indies, the Spanish Crown appointed “*Adelantados de Indias*” to command the exploration of the New World and to establish settlements. *Adelantados* held the post for life and maintained gubernatorial, military and judicial powers. *Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias*, Book IV, Titles 3, 4 and 7 (1680).

Columbus “wrote to welcome” Bobadilla from La Vega as the agent sent by the Crown to “administer justice” that he requested (Book I, 72); little did he know of the extensive campaign of depravity Bobadilla was affecting in his absence.

Bobadilla commandeered Christopher Columbus’s personal effects as well as usurped his gubernatorial office. He “took up residence in [Governor Columbus’s] home and he took everything,” including all of Columbus’s documents. In particular, “those which would have cleared [Columbus from Bobadilla’s calumnious claims] are the ones he kept most hidden” (Book I, 76). Bobadilla provoked the settlers, gathered “rebels and other untrustworthy people” and aroused against Columbus “a quantity of people [who] did not deserve baptism before God or the world,” including slavers “who go out to look for women [and] nine- or ten-year-old girls [selling them] at a premium” on the slave market (Book I, 73).

Bobadilla had wreaked much havoc in Santo Domingo by the time Governor Columbus completed the construction of the fort at La Vega. When Columbus returned to the port town, Bobadilla clapped him in irons, and then did the same to Bartolomé when he finally arrived (Book I, 74). Having made captives of all three of the Columbus brothers, Bobadilla had successfully usurped the hereditary title of Viceroy of the West Indies by force.

Once Bobadilla had removed the Columbus brothers as an obstacle, he undid all the restraints on the Spanish *encomienda* system that Governor Columbus had affected to restrain and discipline the indolent *hidalgos*. Thus, Bobadilla’s true reign of terror commenced. Bobadilla eliminated the *hidalgos*’ requirement to pay all but nominal taxes, and imposed forced labor upon the indigenes as miners and cooks so the *hidalgos* would not have to toil (Book II, 78). Worse, Bobadilla “assigned” entire tribes of indigenes to the settlers as their slaves,

thus making [the Spaniards] very happy. You should have seen those hoodlums, exiled from Castile for homicide with crimes yet to be accounted for, served by native kings and their vassals doing the meanest chores. These chiefs had daughters, wives and other close relations whom the Spaniards took for concubines either with their own consent or by force

(Book II, 78). With Bobadilla’s usurpation from Christopher Columbus of the governance of the West Indies, the *encomienda*, as well as Bobadilla’s own personal brand of tyranny, reigned supreme. De las Casas writes of this dark time, “The Spaniards loved and adored [Bobadilla] in exchange for such favors, help and advice, because they knew how much freer they were now than under Columbus” (Book II, 78-79).

Only after Bobadilla sprung his monstrous machinations did Columbus, his prisoner, finally learn of the extent of them. Columbus wrote in his letter to Doña Juana de Torres that Bobadilla

“did everything in his power to harm me” and such damage to Hispaniola that “Their Highnesses...would be astonished to find that the island is still standing” (Book I, 74).

Bobadilla knew that his own calumnious writings about Columbus were lies; that his own deeds as the new Viceroy were nothing short of the most profane wickedness; and that when the Crown finally heard Governor Columbus’s true accounts, much, if not all of Bobadilla’s unjust ministrations would be undone. Bobadilla told his conspirators, “Take as many advantages as you can since you don’t know how long this will last” (Book II, 79).

Indeed, Christopher Columbus’s efforts to thwart Bobadilla’s ghastly scheme began in the bowels of his prison ship, even as he was shackled in irons. He wrote to the court of the monarchs, “Comendador Bobadilla is striving to explain his conduct, but I will easily show him that his scant knowledge, great cowardice and exorbitant greed are the motives that pushed him into it.” He adds, “Their Highnesses will know this when they order him to give an account, especially if I am present when he gives it” (Book I, 74-75).

The Nightmarish Reign of Francisco Fernández de Bobadilla (as Recounted in Book II)

Francisco de Bobadilla wasted no time in instituting his reign of terror over the West Indies the moment Columbus’s prison ship left shore. “Once the two caravels on which Comendador Bobadilla was sending Columbus and his brothers as prisoners to Castile had sailed,” Bobadilla took control of the Crown’s military force. The garrison would have been “more than enough...to keep the Indians pacified, had [Bobadilla and the *hidalgos*] treated them differently” (Book II, 78). De las Casas notes, however, that the force was also enough “to subdue and kill them all, which is what [Bobadilla and his confederates] did.” Having subverted the purpose of the few servicemen Governor Columbus had requested to assist the settlements – “not because they were needed” for fighting, “but because [Columbus] had to dispose of the weak [settlers], the sick and those homesick for Castile” (Book II, 78) – Comendador Francisco de Bobadilla, knighted conqueror of Moors, now possessed an indomitable, armed and armored war machine against the naked, spear-and-cudgel-wielding indigenes with which to extend the bloodshed of the *Reconquista* to the New World when any, including Columbus, dared to resist him.

Next, Bobadilla exonerated all of the traitorous *hidalgos* who had engaged in sedition against Governor Columbus and been convicted of other crimes. Of the traitorous Alcalde Roldán,³ de las Casas writes, “As far as Francisco Roldán and his followers were concerned, I

³ The appointed office of *alcalde mayor* has no direct English analogue, but included the role of the chief administrator of a territorial unit known as an *alcaldía mayor*, with judicial, administrative, military, and legislative authority. The term *alcalde* derived from the Arabic *qād, ī*, meaning judge.

saw them a few days later, as if nothing had happened, safe and sound, happy and living as honored members of the community.” Enjoying a virtually tax-free existence and with tribes of indigenes as their servants, “those 300 *hidalgos* lived for several years in a continuous state of sin, not counting those other sins they committed daily by oppressing and tyrannizing Indians” (Book II, 78).

Whereas Christopher Columbus had told the Crown that the tribes were intelligent, willing and worthy to become Spanish citizens, with all the rights and protections attendant thereto, under Bobadilla’s rule, the Spaniards called the indigenes “dogs” and plundered their villages, enslaving, raping and murdering them, sometimes simply on a whim or as a cruel joke. Bobadilla deceived the Crown into “believing them to be nonrational animals” to justify his deeds and “to keep power over them” (Book II, 81). Without the presence of Columbus and his pacifying and restraining governance, the *hidalgos* under Bobadilla’s governorship became “[s]oulless, blind and godless,” “killed without restraint and perversely abused the...Indians” (Book II, 80).

Thus, Bobadilla’s treachery was two-fold. Not only against Governor Columbus, but also against the chiefs of the tribes did Bobadilla enact “the first plan of tyrants: to...continually oppress and cause anguish to the most powerful and to the wisest, so that, occupied by their calamities, they lack the time and courage to think of their freedom; thus...degenerat[ing] into cowardice and timidity.” De las Casas queries that “if the wisest of the wise, whether Greek or Roman (history books are full of this), often feared and suffered from this adversity, and if many other nations experienced it and philosophers wrote about it, what could we expect from these gentle and unprotected Indians?” Without Columbus’s protection, they succumbed to “the evil design of those deceivers and counterfeiters of truth” (Book II, 81).

Of Bobadilla and the *hidalgos*, de las Casas writes, “They should have loved and praised the Indians, and even learned from them” as Christopher Columbus had done. Instead, de las Casas writes, Bobadilla and the *hidalgos* engaged in an ongoing course of conduct of “belittling them by publicizing them as beastly; [and] of stealing, afflicting, oppressing and annihilating them, making as much of them as they would a heap of dung on a public square. And let this suffice to account for the state of affairs on this island under Bobadilla’s government, after he had sent Admiral Columbus as a prisoner to Castile...” (Book II, 82).

Schwaller, John F. "Alcalde vs. Mayor: Translating the Colonial World." *The Americas*, Volume 69, Number 3 (2013): 391-400. Print.

Christopher Columbus: Full Exonerate and Civil Rights Activist for the Indigenes

Once Columbus returned to Castile, he presented his own case before the Crown, refuting Bobadilla's slander and revealing Bobadilla's misdeeds. De las Casas writes, "In that year of 1500, in order to investigate Columbus's claim for justice against Bobadilla, as well as for other reasons, the King determined to send a new governor to Hispaniola" to replace Bobadilla, "fray Nicolás de Ovando, Knight of Alcántara, and...*comendador* of Lares." De las Casas, having himself returned to Castile either with Admiral Columbus or shortly after the admiral's undignified exile from the Indies, traveled with the ships carrying Ovando, and came to know Ovando the man. He notes the virtues that aided Ovando's rise to power, but criticizes Ovando "because his government caused [the indigenes] inestimable harm" in the end. At the outset, however, Ovando "took with him...the right to investigate Francisco Bobadilla and the cause of Francisco Roldán's subversion; also, the faults imputed to Columbus and the cause of his imprisonment, all of which was to be reported to Spain" (Book II, 83).

Even from across the Atlantic, deprived of his gubernatorial power over the Indies, and in the face of Bobadilla's sinister machinations and tyranny, Columbus exerted his influence as best he could to protect the indigenes. Columbus petitioned the Court of Spain, resulting in an "instructions" to the settlers from the Crown that included "a very specific clause: all the Indians of Hispaniola were to be left free, not subject to servitude, unmolested and unharmed and allowed to live like free vassals under law just like any other vassal in the Kingdom of Castile" (Book II, 83). Thus, Bobadilla's plot to remove Christopher Columbus as an obstacle to the tyranny of the *hidalgos* was short-lived, and, despite vast, geographical distance and adverse political maneuvering, Columbus mounted his considerable defense on behalf of the civil rights of the indigenes of the West Indies.

Nicolás de Ovando's Investigation of the Tyranny of Francisco de Bobadilla

Comendador Nicolás de Ovando brought with him to the Indies, to aid in the investigation and the undoing of Bobadilla's regime, a cadre of experts in Spanish and Canon law, including lawyer and justice of the peace Alonso Maldonado of Salamanca; Antonio de Torres, the brother of Doña Juana de Torres; twelve Franciscan friars; and Franciscan prelate Alonso del Espinal (Book II, 83-84). Though Ovando took control of the settlement, the Indians were already in a state of rebellion against Bobadilla's tyranny. "[M]any Indians had been made captive slaves" by Bobadilla's army in complete defiance of the Crown's instructions for which Christopher Columbus had so vehemently and successfully petitioned (Book II, 85).

Almost immediately, the discovery of gold a short distance from Santo Domingo flatly contradicted the lies of the *hidalgos* that no gold was to be found on Hispaniola and their calumnious claims that Admiral Columbus's scientific expedition had been a waste of time and resources. "Governor Bobadilla had given the Spaniards so much license in exploiting the Indians that they were sent to the mines at the rate of fifteen to forty men and women for each pair of Spaniards" (Book II, 85).

Ovando began meting out justice immediately. De las Casas writes, "He presented his credentials to Bobadilla in front of the mayors, aldermen and the town council," and "with prudence [he] began his investigation of Bobadilla's case. You should have seen Bobadilla! He remained alone and disgraced...unaccompanied by any of the men he had favored" (Book II, 86). Christopher Columbus wrote of this vindication, "Our Lord God had not performed such a public miracle in a long time when He struck down the architect of my disgrace together with those who aided him" (Book II, 141).

Ovando did not limit his investigation to Bobadilla's treachery. He "also investigated the case of Francisco Roldán and his supporters." Ovando "had sent him to Castile, a prisoner but not in chains, so that the monarchs might determine the punishment he deserved" (Book II, 86-87).

Ovando also investigated the *hidalgos* as well, from the noblest-born to the basest felon-turned-settler/landowner. He put many of them "in prison for their debts." Many other settlers escaped imprisonment for a worse fate: "discouraged and frustrated at not finding what they had come for," they had "caught fever from the climate...and they died at such a rate the priests barely managed to bury them." De las Casas attributes the doom of the slothful and greedy *hidalgos* to divine justice, affirming ominously that "this was the lot of whoever came to the New World to find gold" (Book II, 87).

Ovando's War

Ovando's prosecutions of Bobadilla, Roldán and the *hidalgos* initially brought some relief to the tribes. "At that time, the Indians were peacefully resting from the tyranny and anguish they had suffered under Francisco Roldán" (Book II, 88). Ovando's intervention was not a panacea, however; three hundred *hidalgos* still kept indigenes in servitude. In revolt, a tribe near "La Plata Harbor," the region corresponding to Puerto Plata in modern-day Dominican Republic, by de las Casas's description, "ambushed" the crew of one of Ovando's ships "and killed them" (Book II, 88, 90-91).

Left to govern Hispaniola in the wake of eliminating Bobadilla and Roldán's regime, Governor Ovando failed woefully to rule as judiciously or as peaceably as Governor Columbus had. Unlike Governor Columbus's restraint upon learning of the indigenes' plan to attack Captain Pedro Margarite's men at the Fort of Santo Tomás (Book I, 50), or their actual attack upon Spanish settlers shortly thereafter, which Columbus resolved with no bloodshed (Book I, 51), the news of the attack on Ovando's crewmen by the indigenes easily instigated Ovando, who became "determined to fight them [and,] like all Spaniards at that time, he seized the slightest pretext to provoke war..." (Book II, 92). This time, however, without the pacifying influence of Christopher Columbus to deescalate Spanish aggression, bloody war ensued without limit.

Ovando commenced Spanish aggressions against the indigenes with an intricate deceit. He arranged a banquet for many chieftains and their tribes. He welcomed them into a large hut and "treated them like royal guests" (Book II, 98). Ovando then signaled his conquistadors, who bound the chieftains and their fellow tribe members. Ovando and his men then set fire to the hut, immolating many kings in a single deceptive and devastating stroke. The survivors Ovando hanged or enslaved. De las Casas makes clear that Ovando defied King and Christianity in his aggressions against and enslavement of the indigenes, writing, "He was not excused before God or before the King...because he completely went against what had been told him" by the Crown (Book II, 114).

In Chapters 15 through 18 of Book II, de las Casas relates the atrocities inflicted by the Spanish against the indigenes during "the war that broke out...in the Higüey province" over the killing of Ovando's crewmen (Book II, 115). De las Casas witnessed first-hand the torture and gratuitous murders of indigene men, women and children of the most gruesome sort. Ovando and his settlers committed all these atrocities without the Crown's knowledge or under pretense (Book II, 115-126). "The King and Queen had a royal decree forbidding all Spaniards to aggrieve the Indians in any way, to capture them, to remove them to Castile or other regions unfamiliar to them, or to tamper with their persons and/or possessions" (Book II, 126). Indeed both the Crown and the Church maintained a vested interest in protecting the indigenes. "Disobeying carried a heavy penalty commensurate with the monarchs' desire that Indians receive good examples and good works from the Spaniards in order to facilitate their Christianization" (Book II, 126). De las Casas writes that the Crown's decree, which Ovando ignored, "shows how kings are usually deceived even in matters of the law" (Book II, 127-128). Of Ovando's machinations and misdeeds, de las Casas writes, "No judgment more perverse and unjust ever existed on the whole face of the universe than the one I am recording here before God" (Book II, 129).

As the war raged on, heroes and villains emerged on both sides. The “Indians...[n]aked and unarmed as they were, sometimes...performed outstanding exploits” that were “much celebrated” by both sides (Book II, 93-94). Of the indigenes, de las Casas writes, “[T]hey had a legitimate reason to declare war” on the Spaniards given the “harm through insult, plunder and murder” Bobadilla, Roldán, and ultimately Ovando inflicted upon them (Book II, 92-93).

Ovando’s Regime

Ovando introduced administrative changes that unwisely abrogated many of the sound policies and decisions that Governor Columbus had instituted. Ovando “removed the township of Santo Domingo to [the west] side of the river,” Rio Ozama, as it is currently named, because “all the Spanish towns in the island were on this side and he thought it more convenient to be here to avoid the delays caused by projected ferry boats...” (Book II, 95). De las Casas notes, “However, the admiral’s choice of the eastern shore had been the wiser choice” due to “the rising sun [having] lifted the fog away from the town while now it blows all on the town. Likewise, the eastern shore has good spring water, while here, water is found only in wells and is not too pure” or accessible by the settlers. “For these reasons, the old site of Santo Domingo” chosen by Admiral Columbus “was more salubrious” (Book II, 96).

Not only was Governor Ovando’s administration harmful to the settlers, but it was devastating to the indigenes. Like the administration of Governor Bobadilla, Ovando’s administration was the polar opposite of the “ministry and polity” of amity and harmony with the indigenes achieved by Governor Columbus (Book I, 15, 71). In the wake of Christopher Columbus’s “kind” gubernatorial administration and “good judgment” (Book I, 15), the Spaniards who usurped his governorship, including Ovando, inflicted upon the indigenes “the infinite and implacable vexations, the furious and rigorous oppression [and] the ferocious and wild condition” that caused them to “flee from the Spaniards to hide in the entrails and subterranean paths of the earth” (Book II, 104).

Ovando reinstated Bobadilla’s enslavement of the indigenes. As Christopher Columbus languished in Cádiz, earning his full acquittal, restoring his name, and hastening to arrange his fourth voyage to Hispaniola, “the Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity” under Ovando’s regime, “which no one who has not seen it can understand” (Book II, 114).

Like Bobadilla, whom Ovando unseated with the imprimatur of the Crown, Ovando hid his and the *hidalgos*’ misdeeds from the monarchs – from Isabella and Ferdinand; from their successors, Philip and Juana; and from Ferdinand again, who resumed rulership, alone, as regent

in the wake of King Philip's death (Book II, 115). De las Casas writes in excruciating detail about Ovando's "*repartamentos*," the assigning of indigenes as slaves by the hundreds to the Spaniards, and the inhumane, at best, and fatal, at worst, treatment the indigenes suffered regularly at the hands of *mineros* (miners), *estancieros* (taskmasters of the mines and plantations), and other Spaniards (Book II, 104-115). "In this way husbands died in the mines, wives died at work, and children died from lack of milk, while others had not time or energy for procreation, and in a short time this land which was so great, so powerful and fertile, though so unfortunate, was depopulated." From Hispaniola, "this sweeping plague" of the *repartamentos* "went to San Juan, Jamaica, Cuba, and the continent, spreading destruction over the whole hemisphere." Ovando "established...through diabolical delusion and craft, the violent and raging perdition which was to sterilize and consume the greater part of mankind in these Indies" (Book II, 115). De las Casas surmises, "If this concentration of events had occurred all over the world, the human race would have been wiped out in no time" (Book II, 110).

Admiral Christopher Columbus's Resolute Fourth and Final Voyage to Rescue the Indies

De las Casas commences Chapter 6 of Book II with a brief reference to Admiral Columbus's triumphant return from Cádiz. He writes, "Let the admiral sail his four ships from Puerto Hermoso," the westernmost port of Hispaniola, "or the port of Açuá, also called by some Puerto Escondido," near the center of the southern coast of Hispaniola, the Twenty-First-Century region of Azua, "and fare well on the high seas until we speak of him again (Book II, 86).

De las Casas does so in Chapter 30 of Book II, contrasting the horrors of Ovando's bloodshed with Admiral Columbus's extraordinary benignity, good will and wisdom. Columbus's ships were "drawing water" into their holds as they reached the Caribbean, so he ran them "aground safely" in Jamaica to avoid the surf. Despite the bloodshed Ovando was provoking throughout the West Indies, the indigenes of Jamaica came to meet Admiral Columbus in canoes for amicable trade. De las Casas writes, "To avoid inequities, disputes and grudges, Columbus placed two persons in charge of trading and distributing the goods equally among everyone" (Book II, 133-135). Through this bloody, war-torn landscape, Christopher Columbus's arrival forged a trail of peace, fair trade and amity.

No sooner had Admiral Columbus set his ships aground in Jamaica did he immediately resume his activism on behalf of the civil rights of the indigenes. He took great precautions to protect the indigenes with whom they were trading; "to avoid Spanish misbehavior on the island, the admiral decided to rest and recover at sea because, as [his son] don Hernando says [of the Spaniards], we are an uncouth lot of people and no manner of order or punishment could prevent

our men from stealing and molesting women if they went ashore, and this would greatly endanger our friendly relations with the Indians.” Admiral Columbus ordered that “all the men remained assigned to their posts and could not leave ship except by special permission, which pleased the Indians” (Book II, 133).

On July 7, 1503, while awaiting assistance in Jamaica from his manager on Hispaniola, Admiral Columbus penned a letter to the Crown reiterating his many services “at the cost of much hardship,” including, as de las Casas described, the usurpation of his “Honor and titles he well deserved and well earned” (Book II, 134). The machinations of the usurper, Bobadilla, had impoverished Admiral Columbus, leaving him homeless. De las Casas writes, “After twenty years of extraordinary services, he and his brothers have acquired very little benefit” (Book II, 135). Indeed, de las Casas notes that “no services so famous were ever rendered to any other earthly King. The admiral did not write the last sentence; I am adding it because he is owed the praise” (Book II, 134-135).

While aground in Jamaica, Admiral Columbus sent two messengers in canoes to Hispaniola to deliver his letter, and accompanied them part of the way in his own canoe. Though Ovando’s war prompted the local tribes to perpetually threaten the passage with vigilant hostilities, Admiral Columbus “returned slowly to his ships, visiting villages along his path and conversing joyfully with their inhabitants and leaving many friends behind” (Book II, 135).

The appearance of the messengers in Hispaniola informed Ovando of Admiral Columbus’s arrival. He received the news with a great deal of chagrin, fearful as he was that the return of Christopher Columbus would again thwart Spanish tyranny and threaten his oppressive regime. Ovando read Admiral Columbus’s letter requesting help, but was slow to act – as the admiral accused – with “the deliberate intent to let [Columbus] die there, since a whole year passed without a sign of assistance.” Columbus maintained that “the governor finally relented only because people were talking in Santo Domingo and missionaries there were beginning to reprehend him in their sermons” (Book II, 136).

Help finally arrived in the summer of 1504. “Everyone, including Columbus, sailed from Jamaica on June 27, 1504. Unfavorable winds and currents made the navigation arduous” – perhaps Ovando had waited for a time of year when he knew sailing conditions would be least favorable in an attempt to prevent Columbus’s return – “but they arrived safely at the small island we call Beata, not far from Hispaniola” (Book II, 136). Christopher Columbus’s determination to set things right in Hispaniola buoyed his efforts, and no mere unfavorable sailing conditions would neutralize him.

Once in Beata, Admiral Columbus could continue no further until the strength of the currents subsided. “While Columbus was detained there” by the tides, “he decided to tell the governor that his return meant his intention to free himself from unfounded and frivolous suspicion” (Book II, 136). He penned another letter to Ovando in which he recounted the adversities he faced in Beata, including a mutiny by Captain Francisco Porras:⁴

Porras and his followers returned to Jamaica with an ultimatum: I was to deliver my command to them or we (myself, my brother, my son and my men) would pay dearly for it. I refused to comply and they tried to carry out the threat. There were deaths and many wounded but finally the Lord, who abhors arrogance and ungratefulness, delivered all of them in all their honors, but I am taking Captain Porras to Castile so the monarchs may learn the truth

(Book II, 136). Thus, with great courage and determination, Columbus proved himself a worthy adversary as well as a skilled navigator and a merciful victor.

Upon Admiral Columbus’s eventual triumphant return to Hispaniola, Ovando and the Spanish settlers received him with the veneer of “great respect and celebration,” but “underneath the friendliness and benevolence, there was a will at work to humiliate him” (Book II, 137). Ovando freed Porras from his imprisonment and unfettered him in the presence of Columbus. Ovando then interrogated those who took up arms to defend Admiral Columbus from Porras, despite that “[t]his right belonged only to the admiral since he was in general command of the fleet. Columbus gave advice” and imposed upon Porras and his men “sentences that were not accepted or carried out” because the Spaniards, “behind the admiral’s back in mockery,” claimed that “no one could understand him” supposedly due to his native language being Genoan (Book II, 137).

Christopher Columbus had sailed to the West Indies for the fourth time, at great hardship and peril, to set things right and undo the tyranny and oppression caused by the *hidalgos*, but Ovando and his men gave him no quarter. “These vexations lasted until the ship they brought from Jamaica was repaired,” leaving Admiral Columbus little choice but to return to Spain. Again, without his presence to restrain the Spaniards, those who sailed with him on his fourth voyage “stayed here [in Hispaniola] and some went to San Juan to settle it or, rather, destroy it” (Book II, 138).

⁴ Because Christopher Columbus lacked the funds to have new vessels built for his fourth voyage, he bought four caravels in Seville. The royal treasurer, however, Alonso de Morales, insisted that Columbus include Morales’s brothers-in-law in the expedition, Francisco and Diego Porras. “In an evil hour, Columbus good-naturedly consented,” and appointed Francisco Porras captain of one of the caravels, but the Porras brothers “proved to be mutinous scoundrels.” Markham, Sir Clements Robert. *Life of Christopher Columbus*. Scotts Valley, California; CreateSpace Publishing Co., 2017. 250-251. Print.

Once again, Admiral Columbus proved his indomitability as a sailor on the return trip to Spain. They set sail on September 12, 1504, “losing a mast just as they came out of the river, which caused the admiral to proceed alone.” Though the weather was fair for the first third of their voyage over the Caribbean Sea, “a terrible storm broke out that greatly endangered them.” On October 19th, “when the storm had ceased, the mast fell and broke into four pieces. But the admiral was a great sailor; despite an attack of gout, he repaired it by using the yard of a lateen sail, strengthening it in the middle with material from the forecastles undone for that purpose” (Book II, 138).

The perils of the journey back to Spain continued. “Later another storm broke the mizzenmast; indeed it seemed the Fates were against the admiral, pursuing him relentlessly throughout his life with hardship and affliction. He navigated this way another 700 leagues until God willed he reach the port of San Lúcar de Barrameda,” on the southern coast of Spain, “whence he went to Seville to rest a few days” (Book II, 138).

Christopher Columbus’s Dying Efforts to Champion the Indigenes of the Indies

Once back in Spain, Columbus learned that Queen Isabella had died while he had been on his fourth voyage, much to his supreme grief, as she had been his greatest supporter and ally. Now, bereft of her support and imprimatur, he alone beseeched King Ferdinand to set things right both in Spain and in the West Indies. Admiral Columbus’s petitions took the form of requests to vindicate his property interests in court, and indeed, that was of great import to him. De las Casas emphasizes that Columbus’s “position and dignity [were] taken from him [by Bobadilla] without a hearing, without defense, without even having been incriminated or sentenced, thus depriving him of the procedures of law” (Book II, 139-140) or “due process, judged by people seemingly acting as if they lacked reason, as if they were mad, stupid and absurd and worse than barbaric brutes” (Book II, 144). Yet, though Christopher Columbus himself had been denied due process, he constantly adjured the King in his petitions to consider the civil rights of the indigenes.

Columbus practiced humility and temperance in his appeals regarding his own titles and property, but advocated actively on behalf of the indigenes. Of his property and title, he wrote to the King “that he did not wish to take his grievances to court but that he left it to the King’s discretion to allow him whatever he saw fit from among his privileges, because he wanted only to go and alleviate his weariness in some remote corner” (Book II, 140). But in a letter to the King designed ostensibly as an accounting his stolen assets, he provided “an account,” moreover, “of the disorders caused by the allocation of Indians [to Spaniards]” (Book II, 147, brackets in original). Columbus noted that “he is aware that six out of seven Indians have died since he left

the island because of maltreatment [by Bobadilla and his men]: butchered, beaten, starving and ill-treated, most died in the mountains and streams where they had fled, unable to bear their lot” (Book II, 141).

In that same letter, Columbus condemned the Spanish slavers who subverted his own efforts to aid the indigenes. He complained to the King that he gave passage to the indigenes from Hispaniola to Castile “for the purpose of instructing them in our Faith, our customs, crafts and trades, after which [Columbus] intended to reclaim them and return them to their lands so they could instruct others,” but that the Spaniards, instead, “sold” the people into servitude (Book II, 141). “[B]ut either [King Ferdinand] did not believe [Columbus] or had other important things to attend to; the fact is that he paid no attention” (Book II, 147).

Columbus astutely discerned that the plight of the tribes of the West Indies had become a small priority for King Ferdinand. In light of this, Columbus carefully and judiciously framed his complaints as if “he was lamenting the loss of the tithe in gold and other temporal interests,” which he knew to be of greater concern to the King (Book II, 141). “The more petitions were written,” however, “the more the King answered with words while delaying the action....The idea displeased Columbus very much; he took it as a sign of ill will meaning that none of the promises would be kept,” to himself of his titles, properties or privileges, or to the indigenes of the Indies (Book II, 142).

In spite of the King’s growing indifference, Christopher Columbus remained steadfast in his faith and piety. He wrote, in a letter to the Archbishop of Seville, “Since it appears that the King will not keep his and the Queen’s promises, for me, who am essentially a plowman, to fight against him would be to whip the wind. It is better to leave my case in the hands of God my benefactor, for I have done all I can.” De las Casas notes, “Those are his words, entrusting himself to divine justice because he thought he had exhausted all the possibilities and certainly, I believe that God heard him” (Book II, 142).

Christopher Columbus’s health declined in those years. Ferdinand, too, was aged, and his son-in-law Philip and his daughter Juana prepared to take the throne. While the youngest Columbus brother, Bartolomé, greeted the new monarchs at court, Christopher Columbus’s “gout grew worse from the rigors of winter, aggravated by his mental state of desolation” from his legal battles over his titles and wealth, “his exploits so unjustly forgotten” without the support of the late Queen Isabella. His faith again proved to be his salvation. “He devotedly received the holy sacraments, for he was a good Christian” (Book II, 143). Christopher Columbus “died in Valladolid, on the day of the Ascension, the twentieth of May, 1506, pronouncing his last words: ‘Into your hands, oh Lord, I deliver my soul,’” the last words uttered by Christ on the cross.

Columbus's remains "were taken to the Carthusian monastery of Seville and later buried in the cathedral of Santo Domingo," being granted a resting place and monument befitting the greatest explorer and civil rights activist of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries (Book II, 143).

To his death, Columbus advocated not only for justice for himself and his progeny, but for the indigenes of the West Indies. De las Casas writes, "I believe that had the Admiral and King Philip lived longer, justice would have been done."

Even in death, Christopher Columbus dedicated service to the indigent. In his will, he left his estate to his sons and brothers on the stipulation "that his heir increase the value of his estate and use the income thereof to serve the King and for the propagation of the Christian religion, setting aside ten percent of it as charity for the poor" (Book II, 143-144).

Spain and the West Indies in the Aftermath of Columbus's Death

With the death of Christopher Columbus, so too came the demise of the civil rights of the indigenes of the West Indies under Spanish imperialism. The weary, widowed King Ferdinand renounced his title so his daughter Juana and his son-in-law Philip I of Burgundy could assume the throne. Philip, however, died that same year and Juana suffered from a mental disorder unnamed and undescribed by de las Casas beyond an "illness and unfitness to govern" (Book II, 147).⁵ Ferdinand resumed the throne as regent of Castile and of the Indies, and the *encomienda* flourished in the New World in the post-Columbian age. De las Casas writes, "These turmoils and changes of government allowed the free blossoming and firm establishment of the allocation system and no one" – except Christopher Columbus – "thought about the damage this system caused the Indians because everyone's mind was on gold" (Book II, 148).

De las Casas blames Ovando for instituting the allocation system in the West Indies. He writes, "As the inventor of the allocation system, the *comendador mayor* should have thought about Indian mortality as well as about remedying it; but this was part of his general insensitivity and he did not notice it or he simply did not care." When Ferdinand returned to Spain from Naples to assume the regency after Philip's death, "the only subject of conversation was gold – and it was plentiful then; no mention was made of the Indian lives involved in the extraction of gold and, what was even more painful, of the fact that they were dying without sacraments" (Book II, 148). This was in stark contrast to when Christopher Columbus was alive – in his accountings,

⁵ Psychohistorians indicate that Juana suffered from depression and schizophrenia, possibly causing psychosis. María A. Gómez; Santiago Juan-Navarro; Phyllis Zatlin. *Juana of Castile: History and Myth of the Mad Queen* (illustrated edition). London: Associated University Presse, 2008. 9, 12-13, 85. Print.

Columbus included constant reminders and appeals to the King about the suffering of the indigenes (Book II, 141, 147-148).

Once the schemes of the *hidalgos* succeeded in removing Governor Columbus from office, his successors' appraisals of the indigenes were the antithesis of his own. While Governor Columbus told the Crown that the tribes were intelligent and "ready to receive the faith" (Book I, 38), the Spaniards, now free of Columbus's supervision, "deceived King Hernando (Ferdinand) with a crafty argument...that the Lucayo or Yucago Islands close to Cuba and Hispaniola were full of an idle people who had learned nothing and could not be Christianized there" (Book II, 154). They did this to elicit permission from the King to obtain "ships to bring them to Hispaniola where they could be converted and would work in the mines, thus being of service to the King" (*Id.*)

De las Casas's appraisal of Columbus's dealings with the indigenes vis-à-vis the Spaniards' dealings with them during subsequent administrations is filtered through a nuanced and discriminating lens, and not through that of a zealot. He writes, "God did not want Christianity at that cost: God takes no pleasure in a good deed, no matter its magnitude, if sin against one's fellow man is the price of it, no matter how miniscule that sin may be..." (Book II, 155).

De las Casas pointedly notes that the conquistadors Alonso de Hojeda and Diego de Nicuesa, in defiance of the governance of Christopher Columbus, were the first to bring suffering and ruin to the West Indies. "[B]y virtue of what Hojeda and Nicuesa performed there – they were the first to assault the continent and kill, plunder and enslave – the natives of that land acquired the right...to declare legitimate war against the Spaniards." He reiterates that it was "Alonso de Hojeda who had caused so much damage to the Indians, as we said in Book I: he was the first to commit injustice on this island by using authority he did not possess and cutting off the ears of a *cacique* (chieftain) who had more right than he to mistrust him" (Book II, 173). De las Casas expounds on what this "injustice" was that Hojeda was "first to commit": Hojeda "plagued the continent and other islands that had never offended him and captured a great number of Indians whom he sold in Castile as slaves, as we said in Book I" (Book II, 173).

De las Casas distinguishes starkly between the governorship of Christopher Columbus and that of the heretical and hypocritical conquistadors who deposed him and were "first" to do harm. Of Columbus, whom he describes as "good natured, kind...and pious" (Book I, 15); believing earnestly in "the Lord, who abhors arrogance and ungratefulness" (Book II, 136); and "entrusted" wholeheartedly in "divine justice" (Book II, 142), de las Casas notes that he used "his unusual insight into human and divine affairs" in the exercise of "good judgment" as governor of the West Indies (Book I, 15). Of the Spanish usurpers who unseated Columbus, however, de las Casas criticizes that they "could not even see the incongruity of praying to God and Our Lady...for

help and intercession in a matter so odious to God as is the perpetration of crime against a people who lived in innocence and peace in their own territories without offending anyone” (Book II, 176).

De las Casas makes particular example of the conquistador Martín Fernández de Anciso. “Anciso, for all his knowledge of the law...what else was he doing but asking God and the Virgin to be his criminal accomplices, his fellow participants in homicide and all his other crimes? He was attributing to God and to His Holy Mother the very works of the devil himself” (Book II, 176). Citing the works of St. John Chrysostom, notable for his “priestly influence and renowned rhetorical abilities to critique the misuse of power....both ecclesiastical and political,”⁶ de las Casas writes of the conquistadors: “Indeed they live with the devil and, however much they may seek God’s help, they will never find it.” He writes, “God’s justice is incapable of lending a hand to crime and injustice” (Id.).

De las Casas closes Book II of his *History of the Indies* against this backdrop of Spanish oppression, contrasting it with Christopher Columbus’s selfless, pious and noble activism on behalf of the indigenes of the West Indies. De las Casas writes of Columbus that “divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world,” as opposed to his heretical deponents “who fail to serve [God] by flaunting His law and His commandments so implacably” (Book II, 177).

De las Casas’s Final Installment in the *History of the Indies*

Though de las Casas intended to write six volumes of his *History of the Indies*, each chronicling a single decade of the settlement of the Caribbean, he died after completing the third volume. In it, he demonstrates that without Columbus’s tireless advocacy against the establishment of the *encomienda* system, the West Indies became fully entrenched in that institution of oppression and slavery which Bobadilla and Ovando succeeded in establishing after deposing Columbus from the gubernatorial office. These knight commanders thus doomed the indigenes to the same fate as the conquered Moor invaders of the *Reconquista*. Citing the first chapter of Book II, which details the commencement of Bobadilla’s regime with the ignominious shuttling of the Columbus brothers back to Spain in chains, de las Casas states with pinpoint

⁶ St. John Chrysostom was a Fifth Century archbishop of Constantinople who used his influence as a religious authority to condemn misuse of power by Church and state, both in his sermons and in such writings as *On the Priesthood*, circa 380 A.D. Curta, Florin, and Holt, Andrew. *Great Events in Religion: An Encyclopedia of Pivotal Events in Religious History*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017. 261-261. Print.

accuracy that “gold was always the object of Spanish action here – at least from about 1500” – the precise time Bobadilla removed Christopher Columbus from office (Book III, 190).

De las Casas also demonstrates how history repeated itself. He recounts the arrival of a cadre of Dominican friars, sent by the Pope to establish churches, who, like Columbus, spoke out against the *encomienda* system and the oppression of the indigenes. “[T]he Dominican friars of Santo Domingo could not own Indians with a clear conscience and would neither confess nor absolve Indian owners” (Book III, 208). Unlike Governor Columbus, however, who held and used his gubernatorial authority to protect the indigenes and restrain the conquistadors and settlers, the Dominican friars held no authority, save spiritual, over the settlers. The friars availed themselves of what influence they possessed by preaching sermons at Mass condemning them for oppressing and enslaving the indigenes (Book III, 180-186). As the settlers did to Governor Columbus, they rallied vehemently against the friars, demanding, in outrage, that the Dominicans retract their condemnations under threat of sending them back to Spain, “as if a disavowal could change the law of God which they violated by oppressing the Indians” (Book III, 186).

Instead, the Dominicans defied the settlers’ threats and strengthened their commitment to the preaching of this subversive message. In response, the settlers corresponded with King Ferdinand and, as they did to Columbus, falsely accused the Dominican friars of acting “against the orders of His Highness and [having] aimed at nothing less but to deprive them of both powers and a source of income” (Book III, 187). As King Ferdinand had done previously in response to Bobadilla’s false allegations against Christopher Columbus, he lent the claims credence. De las Casas writes, “You see how easy it is to deceive a King, how ruinous to a kingdom it is to heed misinformation, and how oppression thrives where truth is not allowed a voice” (Book III, 187).

The settlers enlisted Franciscan friars to write to the King on their behalf (Book III, 187-193). The Franciscans recommended that the indigenes be regarded as free men and instructed in the Catholic faith, and that the settlers be permitted to “employ Indian labor” in a manner “tolerable” to the indigenes and that gives the indigenes “recreation periods” and the opportunity to “live in their own houses and...cultivate their land as they please” (Book III, 191).

In response, King Ferdinand issued an injunction, largely adopting the Franciscans’ recommendations (Book III, 192-194). It decreed the indigenes “good and loyal vassals” of the Crown of Spain, and promised, “We will receive you with love and charity, respecting your freedom and that of your wives and sons and your rights of possession” (Book III, 193). Conversely, however, it threatened the indigenes with war and enslavement if they failed or were slow to “owe compliance as a duty to the King” (*id.*). Though the injunction was in accordance with the feudal land tenure of Sixteenth Century Spain, de las Casas, acting in the role of Christopher Columbus’s

successor as advocate for the indigenes, nevertheless condemned the injunction as “unjust, impious, scandalous, irrational and absurd,” and as “unlawfully void” (Book III, 291), being “based on neither law nor justice” (Book III, 193).

The Spanish settlers abused their rights under King Ferdinand’s injunction, oppressing the indigenes to the extent of devastating the West Indies. The settlements became “bare land, not because the land was barren – in its day it too had been most fertile – but because the Spaniards had depopulated it by killing its inhabitants or engaging in slave trade or by causing the remaining Indians to run far away” (Book III, 199). As the *hidalgos* had defied Governor Columbus’s mandate to toil in construction of the settlements, they again shunned contributing to the labor of sustaining the settlements and instead “depended on the King’s provisions for their sustenance.” As a result, the settlers began dying in large numbers “when the King’s rations drew to an end and illness compounded malnutrition” (Book III, 199). De las Casas writes that “had the Spaniards acted like Christians toward the Indian chiefs, noblemen and common people, they and more than they would have lived in abundance, but they were not worthy of this because they had not fulfilled God’s aim since they had left Spain” (Book III, 200).

Indeed Christopher Columbus’s administration over the West Indies brought abundance and peace. Governor Columbus treated the chiefs and their people with respect and, by the end of his governorship, had succeeded in establishing a settlement in which “things were calm, the land was rich and everyone lived in peace” (Book I, 71). But no sooner had the *hidalgos*, through Bobadilla, deposed Columbus through their treachery, did they undo all he had done; unleash a reign of terror, oppression and genocide against the indigenes; and suffer the poetic – or as de las Casas considered it, divine – justice of seeing to their own demise through illness and starvation.

In addition to pestilence and famine, the Spaniards met death at the hands of indigene uprisings in war. As the years passed, conquistador after conquistador committed atrocities in the lust for gold. In 1516, Joan Bono took slaves and slaughtered those who resisted. For these atrocities, de las Casas dubs Bono “Joan the Bad,” wordplay upon the name “Bono,” meaning “good” (Book III, 221-223). Juan de Grijalva tried to subdue the tribes of the valley of Ulanche in Nicaragua and caused great damage to the indigenes there, as he had in Cuba as well; the Ulanche tribes killed him and his men (Book III, 224).

Spurred by news and samples of wealth Grijalva had found in Nicaragua, Diego Velázquez, then the governor of Cuba, authorized Hernán Cortés to conduct an expedition to Mexico. Velázquez pulled back support due to the advice of his friends not to trust Cortés, but Cortés disobeyed Velázquez’s orders to disband and left for Mexico anyway with his expeditionary

force (Book III, 234). De las Casas accuses Cortés of “evil deeds” (Book III, 231) and “tyranny” (Book III, 227), including the “violent invasion and tyrannical exploit Cortés carried out in Tabasco,” Mexico (Book III, 235). “Cortés killed and Cortés won, he conquered – as they say – many nations, he plundered and stacked gold in Spain and became the Marquis del Valle” (Book III, 237). In defeating Montezuma, the *tlatoani*, or ruler, of Tenochtitlan, Cortés exploited any “enmity among the Indians” he encountered (Book III, 241). De las Casas writes:

Tyrants act with a bad conscience; they lack reason, right and justice, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] says in Book V, Chapter II, of the *Politics*. They take advantage of discords when these exist, or otherwise they create them to divide people and subject them more easily, because they know it is more difficult, sometimes impossible, to subject a people united in conformity, at least it is unlikely that, should they succeed, their tyranny should last

(Book III, 241). Cortés claimed to be aiding certain tribes in righteous causes against others in the wrong, but de las Casas reveals, “Cortés really did not care; his only concern was to find means to achieve his goals: to tyrannize and plunder all, great or small, right or wrong...” (Book III, 241-242).

The indigenes had their heroes and victories as well. De las Casas writes of them, beginning with the *cacique* (chieftain) Enrique, who had been enslaved by “a young scatterbrain named Valenzuela, after being raised by Franciscan monks (Book III, 246). Enrique was “very intelligent” and literate, spoke Spanish well and married the daughter of another chieftain (*Id.*). Valenzuela regularly mistreated Enrique, including stealing his horse. When Enrique protested, Valenzuela raped his wife. In stark contrast to the gubernatorial leadership of Governor Columbus a decade prior, the lieutenant governor responded harshly to Enrique’s appeals to the law, imprisoning him in solitary confinement and ultimately sending him back into the servitude of Valenzuela. Enrique escaped and gained great fame as a leader of renegade indigenes who repeatedly routed Spanish armies and inspired other indigene leaders, such as Ciguayo and the vicious Tamayo, to do the same against incredible odds (Book III, 248-253). So indomitable was Enrique’s rebel band, and so costly was the war against him, that the Spaniards agreed, in exchange for the return of their gold, to recognize henceforth Enrique and his followers “as free men” to live on whichever “part of the island Enrique would choose, and the Spaniards would not disturb them in any way” (Book III, 255). And so, Enrique suspended hostilities in the West Indies. He wrote, “From that day, they left Enrique alone and no harm came to either side until the final peace was made, and this interval lasted a matter of four or five years...” (Book III, 256).

In Chapter 129 of Book III, de las Casas explains how, in the decade after Columbus’s death, the African slave trade commenced in the West Indies. A surgeon named Gonzalo de

Velloso improved upon the primitive sugar-making instruments introduced by Aguilón de la Vega. As de las Casas himself was gaining much ground in this era in liberating the indigenes from enslavement, the Flemish Baron Laurent de Govenot (Lorenzo de Gorrevod) of King Ferdinand's "most private circles," then governor of Bresse in Burgundy in the French Alps, granted a license to an unnamed Spanish settler of the Indies to transport 4,000 Africans to Hispaniola, San Juan, Jamaica and Cuba *circa* 1516. The number of sugar mills increased, and so did the number of grants to traffick enslaved Africans. "As a result, the Portuguese, who had long been capturing black slaves in Guinea, for whom [the Spanish] paid good prices, increased the trade by whatever means possible and the Africans themselves, seeing the demand, warred among themselves to sell slaves illicitly to the Portuguese" (Book III, 258).

Above all, de las Casas condemns his own countrymen for their part in the African slave trade. He writes of the Spaniards, "Thus, we are guilty of the sins committed by the Africans and the Portuguese, not to mention our own sin of buying the slaves" (Book III, 258).

The African slaves of the West Indies did not tolerate their enslavement as the indigenes had before the emergence of such rebel leaders as Enrique. The enslaved Africans soon "escaped their misery by fleeing to the woods and from there cruelly attacked the Spaniards" such that "[n]o small Spanish settlement was safe..." (Book III, 258).

Modeling himself after the heroes of his *History of the Indies*, including, especially, Christopher Columbus, de las Casas relates in the final chapters of his work his own efforts "to apologize [to the indigenes] for the harm caused by Spaniards acting against the King's will, to spread tokens of good will and to protect them against future injury" (Book III, 259). As Christopher Columbus had done before him, de las Casas resorted to petitioning King Ferdinand for means to protect the indigenes. He asked the King to allow him to create a religious brotherhood funded by the royal treasury for two purposes: to re-establish peaceful trade with the indigenes, as Columbus had successfully managed, and to preach the Gospel to them. "This would show the irrationality, iniquity and non-Christianity of the practice now in effect," de las Casas writes, "that is, waging war and subduing people before attempting to preach, as if indeed it was necessary to instill hatred before teaching the Gospel!" (Book III, 259).

De las Casas succeeded in his petition (Book III, 266). Speaking of himself, he writes, "This was one of the most outstanding events that occurred in Spain: that a poor clergyman with no estate and no outside help other than God's, persecuted and hated by everybody (the Spanish in the Indies spoke of him as one who was bent on destroying them and Castille), should come to have such influence on a King...and to be the cause of so many measures discussed throughout this *History*" (Book III, 264). His description of his own success, surely by no

coincidence, parallels his portrayal of the hero of his *History*: Christopher Columbus, the low-born and humble Genoan sailor who was hated by the Spanish *hidalgos* for actively opposing the *encomienda* system and for restraining their greed, sloth and mistreatment of the indigenes during his term as governor, and whose service to the Crown earned him, in death, a hero's burial in the Cathedral of Seville. Though Christopher Columbus had been dead more than a decade by the time of the events closing Book III of *History of the Indies*, the narrative echoes Christopher Columbus's legend and legacy as the Biblical David versus Goliath; the low-born, self-made defender of the downtrodden; and the first civil rights activist of the Western Hemisphere and the New World.

Conclusion

Thus ends the three-volume *History of the Indies* by Bartolomé de las Casas. In this work, de las Casas does not muddle the line between right and wrong, good or evil. He makes no apologies for evil deeds – not even on behalf of his own countrymen – nor does he recount events in a relativistic way. In his *History*, there are heroes and villains on both sides, and their deeds and motives plant them firmly in one category or another. Bobadilla, Ovando, Hojeda, Bono and the young Tamayo are clearly villains – de las Casas spares nothing in criticizing their misdeeds. Conversely, de las Casas, writing as an advocate for the indigenes in his capacity as the official Protector of the Indians, very clearly identifies his heroes, few as they are in this history, especially, Christopher Columbus.

Friar Bartolomé de las Casas's *History of the Indies* makes abundantly clear that the slanderous claims so famously and popularly raised in the Twenty-first Century by the misinformed masses against Christopher Columbus are, in fact, the deeds of the villainous Francisco de Bobadilla and his successors. Columbus not only took no part in these deeds, but actively opposed them, rendering him the first civil rights activist in the Western Hemisphere. Christopher Columbus, the Father of American Civil Rights, dared defy the longstanding *encomienda* system; oppose the knight commander Francisco de Bobadilla and the entitled and greedy *hidalgos*; and, preferring the pen to the sword, fought until his dying breath to persuade the Crown of Spain to undo the harm Bobadilla and his successors had inflicted upon the West Indies.

In recounting the events of the settlement of the West Indies, de las Casas attributes the *Pax Columbiana* of Governor Christopher Columbus's administration and the death and suffering of the Spanish settlers in the post-Columbian era to divine justice. Of the bloody rebellions of the indigenes and Africans, de las Casas writes, "Men take these things as bad luck, but we should

remember that we found the island full of people whom we erased from the face of the earth, filling it with dogs and beasts⁷ whom divine will is perforce turning against us.”

De las Casas's *History* is not the only primary source of historical record of the settlement of the West Indies, but it is most certainly the one most singularly written from the perspective most sympathetic to the indigenes' suffering at the hands of the Spanish *hidalgos*. He notes the historical accounts of others throughout his *Historia*, such as Gonzalo Hernández de Ovieda, who “turned conquistador” and “participated in the cruel tyranny” in Hispaniola. Of Ovieda's historical accounts, de las Casas writes quite contemptuously that Ovieda “sells this to the King as distinguished service...to God and Their Majesties” (Book III, 271). De las Casas boldly notes, “Our Spaniards have destroyed the Indians in two ways, as the *History* shows: disastrous wars which they call conquests and distribution of land and Indians which they present under the veneer of the name *encomienda*. Ovieda took part in both” (*Id.*).

Thus, de las Casas's *History*, written in his capacity as Protector of the Indians, and the closest primary source available to an account written by the indigenes themselves, persistently portrays Christopher Columbus as a paragon and a hero of history – not merely European history, but human history. Where Bobadilla, Cortés, and Ovieda participated in both the “disastrous wars they call conquests” and the “distribution of land and Indians” pursuant to the *encomienda* system, Christopher Columbus not only took part in neither, but did everything in his power – to his ultimate political ruin – to actively oppose and thwart both.

De las Casas consistently views the history of the West Indies through the lens of divine justice. He writes, “God always punishes evil with a greater evil” (Book III, 281). For the evil deeds of Bobadilla, Ovando, Hojeda, Ovieda and the Spanish *hidalgos*, death and destruction befell the Spanish settlers of the Caribbean, as they had inflicted on the indigenes. De las Casas characterizes the conquistadors' deeds in the most superlative of terms, “No judgment more perverse and unjust ever existed on the whole face of the universe than the one I am recording here before God” (Book II, 129).

By contrast, Columbus crowned his prodigious achievement of “discovering” – in the sense of bringing to light to the European world – the existence of the lands of the New World with the extraordinary task of brokering a peaceful coexistence between the two hemispheres. For these worthy deeds, the Western world, on both sides of the Atlantic, enjoyed, during his administration, a *Pax Columbiana*, in which “things were calm, the land was rich and everyone lived in peace” (Book I, 71). Even after his unseating by the treacherous *hidalgos*, Columbus

⁷ De las Casas uses the terms “dogs and beasts” literally in this context, though perhaps also as a double *entendre* to refer the beastly behavior of the Spaniards.

fought for the rights of the indigenes until his dying day. Even posthumously, he actively championed the downtrodden, providing in his will that a significant portion of what little was left of his estate be donated to the poor.

Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, first-hand witness, official Protector of the Indians, and author of the foremost primary history of the West Indies, makes abundantly clear that Christopher Columbus was no villain by the reckonings of any standard, most particularly divine justice, for “divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world until now” (Book I, 17). Rather, de las Casas’s accounts demonstrate indisputably the reason why the Crown of Spain gave Christopher Columbus a majestic burial and monument in the Cathedral of Seville, the Founding Fathers of the United States named the nation’s capital after him, and American President William Henry Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday celebrated annually to this day. That reason is this: the primary historical sources show that by his deeds, his motives and his efforts – realized and unrealized – Christopher Columbus was unmistakably, far and away, and by any standards, the single greatest hero of human rights of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.