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BARTOLOMÉ
DE LAS CASAS

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF
THE DESTRUCTION OF
THE INDIES



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DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

1552

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY NIGEL GRIFFIN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ANTHONY PAGDEN

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PROLOGUE

*of Bishop Brother Bartolomé de Las Casas, or Casaus,
to the most high and most mighty Prince of Spain,
our Lord the Prince Philip*

Most high and most mighty Lord:

As Divine Providence has ordained that the world shall, for the benefit and proper government of the human race, be divided into kingdoms and peoples and that these shall be ruled by kings, who are (as Homer has it) fathers and shepherds to their people and are, accordingly, the noblest and most virtuous of beings, there is no doubt, nor could there in all reason be any such doubt, but that these kings entertain nothing save that which is morally unimpeachable. It follows that if the commonwealth suffers from some defect, or shortcoming, or evil, the reason can only be that the ruler is unaware of it; once the matter is brought to his notice, he will work with the utmost diligence to set matters right and will not rest content until the evil has been eradicated. This would appear to be the sense of the words of Solomon in the Bible: 'A king that sitteth in the throne of judgement scattereth away all evil with his eyes'.³ For, granted the innate and natural virtue of the ruler, it follows that the simple knowledge that something is wrong in his kingdom is quite sufficient to ensure that he will see that it is corrected, for he will not tolerate any such evil for a moment longer than it takes him to right it.

Contemplating, therefore (most mighty Lord), as a man with more than fifty⁴ years' experience of seeing at first hand the evil and the harm, the losses and diminutions suffered by those great kingdoms, each so vast and so wonderful that it would be more appropriate to refer to them as the New World of the Americas –

³ Proverbs 20: 8

⁴ See Introduction, pp. xviii–xxx

kingdoms granted and entrusted by God and His Church to the Spanish Crown so that they might be properly ruled and governed, converted to the Faith, and tenderly nurtured to full material and spiritual prosperity —⁵ I am persuaded that, if Your Highness had been informed of even a few of the excesses which this New World has witnessed, all of them surpassing anything that men hitherto have imagined even in their wildest dreams, Your Highness would not have delayed for even one moment before entreating His Majesty to prevent any repetition of the atrocities which go under the name of ‘conquests’: excesses which, if no move is made to stop them, will be committed time and again, and which (given that the indigenous peoples of the region are naturally so gentle, so peace-loving, so humble and so docile) are of themselves iniquitous, tyrannical, contrary to natural, canon, and civil law, and are deemed wicked and are condemned and proscribed by all such legal codes. I therefore concluded that it would constitute a criminal neglect of my duty to remain silent about the enormous loss of life as well as the infinite number of human souls despatched to Hell in the course of such ‘conquests’, and so resolved to publish an account of a few such outrages (and they can be only a few out of the countless number of such incidents that I could relate) in order to make that account the more accessible to Your Highness.

Thus it was that, when the then bishop of Cartagena and tutor to your Highness, the archbishop of Toledo,⁶ asked me for a copy of my *Account*, I duly gave him one and this he presented to Your Highness. But Your Highness has been fully occupied with journeys, by land and sea, as well as other pressing royal

⁵ The reference is to the Bulls of Donation of 1493 by the terms of which Pope Alexander VI conceded to Ferdinand and Isabella sovereignty over the Americas in exchange for an obligation to convert their inhabitants to Christianity. See Introduction, p. xvi

⁶ Juan Martínez de Silíceo, a rare bird indeed in mid-sixteenth-century Spain. The son of a rural labourer, he rose to be a philosophy professor at the university of Salamanca, tutor-confessor to Prince Philip, bishop of Cartagena (1540), and archbishop of Toledo (1546)

business,⁷ and it may well be that Your Highness has never found the time to read the *Account*, or has perhaps allowed it to slip to the back of your mind. Meanwhile, the boldness and the unreason of those who count it as nothing to drench the Americas in human blood and to dispossess the people who are the natural masters and dwellers in those vast and marvellous kingdoms, killing a thousand million of them, and stealing treasures beyond compare, grow by the day, and, masquerading under false colours, they do everything within their power to obtain further licence to continue their conquests (licence that cannot be granted without infringing natural and divine law and thereby conniving at the gravest of mortal sins, worthy of the most terrible and everlasting punishment). I therefore determined to present Your Highness with this *Short Account*, which is but a brief digest of the many and various outrages and depredations which could and should be recorded. I implore Your Highness to accept it and to read it in that spirit of clemency and royal benevolence with which Your Highness traditionally approaches the works of those of Your Highness's subjects and servants whose only desire is to serve the public good and the interests of the Crown. It is my fervent hope that, once Your Highness perceives the extent of the injustices suffered by these innocent peoples and the way in which they are being destroyed and crushed underfoot, unjustly and for no other reason than to satisfy the greed and ambition of those whose purpose it is to commit such wicked atrocities, Your Highness will see fit to beg and entreat His Majesty to refuse all those who seek royal licence for such evil and detestable ventures, and to put a stop once and for all to their infernal clamour in such a way that nobody will henceforth dare to make such a request nor even to mention ventures of this kind.

This, Your Royal Highness, is a matter on which action is

⁷ This would appear to be a reference to Philip's visit to the Netherlands in 1549, the last time he was ever to leave the Iberian Peninsula

both urgent and necessary if God is to continue to watch over the Crown of Castile and ensure its future well-being and prosperity, both spiritual and temporal. Amen.

[PREFACE]

The Americas were discovered in 1492, and the first Christian settlements established by the Spanish the following year. It is accordingly forty-nine years now since Spaniards began arriving in numbers in this part of the world.⁸ They first settled the large and fertile island of Hispaniola, which boasts six hundred leagues of coastline and is surrounded by a great many other large islands, all of them, as I saw for myself, with as high a native population as anywhere on earth.⁹ Of the coast of the mainland, which, at its nearest point, is a little over two hundred and fifty leagues from Hispaniola, more than ten thousand leagues had been explored by 1541, and more are being discovered every day. This coastline, too, was swarming with people and it would seem, if we are to judge by those areas so far explored, that the Almighty selected this part of the world as home to the greater part of the human race.

God made all the peoples of this area, many and varied as they are, as open and as innocent as can be imagined. The simplest people in the world – unassuming, long-suffering, unassertive, and submissive – they are without malice or guile, and are utterly faithful and obedient both to their own native lords and

8 The *Short Account* was written in 1542; see Introduction, p. xv

9 The island of Hispaniola, comprising today Haiti and the Dominican Republic, is, at its most extensive, some 400 miles from west to east and covers an area of nearly 30,000 square miles. The Spanish league (*legua*) was calculated as one twenty-fifth of a degree of latitude measured on the earth's surface, or about 2.6 miles (compare the 'maritime' or 'mariners' league equal to three minutes or one twentieth of a degree of latitude). In the absence of reliable means of measuring distances accurately, a day's journey on horseback was often calculated, whatever the terrain, at seven *leguas* (Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, translated by Anthony Pagden (London: OUP, 1972, 2nd ed., New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1986, p. 529)

to the Spaniards in whose service they now find themselves. Never quarrelsome or belligerent or boisterous, they harbour no grudges and do not seek to settle old scores; indeed, the notions of revenge, rancour, and hatred are quite foreign to them. At the same time, they are among the least robust of human beings: their delicate constitutions make them unable to withstand hard work or suffering and render them liable to succumb to almost any illness, no matter how mild. Even the common people are no tougher than princes or than other Europeans born with a silver spoon in their mouths and who spend their lives shielded from the rigours of the outside world. They are also among the poorest people on the face of the earth; they own next to nothing and have no urge to acquire material possessions. As a result they are neither ambitious nor greedy, and are totally uninterested in worldly power. Their diet is every bit as poor and as monotonous, in quantity and in kind, as that enjoyed by the Desert Fathers. Most of them go naked, save for a loincloth to cover their modesty; at best they may wrap themselves in a piece of cotton material a yard or two square. Most sleep on matting, although a few possess a kind of hanging net, known in the language of Hispaniola as a hammock.¹⁰ They are innocent and pure in mind and have a lively intelligence, all of which makes them particularly receptive to learning and understanding the truths of our Catholic faith and to being instructed in virtue; indeed, God has invested them with fewer impediments in this regard than any other people on earth. Once they begin to learn of the Christian faith they become so keen to know more, to receive the Sacraments, and to worship God, that the missionaries who instruct them do truly have to be men of exceptional patience and forbearance; and over the years I have time and again met Spanish laymen who have been so struck by the natural goodness that shines through these people that they

10 'Hammock' (*hamaca* in Spanish) is one of a dozen or so words common to a great number of European languages – among them potato, tomato, hurricane – which derive from the Taino language of Santo Domingo

frequently can be heard to exclaim: 'These would be the most blessed people on earth if only they were given the chance to convert to Christianity.'

It was upon these gentle lambs, imbued by the Creator with all the qualities we have mentioned, that from the very first day they clapped eyes on them the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold, or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days. The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly. We shall in due course describe some of the many ingenious methods of torture they have invented and refined for this purpose, but one can get some idea of the effectiveness of their methods from the figures alone. When the Spanish first journeyed there, the indigenous population of the island of Hispaniola stood at some three million; today only two hundred survive. The island of Cuba, which extends for a distance almost as great as that separating Valladolid from Rome, is now to all intents and purposes uninhabited;¹¹ and two other large, beautiful and fertile islands, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, have been similarly devastated. Not a living soul remains today on any of the islands of the Bahamas, which lie to the north of Hispaniola and Cuba, even though every single one of the sixty or so islands in the group, as well as those known as the Isles of Giants and others in the area, both large and small, is more fertile and more beautiful than the Royal Gardens in Seville and the climate is as healthy as anywhere on earth.¹² The native population, which once numbered some five hundred thousand, was wiped out by forcible expatriation to the island of Hispaniola, a policy adopted by the Spaniards in an endeavour

¹¹ The maximum east-west extent of Cuba is approximately 700 miles; the distance from Valladolid to Rome some 750

¹² The Royal Gardens (*Huerta del Rey*) were an extensive pleasure ground lying outside the Seville city walls

to make up losses among the indigenous population of that island. One God-fearing individual was moved to mount an expedition to seek out those who had escaped the Spanish trawl and were still living in the Bahamas and to save their souls by converting them to Christianity, but, by the end of a search lasting three whole years, they had found only the eleven survivors I saw with my own eyes.¹³ A further thirty or so islands in the region of Puerto Rico are also now uninhabited and left to go to rack and ruin as a direct result of the same practices. All these islands, which together must run to over two thousand leagues, are now abandoned and desolate.

On the mainland, we know for sure that our fellow-countrymen have, through their cruelty and wickedness, depopulated and laid waste an area which once boasted more than ten kingdoms, each of them larger in area than the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. The whole region, once teeming with human beings, is now deserted over a distance of more than two thousand leagues: a distance, that is, greater than the journey from Seville to Jerusalem and back again.

At a conservative estimate, the despotic and diabolical behaviour of the Christians has, over the last forty years, led to the unjust and totally unwarranted deaths of more than twelve million souls, women and children among them, and there are grounds for believing my own estimate of more than fifteen million to be nearer the mark.

There are two main ways in which those who have travelled to this part of the world pretending to be Christians have uprooted these pitiful peoples and wiped them from the face of the earth. First, they have waged war on them: unjust, cruel, bloody and tyrannical war. Second, they have murdered anyone and everyone who has shown the slightest sign of resistance, or even of wishing to escape the torment to which they have

¹³ On this expedition, mounted by Pedro de Isla, who would later become a Franciscan friar, see Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, book II, chapter 45

subjected him. This latter policy has been instrumental in suppressing the native leaders, and, indeed, given that the Spaniards normally spare only women and children, it has led to the annihilation of all adult males, whom they habitually subject to the harshest and most iniquitous and brutal slavery that man has ever devised for his fellow-men, treating them, in fact, worse than animals. All the many and infinitely varied ways that have been devised for oppressing these peoples can be seen to flow from one or other of these two diabolical and tyrannical policies.

The reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed. They have set out to line their pockets with gold and to amass private fortunes as quickly as possible so that they can then assume a status quite at odds with that into which they were born. Their insatiable greed and overweening ambition know no bounds; the land is fertile and rich, the inhabitants simple, forbearing and submissive. The Spaniards have shown not the slightest consideration for these people, treating them (and I speak from first-hand experience, having been there from the outset) not as brute animals – indeed, I would to God they had done and had shown them the consideration they afford their animals – so much as piles of dung in the middle of the road. They have had as little concern for their souls as for their bodies, all the millions that have perished having gone to their deaths with no knowledge of God and without the benefit of the Sacraments. One fact in all this is widely known and beyond dispute, for even the tyrannical murderers themselves acknowledge the truth of it: the indigenous peoples never did the Europeans any harm whatever; on the contrary, they believed them to have descended from the heavens, at least until they or their fellow-citizens had tasted, at the hands of these oppressors, a diet of robbery, murder, violence, and all other manner of trials and tribulations.

HISPANIOLA

As we have said, the island of Hispaniola was the first to witness the arrival of Europeans and the first to suffer the wholesale slaughter of its people and the devastation and depopulation of the land. It all began with the Europeans taking native women and children both as servants and to satisfy their own base appetites; then, not content with what the local people offered them of their own free will (and all offered as much as they could spare), they started taking for themselves the food the natives contrived to produce by the sweat of their brows, which was in all honesty little enough. Since what a European will consume in a single day normally supports three native households of ten persons each for a whole month, and since the newcomers began to subject the locals to other vexations, assaults, and iniquities, the people began to realize that these men could not, in truth, have descended from the heavens. Some of them started to conceal what food they had, others decided to send their women and children into hiding, and yet others took to the hills to get away from the brutal and ruthless cruelty that was being inflicted on them. The Christians punched them, boxed their ears and flogged them in order to track down the local leaders, and the whole shameful process came to a head when one of the European commanders raped the wife of the paramount chief of the entire island.¹⁴ It was then that the locals began to think up ways of driving the Europeans out of their lands and to take up arms against them. Their weapons, however, were flimsy and ineffective both in attack and in defence (and, indeed, war in the Americas is no more deadly than our jousting,

¹⁴ Guarionex; see below, p. 19

or than many European children's games) and, with their horses and swords and lances, the Spaniards easily fended them off, killing them and committing all kind of atrocities against them.

They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting: 'Wriggle, you little perisher.' They slaughtered anyone and everyone in their path, on occasion running through a mother and her baby with a single thrust of their swords. They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Saviour and the twelve Apostles, or tie dry straw to their bodies and set fire to it. Some they chose to keep alive and simply cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: 'Take this letter' – meaning that their sorry condition would act as a warning to those hiding in the hills. The way they normally dealt with the native leaders and nobles was to tie them to a kind of griddle consisting of sticks resting on pitchforks driven into the ground and then grill them over a slow fire, with the result that they howled in agony and despair as they died a lingering death.

It once happened that I myself witnessed their grilling of four or five local leaders in this fashion (and I believe they had set up two or three other pairs of grills alongside so that they might process other victims at the same time) when the poor creatures' howls came between the Spanish commander and his sleep. He



They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive.

gave orders that the prisoners were to be throttled, but the man in charge of the execution detail, who was more bloodthirsty than the average common hangman (I know his identity and even met some relatives of his in Seville), was loath to cut short his private entertainment by throttling them and so he personally went round ramming wooden bungs into their mouths to stop them making such a racket and deliberately stoked the fire so that they would take just as long to die as he himself chose. I saw all these things for myself and many others besides. And, since all those who could do so took to the hills and mountains

in order to escape the clutches of these merciless and inhuman butchers, these mortal enemies of human kind trained hunting dogs to track them down – wild dogs who would savage a native to death as soon as look at him, tearing him to shreds and devouring his flesh as though he were a pig. These dogs wrought havoc among the natives and were responsible for much carnage. And when, as happened on the odd occasion, the locals did kill a European, as, given the enormity of the crimes committed against them, they were in all justice fully entitled to, the Spanish came to an unofficial agreement among themselves that for every European killed one hundred natives would be executed.

THE ISLANDS OF PUERTO RICO AND JAMAICA

IN 1509, the Spanish, with the same purpose in mind as they had when they landed on Hispaniola, found their way to the two verdant islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica, both of them lands flowing with milk and honey.³⁴ Here they perpetrated the same outrages and committed the same crimes as before, devising yet further refinements of cruelty, murdering the native people, burning and roasting them alive, throwing them to wild dogs³⁵ and then oppressing, tormenting and plaguing them with toil down the mines and elsewhere, and so once again killing off these poor innocents to such effect that where the native population of the two islands was certainly over six hundred thousand (and I personally reckon it at more than a million) fewer than two hundred survive on each of the two islands, all the others having perished without ever learning the truths of the Christian religion and without the benefit of the Sacraments.

34 These expeditions of Juan Ponce de León to Puerto Rico and Juan de Esquivel to Jamaica are discussed at greater length in Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, book II, chapters 46-55

35 Spanish mastiffs proved one of the most feared and most effective weapons of the conquest. The only dogs known to the indigenous inhabitants of the Antilles were the ancestors of the modern Chihuahua, very small and edible

CUBA

In 1511 the Spanish set foot on Cuba. This island, which, as we have said, stretched for a distance as great as that which separates Valladolid from Rome,³⁶ was home to a great many people. The Spanish set about treating them all in the manner we have already described, only even more cruelly. A number of extraordinary incidents took place here. One of the leading local lords, a cacique³⁷ who went by the name of Hatuey, had fled to the island from Hispaniola with many of his people in order to escape the miseries that arose from the inhuman treatment meted out to the natives of that island by the Spanish. When he heard that the Christians had now switched their attention to Cuba, he gathered most if not all his people about him and addressed them, saying: 'You know that rumour has it that the Christians are coming to this island, and you already know what they have done to the lord so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so. What they did on Haiti (which is another name for Hispaniola) they will do again here. Does any of you know why it is that they behave in this way?' And when they answered him: 'No, unless it be that they are innately cruel and evil', he replied: 'It is not simply that. They have a God whom they worship and adore, and it is in order to get that God from us so that they can worship Him that they conquer us and kill us.' He had beside him, as he spoke, a basket filled with gold jewellery and he said:

³⁶ See above, p. 11. The Cuba expedition was under the command of Diego Velázquez; see Introduction, p. xxi

³⁷ The Arawak term *cacique* simply designated a tribal leader, but it came to be used by the Spanish administration all over the Americas to describe Amerindian chieftains who were believed to be inferior in rank to 'kings' and 'princes' (*principales*) and who were frequently employed as tax-gatherers

‘Here is the God of the Christians. If you agree, we will do *areitos* (which is their word for certain kinds of traditional dance) in honour of this God and it may be that we shall please Him and He will order the Christians to leave us unharmed.’ They all shouted: ‘So be it, so be it.’ And after they had danced before this god until they were dropping from exhaustion, the lord Hatuey addressed them once again, saying: ‘Mark you: if we keep this God about us, they will kill us in order to get their hands on Him. Let us throw Him into this river.’ And they were all agreed, and so they threw the god into a great river nearby.

This same cacique and lord knew the Spaniards and their ways only too well and he fled from them once they arrived on the island of Cuba, only resorting to outright resistance when they actually tracked him down. But, eventually, he was captured and, although his only crime was that he had tried to escape the clutches of these cruel and iniquitous monsters because he knew only too well that they were out to kill him and that, if he did not defend himself, they would hound him and all his people to death, the Spaniards’ verdict was that he should be burned alive. Once he was tied to the stake, a Franciscan friar who was present, a saintly man,³⁸ told him as much as he could in the short time permitted by his executioners about the Lord and about our Christian faith, all of which was new to him. The friar told him that, if he would only believe what he was now hearing, he would go to Heaven there to enjoy glory and eternal rest, but that, if he would not, he would be consigned to Hell, where he would endure everlasting pain and torment. The lord Hatuey thought for a short while and then asked the friar whether Christians went to Heaven. When the reply came that good ones do, he retorted, without need for further reflection, that, if that was the case, then he chose to go to Hell to ensure that he would never again have to clap eyes on those cruel

³⁸ Details of this story may be found in Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, book III, chapters 21 and 25

brutes. This is just one example of the reputation and honour that our Lord and our Christian faith have earned as a result of the actions of those 'Christians' who have sailed to the Americas.

On one occasion, when the locals had come some ten leagues out from a large settlement in order to receive us and regale us with victuals and other gifts, and had given us loaves and fishes and any other foodstuffs they could provide, the Christians were suddenly inspired by the Devil and, without the slightest provocation, butchered, before my eyes, some three thousand souls – men, women and children – as they sat there in front of us. I saw that day atrocities more terrible than any living man has ever seen nor ever thought to see.

Only a few days later, with the whole island still reeling at news of this massacre and acting on assurances I obtained from our commander,³⁹ I sent messages to all the nobles of Havana province, as they had all heard of me and knew I could be trusted, assuring them that there was no reason to be afraid and that no harm would befall them if they came to meet us. When we arrived in the province, twenty-one local lords and caciques did indeed make up a welcoming party. But the commander immediately seized them, thereby breaking the promise I had given, and was all for burning them alive the very next day, saying that there was nothing wrong with doing so because, given time, they were bound to do something that merited such punishment. I had a difficult job keeping them from the stake, but in the end they did all make good their escape.⁴⁰

Once all the inhabitants of this island found themselves in the same hopeless predicament as had those on Hispaniola – that is, they were either enslaved or foully murdered – some began to

39 Pánfilo de Narváez (?1480–1528). He had participated with Diego Velázquez in the conquest of Cuba and in 1520 led an army to Mexico in an unsuccessful attempt to wrest control of the country from Hernán Cortés (see below, p. 48). In 1527 he captained an ill-fated expedition to Florida and the following year was the first European to land on the coast of what is today Texas

40 Details of the massacre of Caonao are given at greater length in Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, book III, chapters 29–30

flee into the hills while others were in such despair that they took their own lives. Men and women hanged themselves and even strung up their own children. As a direct result of the barbarity of one Spaniard (a man I knew personally) more than two hundred locals committed suicide, countless thousands in all dying in this way.

There was one royal official on the island who, when he was allotted three hundred natives, worked them so hard that, at the end of three months, only thirty – that is to say, just one tenth of the original number – were still alive, the other two hundred and seventy having perished down the mines. Later, he received another consignment of much the same number, or even more, and he saw them off, too. The more he received, the more he killed, until eventually he himself died and the Devil took his soul.

During the three or four months I was there, more than seven thousand children died of hunger, after their parents had been shipped off to the mines, and I saw many other horrors also.

It was later decided to hunt down the natives who had fled into the mountains, and the subsequent hunting parties were responsible for carnage beyond belief. Thus it was that the whole of the island was devastated and depopulated, and it now affords, as we discovered on a recent visit, a moving and heart-rending spectacle, transformed, as it has been, into one vast, barren wasteland.