

The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities

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THE TERM "BLACK LEGEND" has long existed in the lexicon of Latin American history. Despite its wide acceptance and use, however, it rests on premises whose validity has never been seriously questioned. This essay attempts to test these premises, to clarify the meanings attached to the phrase, and to determine its historical accuracy.

If the essence of the Black Legend is defamatory criticism of Spain and the Spaniards, then the Legend has a history much older than the term itself. Sverker Arnoldsson¹ has shown that from the fourteenth century an unfavorable opinion of Spaniards prevailed among Italians as a result of the personal, economic, political, and cultural relations between the two peoples; and that the nationalist and religious struggles of the sixteenth century provoked similar attitudes toward Spain in Germany and the Netherlands. Arnoldsson makes no systematic effort to determine how much the Spaniards deserved this unfavorable opinion, but he concedes that the Spanish soldiery in Germany and the Netherlands did behave with cruelty, rapacity, and licentiousness.

In 1552-1553 Bartolomé de las Casas published in Seville nine treatises severely critical of the Spanish Conquest in America, including the famous *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. Royal fear of a colonial feudalism, more dangerous to the Crown than the shattered power of Indian kings and states, helps to explain the remarkable tolerance which allowed publication of this exposé. But while the Emperor Charles could allow a domestic debate on Spain's Indian policies in the full sight and hearing of Europe, such a debate became unthinkable under his successor, Philip II. From his accession to the throne (1556), the dominant motive of Philip's Indian policy was to augment the royal revenues in order to overcome the Crown's desperate financial crisis. Simultaneously

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¹ Sverker Arnoldsson, *La leyenda negra, estudios sobre sus origenes* (Göteborg, 1960).

the influence of Las Casas and his Indianist movement virtually disappeared from the Spanish court.² His immense prestige served for a time to prevent the publication of such attacks upon him as that of Captain Vargas Machuca, who claimed that a "Huguenot translation" of the *Very Brief Account* spread lies about Spain and her work in the Indies.³ But Spanish sensitivity to foreign criticism of Spain's colonial record grew as her power in the Old and the New World declined. After 1600 the memory of Las Casas fell under a heavy cloud.

Only one edition of Las Casas' *Very Brief Account* appeared in Spain during the seventeenth century; appropriately enough, that edition was published in Barcelona during the Catalán revolt of 1646 against Castilian imperialism. In 1659 the Aragonese Inquisition banned the *Very Brief Account*, and the ban was later extended

² A contrary impression may be formed by the reader of Lewis Hanke's *Aristotle and the American Indians* (Chicago, 1959), which studies in rich detail the debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas in Valladolid in 1550-1551 and the ramifications of that debate. "Despite all differences of opinion and practice," writes Hanke, "the crown pursued a steady course during the years after Valladolid in the direction of the doctrine set forth by Las Casas—friendly persuasion, and not general warfare—to induce the Indians to listen to the faith" (p. 86). One may justly ask: If doctrine and practice differed, how can one speak of the crown's pursuing "a steady course"—save on paper? In fact, the period after 1573, the year of the promulgation by the Council of the Indies of the general ordinance which, according to Hanke, put the ideas of Las Casas on the law books, saw no cessation of "war by fire and sword" (*guerra a fuego y sangre*) and slavehunting against the Indians. For the history of one such war, see Philip W. Powell, *Soldiers, Indians, and Silver. The Northward Advance of New Spain, 1550-1660* (Berkeley, 1952).

Despite the lip service paid to Las Casas' ideals by the general ordinances of 1573, the essence of Philip's Indian policy was profoundly anti-Lascasian. During his reign Indian tribute and labor burdens increased and Indian living standards declined. See, amid a mass of evidence pointing to that conclusion, the testimony of spokesmen for the Franciscan and Dominican orders in France V. Seholes and Eleanor Adams (eds.), *Documentos para la historia del México colonial* (7 vols. to date, México, 1954-1961), VII: *Cartas del Licenciado Jerónimo Valderrama y otros documentos sobre su visita al gobierno de Nueva España, 1563-1565*, 267-271. The policy found ideological expression in the well-known efforts of Viceroy Francisco de Toledo of Peru to discredit both the ancient Inca rulers of Peru and Las Casas' doctrines. Another indication of the way the wind was blowing is the venomous comment of the Visitador Valderrama that the Dominicans of New Spain who opposed his tribute proposals had suckled their doctrine at the pap of Las Casas (*ibid.*, 46). Marcel Bataillon rightly speaks of "the anti-Lascasian reaction" and of "the inevitable decline of the Indian policy of Las Casas," a process accompanied and hastened by a growing rapprochement between clergy and colonists. See Bataillon's illuminating "Comentarios a un famoso parecer contra Las Casas," and "La herejía de Fray Francisco de la Cruz y la reacción antilascasiana," in his *Études sur Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Paris, 1965).

³ Lewis Hanke, *Bartolomé de Las Casas, Bookman, Scholar, and Propagandist* (Philadelphia, 1952), 50.

to all of Spain. A typical contemporary Spanish comment on the book was the observation of the jurist and bibliographer Antonio de León Pinelo that foreigners valued it not for its learning, but for its strictures on the Conquistadores, "diminishing and destroying their exploits, exaggerating and elaborating their cruelties with a thousand synonyms: this delights foreigners."⁴ The celebrated jurist Solórzano, in his monumental *Política indiana* (1647), could still dissent from Las Casas' views with expressions of respect for the learned Bishop of Chiapas, but the historian Antonio de Solís, whose book on the conquest of Mexico was published in 1684, harshly scolded Las Casas for his alleged services to Spain's enemies.⁵

Eighteenth-century Spanish intellectuals continued to defend their country's colonial record against foreign attack and to deplore the influence of Las Casas' *Very Brief Account*. But their concessions to foreign critics, the reasonable tone of their arguments, and their diminishing appeals to religion reflected Enlightenment influence. The Spanish counterattack subsided further in the century that began with the liberal Cortes of Cádiz and ended with the Generation of '98 and its disillusioned self-criticism. Then it revived in the twentieth century. Facing a growing threat from the forces of liberalism and radicalism, Spanish conservatives and reactionaries developed a historical defense of the traditional order. They explained that Spain declined and lost her empire because she abandoned the spiritual values of true *Hispanidad*, values which found their fullest expression in the Spain of Charles V and Philip II, and because she embraced liberalism, rationalism, democracy, and other pagan, divisive doctrines. In the bizarre conception of some Rightist historians, the Bourbon king Charles III and Las Casas alike became instruments of a corrupting, debilitating liberalism. Meanwhile, conservative circles in Latin America, alarmed by the growth of *Indigenismo* and a variety of social revolutionary movements, identified themselves more closely with a Hispanic colonial past which they viewed through nostalgic eyes. These conditions help to explain the twentieth-century upsurge of a historical revisionism predicated on a Black Legend that falsified Spain's past and particularly her work in America.

A conservative Spanish Crown official, Julián Juderías, coined

⁴ Antonio de León Pinelo, *Tratado de confirmaciones reales* [1630] (Buenos Aires, 1922), 222.

⁵ Antonio de Solís, *Historia de la conquista de Méjico* (Buenos Aires, 1947), 229.

the term "Black Legend." His book, *La leyenda negra* (1914), expressed a deep sense of grievance. According to Juderías, the outside world had long viewed Spain and her past through prisms that distorted the Spanish reality. In twelve years his book went through seven editions. It was followed in both Spain and Latin America by many other apologies full of recriminations. To this tradition belong such prominent names as Carlos Pereyra, Constantino Bayle, Rómulo D. Carbia, José Vasconcelos, Salvador de Madariaga, and Ricardo Levene. Finally in 1963 the venerable Ramón Menéndez Pidal published *El Padre Las Casas, su doble personalidad*, in some respects the climactic work of this school.

Meanwhile, in the United States a more moderate revisionism, also favorable to Spain but less polemical in tone, developed among historians writing on colonial Latin America. This movement had nineteenth-century antecedents, for Yankee historians of that century regarded the Spanish Empire with kindlier eyes than is commonly supposed. There is no doubt, however, that the superb scholarship and readable style of Edward G. Bourne's *Spain in America* (1904) gave impetus to the reaction against what is now called the Black Legend by laying, in Charles Gibson's words, "a positive assessment of early Hispanic colonization before the American public."⁶ That reaction gained strength as a result of other studies. Arthur Aiton's *Antonio de Mendoza* (1927) presented an attractive portrait of a hard-working, efficient viceroy; and Irving Leonard's *Books of the Brave* (1949) demonstrated that Spanish restrictions on colonial reading were far less stringent and effective than had been supposed. The monographs of John Tate Lanning showed the high level of some Latin American thought during the Enlightenment. Lewis Hanke also contributed to the rehabilitation of Spain's colonial policies with his studies on the history of ideas, notably *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (1949) and *Aristotle and the American Indians* (1959).

Hanke's works contain a certain paradox. The central figure in Hanke's studies on intellectual history, the figure whose greatness as a humanist, historian, and anthropologist he has so ably and amply documented, is Las Casas, the supposed source of the Black Legend. Yet Hanke's views on Spain's colonial policies have a striking affinity with the attitudes of Las Casas' foes, who championed a "white legend" of Spanish altruism and tolerance. Gibson rightly observes that Hanke's writings "have had a major influence in stressing Spanish

⁶ Charles Gibson and Benjamin Keen, "Trends of United States Studies in Latin American History," *American Historical Review*, LXII (July 1957), 857.

imperialism's benevolent and legitimate side."⁷ Not without reason, in his lengthy diatribe against Las Casas Menéndez Pidal praised Hanke's "brilliant defense" of the freedom of speech existing in sixteenth-century Spain and Spanish America⁸—a freedom that some of us find so exiguous, so restricted as to cast doubt on the applicability of the phrase, as commonly understood, to that time and place. Not even Bourne ever made a statement so sweepingly favorable to Spain as Hanke's claim in his *Aristotle and the American Indians* that "no other nation made so continuous or so passionate an attempt to discover what was the just treatment for the native peoples under its jurisdiction, as the Spaniards."⁹

⁷ Charles Gibson, *The Colonial Period in Latin American History* (Washington, D. C., 1958), 14.

⁸ Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *El Padre Las Casas, su doble personalidad* (Madrid, 1963), 390. The reference presumably is to Hanke's article on "Free Speech in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America," *HAHR*, XXVI (May 1946), 135-149. A reading of the article reveals that this "free speech" applied only to the ventilation of Indian questions and "barely outlasted the sixteenth century." Compare John H. Elliott's discussion in his *Imperial Spain, 1469-1716* (New York, 1963), 214-221, of "the imposition of orthodoxy" on mid-sixteenth-century Spain and its effect of "forcing a rich and vital society into a strait-jacket of conformity"; and the testimony of a contemporary, Juan de Mariana, concerning the climate of fear and suspicion created by the Inquisition (*ibid.*, 216).

⁹ In my edition of a relation of Alonso de Zorita, *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico* (New Brunswick, 1963), 293, I called this statement "hyperbole" and deplored Hanke's failure to take into account the clash of political and economic interests that underlay the dispute over the Indian—a failure, I wrote, that "gives his writings a curiously abstract air." In the sequel, Professor Hanke published an article, "More Heat and Some Light on the Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America," *HAHR*, XLIV (August 1964), 293-340, in which he subjected to vigorous criticism the recently published book on Las Casas by Menéndez Pidal, and the views on Las Casas of the Colombian scholar Juan Friede. More briefly, Hanke objected to my suggestion that a *leyenda blanca*, a "white legend of Spanish altruism and tolerance" was emerging from writings such as his, and especially to my use of the word "hyperbole" to describe his statement concerning Spain's Indian policy. "Is Keen really convinced," Hanke asked, "that other colonial powers such as Belgium, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, or Portugal made 'as continuous or so passionate attempt to discover what was the just treatment for the native peoples under its jurisdiction as the Spaniards'?"

For some evidence of "White Legend" attitudes in Hanke's writings, see, above, my criticisms of the treatment of Philip's Indian policy in *Aristotle and the American Indians* and of Hanke's article on "free speech" in sixteenth-century Spanish America. Hanke's query begs the question of how serious an effort Spain actually made in behalf of her Indian subjects. If the seriousness of that effort is measured, not by the volume of legislation or of debate on the subject, but by such pragmatic criteria as Indian population trends and living standards, Spanish imperialism comes off no better from the test than any other imperialism—English, French, Dutch, Belgian, or North American. The colonial record of all Western peoples, it seems to me, has been singularly dismal, for the quantity and kind of cruelty inflicted on native peoples have varied mainly

This revisionist scholarship has exerted a marked influence on the teaching and writing of Latin American history in the United States. Rare is the textbook that does not contain the obligatory denunciation of the Black Legend. For example, in his widely used *History of Latin America* the late Hubert Herring declared that “the leyenda negra of Spanish perfidy with which American and English school-boys have been regaled” had reared a formidable barrier to understanding of the life of Spain and Portugal. To make the necessary rebuttal of the Black Legend, Herring offered such sweeping propositions as the following: “Spain did not destroy great Indian populations: there never were great populations . . . Spain did not destroy ancient systems of noble moral standards: the Indians were masters of gluttony, drunkenness, sexual excesses, and refined torture.”¹⁰

Meanwhile few United States historians have seriously come to grips with the Black Legend, so as to define it and determine its validity. One of these is Charles Gibson. It is possible to trace a certain progression in Gibson’s thought on this subject in three of his writings: a pamphlet on *The Colonial Period in Latin American History* (1958); *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (1964); and *Spain in America* (1966).

In his pamphlet Gibson defined the Black Legend as “the accumulated tradition of propaganda and Hispanophobia according to which Spanish imperialism is regarded as cruel, bigoted, exploitative, and self-righteous in excess of reality.” This definition poses several problems—to begin with, the well-known difficulty of determining what is and what is not propaganda. Moreover, the motives behind a statement (or the vehemence with which it is made) have little bearing on its validity, which rests in the last analysis on its correspondence with the facts of the case. The word “Hispanophobia” creates other difficulties, since the Black Legend tradition has included in every age Spaniards like Las Casas and the poet Manuel Quintana, who certainly did not hate their country. The phrase “in excess of reality” requires a demonstration which Gibson could not supply in the brief compass of his pamphlet. To complicate the matter, Gibson went on to observe: “The difficulty lies in the fact that the Spaniards were cruel, bigoted, exploitative, and self-righteous, though not

with the opportunities presented and with the diverse backgrounds of the conquerors and the conquered.

¹⁰ Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America* (3rd ed., New York, 1967), 152-153.

consistently and not in any simple way." Here Gibson appeared to grant the substantial truth of the so-called "legend."¹¹

In the conclusion to *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, Gibson made further concessions to the Black Legend. "The Black Legend," he wrote, "provides a gross but essentially accurate interpretation of relations between Spaniards and Indians. . . . It is insufficient in its awareness of the institutions of colonial history. But the substantive content of the Black Legend asserts that the Indians were exploited by Spaniards, and in empirical fact they were." Gibson proceeded to draw a sombre picture of an Indian population reduced by multiple labor and tribute burdens and by usurpation of its land to the barest margin of existence—a population so demoralized that it found relief from its misery in drinking on a scale rarely seen in history.¹²

Gibson returned to the Black Legend in his latest book, *Spain in America*. Here he admitted that the Spaniards had slaughtered thousands of Indians and subjected the rest to forced labor. He even suggested that the traditional indictment of Spain's colonial policies had understated the extent and variety of Spanish cruelty by overlooking such forms of oppression as usurpation of Indian lands. "The Black Legend," he wrote, "by no means exhausts the history of Spanish cruelty." Having made these admissions, Gibson went on to strike a neat balance between the Black Legend and a White Legend, which stressed "that Spaniards brought Christianity to the Indians, eliminated human sacrifices and cannibalism from their society, and offered them draft animals, plows, and other material benefits." Both legends, wrote Gibson, were accurate; both were one-sided and selective in content.¹³ But in his *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, with its sombre conclusion concerning the "deterioration of a native empire and civilization," Gibson did not mention how the Aztecs benefited from conversion to Christianity, abolition of human sacrifice, and so on. Clearly he regarded these reforms as largely irrelevant to the problems of adjustment which the Aztecs faced under Spanish rule, and irrelevant they were.

Let us turn to the supposed responsibility of Las Casas for the origin and diffusion of the Black Legend. First of all, how accurate were the facts and figures in his *Very Brief Account*? Herring states the conventional position on these questions. Las Casas exaggerated and gave absurd statistics. His book "furnished fuel for Spain's

¹¹ Gibson, *The Colonial Period in Latin American History*, 13-14.

¹² Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (Stanford, 1964), 403-409.

¹³ Charles Gibson, *Spain in America* (New York, 1966), 136-137.

enemies, who forthwith made capital of Spain's iniquities for their own ends. It laid a solid foundation for the 'Black Legend' which has colored the writings of the English, Dutch, Germans, and Americans ever since." From Herring's account, Las Casas emerges with the familiar aspect of a well-meaning humanitarian, admirable in his zeal, but lacking serious standards of accuracy.

It remained for Ramón Menéndez Pidal to say of Las Casas what no critic of Las Casas' own time had dared to say. Study and reflection had led Menéndez Pidal to the conclusion that Las Casas was a "paranoiac," with the fixed idea that "everything done in the Indies by Columbus and the Spaniards was diabolical and must be annulled and done all over again, whereas everything done by the Indians was good and just."¹⁴ Menéndez Pidal surveyed Las Casas' figures of Indian deaths and his recital of Spanish atrocities and then dismissed them with the contemptuous phrase "la enormización lascasiana."

A few comments are in order. With regard to Las Casas' figures of Indian deaths, John Fiske pointed out long ago that "the arithmetic of Las Casas is . . . no worse than that of all the Spanish historians of that age. With every one of them the nine digits seem to have gone on a glorious spree."¹⁵ In our own times of concern for statistical precision it is not uncommon, as Marcel Bataillon has remarked, for journals of different political views to vary by as much as 200% in their counts of the attendance at a demonstration. To be sure, Las Casas may not have been strictly accurate in his overall figures of 15 to 20 million Indian deaths in the Conquest. Nevertheless, some modern estimates of the pre-Columbian population in America (e.g., Woodrow Borah's suggestion of more than 100 millions)¹⁶ lend a new plausibility to Las Casas' statistics. For the rest, we have the testimony of independent witnesses, including some who cannot be charged with sympathy with Las Casas, and these confirm

¹⁴ Menéndez Pidal, *El Padre Las Casas*, xiv-xv. Menéndez Pidal's book provoked a storm of controversy which has not yet subsided. See, in particular, the impressive rebuttals of Lewis Hanke, "More Heat and Some Light on the Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America"; Manuel Giménez Fernández, "Sobre Bartolomé de Las Casas," in *Actas y Memorias, XXXVI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, España, 1964* (Seville, 1966), IV, 71-129, which more than hints that political pressures and debts explain Don Ramón's anti-Lascasian writings; and Marcel Bataillon, in his introduction to *Études sur Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Paris, 1965).

¹⁵ John Fiske, *The Discovery of America* (2 vols., Boston, 1892), II, 441 n.

¹⁶ Woodrow Borah, *The Historical Demography of Aboriginal and Colonial Latin America: An Attempt at Perspective* (Berkeley, n.d., mimeographed), 6. But the controversy continues; for a reaffirmation of older, much smaller estimates, see Ángel Rosenblat, *La población de América en 1492* (México, 1967).

the very heavy mortality among Indians from causes other than epidemic disease. Bataillon,¹⁷ for example, cites the estimate of the conquistador and encomendero Rodrigo Lozano that the civil wars of 1544-1548 in Peru caused the death of "more than half," probably "three-fifths" of the Indians who were forced to serve the Spaniards as carriers.

We are on firmer ground when we turn to particular events related in the *Very Brief Account*. Menéndez Pidal ridicules Las Casas' stories of exhausted Indian carriers, chained by the neck, whose heads the Spaniards severed from their bodies so they might not have to stop to untie them. For Menéndez Pidal these tales are the products of the imagination of Las Casas or of his informants. But Bataillon brings together a group of witnesses who confirm this "sinister practice"; they include the chronicler Cieza de León, the royal official Pedro de la Gasca, and Gonzalo de Pizarro. Still others were the exceptionally well-informed judge Alonso de Zorita, who reported the same practice in his *Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*; and, for the seventeenth century, Gabriel Fernández de Villalobos, Marqués de Varinas, an eyewitness of such crimes in Venezuela.¹⁸ Testimony on the general reliability of the sources used for the *Very Brief Account* comes from the late Manuel Giménez Fernández, in a preliminary report on a study that he and his students were making of the sources and parallel texts of the treatise. Giménez Fernández concluded that the facts cited by Las Casas were in great part drawn from reports submitted to the Spanish monarchs and the Council of the Indies.¹⁹ Future archival research will undoubtedly provide further collaboration of statements made by Las Casas in the *Very Brief Account*.

Herring further makes the familiar claim that the *Very Brief Account* "laid a solid foundation for the 'Black Legend' which has colored the writings of the English, Dutch, Germans, and Americans ever since." In his luminous discussion of Las Casas, Alberto Salas acquitted him of this charge for two reasons. First, Las Casas never considered the use that Spain's enemies might make of his treatises. Second, he leveled charges of cruelty not only against Spaniards, but against Portuguese and the German conquerors in Venezuela, whom

¹⁷ Introduction to *Études sur Bartolomé de Las Casas*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹⁸ Alonso de Zorita, *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico*, 210; Gabriel Fernández de Villalobos, *Vaticinio de la pérdida de las Indias y Mano de Relox* (Caracas, 1949), 30.

¹⁹ "Sobre Bartolomé de Las Casas," 110 n. Fray Agustín Dávila Padilla made the same point in his *Historia de la fundación y discurso de la provincia de Santiago de México, de la Orden de Predicadores* [1596] (México, 1955), 312.

he described as “more cruel than tigers and ravenous wolves.” Had he known of the crimes by English, Portuguese, and French colonizers, he would not have criticized them any more or less vigorously because they were foreigners. As Salas correctly observes, Las Casas was entirely free from nationalist sentiment.²⁰

An eighteenth-century French Dominican long ago absolved Las Casas of responsibility for Spain’s ill repute with an argument that has lost none of its cogency. In his *Histoire générale de l’Amérique*, Father Touron refused to believe that the Dutch were ignorant of Spanish cruelties in the Indies before reading Las Casas’ book. “The tyranny of the Conquistadors had been too widely bruited in both the Old and the New Worlds, men of good will had complained too loudly for the past forty or thirty years, for the Dutch to be unaware of facts so generally known throughout Europe.”²¹ Obviously, too, the Dutch had ample cause to be aware of the Spanish capacity for cruelty without information on events in America. Sverker Arnolds-son comments in his study of Black Legend origins that the portrayal of the Spaniards in Dutch propaganda as rapacious, cruel, and lascivious had a “fearful basis of reality.”²²

Certainly the *Very Brief Account* of Las Casas helped to deepen and diffuse more widely the evil reputation that Spain already had acquired in Europe, but to say that the book “laid a solid foundation for the Black Legend” of Spanish cruelty in the Indies is to oversimplify a complex process that still awaits a thorough investigation. Consider the facts. The *Very Brief Account* was published in Seville in 1552; the first foreign translation (Dutch) appeared in 1578, followed by French (1579), English (1583), and German (1599) versions. Much earlier, however, the Italian traveler Girolamo Benzoni had published his *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* (Venice, 1565), with its moving accounts of Spanish cruelty to the Indians.

A simple style, much anecdotal detail, and a general impression of candor and compassion contributed to the Benzoni book’s great popularity. It soon appeared in Latin (1573) and in a French (1578) translation by the Huguenot Urbain Chauveton, his party’s knowledgeable specialist on American affairs, who provided the book with elaborate annotation. Bataillon calls attention to the fact that the famous French surgeon Ambroise Paré and the essayist Montaigne cite Benzoni and Gómara—not Las Casas—in their denunciations of

²⁰ Alberto M. Salas, *Tres cronistas de Indias* (México, 1959), 275-276.

²¹ Antoine Touron, *Histoire générale de l’Amérique depuis sa découverte* (14 vols., Paris, 1769-1770), II, 373.

²² Arnolds-son, *La leyenda negra*, 138.

Spanish misdeeds in the Indies.²³ Apparently it was Montaigne's reading of Gómara, not Benzoni, that moved him to an explosion of wrath on this subject. Gilbert Chinard contrasts the playful tone of Montaigne's essay *On Cannibals* with the angry mood of the essay *On Coaches*. Both dealt with the American Indians, but the first was written in 1580, the second in 1588. What had happened in the meantime? Montaigne had read Gómara and learned from the lips of a Spaniard of the actions of the Conquerors in America.²⁴

Gómara was not the only imperialist chronicler, however, who stoked Black Legend fires. The Englishman Richard Hakluyt cited Las Casas and Benzoni in his attack on Spanish cruelty to the Indians, but he also quoted a statement by Oviedo, "another of their own historiographers and Captain of the Castle of Sancto Domingo." Oviedo declared that Spaniards who had come to the Indies, "having left their consciences and all fear of God and man behind them, and having played the parts not of men but of dragons and infidels, and having no respect for humanitie, have been the cause that many Indians that peradventure might have been converted and saved, are dead by divers and sondrie deaths."²⁵ Clearly the Black Legend had more than one or two "authors."

References to the Black Legend almost invariably proclaim foreign rivals' envy of Spain's American riches and their desire to take over her empire as the principal reasons for the creation and diffusion of the Legend. Hubert Herring approvingly quoted the statement of "a sagacious Spaniard," Salvador de Madariaga, that "love of tribe made it necessary for England, France, and Holland to blacken Spain; for the richest and most majestic empire the world had ever seen was for three hundred years the quarry out of which England, France, and Holland built their own empires. Spain had to be wrong so that France, Holland, and England, and later the United States could be right."²⁶

The French historian Pierre Chaunu recently restated this thesis. He lamented that it was Las Casas' unhappy fate to be exploited after his death by Spain's unscrupulous enemies. The *Very Brief Account*, wrote Chaunu, "was seized as an arm by Spain's adversaries at the height of the struggle which, in Europe, the Atlantic Ocean, America, and soon in the Indian Ocean and the Far East, opposed to the

²³ Bataillon, *Études sur Las Casas*, xxxviii.

²⁴ Gilbert Chinard, *L'exotisme américain dans la littérature française au XVI^e siècle d'après Rabelais, Ronsard, Montaigne, etc.* (Paris, 1911), 209-210.

²⁵ E. G. R. Taylor (ed.), *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts* (London, 1935), II, 309-310.

²⁶ Herring, *History of Latin America*, 64.

beati possidentes of the first Iberian wave of European expansion the second wave of robust late-comers." Foreign translations of Las Casas' treatises became weapons "in the polemical arsenal of imperialisms hostile to the Spanish Empire," "the cynical arms of psychological warfare." Thus they were turned to ends having no relation to "the noble motive that had inspired them."²⁷

Chaunu offered a statistical analysis concerning the publication history of the *Very Brief Account* and three other major tracts by Las Casas. He easily demonstrated that the great majority of editions of the four tracts appeared not in Spain but abroad. Chaunu also showed that the distribution of editions by country up to 1700 corresponded to "the hierarchy of Spain's enemies," with the greatest number of translations published in Holland, followed by France and England. Chaunu's analysis also revealed a correlation between the fortunes of the struggle between Spain and her enemies and the rise and wane of foreign interest in Las Casas' treatises.

Chaunu did not and could not prove, however, that the foreign translations of Las Casas were used exclusively or even principally for ignoble imperialist ends, as weapons "in the polemical arsenal of imperialisms hostile to the Spanish Empire." A careful examination of the circumstances surrounding specific editions of Black Legend titles suggests that nationalist aspirations and religious and other ideological conflicts with Spain of the Counter-Reformation, sometimes even an authentic humanitarianism, as well as the expansionist interests of merchant capitalist groups, all played their part in the complex process of the diffusion of the Black Legend. Such an examination quickly reveals Chaunu's error in claiming that the foreign translations of Las Casas' treatises had no relation to "the noble motive that inspired them."

The first major Black Legend work published outside Spain was Benzoni's *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* (Venice, 1565). It would require a powerful imagination to explain the appearance of this book in terms of Venetian colonial appetites for America. Furthermore, this travel account of a Milanese who passed fourteen years in the Indies is not as uncompromisingly hostile to the Spaniards as is sometimes supposed. Benzoni praised the Spanish Dominicans in the Indies for their efforts in behalf of the natives. He called the New Laws "a most holy and glorious law [sic.] truly, vouchsafed by a divine emperor." He spoke warmly of Alonso López de Cerrato,

²⁷ Pierre Chaunu, "Las Casas et la première crise structurelle de la colonisation Espagnole (1515-1523)," *Revue Historique* CCXXIX (January-March 1963), 61-73.

president of the audiencia of Guatemala. "I can testify that throughout India there never was a better judge, nor one who practiced good precepts more strictly, obeying the royal commands, always endeavouring that the Indians should not be ill-treated by any Spaniard." Benzoni even complimented Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza of New Spain for his prudence in not attempting to enforce the New Laws against the overwhelming opposition of the colonists. Curiously enough, Benzoni appears poorly informed concerning Las Casas, whose efforts to establish a colony on the coasts of Venezuela he criticized as a scheme to fish for pearls.²⁸

Las Casas found no Italian translator in the sixteenth century. This may be attributed in large part to the fact that after the treaty of Cateau Cambresis (1559) the Spaniards exercised direct or indirect control over every part of Italy except the Venetian Republic and the Duchy of Savoy. Beginning in 1616, however, a series of Las Casas' tracts in translation came off Venetian presses, including the *Very Brief Account*, his brief against Indian slavery, and the summary of his dispute with Sepúlveda.²⁹ In their prefaces and notes the editors or translators denounced Spanish cruelty to the Indians, drew analogies between the plight of the Indians and the condition of European peoples under Spanish rule, and endorsed Las Casas' doctrines of peaceful conversion. Ascribing this Italian use of Las Casas to colonial rivalry would be absurd. Still, this publishing activity certainly reflected the deadly enmity between Spain and Venice, an enmity which the author of a standard history of the Republic accounts for by "the tolerant temper of Venice in spiritual matters, its independence of the Papacy, its friendly relations with Protestant England and the heretical Netherlands, its opposition to the Jesuits, and its indulgence to the Jews. . . ."³⁰ It is difficult to comprehend why the principles of toleration, national independence, and peaceful conversion advocated by the Italian editors of Las Casas' writings are less noble than Las Casas' own ideals.

Perhaps the first French contributions to the Black Legend were Urbain Chauveton's French and Latin translations of Benzoni. One may find a hint of colonial appetite in Chauveton's assurance that

²⁸ Girolamo Benzoni, *History of the New World* (London, 1857), 57, 168, 47-50.

²⁹ For these and for all other foreign editions of Las Casas' writings cited in this paper, see the invaluable work of Lewis Hanke and Manuel Giménez Fernández, *Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1474-1566. Bibliografía crítica y cuerpo de materiales para el estudio de su vida, escritos, actuación y polémicas que suscitaron durante cuatro siglos* (Santiago de Chile, 1954).

³⁰ William Carew Hazlitt, *The Venetian Republic: Its Rise, its Growth, its Fall* (2 vols., London, 1915), II, 161.

the French, because of their kindlier ways, would have better success than Spaniards or Portuguese in the work of Indian conversion.³¹ But Chauveton's hostility toward Spain reflected above all the religious-political cleavage that dominated France during the sixteenth century. French published opinion of the Spanish Conquest tended to divide neatly along religious lines. If the Huguenot Chauveton denounced Spanish cruelty to the Indians, Spain found an ardent defender in the Franciscan André Thevet, royal cosmographer. Thevet poked fun at the good Sieur Chauveton for letting himself be taken in by the lies of Benzoni, who, claimed Thevet, never set foot in America. The French Franciscan turned the same suspicious eye on Las Casas' *Brief Relation*, calling it a small collection of lies falsely attributed to a Spanish bishop. And Thevet poured scorn on the humanitarians, "the crack-brained men who in their counting houses and studies give themselves up to the contemplation of Platonic ideas."³²

Chaunu's imperialist thesis and Madariaga's "love of tribe" are even less adequate to explain the passion with which Michel de Montaigne denounced the conquest of Mexico and Peru. Montaigne did not even mention Spain by name in his essay *On Coaches*. Instead he indicted all of European civilization for its failure to approach the Indians in a spirit of "brotherly fellowship and understanding," for not respecting the rights of weaker peoples to life and liberty.³³

Since Chaunu assigns a special importance to the Dutch use of Las Casas, allegedly for imperialist ends, we must examine the circumstances under which the first translations of Las Casas appeared in the Netherlands. In 1578 a volume containing translations of the *Very Brief Account* and two other tracts by Las Casas was published in Holland. At that date the Dutch Revolution was fighting for life—a revolution that began, according to Pieter Geyl,³⁴ by "resistance to the non-national tendencies of Philip's rule, to the Spanish troops, to the excessive centralization, and to the religious persecution." To speak of imperialist motives in connection with the first Dutch edition of Las Casas is to fly in the face of reality. The propagandist aim of the book was clearly to promote Dutch unity and fighting spirit by showing the merciless, unjust nature of an enemy who committed

³¹ *Histoire nouvelle du Nouveau Monde . . .* (Paris [or Geneva?], 1579), 215.

³² André Thevet, *Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres grecs, latin, et payens* (Paris, 1584), 377-379.

³³ Donald Murdock Frame (ed.), *The Complete Works of Montaigne* (Stanford, 1957), 694-695.

³⁴ Pieter Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands, (1555-1609)* (2nd ed., London, 1958), 99.

such great atrocities in both the Old and the New World. The same motives figured in the bitter attack on Spain's Indian policies by William of Orange in his *Apologia* (1580). The year before, a French edition of the *Very Brief Account* appeared in Antwerp, then in rebel hands. This edition seems to have been intended to gain the support of the French-speaking Walloons in the struggle for independence.

To be sure, once independence had been more or less firmly secured, Dutch merchant capitalism began to display expansionist tendencies. The first Dutch piratical expeditions to Brazil and northern South America date from the last decade of the sixteenth century; the Dutch West Indian Company was organized in 1621. A possible early instance of Dutch use of the *Very Brief Account* for the promotion of colonial designs is an Amsterdam edition (1620) whose preface refers to the liberation of the Indians from their oppressors with Dutch assistance.³⁵ No doubt commercial and colonial appetites had much to do with the large number of Dutch editions of *Las Casas* that appeared in the course of the seventeenth century. But to assume that no other motives (religious, ideological) played a part in the appearance of these editions is to accept a very simplistic interpretation of history.

Chaunu's conviction regarding a structural link between the foreign editions of *Las Casas* and colonial rivalry finds no more support in the case of England. The Russian scholar Afanasiev has shown that the successive English editions of *Las Casas' Very Brief Account*: 1583, 1625, 1656, 1689, 1699, 1745, coincided either with episodes of Anglo-Spanish tension in which colonial and commercial questions dominated, or with internal political crises caused by the danger of a Stuart restoration and the "Papist" menace.³⁶ In the case of the second group of editions, the colonial issue played at most a secondary role.

No name is more important in the diffusion of the Black Legend than that of Theodore de Bry. A Walloon born in Liege, De Bry left Flanders about 1570, probably to escape the "Spanish Fury," and moved to Frankfurt, then ruled by the Calvinist Frederick III of the Palatinate. There De Bry established a publishing house that specialized in handsomely made, profusely illustrated travel works. He published Latin and German editions of Benzoni; and his sons brought out Latin and German editions of *Las Casas' Very Brief*

³⁵ For a detailed examination of this edition, see V. L. Afanas'ev, "Literaturnoe Nasledstvo Bartolome de Las-Kasasa i nekotorye Voprosy Istorii ego Opublikovaniia," in I. R. Grigulevich (ed.), *Bartolome de Las-Kasas. K Istorii Zavoevaniia Ameriki* (Moscow, 1966), 208-210.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-219.

Account (1598, 1599), with the famous illustrations that carried to every corner of Europe the message of Spanish cruelty. Chaunu asserts that all the Dutch, German, and Latin editions of Las Casas in the period 1594-1599 were “manifestly inspired by the United Provinces to hold (*assurer*) their clientele.”³⁷ In this pronouncement Chaunu was evidently taking his cue from Rómulo Carbia—with no more proof than Carbia.³⁸

If this were indeed the case, we might expect the *Praefatio ad Lectorem*, which introduces the Latin edition of the *Very Brief Account*, to be unrelentingly anti-Spanish in spirit. To be sure, the brothers Jean Theodore and Jean Israel de Bry used almost the same words as Las Casas when they declared that the Spaniards in the Indies had committed such cruelties that they could more fittingly be called tigers and lions than men. But they disavowed any intent to defame the whole Spanish nation. They recognized that good and bad men were to be found in every people and region. Indeed, they affirmed that “if we enjoyed the freedom and license that the Spaniards enjoyed in America, with no superior magistrate to inspire fear and hold them in check, we would doubtless be equal to the Spaniards in savagery, cruelty, and inhumanity.”

The brothers not only commended Las Casas, but complimented the Emperor Charles V, “of happy memory,” for his efforts to liberate the Indians from a “harsh and intolerable slavery.” Their sole aim, proclaimed these devout Calvinists, was to make men understand the terrible fruits of that root of all evil, the love of money, and to eradicate that passion from their hearts. Whoever searched his conscience seriously would find it rooted in his heart.³⁹ Thus the De Bry brothers rejected the notion of a unique Spanish wickedness or cruelty.⁴⁰ Nothing in the preface to their 1598 edition of the *Very*

³⁷ Chaunu, “Las Casas et la première crise structurelle de la colonisation espagnole,” 72.

³⁸ According to Carbia, with the De Bry editions of Las Casas “the campaign of Dutch defamation against Spain reached its climax.” *Historia de la leyenda negra hispano-americana*, 72.

³⁹ *Praefatio ad Lectorem*, in *Narratio Regionum Indicarum Per Hispanos quosdam devastatarum verissima . . .* (Frankfort, 1598).

⁴⁰ Theodore de Bry rejected the notion of a unique Spanish cruelty or of a special guilt attached to the Spanish nation even more forcefully in his preface to the 1594 Latin edition of Benzoni. Citing the many frauds, usuries, and abuses committed against the poor in all parts of Europe, and the cruelties committed by French, German, and Italian soldiers and by soldiers of other nationalities in their wars, he wrote: “Let us not be so hasty in condemning the Spaniards, but let us rather examine ourselves to see whether we are any better.” Solórzano found the passage favorable enough to Spain to cite in his defense of the Spanish Conquest against foreign critics. Juan Solórzano y Pereyra, *Política indiana* (5 vols., Madrid, 1930), I, 127.

Brief Account justifies the claim that it was designed as "a cynical arm of psychological warfare" or as a weapon "in the polemical arsenal of imperialisms hostile to the Spanish Empire."

Three tentative conclusions would seem to be justified. In the first place, the so-called Black Legend is substantially accurate, if stripped of its rhetoric and emotional coloration, and with due regard for its failure to notice less dramatic forms of Spanish exploitation of the Indians (land usurpation, peonage, and the like). Consequently it is no legend at all, and the term lacks scientific descriptive value. Acceptance that the traditional critique of Spanish colonial practices was valid in no way implies superior practices by other imperialisms. Nor does it preclude an equal stress on Spanish colonial achievements, ranging from the devoted labors of many clergy in the fields of scholarship, education, and protection of the natives to the cultural flowering that occurred in some parts of the region during the eighteenth century.

Secondly, all major corollaries of the Black Legend concept are open to serious questioning. These include the primary responsibility of Las Casas for the rise and diffusion of the Legend, the decisive importance of colonial rivalry in its use by foreigners, and the virtual domination of historical literature by Black Legend attitudes before the time of Bourne.

Finally, the concept of a Black Legend does not illuminate the subject of Spanish-Indian relations, but rather serves to confuse and distort those relations. In particular it has served to engender a thoroughly misleading counterlegend of Spanish altruism and benevolence to the Indians. Part of this White Legend substitutes the texts of laws and pious expressions of goodwill, generally unimplemented, for the reality of Indian-Spanish relations. Another part stresses genuine cultural advances (such as the abolition of human sacrifice and cannibalism) that are largely irrelevant to the operation and effects of the Spanish colonial system. Still another part denigrates Indian lifeways with reckless generalizations that show little understanding of aboriginal culture and modern anthropological viewpoints.

A traditional function of historical scholarship has been to exercise myths wherever they have occurred. Let us have done with legends about the Spanish Empire, both black and white.