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How Cruel Were the Spaniards?

The Spanish word “conquistador” means “conqueror” and has been used loosely to describe Spaniards who came to the New World during the colonial period in search of wealth and Indian labor. Unfortunately, the word has been applied to Spaniards who came as missionaries to convert the natives to Christianity, as explorers to chart the coasts, as farmers to cultivate the soil, as ranchers to raise cattle and sheep, or even as naturalists to study the fauna and flora (1).

Curiously, the English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, and Russians came for similar purposes, but have escaped the label of “conquerors.” The English are usually remembered as colonists or settlers, while the French, Portuguese, and Dutch are often thought of as merchants or traders (2). The Russians, as aggressive as they may have been against the Eskimos or Aleuts, are seldom referred to as “conquerors.” It is the Spaniards—because of events surrounding the Spanish Inquisition, the notoriety of the so-called “Black Legend” (3), and the widespread attention given to the conquest of the Aztecs and Incas—who became the avaricious “conquistadores.” The cruelest deeds of individual Spaniards have become emblematic of a people and have been described in detail in various monographs, given ample space in general textbooks, and popularized in movies and television for American audiences stretching from Cape Horn to the Bering Strait. Even the spread of smallpox among Indians of the Northwest Coast has been attributed to Spaniards without supporting evidence (4).

Were the Spanish conquistadores of the sixteenth century cruel? Of course. How would it be possible to conquer other peoples without acts of cruelty? But cruelty of one nation toward another, or one group of people toward another, must be evaluated in terms of time and place. One could ask, “Were the Indians of the sixteenth century cruel?” Of course. Some engaged in human sacrifice, slavery, infanticide, and other forms of human behavior that we regard today as “cruel.” We could also ask about cruelty in modern times—the bombing of cities, the destruction caused by nuclear attacks, torture of political prisoners, and random shootings of innocent victims. A study of areas conquered by other Europeans, or methods of punishment throughout Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries can also be helpful in understanding degrees of cruelty. Sailors, petty criminals, and even schoolboys were routinely flogged or subjected to treatment considered extremely cruel by

today’s standards. Even though comparisons cannot give the answers, they can put our discussion into a broader framework. But because of space limitations it will be possible to give only a few examples to confirm or dispel the “conquistador image” as applied to all Spaniards of the colonial period.

From first contact in the Caribbean, Spaniards uprooted natives from their homelands, forced them to give up their treasures, and placed them in captivity. Spaniards who were victims of conquest by Muslims over much of their history, and common sailors who were struggling to find some kind of wealth after weeks of deprivation on board ship were not disposed to act kindly. Countless Indians died during the first years of contact, although mainly from disease. Other Spaniards in the Caribbean, like the Dominican priest Antonio de Montesinos, spoke out against mistreatment of Indians as early as 1511 (5).

When rumors of Indian riches on the mainland reached the Spanish headquarters in the West Indies, the men of the conquest followed their dreams of instant wealth. They soon found that the civilizations of both the Aztecs and the Incas were sedentary, wealthy, powerful, and in control of subjugated peoples. Centuries of warfare in the name of a “true” religion on the Iberian Peninsula—the well-known Reconquista—shaped the Spanish course of action. With the defeat of these New World empires, the conquistadores leveled pyramids and built churches in their place. With the arrival of priests and missionaries, they introduced the Catholic faith and set up schools and hospitals. This pattern of conquest continued, although with less fruitful economic gain, throughout the sixteenth century. Exploratory expeditions covered the southern part of the present United States from Florida to California, tolerating or eliminating Indians as Spaniards deemed necessary (6). It must be kept in mind, however, that the English and French in early America also fought against natives when necessary and introduced them to gunpowder and distilled spirits, both of which were capable of destroying life and health (7).

By the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, new circumstances prevailed within the areas of New Mexico and Texas that can serve as case studies and give a different viewpoint about the Spanish presence in America. No obvious wealth had been found in the southern regions of today’s United States. Jesuits built missions in Sonora, southern Arizona, and Baja California while Franciscan missionaries moved into Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, and Texas (8). From the beginning, however, the conflict between church and

state—between missionaries protecting the natives and those wishing to exploit Indian lands and labor—led to a different kind of struggle.

The Spanish Crown, in its *Royal Orders for New Discoveries* of 1573, decreed that Indians should be taught “to live in a civilized manner, clothed and wearing shoes...given the use of bread and wine and oil and many other essentials of life—bread, silk, linen, horses, cattle, tools, and weapons, and all the rest that Spain has had. Instructed in the trades and skills with which they might live richly” (9). The Franciscans, as well as other missionaries, made tremendous sacrifices to carry out those instructions in some inhospitable areas. Some considered themselves an antidote to the cruel treatment leveled against natives by other Spaniards. In New Mexico, despite difficulties of distance, extremes of heat and cold, lack of material support, and struggles with civilian and military authorities, Franciscans founded eleven missions and baptized some ten thousand Indians in New Mexico by 1616. By 1629, numbers had increased to twenty-five missions, fifty priests, and over sixty thousand Indians by their count. As “politically incorrect” as these actions may seem to certain groups at present, we cannot judge missionary motivations by today’s standards. Franciscans believed that conversion was necessary to save souls and assure a person’s entry into heaven.

Nevertheless, nonreligious authorities wanted Indians to work in textile mills and leather factories, serve as soldiers against warring tribes, and otherwise work for the benefit of the government. Even though Europeans also worked long hours in fields, factories, and mines, Indians were unaccustomed to such structured servitude for foreign overlords (10). Both church and state restricted Indian freedom, suppressed native customs and religion, and inadvertently introduced disease (11). In New Mexico, these excesses led eventually to the most disastrous event in the province’s colonial history—the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, in which the Indians succeeded in expelling the Spaniards from their territory for more than a decade (12). Some Pueblo Indians in New Mexico had benefitted from Spanish occupation, however, and fled with them; others welcomed the Spaniards back. If Spaniards were cruel, not all Indians saw them that way. Like natives in other parts of the Spanish empire, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico also found protection in the Hispanic legal system through the office of the *protector de indios*. The protector, whose duty was to “aid and defend” the natives against the Spaniards, often played a major role in guiding them through judicial procedures with varying degrees of success (13).

The occupation of California little resembled earlier contacts in New Mexico because of differences in the nature of the Indians, the purposes of Spanish explorers, and the Spaniards’ prospects for wealth or exploitation of natives in that remote setting. As early as 1542 Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo reported that on San Salvador [Catalina] Island, “a great number of Indians emerged from the bushes and grass, shouting, dancing, and making signs that they should land.” The Spaniards “gave them beads and other articles, with which they were pleased” (14). In 1602 Sebastián Vizcaino visited the same island and the natives “came alongside without the least fear and came on board our ships, mooring their own....[Vizcaino] received them kindly and gave them some presents” (15).

The next important contact did not take place until 1769, when the expedition of Captain Gaspar de Portolá and Father Junípero Serra arrived to found the first mission at San Diego. Lieutenant Pedro Fages of the Catalonian Volunteers reported on their friendly interchange with the natives, “We have made very good friends with them and we are never lacking some little rabbits, hares, and fish that they bring to us. We gave them some glass beads, but they value very highly any kind of cloth” (16).

By 1775 Franciscan missionaries had founded five missions in Alta California, and Juan Bautista de Anza from the presidio of Tubac, south of Tucson, Arizona, opened an overland route connecting the mission fields of Sonora and California. In late October 1775, however, several hundred nonmission Indians at San Diego revolted against the Spaniards, attacked and burned the mission, and killed the resident priest along with several others. Father Junípero Serra, who had sought protection for Indians against the exploitation by soldiers that apparently provoked the revolt, asked the viceroy for leniency for one of the Indians responsible. “Give him to understand, after a moderate amount of punishment, that he is being pardoned in accordance with our law, which commands us to forgive injuries; and let us prepare him, not for death, but for eternal life” (17).

In California, as throughout the Spanish empire, the Franciscans supported the rights of Indians when they conflicted with demands of Spanish settlers. In 1786 Father Francisco Palóu complained to the viceroy that the proximity of the civilian town of San José to Mission Santa Clara had caused harm to the Indians. There had been a mingling of mission and town herds of cattle, and the settlers’ livestock had damaged the mission corn fields. Moreover, the settlers scandalized the Indians, committed adultery, and threatened those husbands who protested. They asked that a fixed boundary between the mission and town be drawn so that further conflict could be avoided. The matter, taken seriously by all concerned, was settled to the satisfaction of the missionaries and their charges in 1801.

The mission system remains a controversial topic among California historians. Some stress that Indians benefitted if they learned to live in settled communities, cultivate the soil, tend cattle and sheep, ride horses, weave cloth, and adapt to European ways. Others emphasize that native groups who had previously enjoyed independence were forcibly reduced to subject peoples, rigidly controlled by a foreign nation, and decimated by European diseases (18). For their part, the Franciscans believed that Indians had to be separated from their aboriginal culture or they would not learn the ways of Christians. Missionaries used both rewards and punishments. Certainly individual friars were sometimes guilty of excesses in forms of punishment, but their motives were to improve the lives of their charges and give their souls salvation. In several ways, they subjected Indians to the same forms of discipline as they meted out to Spanish students in Franciscan schools (19). With hindsight it might be said that Indians, who in the long run proved powerless to resist European encroachment upon their lands throughout the New World, may have been better off under Spanish missionaries than they would have been under civilians or the military forces of other conquering nations (20).

Finally, it must be remembered that some Spaniards came to the New World to study rather than subjugate Indians. Spanish naturalists of the late eighteenth century sought to learn about native customs from a purely scientific viewpoint. They surveyed native villages much as a sociologist does today, taking note of natural resources, social customs, goods produced, food supplies, kinds of housing, religious beliefs, medicinal plants, and even musical instruments. This kind of investigation reflected the enlightened learning found in Europe during the eighteenth century (21). Although defense of the empire and trade considerations were the Crown's motives in sponsoring these expeditions, the advancement of science played a major role (22).

José Mariano Moziño, a naturalist/physician born in Mexico, lived with the Mowachaht Indians of Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island for more than four months in the spring and summer of 1792, learning the language and becoming familiar with their customs, religion, and history. A trained scientist, Moziño had no agenda to save souls or to achieve economic gains, and so he recorded the Mowachahts' customs as objectively as he could. He found it difficult, for example, to give their religion an adequate name but noted that "the natives recognize the existence of a God Creator, Preserver of all things" as well as "another malign deity, author of wars, of infirmities, and of death" (23). Dionisio Alcalá Galiano and Cayetano Valdés of the Spanish navy, in command of the exploring expedition of the *Sutil* and *Mexicana*, respectfully described the Indians in the area of Monterey, California, in their journal of 1792: "[The Indians] show signs of tenderness toward their children, and like sensitive people, they never leave them, not even in their most tiring occupations, but rather they are frequently seen loaded down

with their little ones. They are loving mothers, and they are not indifferent nor unfaithful wives." (24).

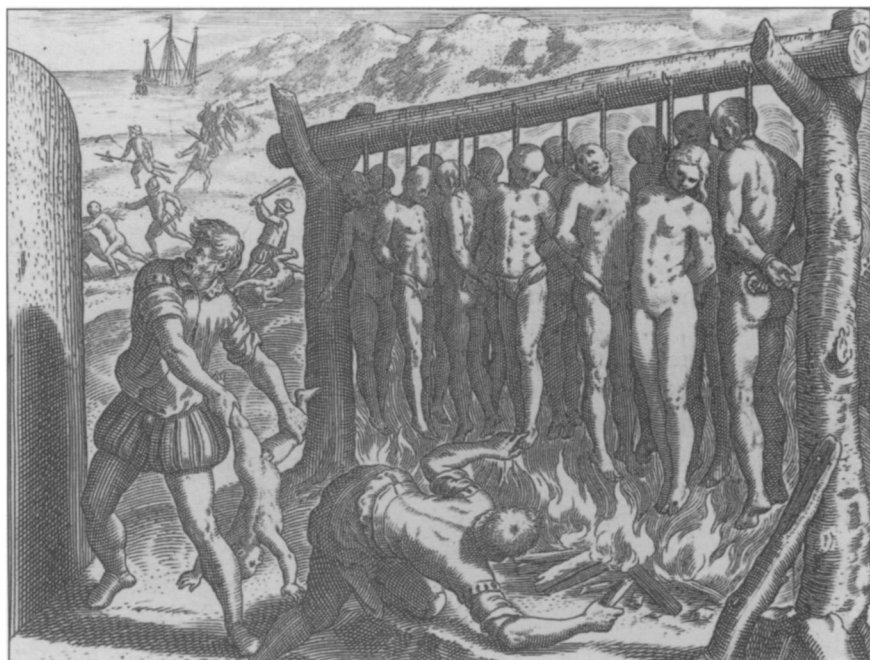
How cruel then, were the Spaniards? If we are talking about the first Spaniards in many areas—adventurers, seekers of wealth at any cost, and illiterate fighters imbued with the idea that territories inhabited by pagan peoples were fair game—the conquistadores and their armies were cruel. Later land, mine, and factory owners were also cruel in terms of exploitation of native labor. Even missionaries, who had the purest of motives, often displaced, estranged, and forced Native Americans into resistance or outright rebellion. On the other hand, there were always those who protected Indians from these excesses, and there were often advantages to Spanish settlement in contrast to colonization by other European nations. Spaniards built schools and hospitals for Native Americans from the earliest days of the conquest and brought new crops, livestock, and tools.

In the long run, interactions between Spaniards and Indians have resulted, not in the annihilation of either group, but ultimately in the development of racially and ethnically merged peoples living in the Americas and a portion of what is now the United States. In the main, Spanish society absorbed Indians rather than excluded them. As historian Philip Wayne Powell wrote in 1971: "Spain's three centuries of tutelage and official concern for the welfare of the American Indian is a record not equaled by other Europeans in overseas government of peoples of lesser, or what were considered lesser, cultures. For all the mistakes, for all the failures, for all the crimes committed...in its overall performance Spain, in relation to the American Indian, need offer no apology to any other people or nation" (25).

We cannot go back and change history to suit present standards, but we can try to understand actions and motives by both players and recorders of past events. We can understand only what we know, and we can know only what we learn. But, most importantly, we can learn only by keeping an open mind and not falling victim to half-truths or prejudices developed over time. □

Endnotes

1. As the result of an intense reexamination of Native American issues during the Columbus quincentennial, Spaniards underwent tremendous criticism for having been the first to exploit the resources of the New World, for mistreatment of indigenous peoples, and even for opening the way for other Europeans to follow in their footsteps. See, for example, Kirkpatrick Sale, *Conquest of Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1990). An insightful summary of the issues can be found in Frederick P. Bowser, "Columbus Transformed (Again)," in *Columbus, Confrontation, Christianity: The European-American Encounter Revisited*, ed. Timothy O'Keefe (Los Gatos, CA: Forbes Mills Press, 1994), 211-28.
2. Even when the epithet pirate or privateer is given to those who preyed on Spanish shipping, harmful treatment of Spaniards does not seem to constitute cruelty.



Powerful scenes by the Frankfurt publisher and engraver Theodore de Bry, such as this illustration for Bartolome de las Casas, *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1598), helped fix the image of extreme Spanish cruelty in the minds of other Europeans. (Courtesy of the DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, F1411.C462.)

3. A scathing denunciation of Spanish mistreatment of Indians during the earliest days of the conquest was written by the Dominican priest Bartólome de las Casas to force the Spanish sovereign Carlos V to promote laws to protect the native inhabitants. As a result, the New Laws of 1542, with safeguards for Indians, were passed but not always followed. The writings of Las Casas were quickly translated into English, Dutch, French, and German and used as anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish propaganda, becoming known as "The Black Legend." For a reevaluation of the Black Legend, see Nicolas Kanellos, *Thirty Million Strong: Reclaiming the Hispanic Image in American Culture* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1998).
4. See Christon I. Archer, "Whose Scourge? Smallpox Epidemics on the Northwest Coast," in *Pacific Empires: Essays in Honour of Glyndwr Williams*, ed. by Alan Frost and Jane Sampson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 165-91.
5. See Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 17-18.
6. The expeditions of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and Hernando de Soto committed unnecessarily cruel acts towards Indians during the early 1540s in their relentless search for gold and other riches. The Pacific explorers under Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542, on the other hand, attempted to deal with the natives on the basis of friendship.
7. Even the racist concept of "Manifest Destiny"—the popular belief in promoting nineteenth-century American westward expansion (i.e., conquest) at the expense of Native Americans and Hispanic settlers—has never received the same degree of criticism as that leveled against Spain during the discovery period. A number of writings of the mid 1800s extol the virtues of an "Anglo-Saxon" civilization in contrast to that of Spaniards, Indians, or "a mixed population." In contrast to this Anglo American attitude, runaway slaves could find freedom in Spanish Florida, and the government of Mexico tried to prevent the introduction of slavery into Texas.
8. The Jesuits by this time were the most important teaching order in the Americas, and the Franciscans were well known for their hospitals and orphanages.
9. Quoted in David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 106.
10. Some Indians were effectively enslaved despite royal strictures against the practice.
11. For details of this era, see Donald Cutter and Iris H. W. Engstrand, *Quest for Empire: Spanish Settlement in the Southwest* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1996), 73-116.
12. A new work on this subject designed for students is David J. Weber, ed., *What Caused the Pueblo Revolt of 1680?* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999).
13. See Charles R. Cutter, *The Protector de Indios in Colonial New Mexico, 1659-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).
14. A summary account of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo's voyage, quoted in Herbert E. Bolton, ed., *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (1908; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 23-24.
15. Journal of Sebastián Vizcaíno, quoted in Bolton, *Spanish Exploration*, 80-82.
16. Pedro Fages to José de Gálvez, 26 June 1769, MS GA 487, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
17. Antonine Tibesar, ed. and trans., *Writings of Junípero Serra*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: American Academy of Franciscan History, 1955-1966), 2:7.
18. See David J. Weber, "Blood of Martyrs, Blood of Indians: Toward a More Balanced View of Spanish Missions in Seventeenth Century North America," in O'Keefe, ed., *Columbus, Confrontation, Christianity: The European-American Encounter Revisited*, 134-47.
19. For a legal defense of Native Americans, see Iris H. W. Engstrand, "Franciscan Missionary Practices in California During the Spanish Period," in O'Keefe, ed., *Columbus, Confrontation, Christianity*, 158-68.
20. Examples include the crushing of Pequot resistance by the English during the 1630s; the distribution of smallpox-infected blankets to the Indians at a peace conference in 1763 after attacks by Pontiac; and the forced resettlement of Cherokee, Creeks, and other Indians under Andrew Jackson, known as the Trail of Tears, during the 1830s.
21. Another aspect of the Enlightenment, however, was the idea of individual freedom, whereby a person was no longer subject to the dictates of church or state authorities. Private property, not communal living, was the ideal for some liberal thinkers—clearly in opposition to missionary goals of a cooperative society. See D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
22. See Iris H. W. Engstrand, "The Eighteenth Century Enlightenment Comes to Spanish California," *Southern California Quarterly*, 80 (Spring 1998): 3-30.
23. See José Mariano Moziño, *Noticias de Nutka: An Account of Nootka Sound in 1792*, ed. and trans. Iris H. W. Engstrand (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).
24. Donald C. Cutter, *California in 1792: A Spanish Naval Visit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 144.
25. Philip Wayne Powell, *Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting United States Relations with the Hispanic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 25.

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