

**Sensational illustrations by Theodor De Bry illuminate Las Casas' tract on the mistreatment of Aztec Indians after the 16th-century Spanish conquest.**

Casas, Bartolomé de las. *Narratio regionum indicarum per Hispanos quosdam devastatarum verissima: priùs ... hispanicè conscripta*. Francofvrti, Sumptibus Theodori de Bry, & Ioannis Saurii typis, 1598. 8 1/4 inches (210 mm), 4 pp. l., 141 pp.

As part of the Spanish program to promote agriculture and Christianity (in addition to the pursuit of precious metals) after the conquest of the Aztec empire in Mexico by Cortes in 1520, the Indians were obliged to receive religious instruction in the intervals of forced labor, with the notion of their eventually becoming Christian subjects. Actual practice was more grim, and many Indians died from overwork and inhumane treatment. Las Casas, a priest in Cuba at the time, became their advocate, and eventually succeeded in 1543, after some thirty years of lobbying and travel back and forth from Spain, in obtaining from the Spanish crown certain “New Laws” for the fair treatment of the Indian population of Mexico and the Spanish Caribbean.

These laws, however, were resisted in the colonies, and at least those parts relating to the Indians had to be repealed in 1545–46. Las Casas received the popular titles “Protector of the Indians” and later “Apostle of the Indies” but his actual practical success was slight. Nonetheless, his collection of nine of his petitions and tracts, first published in Spain in 1552–53, was widely circulated in translation (with appropriately sensational titles to reflect its grisly account of Spanish atrocities) in every part of Europe that was antagonistic to Spain. It was especially popular in the Protestant north, eager to destroy both Roman Catholicism and the Spanish commercial monopoly of the Caribbean.

The packaging of the book for circulation beyond Spain is reminiscent of the way in which the Communist bloc gleefully seized upon American racial turmoil—and riot photographs—of the 1960s as a sign of the utter corruption of the capitalist system, or of the way in which Fernando Botero has used the atrocities of Abu Ghraib for artistic sensationalizing. To advance his own similar agenda, Theodor De Bry added to the edition of 1598 (reproduced here) a series of horrifying illustrations of Spanish torture,

none of which were drawn from life. These should be viewed not only in the context of the current political situation, but also as representative of the religious sensibility or imagery of the time. Counter-Reformation taste delighted in engraved albums of the various means of crucifixion, and the still more diverse styles of martyrdom endured over the centuries by the saints. Some of the many depictions of *Crudelitates Hispanorum* may be seen at **Spreads 13, 14, 16, 19, 22, 26**, etc., etc.

Las Casas' occasionally exaggerated tales, aided by De Bry's fanciful illustrations, are undoubtedly the chief source for the enduring image of the cruel conquistador—the *Leyenda Negra*, the Black Legend of Spain. What more telling evidence could there be of a popular influence centuries after publication, exceeding even the afterlife of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, than the presence on **Spread 2** of the 19th-century bookplate of The Odd Fellows' Library Association of San Francisco—there is a borrower's pocket at **Spread 81**. The book was no doubt a gift to the Odd Fellows rather than a purchase, for any American engravings by De Bry were already costly collectable items. By 1900 (**Spread 5**) the book was in the safe keeping of Stanford University.