

■ In Defense of the Indians

Date: 1550

Author: Las Casas, Bartolomé de

Genre: address

“They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom.”

Summary Overview

Written within the first sixty years of the conquest of the Americas, Bartolomé de Las Casas’s *In Defense of the Indians* was one of the first works in which a person from a colonizing nation argued for the rights of the indigenous peoples of the region that was being conquered. In the *encomienda* system in place during Las Casas’s time, indigenous peoples were viewed as part of the property that a Spaniard held and could exploit. The landowner’s only responsibility, at times ignored, was to provide a priest for the conversion of the natives. Las Casas himself was an *encomendero* (encomienda owner), but he was also a Catholic priest, and his beliefs shaped his attitude toward the indigenous peoples of the Americas. *In Defense of the Indians* was composed as part of his debate with theologian and philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on whether the indigenous peoples should be forced to convert to Christianity or allowed to convert of their own free will and ultimately concerns the humanity of the natives and their exploitation by the *encomenderos*.

Defining Moment

In Valladolid, Spain, in 1550 and 1551, Las Casas and Sepúlveda engaged in a debate that would shape the policy of the growing Spanish Empire toward the inhabitants of its newly conquered lands. The audience was a group of jurists and theologians who were tasked with recommending a course of action to the Spanish king, Charles V. By the time the Valladolid debates took

place, both Charles V and Pope Paul III had already accepted that the indigenous Americans were, indeed, human and should therefore be converted to Christianity. Many questions remained, however. Did the indigenous Americans have the right to own land or control their own labor? Did they have the right to refuse to convert to Christianity? These were the questions that drove Las Casas and Sepúlveda to debate.

By 1550, the conquest of the New World was already in progress. From Mexico to Peru, the Spanish had gained control of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people. Although the basic questions had long been settled, the outcome of Las Casas and Sepúlveda’s debate was nevertheless important. Sepúlveda represented an attempt to justify intellectually what had already occurred in the Americas—the conquest, enslavement, and forced conversion of indigenous peoples. He argued that the indigenous peoples were largely predisposed to slavery and needed to be enslaved so as to have their lives guided by the Spanish and the Catholic Church. If they resisted, war against them would be justified. Las Casas argued that the natives were not barbaric but civilized and as such should be accorded the same rights of self-determination as any other population. Further, he asserted that the cruelty that had characterized the Spanish treatment of the natives was reprehensible. These debates, and Las Casas’s words, would resonate not only throughout the Spanish Empire but also through the centuries as the first true defense of the rights of native peoples in a colonial setting.

Author Biography

Bartolomé de Las Casas was born in 1484 in Seville, Spain. A child of a merchant family, Las Casas knew of the Americas from a young age, as his father and uncles accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. In 1502, Las Casas traveled to the New World himself on an expedition with Nicolás de Ovando, who became the governor of the West Indies. For his service, Las Casas was given an *encomienda*—a grant of land in the New World and the right to tribute from or the labor of the indigenous people inhabiting it. He was later ordained as a priest, and in 1511, he accompanied conquistador Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar as chaplain on an expedition to conquer Cuba.

Not long after the Cuba expedition, Las Casas began to speak out against the cruel treatment of the native peoples by the Spanish conquistadors. He used his influence in the Spanish royal court to encourage the introduction of what became known as the *Leyes de Burgos* (laws of Burgos), issued by the Spanish king Ferdinand II in 1512, which forbade the mistreatment of the native peoples of the Caribbean and emphasized that Spain's goal was to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity. These laws codified the *encomienda* system, which Las Casas eventually came to see as the source of continued abuses against the native peoples. Many conquistadors and *encomienderos* opposed Las

Casas's efforts, and when he established a mission in Venezuela in 1522, his opponents turned the local natives against him. Following this event, Las Casas retreated to the island of Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti) and joined the Dominican Order.

Las Casas's influence in the church was seen in the 1537 papal bull *Sublimus Dei* (From God on high), in which Pope Paul III officially confirmed that the native peoples were human and rational and forbade their enslavement. Both the Dominicans and the Franciscans were eager to convert the indigenous people to Christianity; however, Las Casas argued that the mass conversions and baptisms favored by the Franciscans were not true conversions, as the converts did not have an adequate understanding of the decision they were making. Seeking to end the abuses that had not abated since the *Leyes de Burgos* were passed, Las Casas pushed for the issuance of the *Leyes Nuevas* (new laws), which King Charles V issued in 1542. Again, however, Las Casas's efforts met massive resistance by the *encomienderos*, who simply refused to comply. Las Casas returned to Spain in 1547, where he continued to advocate for the temporal and spiritual rights of the native peoples of the Americas, as evidenced by his participation in the debates at Valladolid. He died in Madrid in 1566.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians of the western and southern shores (granting that we call them barbarians and that they are barbarians) there are important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and the other contracts of the law of nations, will it now stand proved that the Reverend Doctor Sepúlveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these, either out of malice or ignorance of Aristotle's teaching, and, therefore, has falsely and perhaps irreparably slandered them before the entire world? From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by others, except to be

taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word *Spaniard* they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound together in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably, truly governed by laws that at very many points surpass ours, and could have won the admiration of the sages of Athens, as I will show in the second part of this *Defense*.

Now if they are to be subjugated by war because they are ignorant of polished literature, let Sepúlveda hear Trogus Pompey:

Nor could the Spaniards submit to the yoke of a conquered province until Caesar Augustus, after he had conquered the world, turned his victorious armies against them and organized that barbaric and wild people as a province, once he had led them by law to a more civilized way of life.

Now see how he called the Spanish people barbaric and wild. I would like to hear Sepúlveda, in his cleverness, answer this question: Does he think that the war of the Romans against the Spanish was justified in order to free them from barbarism? And this question also: Did the Spanish wage an unjust war when they vigorously defended themselves against them?

Next, I call the Spaniards who plunder that unhappy people torturers. Do you think that the Romans, once they had subjugated the wild and barbaric peoples of Spain, could with secure right divide all of you among themselves, handing over so many head of both males and females as allotments to individuals? And do you then conclude that the Romans could have stripped your rulers of their authority and consigned all of you, after you had been deprived of your liberty, to wretched labors, especially in searching for gold and silver lodes and mining and refining the metals? And if the Romans finally did that, as is evident from Diodorus, [would you not judge] that you also have the right to defend your freedom, indeed your very life, by war? Sepúlveda, would you have permitted Saint James to evangelize your own people of Córdoba in that way? For God's sake and man's faith in him, is this the way to impose the yoke of Christ on Christian men?

Is this the way to remove wild barbarism from the minds of barbarians? Is it not, rather, to act like thieves, cut-throats, and cruel plunderers and to drive the gentlest of people headlong into despair? The Indian race

is not that barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God. They have been endowed with excellent conduct, and before the coming of the Spaniards, as we have said, they had political states that were well founded on beneficial laws. . . .

From this it is clear that the basis for Sepúlveda's teaching that these people are uncivilized and ignorant is worse than false. Yet even if we were to grant that this race has no keenness of mind or artistic ability, certainly they are not, in consequence, obliged to submit themselves to those who are more intelligent and to adopt their ways, so that, if they refuse, they may be subdued by having war waged against them and be enslaved, as happens today. For men are obliged by the natural law to do many things they cannot be forced to do against their will. We are bound by the natural law to embrace virtue and imitate the uprightness of good men. No one, however, is punished for being bad unless he is guilty of rebellion. Where the Catholic faith has been preached in a Christian manner and as it ought to be, all men are bound by the natural law to accept it, yet no one is forced to accept the faith of Christ. No one is punished because he is sunk in vice, unless he is rebellious or harms the property and persons of others. No one is forced to embrace virtue and show himself as a good man. One who receives a favor is bound by the natural law to return the favor by what we call antidotal obligation. Yet no one is forced to this, nor is he punished if he omits it, according to the common interpretation of the jurists.

GLOSSARY

Aristotle's teaching: the idea derived from the *Politics*, written by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, that there are uncivilized peoples who are predisposed to slavery and should be controlled by civilized peoples

barbarians: in a practical sense, people who live a nomadic, tribal lifestyle; in a philosophical sense, people who are incapable of the mental faculty and reason that would allow them logically to choose Christianity as a moral philosophy and religion

Diodorus: a Greek historian, writing between 60 and 30 BCE, whose history of gold mining in ancient Egypt demonstrates the brutality of slave labor used in such ventures

natural law: an idea, drawn from Romans 2:15, that God's laws and Christian morality are known to people and observed by anyone who is not a barbarian, even when not exposed to Christianity

sacraments: Christian rites, typically performed by priests or ministers, that confer the benefits of Christianity onto parishioners; in the Catholic Church, these include baptism, the Eucharist (Communion), penance, anointing of the sick, and matrimony

Saint James: the patron saint of Spain who is said to have introduced Christianity to the Iberian Peninsula in about 40 CE

Trogus Pompey: the Roman historian of the first century BCE who wrote about the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and its peoples, who were considered to be barbarians

Document Analysis

On April 16, 1550, Charles V of Spain issued a decree to stop all further colonial conquests until jurists and theologians could deliberate about the ethical nature of Spanish colonization. To facilitate this discussion, a debate was held beginning in August of that year in Valladolid. Las Casas and Sepúlveda were tasked with helping the assembled scholars deliberate the nature of the rights and identities of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Both debaters were already well known in Spanish royal, academic, and theological circles. By the time he reached Valladolid, Las Casas had been expressing his views on the maltreatment of the indigenous peoples of the Americas by the Spanish government and church for several decades. Sepúlveda's views were also well known by 1550, as he had articulated them in *Democrates alter de justis belli causis apud Indios* (*A second Democritus: On the just causes of the war with the Indians*) in 1547. In this work, Sepúlveda uses Aristotelian logic to argue that the natives are not rational and thus cannot be converted by typical missionary tactics. He argues that a number of definitions of barbarism characterize the native peoples of the Americas. First, Sepúlveda uses circular logic to suggest that the native peoples are barbarians because they do not display certain characteristics of Spanish civilization, and as such, the Spanish have a responsibility to spread their civilization to the native peoples. Then, Sepúlveda moves on to the differences between indigenous religion and Spanish Christianity. Finally, he takes differences be-

tween native and Spanish intellectual expression as evidence of barbarism on the part of the natives. Any of these marks of barbarism, to Sepúlveda, is enough to justify the conquest and forced conversion of the native peoples, whom he describes as barely human. Thus, warfare is the means by which the native peoples should be brought to civilization and Christianity.

When writing or speaking on the topic of the indigenous peoples, Las Casas and Sepúlveda generally approached their arguments based on the academic disciplines of which they were a part—theology and political philosophy, respectively. Within Sepúlveda's view, conversion to Christianity was conflated with submission to the authority of the church and the Spanish colonial government. Further, he believed that Christianization and forced labor were not mutually exclusive. Las Casas, as a Dominican priest, believed that the natives' souls were the first concern of the colonial enterprise. However, in Las Casas's *In Defense of the Indians*, he pursues the argument on Sepúlveda's terms. Rather than rehashing his theological arguments for the rights of the native peoples—which had been reinforced by both the Spanish crown and the pope—Las Casas ventures into philosophy to show the fallacy of Sepúlveda's arguments on their own terms. Formulating his arguments in favor of the humanity, logic, and rationality of the natives based on his experiences with them in the New World, Las Casas uses political philosophy, logic, and history to argue against Sepúlveda's justification for making war against the natives. He reveals that the true intent of those supporting Sepúlveda's argument

is not to bring the natives to Christianity but rather to take their lands and goods and to enslave them, forcing them to labor for Spanish masters in *encomiendas*. Las Casas attempts to dismantle the basic assumptions of Sepúlveda's arguments, examining his presuppositions and illuminating their flaws.

Las Casas's argument, like Sepúlveda's, focuses on the idea of barbarism, juxtaposed with the civilized way of life the Spanish assumed they exemplified. But while Sepúlveda uses the alleged barbarism of the native peoples as justification for their conquest, forced conversion, and enslavement, Las Casas uses the idea of barbarism to turn Sepúlveda's very argument on its head. He begins by examining the historical understanding of barbarism. In the Roman Empire, European peoples such as the Franks, Vandals, and Visigoths were seen to embody a nomadic, tribal way of life foreign to those living in the cities of the empire; thus, they were considered barbarians. Such was the popular perception of the native peoples of the Americas among many in Spain, and Sepúlveda used this perception to his advantage. Las Casas refutes this by pointing out that many of the native societies of Central and South America were characterized by "important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and the other contracts of the law of nations"—features that the Spanish jurists and theologians at Valladolid would have considered key elements of civilization. With this evidence, Las Casas questions the characterization of the native peoples of the Americas as barbarians.

Next, Las Casas discusses Sepúlveda's assertion of barbarism on the part of the natives and his philosophical argument that barbarism is a reason to make war against them and force their conversion and labor. Sepúlveda, basing his arguments on his understanding of the philosophies of Greek philosopher Aristotle and Roman theologian Saint Augustine, believed the native peoples to be barbarians because of their lack of written language, private property, and other markers of Western civilization; their acts of cannibalism and human sacrifice; and their perceived lack of intelligence and basic inferiority. Based on Aristotle's writings, Sepúlveda thought that the indigenous peoples of the Americas were naturally inferior and thus predisposed to be slaves; likewise, his interpretation of the philosophy of Saint Augustine supported the forced conversion of the natives through conquest.

In the context of his larger argument in favor of the rights and humanity of the native peoples, Las Casas uses the concept of barbarism in three ways. First, he focuses his analysis on the Spanish themselves. The Spanish saw themselves as being at the apex of civilization, and thus, like the Romans, they viewed other cultures as somewhat barbaric. Las Casas uses his own knowledge of Roman history to show that the Spanish themselves were once considered barbarians, citing in particular the writings of Roman historian Trogus Pompey; thus, according to Sepúlveda's argument, the Romans were completely justified when they invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 219 BCE. Based on the idea that the Romans conquered Spain and brought it into civilization, he then poses the following rhetorical questions: "Does [Sepúlveda] think that the war of the Romans against the Spanish was justified in order to free them from barbarism? . . . Did the Spanish wage an unjust war when they vigorously defended themselves against them?" According to Sepúlveda's definition of barbarism, the war of conquest that Rome fought against Spain was just, and the Spanish resistance to Roman conquest was not justified, two points with which many in Spain would have disagreed.

Next, Las Casas demonstrates the brutality of the *encomienda* system, which had been the central theme of his writings ever since it became clear that the *Leyes de Burgos* were not having the intended effect on the system. Again using Sepúlveda's tactics against him, Las Casas presents a historical and philosophical demonstration of the brutality of the *encomienda* system and describes a hypothetical imposition of the system on the Spanish themselves. Superimposing the *encomienda* system on the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, Las Casas rhetorically asks, "Do you think that the Romans . . . could with secure right divide all of you among themselves, handing over so many head of both males and females as allotments to individuals?" Again, knowing full well that the image of the Spanish being divided among Roman landowners and forced into slave labor would be shocking to the jurists and theologians assembled, Las Casas uses Sepúlveda's rhetorical position to discredit his argument. By doing so, he shows that the Spanish have demonstrated their own barbarism in their treatment of the natives. The Spanish have acted "like thieves, cut-throats, and cruel plunderers," which has only served to "drive the gentlest of people headlong into despair."

Finally, Las Casas uses the example of the peaceful conversion of the Iberian Peninsula to Christianity by the mission of Saint James as a counterexample to Sepúlveda's proposed course of action. He asks directly, "Sepúlveda, would you have permitted Saint James to evangelize your own people of Córdoba in that way?"—that is, in the violent way in which Spain was attempting to convert the people of the Americas. By presenting this juxtaposition, Las Casas implies that using logic and demonstrating a peaceful, Christian way of life is a much more effective and civilized way to convert people to Christianity, and he bases this perspective on his own personal experience in the New World. Las Casas demonstrates that the native peoples of the Americas do not fit Sepúlveda's definition of barbarism and argues that they are both intelligent and frequently willing to accept Christianity once they have been introduced to it. The natives, he notes, possess one of the key components necessary for civilization: the ability to reason. They are not animals, as some in Spain had argued, destined to perform slave labor and able to be converted to Christianity only through conquest and violence. To Las Casas, the brutality of Spanish warfare, another topic in which he was quite well versed, only served to dissuade people from accepting what he held to be the true religion.

In his three-pronged attack on Sepúlveda's rhetorical position, Las Casas uses political philosophy to reinforce the religious arguments he had been making for nearly forty years. After dismantling Sepúlveda's case, Las Casas returns to the arguments of his earlier writings to argue that even if Sepúlveda's arguments were philosophically sound, the religious justifications for the right of indigenous peoples to live peacefully and come to Christianity of their own volition are paramount. By Las Casas's formulation, if Aristotle argued that barbarism was a reasonable excuse to make war against and enslave populations such as the natives of the Americas, then Aristotle himself was to be rejected in favor of Christ. The imperative to spread Christianity in the peaceful manner outlined in the Bible, Las Casas argues, outweighs any philosophical considerations and should guide Spain's actions toward the native peoples of the regions Spain had colonized.

Essential Themes

At the conclusion of the debates, the jurists and theologians discussed the various points made by Sepúlveda and Las Casas among themselves, though little written

record of these deliberations survives. Reportedly, Las Casas and Sepúlveda each believed that the assembled panel had been persuaded by his arguments. However, it appears that the motivation to determine the moral righteousness of the Spanish colonial enterprise and the treatment of the American natives that went along with it lost momentum, as no official decision regarding the debates was ever made. For the remaining fifteen years of his life, Las Casas continued to advocate for the rights of native peoples in the Americas, and historical evidence indicates that Sepúlveda's views did not change either. Nor, in the short term, did the actions of the *encomienderos* in the Americas, as the abuses of the natives continued unabated.

In the short term, both Sepúlveda's arguments for a just war and Las Casas's impassioned writings favoring a more peaceful approach to conversion garnered followers. Sepúlveda's argument that the natives were, indeed, barbarians to be conquered would influence the policies of the Council of the Indies. Yet, the judge Alonso de Zorita and the Franciscan priest Jacinto de San Francisco used Las Casas's ideas of peaceful conversion to spread Christianity to the native peoples of the Americas. Spanish missionaries such as Bernardino de Sahagún followed Las Casas's example, learning the native languages as a means of spreading the faith in a way that would engage the indigenous peoples' logic and increase their understanding. Although Las Casas was unsuccessful in ending the *encomienda* system, his views continued to influence Spanish policy; later laws based on the *Leyes Nuevas* diminished the power of the *encomendarios* over the natives on their lands, enabling a more humane approach to be overseen by missionaries to the New World.

In the longer view, it is easy to conclude that Las Casas's influence was much more widely felt than Sepúlveda's. Although there was no official determination as to whether Las Casas or Sepúlveda won the debate, Las Casas's words have had the greater historical resonance. Las Casas influenced future rulers of Spain as well as later popes, and historians recall him as being among the first to argue for the human rights of indigenous peoples. The major themes of his writings, particularly those related to self-determination, continued to be of importance as colonized peoples in the Americas and elsewhere fought for and regained political and religious independence in the centuries following his death.

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Additional Reading

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LESSON PLAN: An Argument in Defense of the Indians

Students analyze excerpts from *In Defense of the Indians* and collaborate in formulating opinions on how the debate it records affected the treatment of native peoples

Learning Objectives

Identify the central question of the debate between Sepulveda and Las Casas; appreciate how historical perspectives affect perceptions of *encomienda* and slavery; examine the influence of ideas in the treatment of native peoples; compare and contrast differing opinions

Materials: Excerpt from *In Defense of the Indians*: “Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians...” and “... From this it is clear that the basis for Sepulveda’s teach-

ing that these people are uncivilized and ignorant...””; excerpts from *The Journey of Coronado*

Overview Questions

What strategies does Las Casas employ to refute Sepulveda? How does Las Casas’s experiences inform his viewpoint? How does Sepulveda’s argument support *encomienda*? Based on the excerpts from *In Defense of Indians* and *The Journey of Coronado*, what was the prevailing opinion concerning Native South Americans?

Step 1: Comprehension Questions

Why does Las Casas summarize Sepulveda’s argument? How does Las Casas initially counter Sepulveda? Explain why, if Sepulveda is wrong, Aristotle might also be wrong.

- **Activity:** Select students to reread passages summarizing Sepulveda’s argument and Las Casas’s first refutation of it. Have students rephrase each argument. Have students evaluate Aristotle’s position on the subjugation of “inferior” peoples.

Step 2: Comprehension Questions

How does Las Casas’s religious views and life experiences support his argument? In the second excerpt, how does he move from Catholicism to a more secular view?

- **Activity:** Select students to read passages in which Las Casas’s experience supports his argument. Have students read the passages from the second excerpt that put his argument in a secular frame. Have students evaluate which argument is more powerful.

Step 3: Context Questions

How did *encomienda* direct Spanish interaction with native peoples? How does Sepulveda’s argument justify the abuses of *encomienda*? How might Las Casas’s viewpoint justify a benign version of it?

- **Activity:** Ask students to explain how Sepulveda’s argument took *encomienda* closer to slavery. Have students discuss how Las Casas’s viewpoint might support *encomienda*. Ask students how missionaries’ activities might have affected the implementation of *encomienda*.

Step 4: Exploration Questions

How do Las Casas’s experiences in America compare with Coronado’s? How does *The Journey of Coronado* suggest that the debate between Las Casas and Sepulveda was moot?

- **Activity:** Have students choose passages in *The Journeys of Coronado* that show the reality of *encomienda*. Ask students to outline a potential essay that argues who ultimately won the Las Casas-Sepulveda debate and why.

Step 5: Response Paper

Word length and additional requirements set by instructor. Students answer the research question in the Overview Questions. Students state a thesis and use as evidence passages from the primary source document as well any support from supplemental materials assigned in the lesson.