

# Bartolome de las Casas Condemns Spanish Treatment of Indians (c.1510)

*Friar Bartolome de las Casas came to Spain's colonies in the New World in 1502. He personally witnessed the harsh working conditions forced on many Indians by the Spanish. In his book History of the Indies he detailed the plight of the Indians and strongly condemned Spanish labor practices. As you read this excerpt, consider what seems to have been the main use the Spanish made of the Indians.*

**A**t first, the Indians were forced to stay six months away from home at work. Later, the time was extended to eight months and this was called a shift, at the end of which they brought all the gold minting [making into coins]. During the minting period, the Indians were allowed to go home, a few days' journey on foot. One can imagine their state when they arrived after eight months, and those who found their wives must have cried, lamenting their working condition together. Of those who had worked in mines, a bare 10 percent survived to start the journey home.

Many Spaniards had no scruples about making them work on Sundays, if not in the mines, then on minor tasks such as building and repairing houses, carrying firewood, etc. They fed them cassava bread, which is adequate nutrition only when supplemented with meat, fish, or other more substantial food. The *minero* [Spaniard in charge of the mines] killed a pig once a week but he kept more than half for himself and had the leftover cooked daily for thirty or forty Indians, which came to a bite of meat the size of a walnut, per individual. While the *minero* was eating, the Indians were under the table, just like dogs and cats, ready to snatch a bone. This ration applied only to mine workers; others never tasted meat in their lives and sustained themselves exclusively on cassava and other roots.



In exchange for his life services, an Indian received 225 *maravedis*, paid them once a year as pin money or *cacona*, as Indians call it, which means bonus or reward. This sum bought a comb, a small mirror, and a string of green or blue glass beads.

I believe the above clearly demonstrates that the Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom which they are allowed to graze in the fields. When the Indians were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and had no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and die. When they feel ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them, and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were grasping and moaning in their death and agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry." And *this* was the freedom, the good treatment, and the Christianity that Indians received.

Is there a single nation which would not think that the world is full of such evildoers as the Spaniards if their first experience with that outside world was with a people who entered territories by force, killed the people, and deprived them of their rights? Just because the Spaniards told them to obey the King of Castile [Spain], supposing they understood, what obligation did they have to obey since they already had their own kings? Or rather, if they had consented, would they not be judged as ridiculously stupid for doing so? Was trying to defend oneself from Spanish Cruelties such a crime? Even beasts are allowed the right of self-defense.

**REVIEW THE READING.** Please answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. According to Las Casa, what was the primary purpose for which the Spanish used the Indians?
2. What hardships did the Indians endure during their forced labor in the mines?
3. Using Your Historical Imagination: Why do you think the Spaniards treated the Indians as they did, and why is Las Casas, a Spaniard himself, so bitterly in disagreement with this policy?