



How the slave trade from Africa to the Americas began Bartolomé de las Casas (Events described: 1510s)

Bartolomé de las Casas was a Spanish colonist in the Caribbean who became a Catholic priest and an opponent of colonists' abuse of indigenous Taínos. In what could seem a paradox, Las Casas was also instrumental in inaugurating the mass transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas. He describes his role, speaking of himself in the third person, in this selection from his Historia de las Indias ("History of the Indies"), an account he wrote of the beginnings of Spain's American empire. Alarmed by the decimation of the Taínos, which he blamed on Spanish colonists overworking Taíno laborers, Las Casas urged the Spanish government to let colonists bring in enslaved Africans instead—an action he later rued.

The colonists of this island enlisted in another enterprise, which was to find a means to manufacture sugar, seeing that sugarcane grew abundantly in this land. [...S]ome colonists, having formerly profited from the sweat and blood of the Indians, now sought license to send to Castile for the purchase of some black^a slaves, seeing that the Indians were dwindling away; and some there were, even, [...] who promised the cleric Bartolomé de las Casas that if he brought or obtained for them license to bring to this island a dozen blacks, they would give up the Indians they still had so that they could be freed. With this understanding, the said cleric, being much in favor since the King began to reign [...] and having been commissioned to set these lands to right, obtained the King's consent that, in order to free the Indians, the Spanish of these islands be allowed to transport from Castile some black slaves. The Council determined [...] that license should be granted to transport 4,000 at that time for the four islands: Hispaniola, San Juan, Cuba, and Jamaica. [...]

That he had counseled this, the cleric later repented, judging himself guilty by inadvertence, because he afterward saw and discovered, as will be seen, that the captivity of the blacks is as unjust as that of the Indians, and therefore his counsel that blacks be brought so that the Indians could be freed was not a wise remedy; and although he had believed, at the time, that they were justly captive, he feared that neither his ignorance in this nor his good intention would excuse him before the judgment of God.

There were already on this island up to 10 or 12 blacks who belonged to the King, who had been brought to construct the fort that overlooks the mouth of the river; but following the granting of this license and the completion of that fort, many other licenses always followed, such that there have been brought to this island over 30,000 blacks, and to all the Indies more than 100,000, I believe; yet despite this, the Indians never received redress or freedom, as the cleric Casas was unable to press these matters further. The King was absent, and on the Council there were always

^a Throughout this text, the English word black(s) is used to translate the Spanish word negro(s). In both Spanish and Portuguese, negro refers literally to the color black but came to be applied also to people from sub-Saharan Africa. The Spanish/Portuguese word is the origin of the English racial label Negro, though the word was pronounced differently in English than in Spanish or Portuguese. (In Spanish and Portuguese, the letter e is pronounced as in the English word negative, not as in knee.)

new members ignorant of the right—although they were obliged to know it, as has been shown in this *History* many times. And as day by day the number of sugar mills increased, so too increased the need for blacks to work in them, for each watermill required at least 80, and the trapiches 30 or 40; and consequently the King's share of the revenues also increased.

It further followed that the Portuguese—who for many years now have been plundering Guinea and enslaving the blacks, very unjustly—seeing our great demand and how well we paid for them, hastened and are still hastening daily to abduct and capture blacks by as many evil and wicked means as they can; moreover, the blacks themselves, seeing how urgently slaves are demanded, wage unjust wars against one another and, by other illicit means, steal and sell one another to the Portuguese; so that we are the cause of all the sins that all of these commit, in addition to the sins that we commit in buying them. [...]

Before there were sugar mills, we used to say on this island that unless a black were to hang himself, he would not die, because we had never seen a black dead of disease, for truly the blacks were, like orange trees, naturally suited to this land, more so even than to their Guinea; but after they were set to work in the mills, death and pestilence came to them through the heavy labors they endure and through the beverages they concoct for themselves from the cane juice, and thus many of them die every day. Because of this, they run away together in gangs when they are able; and whenever opportunity permits, they rise up and inflict deaths and cruelties on the Spanish in order to escape their captivity. And for this reason, the small towns of this island do not live very safely, which is yet another plague that has befallen it.

Source: Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. Marquess of Fuensanta del Valle and José Sancho Rayon (Madrid: Miguel Ginesta, 1875-76), 5:28-31 (book 3, chap. 129), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000024807630>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Two emendations made to the 1875-76 edition of the Spanish text (one instance of *negros* → *negocios*; *padećian* → *padećen*) based on Miguel Angel Medina, Jesús Angel Barreda, and Isacio Pérez Fernández, eds., *Historia de las Indias III*, vol. 5 of *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Obras Completas*, ed. Paulino Castañeda Delgado (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1994), 2321-2325.

Excerpts translated into English, edited, and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph and sentence breaks added, and punctuation emended, for readability. An abbreviated title italicized (*Historia* → *History*). The Spanish word *negros* is lowercase in the source publication, in keeping with Spanish usage for ethnonyms, and has been left so in translation (*blacks*); however, the Spanish words *indios*, *españoles*, and *portugueses* have been capitalized in translation (*Indians*, *Spanish*, and *Portuguese*), in keeping with the English norm that capitalizes demonyms, which are derived from place names. The capitalization of *King* and *Council* reproduces the capitalization of the equivalent Spanish terms in the 1875-76 source publication (*Rey*, *Consejo*); but for the sake of modernization, *Clérigo*, capitalized in the source, has been converted to lowercase in translation (*cleric*).



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