

**INTREPID EXPLORER OR
GENOCIDAL MANIAC?
"THE COMPLEX CASE
OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS**

Columbus was a thief, and invader, an organizer of rape of Indian women, a slave trader, a reactionary religious fanatic, and the personal director of a campaign for mass murder of defenseless peoples.

—John Henrik Clarke, Christopher Columbus and the Afrikan Holocaust

In an episode of the TV series *Yellowstone*, Native American history professor Monica Dutton gives a lesson on Christopher Columbus to a class of mostly white students at Montana State University.⁹ Professor Dutton reads aloud the following phrases from Columbus's journal:

"[The Natives] willingly traded us everything they owned.... They do not bear arms and do not know them, for I showed them a sword they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance.... They will make fine slaves.... With fifty men we can subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."

Dutton then singles out a white, baseball-cap-wearing "dudebro" named Trent:

"Trent, do you ever feel like making someone do what you want, whether they want to or not? It's a very European mentality. Stemming from the oppressive political and religious structures of the Renaissance. Kings and priests with absolute power ruling masses who have none. That was the mentality of the man who discovered America. And it's the mentality our society struggles with today. What you know of history is the dominant culture's justification of its actions. But I don't teach you that."

Professor Dutton has a point about the political uses of history. Most societies do paint a flattering portrait of their past and tend to justify or airbrush their crimes. Historical revisionism is therefore often a necessary corrective.

But it is also possible to go too far in the other direction. Thus, the idea of Christopher Columbus as the carrier of a peculiar European depravity founded on hierarchy, oppression, patriarchy, racism, capitalist exploitation, and a delight in cruelty and torture has become mainstream in the historical profession, and by osmosis among the public at large.

The image of Renaissance Europe as a place of absolutist hierarchy and oppression began with certain radical historians in the 1970s and has mushroomed in recent decades until it has become the mainstream interpretation of European culture. Beginning with books such as Francis Jennings's 1975 *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*, this story has since made it into mainstream textbooks such as Peter Charles Hoffer's *The Brave New World: A History of Early America*, which we will visit in more detail later. Columbus himself has emerged as a symbol of this cultural invasion—the most destructive force ever to propagate itself across the planet.

In this view, Columbus embodies the European penchant for killing and enslaving nonwhite peoples wherever they are found. Throw in the notion that he was also the founder of modern capitalism, the first imperialist, the first colonizer, the bringer of patriarchy to the New World, and the instigator of mass environmental destruction, and Columbus becomes a nearly perfect embodiment of everything hated by the Left today.

On the surface, this vision of Columbus seems consistent with what most people think they know about New World history:

Europeans created colonies that stole Indian land and pushed the Native peoples nearly to extinction; they were racists who engaged in slavery on a massive scale; they set up exploitative proto-capitalist trading systems, were rapacious and careless exploiters of natural resources, and imported alien technologies that lie at the root of modern environmental disaster.

But it is one thing to recognize that the interlopers who followed Columbus caused a great deal of suffering and quite another to suggest that they were the vanguard of a uniquely evil European “system” of oppression that has lasted from that day to this. A system that moreover remains the root of most suffering endured by minorities and women today. According to this view, if only Indigenous institutions and mentalities had triumphed over European ones, rather than the other way around, the world today would be a veritable utopia, where all races and genders live in harmony with nature and one another. Because that, in their idealized view, is what New World society was like before Columbus arrived.

This modern consensus resembles the portrait presented by the editors of the fringe academic journal *Social Justice*. In the introduction to their 1992 Columbus-themed issue, the editors had the following to say (italics mine):

Columbus and subsequent invaders set in motion a world-historic process of European colonization, by which a nascent *capitalist system* expanded monumentally across the earth—in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. It was a process based on human and environmental *exploitation*, the legacies of which continue to this day. The *merciless assault on indigenous peoples* served as the *bedrock* upon which *Western culture* and the *capitalist economy* were built in the Americas.

Human society had seen *racism* before, but nothing could approach the forms it took on this continent as the *capitalist process* unfolded....

We can also say that the planet had been mistreated before, but nothing could approach its post-1492 fate.... Simply put, today's environmental crisis results from *500 years of unbridled capitalist exploitation*. “Progress” has not come without a staggering price, if it can be called progress at all.

In this view the wellspring of Western civilization is the oppression of Natives. A more radical statement could hardly be made, and yet this is now what passes for mainstream historical opinion. Notice how this view of history is carefully crafted to lump together the hot button issues of the modern Left. Classical Marxism did not give a fig about racism, or gender issues, or environmentalism, but as communism imploded after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Leftists broadened their definitions of “oppression” in a deliberate move to broaden their appeal to these minority and activist groups. The resulting worldview is so rabidly anti-white, anti-male, and anti-European that it challenges the idea of human progress itself.

WHAT DID COLUMBUS THINK OF THE INDIANS?

How do we untangle the truth about Columbus in the face of so much vitriol? Let us begin by unpacking the supposed quotations from his journal that are cited in *Yellowstone*. This passage may be found quoted all over the internet and has now become widely accepted as a shocking confession of truth about Columbus's motives. Yet almost every word is misleading, based on mistranslation and distortion of what Columbus meant to convey.

We may skip over the fact that our modern version of Columbus's journal is an extract from a lost original, meaning that we will probably never know the navigator's actual words. Even so, the passage in question—which is also cited in Zinn's influential *People's History*—is actually a pastiche of lines that appear several pages apart in Columbus's original account. Presented as a single passage, they make the speaker look a lot worse than he was.

Dutton quotes Columbus as saying "they will make fine slaves." But Columbus did not use the Spanish word for slave (*esclavo*). In the original Spanish, the line she is quoting goes: "*Ellos deben ser buenos servidores y de buen ingenio, que veo que muy presto dicentodo lo que les decia,*" which most translators render as: "they will make good servants, as they are very clever, and quickly understood everything which was said to them." Even in the context of an aristocratic system that seems unjust by modern standards, servants are very different from slaves. Moreover, elsewhere in the *Diario*, Columbus uses the term "*servidores*" to mean "subjects of the Crown" rather than personal servants. He uses this context because Columbus was addressing the journal not to himself, as modern readers might assume, but to his patrons Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain.

Monica's monologue neglects to mention Columbus's glowing appraisal of Indigenous intelligence and their capacity to learn, which can be found in the very same sentence. She also leaves out the passage where Columbus observes how fortunate the Spanish would be to welcome such intelligent people as fellow Christians and subjects of the crown.

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that what he meant was nearly the opposite of what Monica (and Howard Zinn) implies. Rather than consigning the Indians to perpetual enslavement on the grounds of irredeemable racial inferiority, Columbus was advocating their admission into European society as spiritual, racial, and social equals, based on his understanding of them as fellow descendants of Adam and Eve. (On which more appears in chapter 3.)

We know in hindsight that things did not turn out very well for the Caribbean Indians, so this may sound far-fetched to modern ears. But it is an indisputable historical fact that many Spaniards, including well-placed figures such as Columbus and Queen Isabella herself, did hope to welcome the Indians as fellow citizens and subjects at many points during the early history of the Spanish Empire.

Monica Dutton's quotation also contains the line: "They willingly traded us everything they owned." This quote appears to support the stereotype of Natives as guileless and easy to take advantage of: innocent, childlike, naive, generous, naturally communistic, ignorant of the evils of private property or exploitative labor hierarchies. In reality, Columbus's impression of Native generosity underwent a rapid series of transformations. When the first Natives willingly traded pieces of gold for a few glass beads, this was because to them, the beads were so rare and unusual that they were worth more than any gold that they

could find. Nonetheless, a few encounters later, we find Columbus deliberately sending his secretary and other reliable lieutenants to oversee trade between his men and the Indians, in order to ensure that the Spanish did not take undue advantage of the Natives. Soon, however, the Spanish were complaining that the Natives had already learned to drive a hard bargain and would no longer part with things the Spanish found precious or useful without charging a high price.

In other words, the Natives quickly showed as much cunning as any merchants, anywhere on Earth. These initial encounters should be seen for what they were: the first exchanges in a market that was not yet fully understood by either side. As modern economists know, a major component of any market is information. What we see in this instance—as in others throughout the colonial period—is the ability of Native Americans to rapidly adapt to changing market conditions in order to maximize their own advantage. They did not stay naive, any longer than the Europeans with whom they traded. Let us move away from the cherry-picked quotations favored by anti-Columbus campaigners and turn to what he actually said about the Native Americans as a people or “race.” In his first weeks in the Caribbean, Columbus was astonished by the lushness of the landscape and the variety of the trees and animals, many of which had never been seen by Old World eyes before. About the Taino Indians he encountered, Columbus said:

They are very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances. Their hair is short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse's tail. They wear the hairs brought down to the eyebrows, except a few locks behind, which they wear long and never cut.... They are all of fair stature and size, with good faces, and well made. I saw some with marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to ask what it was, and they gave me to understand that people from other adjacent islands [Caribs?] came with the intention of seizing them, and that they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them prisoners. They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion.¹⁰

He also reported:

Your Highnesses may believe that there is no better nor gentler people in the world. Your highnesses ought to rejoice that they will soon become Christians, and that they will be taught the good customs of your kingdom. *A better race there cannot be*, and both the people and the lands are in such quantity that I know not how to write it.... I repeat that the things and the great villages of this island of Espanola, which they call Bohio, are wonderful. All here have a loving manner and gentle speech, unlike the others, who seem to be menacing when they speak. Both men and women are of good stature. It is true that they all paint [themselves], some with black, others with other colours, but most with red. I know that they are tanned by the sun, but this does not affect them much. Their houses and villages are pretty, each with a chief, who acts as their judge, and who is obeyed by them. All these lords use few words, and have excellent manners. Most of their orders are given by a sign with the hand, which is understood with surprising quickness.”¹¹

Columbus's favorable views about the physical and mental characteristics of the New World peoples were not unique. The Spanish scholar Peter Martyr d'Anghiera collected stories about the Indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean from a number of men who sailed with Columbus and other early adventurers. In their collective opinion, these Caribbean islanders showed a number of admirable traits,

including graceful customs and rhetorical sophistication. After reporting on their skills as weavers of cotton, Martyr writes:

It is in the manufacture of [ceremonial stools] that the islanders devote the best of their native ingenuity. In the island of Ganabara which, if you have a map, you will see lies at the western extremity of Hispaniola and which is subject to Anacaehoa, it is the women who are thus employed; the various pieces are decorated with representations of phantoms which they pretend to see in the nighttime, and serpents and men and everything that they see about them. What would they not be able to manufacture, Most Illustrious Prince, if they knew the use of iron and steel?

Peter Martyr, who was a chief tutor at the Spanish Court with a major influence on elite opinion, was convinced that the Indians of the Caribbean would prove equal to Europeans in skill and productivity, if only they were given the same technology and skills.

In sum, the earliest accounts of Columbus and other Spanish adventurers present a complex picture of both Caribbean society and European intentions. Most conclude that at least some groups of Indians were equal or superior to Europeans in terms of physical beauty, intelligence, and potential for future development. They also believed that some groups of Indians were more fearsome, physically uglier in their opinion, and had less praiseworthy customs. Of one thing we can be sure: this complex picture smashes through easy stereotypes like those proffered by the majority of modern pundits.

WHO WAS THE REAL COLUMBUS?

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa in 1451, as the Italian Renaissance was reaching a crescendo. Contrary to what Monica Dutton and many of her real-world colleagues might claim, Renaissance Europe was no more hierarchical, patriarchal, or oppressive than any other major civilization. In fact, it was a good deal less so. In Columbus's day, European society was a chaotic patchwork of jurisdictions and political systems. This included dozens of the world's only functioning small-scale republics. Many scholars have credited this political fragmentation with creating a fertile ground for entrepreneurialism, a crucible of clashing institutions that eventually gave birth to modern capitalism. It was messy, and it was risky, but it created unequalled opportunities for social mobility, along with technological and scientific advancement.

Just a few decades after Columbus landed in the New World, Spain was rocked by a series of urban revolts led by the *comuneros*, in which citizens demanded constitutional rights, liberties, and freedoms. One looks in vain for similar occurrences in the contemporary Islamic or Asiatic worlds. Moreover, Western Europe was the only major society that allowed women to hold supreme political power: Queen Isabella of Spain and Queen Elizabeth I of England are only the most famous examples. European society gave administrative and economic power to women at every level of society, from duchesses down to tailors' widows. The female literacy rate in Renaissance Europe far outstripped anywhere else in the world; Catholicism allowed women to become powerful abbesses; some Protestant sects allowed women to become preachers. Western Europe was—already by Columbus's day—easily the most “feminist” city-dwelling culture the world had ever known.

It was into this world of chaos and opportunity that Christopher Columbus was born, and he took full advantage of it. His father wanted him to become a cloth weaver like himself, but young Cristoforo abandoned the workshop in favor of an adventurous life at sea. As a traveling merchant and budding

entrepreneur, Columbus showed good knowledge of the long-distance cloth trade and experienced some early success. In his twenties, he immigrated to Lisbon, where he spent ten years at the heart of Europe's growing community of Atlantic explorers and married into a wealthy family of Italian immigrants who had been ennobled by the Portuguese crown. His father-in-law—the lord of one of the newly organized European estates on Porto Santo, a previously uninhabited island off the coast of Morocco—served as an example of local lordship and estate management that loomed large in Columbus's mind.

After many years spent badgering the Iberian monarchs to let him lead an expedition across the Atlantic in search of a passage to Asia, Columbus set sail from Seville in August 1492. Two months later, he sighted land on the other side of the Atlantic, likely an island in the modern-day Bahamas. Two weeks later he was at Cuba, and a month after that, he landed at Hispaniola, a large island that today hosts the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

It was in these islands that Columbus encountered the Taino Indians, part of a larger group sometimes known as the Arawaks. The Tainos, in turn, were in the midst of being driven off their islands by the ruthless, cannibalistic Caribs, who were working their way up the Leeward Islands chain from South America. It was his encounters with the Tainos that caused Columbus to write the journal entries that we have already examined above.

After losing his flagship *Santa Maria* on a sandbar, Columbus had no choice but to leave some of his sailors behind. He christened the castaway settlement La Navidad and told them that he would return the following year. By February he was back at the Portuguese-held Azores. He returned to Spain in March, where he received a hero's welcome.

On his first voyage, Columbus's main goal was to produce proof that he had reached the great trading cities of Asia, described so lavishly by the Italian traveler Marco Polo some two hundred years before. Columbus was extremely disappointed to find the Bahaman islanders going about naked and "poor in everything," as he put it. He asked these people for directions to China, but they kept pointing him to the source of their own legends, a great kingdom of gold that lay to the southeast. When Columbus later reached Cuba, he convinced himself (and tried to convince his men) that he had found the Asian mainland.

Also in Columbus's mind was the hope that, given proper instruction, the Great Khan (the emperor) of China might prove willing to convert to Christianity. This would make him an invaluable ally against the Muslims whose successes after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 threatened to drive the Christians off the face of the Earth.

The question of just how religious Columbus really was has exercised scholars throughout the modern era. On the one hand he was eminently practical, a crass businessman and self-promoter who recognized that the use of religious rhetoric would have a positive effect on the pious Isabella. On the other hand, he himself became increasingly religious as he got older, though this was tinged with a sense of himself as an agent of providence who united previously disparate people around the world.¹²

In his journal Columbus advocated restraint when it came to introducing the Indians to Christianity, writing that "they were a people who could be more easily freed and converted to our holy faith by love than by force." Even in late medieval Spain, voluntary conversion was usually preferred. While academics tend to think of Christian missionaries as agents of repression, the fact is Christianity has caused countless individuals to dedicate their lives to bettering the lot of Native groups in the New World, from Columbus's

day through the present.¹³ Bartolome de las Casas, whom we will meet later, was only the tip of the charitable iceberg in these early decades, a small army of Christian clergy and others whose selflessness and decency are now completely overlooked. Columbus and many others believed that, if shown good treatment, the Indians would accept Christianity in due time. On a pragmatic note, Columbus also recognized that people who did not have their own scriptures, such as Jews and Muslims, had proven historically more receptive to Christianity. In the end, his perception was correct. Throughout his subsequent governorship of the Caribbean, despite his numerous incompetencies and misdeeds, Columbus was never a consistent advocate for forced conversion, any more than Isabella herself.

Upon his return to Spain, Columbus found the Spanish monarchs in Barcelona, where he misleadingly informed them that the lands he had discovered were “infinitely fertile” and contained ample amounts of gold and valuable Asian spices. As William and Carla Phillips put it, Columbus knew that “his reputation and his future success would depend on the profitability of the lands he had discovered.”¹⁴ More specifically, he hoped to rule over his island kingdom as a sort of count or duke, whose family would share in his prestige. With all the subtlety of a used car salesman, he described Cuba as an island larger than Great Britain, whose interior possessed “great mines of gold and other metals.” He further suggested that his tiny colony of La Navidad was “in the best position for the mines of gold...and for trade with the mainland... belonging to the Grand Khan, where there will be great trade and gain.”

In order to exploit the connections he created with the New World, the entrepreneurial Columbus proposed the creation of a series of trading posts in the Caribbean. The idea was to trade with Natives for their most valuable products, using a string of permanent coastal forts as bases for trade. This was hardly a novel idea: Columbus simply embraced the trading-fort model that the Italians had been using in the Black Sea for centuries. This trading-fort model had recently been exported to the West Coast of Africa with great success. It would soon be adopted by the Portuguese in India, Malaysia, East Africa, and the Persian Gulf.

Many people fault Columbus for setting up these trading forts, as if he should have known that this would soon prove devastating to New World civilization. But in the Black Sea, in West Africa, and in the Portuguese Indian Ocean Empire, these trading forts had only a very limited effect on local peoples. In all these places, Europeans were confined to their coastal enclaves by local rulers for many centuries, and the major effect of the European presence was to enrich both Europeans and locals via the creation of new trading networks. Given European experience throughout the Old World, in which Indigenous populations continued to thrive after contact with Europeans, neither Columbus nor anyone else could have foreseen the collapse in New World population levels that would result from European presence in the Caribbean.

The Spanish monarchs recognized that Columbus was an opportunist and prone to hyperbole, but they nonetheless granted him the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea as the promised reward for his exploits. Enticed by the potential of this New World, and the prospect of opening a direct trade route to China, they sent him out in 1493 with a much larger fleet of seventeen ships, with the purpose of reinforcing the fledgling colony at La Navidad. Columbus's brother Diego accompanied him on this voyage, with the idea that he could act as governor and help establish a Columbus family dynasty.

Columbus arrived to find La Navidad in ruins, its people having been murdered by the supposedly peaceful islanders. He therefore founded a second colony, which he called La Isabela. But with ships and intelligence reports now arriving in Spain from the New World every few months or so, the Spanish monarchs soon realized that the Caribbean offered less in the way of quick riches than Columbus had promised.

They also quickly came to understand that Columbus was a terrible estate manager. La Isabela was badly situated and had limited sources of fresh water; there was also a lack of domestic animals after the starving inhabitants had slaughtered them for meat. In the end, many colonists either ran off to live with the Indians or sailed back to Spain in disgust. Meanwhile fights broke out among the settlers, and within a few years a full-scale rebellion was underway. Other colonists picked fights with the Indians, leading to a rapid collapse of any remaining goodwill and war with the Taino as early as 1494.

A few decades of Spanish maladministration and repression were sufficient to drive most of the Taino Indians from the islands altogether. Most accounts assume that the Tainos pitifully gave up and died in droves at the hands of sword-wielding Spanish adventurers, but this theory assumes that the Indians were stupid and lacking in agency—which they most certainly were not. Given their proven ability to canoe from island to island, and also to spread news quickly over long distances, it seems likely that most of the supposed “victims” of the Spanish invasion simply fled as Spanish repression got out of hand.

Many Taino women, meanwhile, settled down as wives of the Spanish newcomers, knowing that this would afford them considerable protection. Enthusiastic miscegenation on both sides led to a rapid increase in the mixed-race “mestizo” population of the islands—not to mention a tolerance for mixed-race people that persists to this day.

Desperate to prove that the New World could be profitable for Spain, Columbus allowed his men to enslave some of the “rebellious” Indians on Hispaniola and sell them in the Seville slave market. He accordingly sent several hundred of these back to Spain, though nearly half of them died (along with their European captors) when their ship was lost in an Atlantic storm.

This single incident was to prove the sum total of Columbus’s slaving activities, though even his admirers such as the chronicler Bartolome de Las Casas would regard it as the darkest stain on his entire career. Whether he would have enslaved more Indians or not given the chance to do so, the practice of selling them in Spain was quickly squelched by order of the queen, who regarded the Taino as subjects and therefore ineligible for enslavement. When she learned that about three hundred Tainos had been sold, she had the Indians tracked down, ransomed from their owners, and sent back to their homes in the New World. In fact, she was furious with Columbus, since she had made it clear that he was not to enslave the Natives; after this, she quickly sought ways to limit his power.

Meanwhile, Columbus made numerous concessions to the disgruntled colonists in a misguided effort to placate them, including a fateful decision to replicate the labor-service practice owed by peasants on Iberian estates. This became the basis of the much-disparaged *encomienda* system, whereby Natives were subjected to forced labor by their Spanish landlords. Moreover, the labor-service concession, which worked reasonably enough back in Iberia, was roundly abused in the Caribbean. Many colonists interpreted it as a license to round up and forcibly relocate bands of Indians, leading to further strife, atrocities, mass flight, and rapid social disintegration.

No one should be under any illusion as to whether the Spanish sometimes treated the Indians with incredible cruelty. According to various accounts, they devised games to determine whether individual Indians should live or die; they tested the sharpness of their swords by lopping off Indians’ heads at random, and mutilated them in any number of ways. At the same time, this needs to be seen in the light of Indian cruelty toward their own captives, both European and Indian, which as a rule was crueler and more torturous than that inflicted on them by the Spanish. It also needs to be seen in the light of the

mixed-race relationships—and children —that were already being produced within a few years of the Spanish arrival.

When Isabella's inspector Francisco de Bobadilla arrived at the islands in 1500, he found open rebellion among Spanish and Indian factions against Columbus and his brother. As he sailed into the harbor, Bobadilla saw that the admiral was in the process of hanging more than a dozen Europeans who had refused to submit to his authority. He immediately ordered Columbus and his brother removed from power and sent them home in chains.

Though he was later released, Columbus was never given another governorship. After a disastrous fourth voyage in which he discovered the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, only to be shipwrecked for over a year on the coast of Jamaica, Columbus returned home in a state of extreme mental agitation. In these later years he was given to fits of mystical prophecy and religious extremism that lasted until his death.

WAS COLUMBUS A MASS MURDERER?

According to popularly accepted figures, Columbus and the Spanish administrators of the islands are held responsible for the deaths of up to eight million Indians. We will look in greater detail at the charge of Taino genocide in the next chapter. But this is undoubtedly a wild exaggeration.

The idea that Columbus killed millions of people on Hispaniola is an unfortunate legacy of the writings of the aforementioned friar de las Casas, who saw firsthand the mistreatment of the Natives at the hands of Europeans during those first lawless decades. Las Casas's most famous work, *On the Destruction of the Indies*, was a polemical tract designed to create maximum sympathy for the Indians in Spain.

It worked, and his persistence paid off with the passage in 1542 of the New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians, which overhauled the encomienda system and led to a gradual stabilization of Colonist-Indian-mestizo relations. By the end of the sixteenth century, most forced labor in New Spain had been replaced by wage labor, with African slaves remaining a small minority of unpaid workers in many Latin American countries.

Las Casas's sympathy for the Indian plight did not prevent him from being a great admirer of Columbus. He went out of his way to portray Columbus as a protector of the Indians rather than a scourge. This is another inconvenient truth that has been swept under the rug by modern polemical treatments. Las Casas's main target was not Columbus himself, but the Spanish adventurers and ne'er-do-wells who came after him in search of an opportunity to get rich quick. It was Las Casas who suggested that Hispaniola might have had up to three million people in 1491, a figure that most serious demographers reject as absurd, while modern activists continue to broadcast it as widely as possible.

The Yale Genocide Studies Program is slightly more cautious than many advocates of the island genocide theory, though it still gives credence to the idea that over a million Tainos might have died at the hands of the Spanish on the island.¹⁵ Yet even Howard Zinn, who understood the geography of Hispaniola and the limited ability of the Taino to produce food using their system of mound farming, accepted the far more realistic figure of two hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants on the island before Columbus's arrival.¹⁶

Furthermore, while it is true that thousands of people died as a result of Spanish maladministration and forced labor (perhaps up to twenty-five thousand over the course of fifty years), the number of Indigenous people killed in military engagements or wanton violence probably numbered about two or three thousand. The total number who were enslaved and sent back to Spain likewise appears to have been in the hundreds. Columbus himself was responsible for a tiny fraction of those killed through direct violence and mistreatment; as governor, he proved as likely to kill a European “rebel” as an Indigenous one. The great majority of those who died—easily over 90 percent—were victims of disease rather than cruelty.

Genetic tests have revealed surprisingly large proportions of Taino Indian DNA among modern Caribbean islanders, a finding that has shocked (and disheartened) advocates of Spanish genocide. Genetic evidence provides irrefutable proof that many more Indians survived and intermarried than is popularly believed. According to a report published in *Indian Country Today*, up to 61 percent of all Puerto Ricans have been found to have Taino Indian blood.¹⁷ This is a huge proportion, compared with only a couple of percent of Indian blood found in the US population at large. It suggests that Puerto Ricans have similar levels of Indigenous blood compared to other highly mixed peoples such as Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Bolivians; more will be said on this in the next chapter.

Moreover, research suggests that Taino genes were not at all inbred, confirming that Taino peoples mixed widely with people all around the Caribbean. Flight, intermarriage, and disease therefore are likely to account for over 90 percent of the missing Indians, and all of this points to the fact that charges of mass murder have been greatly exaggerated.

The reason why the real numbers of killed and enslaved were so low is that the Spanish government viewed the inhabitants of Hispaniola and other Caribbean islands as valuable subjects of the crown. Just as Queen Isabella would never send out an army of extermination against one of her own provinces except in extreme circumstances, so she continually admonished her officials to treat the Caribbean Natives with as much care as possible. Human beings were the greatest source of capital in Isabella's day. Like other feudal lords, Isabella wanted to maximize the population of her territories, not reduce it. In a world recently depopulated by the Black Death, European lords knew that the only way to reap revenue from an estate was to have it worked by numerous hands in longstanding agricultural settlements.¹⁸ Geographers and travelers often judged the quality of a city and a kingdom based on how populous it was. Population density was equated with power and good administration.

SLAVES...OR SOCIAL SUPERIORS?

The Wikipedia article on the voyages of Columbus is unfortunately typical of modern bias and sloppiness on the topic.¹⁹ It suggests, for example, that the seven Tainos brought to Spain by Columbus after his first voyage were brought back as slaves, mere samples of human merchandise. To the contrary, all seven Tainos whom Columbus had captured and kept as interpreters were accorded places of honor in the Spanish court. Many solemn processions were held to commemorate their arrival; they were feasted and paraded with pomp across Iberia like visiting dignitaries. In the royal hall at Barcelona, the seven Natives were baptized in a high ceremony, with one being given the baptismal name Fernando de Aragon—the same name as the king of Spain—and another Juan de Castilla, after the heir to the Spanish throne. The king and crown prince also acted as godparents.

The Indian christened Fernando was a relative of the chief Guacanagarix; he was therefore treated as a nobleman by the Spanish court. As we will see, this willingness to treat Indian “lords” as analogous to European nobility—hence socially and biologically superior to European commoners—was a standard feature of European-Indian relations for the first two centuries of contact.

Columbus's accomplishments as a navigator and explorer are irrefutable and justly catapult him into the first rank of historical figures. For hundreds of years after Columbus, the mapmaking and geography he spurred acted as anchors for countless scientific advancements. It is no exaggeration to say that the European voyages of discovery remain foundational to all modern science and technology. Columbus was the first to bring New World peoples back into contact with the major civilizations of the Old World, and he is rightly remembered as a brash, colorful architect of modern globalism. He was also very much a man of his time and of his culture. He marveled at the wonders of the New World and had some of the sensibilities of a Renaissance artist. He appreciated the physical form and intelligence of some of the Caribbean Indians he encountered. He had the capacity for religious fanaticism, but for most of his life he was a religious opportunist who counseled moderation. He was greedy, to be sure, but like all good businessmen, he understood the need to play fair. He was willing to sell war captives as slaves, but only in some cases and only if circumstances allowed. His primary motive was the creation of a family dynasty, though he also wished to be remembered as an oceangoing successor to Marco Polo. As an administrator, however, he was disastrous. He was not particularly cruel by the standards of his day, but nor was he good at maintaining order or restraining his adopted Spanish allies from making life intolerable for the Tainos.

In sum, Columbus was no saint. He was a self-aggrandizing entrepreneur and a bad administrator who allowed anarchy to break out where some other men might have kept order. This ended up causing thousands of deaths and set the stage for more. At the same time, Columbus was an extremely brave and skilled navigator and a visionary who set the stage for modernity by uniting the two halves of planet Earth. The task of governing first contact between the Caribbean and European peoples was never going to be an easy one, and the fact that New World people proved so extremely susceptible to Old World disease could have been predicted by no one.

One thing that does no one any good is to exaggerate the numbers of Natives who died in the Caribbean, and to exaggerate the level of malice, racism, cruelty, greed, and zealotry borne by the Europeans. On all these counts, the slightest brush with the facts about Columbus and his career shows that the ideas articulated by Howard Zinn and his followers—including the writers of *Yellowstone*—are gross misrepresentations of what was in reality a complex and multifaceted historical encounter.

FOOTNOTES

- 9** Yellowstone stars and is produced by veteran filmmaker Kevin Costner, whose tendencies to mythologize the American West were previously established in *Dances with Wolves*-a film to which we will return in due course.
- 10** Christopher Columbus, *The Journal of Christopher Columbus (During His First Voyage 1492-93)*, ed. Clements R. Markham (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2016), entry for October 11, 1492.
- 11** Columbus, journal entry for December 24, 1492.
- 12** Francis Jennings in his *Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*, pp. 5-6, sets up Spain as a “crusading society” that had been shaped by the Reconquista. This view was common in his day, but it has long since been debunked by scholars working on the topic. In the popular mind, this stereotype of Spaniards as religious zealots still has a lot of traction.
- 13** The dominant academic reading of Christian missionizing activity is based on the writings of French theorist Michel Foucault (1926-84), who is credited with inventing the notion that “all discourse is power.” One implication of this theory is that no missionizing, however well-meaning, is simply “good” or “kind.” It is also an attempt by one group to gain power over another. While cynical, this view contains enough elements of truth to keep a lively debate going.
- 14** William D. Phillips and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 185.
- 15** “[Hispaniola](#),” Genocide Studies Program, Yale University.
- 16** For this system, see M. E. Danubio, “[The Decline of the Tainos: Critical Revision of the Demographical-Historical Sources](#),” *International Journal of Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1987), 241-245.
- 17** Rick Kearns, “[Indigenous Puerto Rico: DNA Evidence Upsets Established History](#),” *Indian Country Today*, September 6, 2017.
- 18** Karl W. Butzer, “[The Americas Before and After 1492: An Introduction to Current Geographical Research](#),” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (1992), 345-368.
- 19** “Voyages of Christopher Columbus,” [Wikipedia](#).