

ART AS PROPAGANDA

The Black Legend



Spain's vast acquisitions in the New World made her the greatest power in Europe, and then as now, power excited jealousy. So it was that some of Las Casas' propaganda tracts, which exaggerated actual Spanish mistreatment of the Indians in an effort to get the Crown to stop it, were gleefully exploited by France and England; the result has been a "Black Legend" which, like many half-truths in history, dies very hard. This was the origin of the extraordinarily grisly group of water colors—now in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan—which appears on this and the next three pages. Probably intended to illustrate a 1582 French translation of Las Casas' most widely reprinted tract, his *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, the drawings were never published. But they seem to have formed the basis for a whole series of illustrations which over the next three centuries made "Spain" and "cruelty" synonymous throughout the world. The rare original drawings—reproduced here in color for the first time—are accompanied by the relevant verbatim excerpts from an English translation of Las Casas' writings which was published in London in 1699.

The *Spaniards* [wrote Las Casas of the scene above] were no sooner arriv'd in the Isle of *Cuba*, but this *Cacyque* [chief] who knew 'em too well, . . . resolv'd to defend himself . . . but he unfortunately fell into their Hands [and] was burn'd alive. While he was in the midst of the Flames, tied to a Stake, a certain Franciscan Frier of great Piety and Vertue, took upon him to speak to him of God and our Religion . . . [The *Cacyque*] ask'd the Frier whether the Gate of Heaven was open to the *Spaniards*; and being answer'd that such of 'em as were good men might hope for entrance there: The *Cacyque*, without any farther deliberation, told him, he had no mind to go to Heaven, for fear of meeting with such cruel and wicked Company as they were; but would much rather go to Hell . . .

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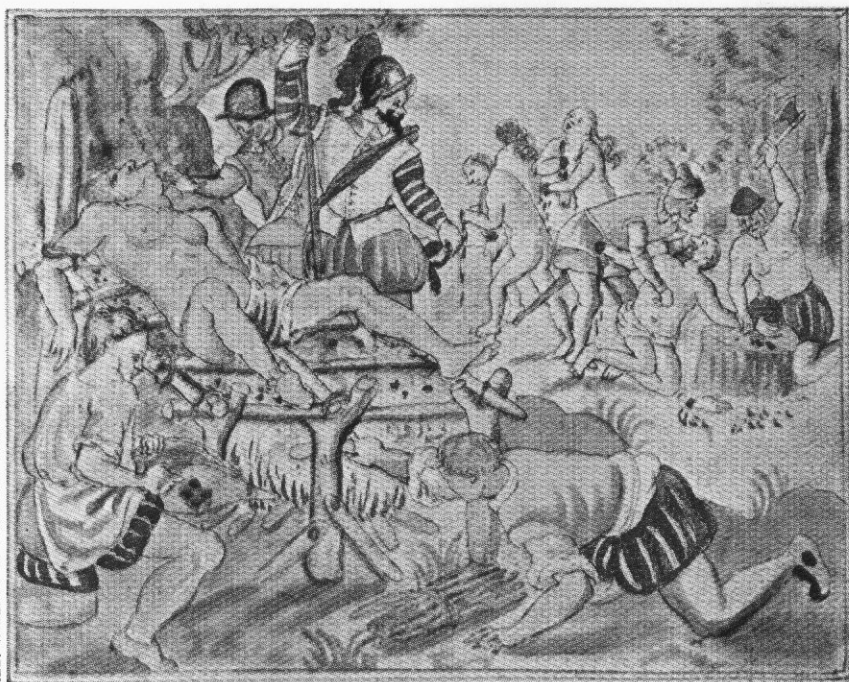
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MEXICO: [The Spaniards] afterwards went to *Mexico*, where King *Montezuma* accompanied with his Nobles receiv'd 'em . . . being carried upon a Golden Frame, or Chair of State, and conducted 'em to the Palace that was provided for 'em. But the same day they seiz'd this unfortunate Prince . . .



All the Nobility of the City was engag'd in representing Plays and Shows, and in dancing round the place where their King was imprison'd, to allay the Troubles of his Mind during his Captivity; in these Plays they expos'd to view all their Riches and Magnificence. . . . there were about the Palace two thousand young Men that were the very flower of the whole Kingdom, and the Pride and Glory of the Court of King *Montezuma*: While they were thus engag'd, the Commander of the *Spaniards* with one of his Troops came to fall upon 'em. . . . Accordingly they fell upon 'em, pronouncing the word *St. James*, which was the Signal for massacring these poor naked *Indians* . . . and not so much as one of 'em escap'd.



HISPANIOLA: They erected a small Scaffold, supported with Forks and Poles, upon which to execute their Chiefs, and those of the most considerable quality among 'em. When they had laid 'em at length upon this Scaffold, they kindled a gentle Fire, to make 'em feel themselves die gradually, till the poor Wretches after the most exquisite Pain and Anguish, attended with horrible Screeches and Outcries, at length expir'd. I one day saw four or five Persons of the highest Rank in this Island burn'd after this manner.

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HISPANIOLA: They cut off the Hands of those they sav'd alive, and sent 'em away in that miserable condition, bidding 'em carry the News of their Calamities to those that were retir'd into the Mountains to escape the *Spaniards*.



One day the Governor of the Island, accompanied with 60 Horse and 300 Foot, sends a Summons to about 300 of the greatest Lords of the Country to attend his Person. . . . The Indian Nobles, not at all suspecting any treacherous Design, were by the Governor's Order brought into a House cover'd with Straw, which he commanded to be set on fire, where they perish'd miserably. Those of 'em who attempted to escape were pursued by the Spanish Troopers, and kill'd without Mercy. . . . This same Governor caus'd Queen *Anacaona* . . . to be hang'd, that he might disgrace the Memory of that Princess as much as he could by so ignominious a Death.



MEXICO: In the flourishing and famous City of *Cholula* . . . [the Spaniards] demanded 6000 *Indians* of 'em to carry their Baggage, their Utensils and Provisions: When they were come, they shut 'em up in divers Yards, and 'twas a miserable Spectacle to see the poor Wretches prepare to carry the Burdens they were to lay upon 'em. They were almost stark naked, and stoop'd down prostrating themselves upon the Ground, submitting like Sheep to the Blows . . . these Tyrants gave 'em.

