New Spain was discovered in 1517 and, at the time, great atrocities were committed against the indigenous people of the region and some were killed by members of the expedition. In 1518 the so-called Christians set about stealing from the people and murdering them on the pretence of settling the area. And from that year until this – and it is now 1542 – the great iniquities and injustices, the outrageous acts of violence and the bloody tyranny of these Christians have steadily escalated, the perpetrators having lost all fear of God, all love of their sovereign, and all sense of self-respect. The heinous outrages and acts of barbarity have been so vile, the violence so intense, the murders so frequent, other acts of despotism so extreme, and the havoc and devastation so widespread throughout the kingdoms of the Mainland that what we have so far set down in this account is as nothing compared with what went on in New Spain, and the scale and nature of the atrocities committed without a break from 1518 right up to this day beggars description. Even now, in September 1542, the atrocities get worse by the day, it being the case, as we have said, that the infernal brutality and utter inhumanity of the acts committed have steadily increased as time has gone on.

From the very first day they set foot in New Spain, which was the eighteenth of April 1518, until 1530, there was no respite whatever in the carnage and mayhem provoked by these cruel and bloodthirsty Spaniards. Throughout those twelve long years they pillaged their way over an area of some four hundred and fifty leagues around Mexico City, putting those who lived there to the sword and committing all manner of barbarities against them. This area had originally boasted four or five great kingdoms, each of them as large as Spain and a good deal better favoured, and each of them inhabited, as the Almighty had ordained, by more people than the combined population of Toledo, Seville, Valladolid, Saragossa and Barcelona, even when these Spanish cities were at the very height of their fortunes. The whole area veritably teemed with humanity, even though if one were to walk its frontier one would travel over one thousand eight hundred leagues. Yet, over the twelve years of which we are speaking, and during the course of what they term the ‘conquest’ (which is really and truly nothing other than a series of violent incursions into the territory by these cruel tyrants: incursions condemned not only in the eyes of God but also by law, and in practice far worse than the assaults mounted by the Turk in his attempt to destroy Christendom), the Europeans have, throughout these four hundred and fifty leagues, butchered, burned alive or otherwise done to death four million souls, young and old alike, men, women and children. And this figure does not include those killed and still being killed today as a direct result of the tyrannical slavery and the oppression and privation its victims are forced to endure on a daily basis.

And no account, no matter how lengthy, how long it took to write, nor how conscientiously it was compiled, could possibly do justice to the full horror of the atrocities committed at one time or another in various parts of this region by these mortal enemies of the human race. Even if one were simply to select one or two outrages from among the many, it would still be nigh on impossible to describe them in all their bloody and terrible detail. That said, and even though I am well aware that I can

---

54 Francisco Hernández de Córdoba led the first expedition to Mexico in 1517; he was followed by Juan de Grijalva in 1518. Both of these, however, were trading expeditions and neither had formal leave to settle. The first fully equipped military venture was that led by Cortés which left Cuba on 18 November 1519.

55 See Introduction, p. xxxix
Among other massacres was one which took place in Cholula, a great city of some thirty thousand inhabitants. When all the dignitaries of the city and the region came out to welcome the Spaniards with all due pomp and ceremony, the priests to the fore and the high priest at the head of the procession, and then proceeded to escort them into the city and lodge them in the houses of the lord and the leading citizens, the Spaniards decided that the moment had come to organize a massacre (or ‘punishment’ as they themselves express such things) in order to inspire fear and terror in all the people of the territory. This was, indeed, the pattern they followed in all the lands they invaded: to stage a bloody massacre of the most public possible kind in order to terrorize those meek and gentle peoples. What they did was the following. They requested the local lord to send for all the nobles and leading citizens of the city and of all the surrounding communities subject to it and, as soon as they arrived and entered the building to begin talks with the Spanish commander, they were seized without anyone outside getting wind of what was afoot. Part of the original request was that they should bring with them five or six thousand native bearers and these were mustered in the courtyards when and as they arrived. One could not watch these poor wretches getting ready to carry the Spaniards’ packs without taking pity on them, stark naked as

56 This was Cortés’s most spectacular and widely reported massacre. Cholula was a wealthy town on the major Central America trade-route; it was also the cult-centre of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican deity with whom Cortés is supposed to have been confused. Cortés gave the number of dead as three thousand, but another witness, Vázquez de Tapia, claimed the death-toll was ten times higher. The precise figures are irrecoverable; see Cortés, Letters from Mexico, pp. 465–6
Among other massacres was one which took place in Cholula, a great city of some thirty thousand inhabitants. When all the dignitaries of the city and the region came out to welcome the Spaniards with all due pomp and ceremony, the priests to the fore and the high priest at the head of the procession, and then proceeded to escort them into the city and lodge them in the houses of the lord and the leading citizens, the Spaniards decided that the moment had come to organize a massacre (or 'punishment' as they themselves express such things) in order to inspire fear and terror in all the people of the territory. This was, indeed, the pattern they followed in all the lands they invaded: to stage a bloody massacre of the most public possible kind in order to terrorize those meek and gentle peoples. What they did was the following. They requested the local lord to send for all the nobles and leading citizens of the city and of all the surrounding communities subject to it and, as soon as they arrived and entered the building to begin talks with the Spanish commander, they were seized without anyone outside getting wind of what was afoot. Part of the original request was that they should bring with them five or six thousand native bearers and these were mustered in the courtyards when and as they arrived. One could not watch these poor wretches getting ready to carry the Spaniards’ packs without taking pity on them, stark naked as

56 This was Cortés's most spectacular and widely reported massacre. Cholula was a wealthy town on the major Central America trade-route; it was also the cult-centre of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican deity with whom Cortés is supposed to have been confused. Cortés gave the number of dead as three thousand, but another witness, Vázquez de Tapia, claimed the death-toll was ten times higher. The precise figures are irrecoverable; see Cortés, Letters from Mexico, pp. 465-6
they were with only their modesty hidden from view, each with a kind of little net on his shoulders in which he carried his own modest store of provisions. They all got down on their haunches and waited patiently like sheep. Once they were all safely inside the courtyard, together with a number of others who were also there at the time, armed guards took up positions covering the exits and Spanish soldiers unsheathed their swords and grasped their lances and proceeded to slaughter these poor innocents. Not a single soul escaped. After a day or two had gone by, several victims surfaced, soaked from head to foot in the blood of their fellows beneath whose bodies they had sheltered (so thick was the carpet of corpses in the courtyard) and, with tears in their eyes, pleaded for their lives; but the Spaniards showed them no mercy nor any compassion, and no sooner did they crawl out from under the pile of corpses than they were butchered. The Spanish commander gave orders that the leading citizens, who numbered over a hundred and were roped together, were to be tied to stakes set in the ground and burned alive. One of these dignitaries, however, who may well have been the first among them and the king of that whole region, managed to get free and took refuge, along with twenty or thirty or forty others, in the great temple of the city, which was fortified and was known in the local language as *guar*. There they put up a stout defence against the Spaniards which lasted for the best part of the day. But the Spaniards, against whom no resistance is really possible, especially when it is mounted by unarmed civilians, set fire to the temple, burning those inside alive, the victims shouting all the time: ‘Oh, wicked men! What harm had we done to you? Why do you kill us? Wait till you get to Mexico City, for there our great king, Montezuma, will avenge our deaths.’ It is said

The Spanish commander gave orders that the leading citizens be roped together, tied to stakes and burned alive.

that, while the Spaniards were slaughtering the five or six thousand men gathered in the courtyard, their commander regaled his men with snatches of:

Nero watched from Tarpey’s height
the flames engulf Rome’s awesome might;
children and ancients shout in pain,
he all regards with cold disdain.

A traditional Spanish ballad:

*Mira Nero de Tarpeya, a Roma cómo se ardia;
gritos dan niños y viejos, y él de nada se dolía.*
They were responsible also for another huge massacre in Tepeaca, a city bigger than Cholula and one with a larger population. Here the Spaniards put countless thousands to the sword in the cruellest possible manner.60

From Cholula they made their way to Mexico City.61 On their journey, they were showered with thousands of gifts from the great king Montezuma who also sent some of his men to stage entertainments and banquets for them on the way. When they reached the Great Causeway which runs for some two leagues right up to the city itself, they were greeted by Montezuma’s own brother and many local dignitaries bearing valuable gifts of gold, silver and apparel from the great lord.62 At the city gates, Montezuma himself came out to meet them, carried on a litter of gold and surrounded by the entire court. He escorted them into the city to the great houses where he had directed they should be lodged. Yet that same day, or so I am reliably informed by a number of eye-witnesses, the Spaniards seized the great king unawares by means of a trick and held him under armed guard of eighty soldiers, eventually putting him in irons.63 But, leaving aside all of this, although much passed of consequence and one could dwell upon it at length, I should like to relate just one incident contrived by these tyrants. It happened that the Spanish commander had occasion to go to the sea-port to deal with one of his captains who was planning an attack on him,64 and he left another of his henchmen, with a hundred or so men at his command, to guard King Montezuma while he was away.65 The garrison decided to stage a show of strength and thereby boost

60 For Cortés’s account of the attacks mounted against his men in Tepeaca ‘from strong and dangerous positions’ — which, for reasons he does not explain, led to the attackers’ neither ‘killing nor wounding a single Spaniard’ — see Letters from Mexico, pp. 145–8
61 The proper name for the city which Las Casas calls ‘Mexico’ was Temixtitán or Tenochtitlán
62 Montezuma’s brother Cuitlahuac (Cuauhtecuatzin) was lord of Yztapalapa, a city through which Cortés had passed on his journey from Cholula. See Cortés’s account of this episode in Letters from Mexico, pp. 83–4.
63 By Cortés’s own account, Montezuma was not seized until more than a week later (Letters from Mexico, pp. 88–90)
64 The commander was Cortés, the captain Pánfilo de Narváez. On this expedition and the reasons behind the Narváez expedition, see the essay by J.H. Elliott, ‘Cortés, Velázquez, and Charles V’, in Letters from Mexico, pp. xi–xxxvii (xxiii–xxvi)
65 The captain left in charge was Pedro de Alvarado, a veteran of Juan de Grijalva’s expedition and effectively second-in-command to Cortés; see J.E. Kelly, Pedro de Alvarado, conquistador (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932; reissue Washington, etc.: Kennikat Press, 1971). Cortés’s claim that he left Mexico City garrisoned by ‘five hundred men’ (Letters from Mexico, p. 119) is at odds with eye-witness accounts which put the number at about one hundred and twenty, many of them sick and wounded
A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

the fear they inspired in the people of this kingdom, a classic Spanish tactic in these campaigns, as we have had occasion to remark before. All the local citizens, great and small, as well as all the members of the court, were wholly taken up with entertaining their imprisoned lord. To this end, they organized fiestas, some of which involved staging traditional dances every afternoon and evening in squares and residential quarters throughout the city. These dances are called in the local language mitoles (those typical of the islands being known as areitos); and since these dances are the principal form of public entertainment and enjoyment among the people, they deck themselves out in all their best finery. And the entertainments were organized with close attention to rank and station, the noblest of the citizens dancing nearest the building where their lord was being held. Close by this building, then, danced over two thousand youths of quality, the flower of the nobility of Montezuma's whole empire. Thither the Spanish captain made his way, accompanied by a platoon of his men, under pretense of wanting to watch the spectacle but in fact carrying orders to attack the revellers at a prearranged time, further platoons with identical orders having been despatched to the other squares where entertainments were being staged. The nobles were totally absorbed in what they were doing and had no thought for their own safety when the soldiers drew their swords and shouting: 'For Saint James, and at 'em, men!' proceeded to slice open the sthie and naked bodies of the dancers and to spill their noble blood. Not one dancer was left alive, and the same story was repeated in the other squares throughout the city. This series of events caused horror, anguish and bitterness throughout the land; the whole nation was plunged into mourning and, until the end of time, or at least as long as a few of these people survive, they will not cease to tell and re-tell, in their areitos and dances, just as we do at home in Spain with our ballads, this sad story of a massacre which wiped out their entire nobility, beloved and respected by them for generations and generations.

Once the native population learned of this barbaric and unprecedented outrage, perpetrated against innocent individuals who had done nothing whatever to deserve such cruelty, the whole city, which had up to then tolerated the equally unmerited imprisonment of its lord and master simply because he himself had issued orders that no one was to fight the Christians nor to offer any resistance to them, took up arms and attacked them. Many Spaniards were wounded and only narrowly managed to make good their escape. They ordered Montezuma out on to the terrace at dagger point and forced him to order his men not to attack the house and to cease their insurrection. But the people ceased altogether at that juncture to obey such orders and there was a feeling that they should elect another lord in Montezuma's place who would be able and willing to lead them in battle. At this point, it became known that the Spanish commander was on his way back from the coast after his victory over the rebel forces and that he was not far off and was bringing reinforcements. There followed a lull in the fighting which lasted until he arrived some three or four days later; meanwhile, the number of protesters had swollen with the influx of people from all over the territory. Once the commander arrived, the natives attacked with such unrelenting ferocity that it seemed to the garrison that not one of them would be left alive, and they decided to abandon the city in secret and at night. The locals got wind of this, catching up with many as they fled across the causeways that span the lake and killing them in great numbers, as, indeed, they had every right to, given the attacks we have described that

66 For a previous reference to areitos, see above p. 28
67 Santiago, the name of Saint James of Compostela, was traditionally used by the Spanish as a battle-cry, the legend being that he appeared in person, mounted on a white charger, at the battle of Clavijo against the Moors which supposedly took place in the year 822
68 On the site of Tenochtitlán and Cortés's retreat on what became known as the 'Black Night' (noche triste), see his Letters from Mexico, pp. 131-8
A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

had been made on them: a reasonable and fair-minded man will see that theirs was a defensive action and a just one. The Spaniards then regrouped and there followed a battle for the city in which terrible and bizarre outrages were committed against the indigenous population, vast numbers of whom were killed and many others, several leaders among them, burned alive.69

After the vile outrages and abominations perpetrated by the Spaniards, both in Mexico City itself and throughout the whole region (an area of ten or fifteen or twenty leagues all round the city saw countless natives perish at their hands), they transferred their pestilential attentions to the densely populated Pánuco province, where once again they swept through the territory, pillaging and murdering on the grand scale as they went. They then moved on to the provinces of Tuxtepec,70 Impilcingo,71 and finally Colima,72 each one of them greater in extent than the kingdoms of Castile and León, and in each they wrought the same destruction as they had in Mexico City and its province. It would be impracticable to compile a complete dossier of all the atrocities, foul murders and other barbarities they committed, and any such account would be so lengthy it would prove impossible for the reader to take in.

It should be recalled that the pretext upon which the Spanish invaded each of these provinces and proceeded to massacre the people and destroy their lands – lands which teemed with people and should surely have been a joy and a delight to any true Christian – was purely and simply that they were making good the claim of the Spanish Crown to the territories in question. At no stage had any order been issued entitling them to massacre the people or to enslave them. Yet, whenever the natives did not drop everything and rush to recognize publicly the truth of the

irrational and illogical claims that were made, and whenever they did not immediately place themselves completely at the mercy of the iniquitous and cruel and bestial individuals who were making such claims, they were dubbed outlaws and held to be in rebellion against His Majesty. This, indeed, was the tenor of the letters that were sent back to the Spanish court, and everybody involved in the administration of the New World was blind to the simple truth enshrined in the first principles of law and government that nobody who is not a subject of a civil power in the first place can be deemed in law to be in rebellion against that power. Any reasonable person who knows anything of God, of rights and of civil law can imagine for himself what the likely reaction would be of any people living peaceably within their own frontiers, unaware that they owe allegiance to anyone save their natural lords, were a stranger suddenly to issue a demand along the following lines: ‘You shall henceforth obey a foreign king, whom you have never seen nor ever heard of, if you do not, we will cut you to pieces’ – especially when they discover that these strangers are indeed quite prepared to carry out this threat to the letter. Even more shocking is the fact that when the local people do obey such commands they are harshly treated as common slaves, put to hard labour and subjected to all manner of abuse and to agonizing torments that ensure a slower and more painful death than would summary execution. Indeed, for them, the end result is the same: they, their wives and their children all perish and the whole of their nation is wiped from the face of the earth. And so blinded by ambition and driven by greed are the devils who advocate such treatment of these people that they cannot see that, when their victims come to obey under duress this foreign overlord and publicly recognize his authority over them, simply because of their fear of what will happen to them if they do not, such a recognition of suzerainty has no standing in law whatever, any such prerogative obtained by menaces from any people anywhere in the world being invalid. In practice, the only rights these perfidious crusaders have

69 Las Casas is here conflating two events: the retreat which took place in 1520 and the siege of the city by Cortés the following year
71 Or ‘Impilcingo’
72 Also known as ‘Colimán’ or ‘Alimán’

NEW SPAIN [continued]
A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

earned which can be upheld in human, divine, or natural law are
the right to eternal damnation and the right to answer for
the offences and the harm they have done the Spanish Crown by
utterly ruining every one of these kingdoms and (as far as it is
within their power) invalidating all claims the Spanish Crown
may have to the territories of the New World. These, then, are
the true services they have performed and continue to perform
for their sovereign in this part of the world.

With this same unimpeachable title to possession, this tyrant of
a commander sent two of his captains, both of them even more
ferocious and barbaric, more implacable and merciless than he was
himself, to two vast, prosperous and highly favoured kingdoms,
sharing a common frontier and some three hundred leagues from
Mexico City. The first of these two densely populated realms,
Guatemala, lies on the Pacific; the other, known as Naco and
Honduras (or Guaimura), has an Atlantic seaboard. Both expedi-
tionary forces were well-manned, with both cavalry and infantry,
the commander sending one overland and the other by sea.

It is no exaggeration to say that one could make a whole book
- and a book that would stagger not only contemporaries but
future generations also - out of the atrocities, barbarities, mur-
ders, clearances, ravages and other foul injustices perpetrated by
members of these two expeditions, and particularly by those that
gone to Guatemala, the leader of the other expedition coming to
an abrupt and sticky end. Here were abominations that not

only outdid, in number and in kind, everything that had been
seen before in the New World but also went far beyond those
perpetrated by contemporaries, vast tracts of land being laid
waste and turned into desert and an incalculable number of
natives killed.

The seaborne expedition sacked the towns all along the
coast, committing all manner of violence against the people
who lived there, as, for example, when the locals of Yucatán,
a province which lay on their route to the kingdom of Naco
and Guaimura, whither the Spaniards were headed, came out
to greet them and offer them gifts and then the Spaniards,
once they had landed, sent out raiding parties throughout the
territory, robbing and killing and destroying everything and
everyone in sight. There was one Spanish captain who mutinied
and, taking three hundred men with him, set off inland towards
the kingdom of Guatemala, burning and looting the towns, and
robbing and killing those who lived there. He deliberately
followed such a scorched-earth policy for some one hundred and
twenty leagues, so that, should his erstwhile companions-in-
arms decide on pursuit, they would find the whole region
empty and barren, and all the local people athirst to take
revenge on their pursuers in return for the harm and destruc-
tion wrought by him and his men. A few days later the officer
in overall charge of the expedition, against whom he had mutin-
nied, was killed and his place taken by a whole series of barbaric
despots who inflicted unspeakable cruelty on the natives, butch-
ering them, enslaving them and selling them to merchant-sailors in
exchange for wine, clothing and other things. The despoticism of
the invaders and the enslavement of the population led, be-
tween 1524 and 1533, to the complete destruction of all the
territories of the kingdom of Naco and Honduras, once a
veritable paradise on earth supporting a denser population than
anywhere else in the world. Nowadays, when one travels through
this area, one sees nothing but bare, ruined settlements, and the
whole melancholy spectacle is enough to melt the hardest of

73 Las Casas calls the Pacific 'the southern shore' and the Atlantic 'the northern
shore' (e.g. below, p. 63).
74 The overland expedition to Guatemala was under the command of Pedro de
Alvarado (see above, p. 49, n. 61), the fleet headed for Honduras under that of
Cristóbal de Olid. Alvarado's own account of the conquest of Guatemala is
contained in his two surviving letters to Cortés, reproduced in English trans-
182-96, and used extensively by Las Casas in compiling the present account.
75 For an account of Olid's drumhead court-martial and execution at the hands of
Francisco de Las Casas and Gil González Dávila, see Cortés, Letters from Mexico,
p. 412 and Robert S. Chamberlain, The Conquest and Colonization of Honduras, 1502-
A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

hearts. During these eleven years, more than two million souls have perished and, in an area of more than a hundred leagues by a hundred leagues, only two thousand survivors are to be seen; and even this number is shrinking day by day as the survivors succumb to the rigours of a life of slavery.

Turning our attention once more to the implacable tyrant in charge of the Guatemala expedition, we find him outdoing, as we have already had occasion to remark, all his predecessors in cruelty and barbarism, rivalling in wickedness even those who are active in the area today. He covered (as he was to report back to the commander who had sent the expedition) a distance of some four hundred leagues, from the provinces around Mexico City to the Guatemala border, killing and stealing, burning and pillaging. His pretext for destroying everything and everyone in his path was the one we have seen invoked before: that the locals must recognize the suzerainty of a bunch of inhuman and unjust barbarians who proclaimed themselves the representatives of a Spanish sovereign the locals had never seen, of whom they had never heard, and whom they soon judged to be even more cruel than his agents, for he and his men never allowed the people time to think over the implications of this proclamation, but fell upon them, killing and burning, the minute it had been read.

As soon as he set foot in the kingdom of Guatemala, this tyrant proceeded to kill the inhabitants in large numbers. None the less, the chief of Utatlán, the largest city in the kingdom, came out to receive him with all due ceremony, having himself carried out of the city on a litter amid fanfares of trumpets and the beating of war-drums, staging lavish entertainments to mark his arrival, setting before the visitors a sumptuous banquet, and inviting them to make free with whatever they could provide. That night, the Spaniards camped outside the city, impressed as they were by the defences and afraid that they might be in danger if they risked spending the night within the walls. On the morrow, the Spanish captain summoned the chief and the leading citizens and when they came, all unsuspecting, he seized them and demanded a certain sum of gold. When they replied that they had none, there being no gold in Guatemala, he declared them guilty on that count alone and without any due process of law directed that they be burned alive. Once the lords of the other provinces of the kingdom learned that he had burned their chief and his nobles simply because they had refused him gold, they fled their towns and cities and took to the mountains, leaving instructions to their people that they should go and offer to serve the Spaniards but not disclose where it was that the lords had gone into hiding. When the local people duly approached the Spaniards, declaring themselves willing to recognize them as their masters and to serve them in whatever

76 Las Casas is presumably alluding to his journey through the area in 1540 on his way to take ship for Europe.

77 Utatlán (or Ucatlán), known to its original inhabitants as Guماركaj and capital of the Quiché kingdom, stood near the modern town of Santa Cruz de Quiché. The chief mentioned here was Tecum Uman, later assassinated by Alvarado.
BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS
A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

TRANSLATED BY NIGEL GRIFFIN WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ANTHONY PAGDEN

Bartolomé de Las Casas was the first and fiercest critic of Spanish colonialism in the New World.

In 1542, after years of witnessing Indian suffering and slavery – and the failure of his own attempts to create a humane settlement – Las Casas wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. A work of great passion and documentary vividness, it embodies his belief that the early evangelizing vision of Christopher Columbus (whose diaries he preserved and edited) was corrupted by later conquistadores into a genocidal colonization. Like a distant forefather of the Enlightenment, he argues that the Indians should be regarded as human, and entitled to the basic rights of mankind.

Las Casas’s *Short Account* was dedicated to Prince Philip of Spain and appeared in published form in 1552. It makes compelling reading and carries all the urgency of a petition written at a moment in history when it still seemed possible to reverse the tide.

The cover shows an engraving by Theodor de Bry from a 17th century edition of *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.