

ON THE SPOT

Explorers Who Abused The Indians - And Got Away With It

The Sara Rose Show
Sarah Rose, host

Today's Guests

(These characters are real.)

Hernando Cortes, explored Mexico; conquered Aztecs
Christopher Columbus, explored Caribbean islands; conquered Arawak Indians
Francisco Pizarro, explored Peru; conquered Incas
Bartolome de las Casas, a friar; criticized conquistadors
Mancio Serra, colleague of Pizarro
Atahualpa, head of Inca empire
Dona Marina, translator for Cortes

Members of the Audience

Marcia Moore
Susan Halftown
Juan Molina
Sandra Hawkins

Sarah: Welcome. This might be shocking to learn, but the early explorers of America may have led the worst mass murder in human history. In the 100 years after the first Europeans arrived, the native population of the New World was nearly destroyed. Today you're going to meet three of the men responsible for this tragedy. You know them as conquistadors - conquerors, heroes. But we're going to dig behind the textbook tales, and uncover the dark side.

Hernando Cortes: We were led to believe, senora that this was not to be a trial. Yet you are sounding like judge and executioner all in one.

Sarah: Hey, my audience just wants to know the truth. (Applause) OK, let's meet our guests. First, a man I'm sure you all remember: the man who started it all. Christopher Columbus. (Applause) Next to him, a career soldier, the conqueror of Mexico, Hernando Cortes. (Applause) And finally, the conqueror of Peru, Francisco Pizarro. (Applause) Gentlemen, thank you for traveling all the way from the 16th century.

So, Mr. Columbus, let's start with you. When you landed, you had no idea what to expect, and here was a new race of people, like nobody you'd ever seen before. What did you think?

Christopher Columbus: Well, they were a simple people, these Indians, naked as the day they were born, and certainly ignorant of civilized ways. When I showed one my sword, he grabbed it by the blade and cut himself. They were the best people in the world and the most peaceable.

Sarah: So you like them?

Columbus: They were heathens, mind you; they had no religion. But I felt they could be converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force. I thought surely they would make good and skilled servants, for they were quick to imitate us. I told the King and Queen of Spain, that with 50 men, we could defeat them and make them do as we wished.

Sarah: Wait a second. They were the best people in the world, and you wanted to make them slaves?

Columbus: You don't understand. They were good in the way a dog is good. They had no knowledge of evil or of right and wrong or the value of things. They would give away pieces of gold in exchange for worthless little bells.

Sarah: Yeah, maybe they just wanted to get you out of their hair. But what about the gold? Weren't you more interested in getting rich than in preaching your religion to these people?

Columbus: Gold makes Christian nations strong and helps to spread the word of our Lord. And these simple people were ready to lead me to the empire of the Great Khan, where houses have roofs of gold.

Cortes: Hah! You never came within 5,000 miles of the Great Khan.

Columbus: You are a disbeliever like all the rest. I found Cipangu and Cathay, yet it was liars like you who refused me the credit.

Sarah: For those viewers who are a little confused, Cipangu and Cathay were the 16th-century names for Japan and China. And the Great Khan was the ruler of China. You know the story: Columbus thought, till his dying day, that he'd found Asia. So let's turn to Mr. Cortes. Tell us about your claim to fortune.

Cortes: You must understand that I brought more gold to Spain in a week than Columbus did in his lifetime. Montezuma, the Aztec king whom I conquered, ruled over a vast empire. In Tenochtitlan - the capital city - there were towers higher than the cathedral of Seville, forts larger than any castle in Spain, gold and silver figures so real that no craftsman in the world could have made better. There were . .

Sarah: OK, we get the idea. Let's go to the audience for a question.

Marcia Moore: I don't understand; if the Aztecs were so great, how did you defeat them so easily?

Sarah: Yeah, the Aztecs were an empire of 5 or 6 million people, and you went in there with 700 men and took over.

Cortes: Even a nation of heathens is no match for a small band of Christians.

Sarah: Hold it. Why do you keep implying that the Aztecs had no religion? What about their huge temples, priests, and gods?

Cortes: They did not worship the true God. They were so ignorant as to think that I myself was a god, returned from the heavens to seize power from Montezuma.

Sarah: And I suppose you didn't mind playing God?

Cortes: I was doing the work of the Lord. These people were sacrificing human beings to their gods. Their priests and their temples were drenched in human blood. I cleansed the temples and smashed the statues to end these vicious rituals.

Sarah: Let's turn to Mr. Pizarro before we break for a commercial. You conquered an empire of 12 million people - the Incas.

Francisco Pizarro: Yes, and the riches of my Peru make Mexico look like a peasant village in Portugal.

Cortes: What do you know? You are an illiterate peasant yourself!

Sarah: OK! So, Mr. Pizarro, I suppose you went around smashing statues and temples too.

Pizarro: Yes, but religion doesn't really interest me. I went among the Incas to take away their gold.

Sarah: Well, that's honest. We have to take a break. In a moment, we'll meet a monk who risked his reputation to expose what he says are the horrendous crimes of these men. We'll be right back. *(Applause)*

NEXT - A SPANIARD WHO CARED

Sarah: Here's an amazing fact. When Columbus landed on Hispaniola - the island that is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic - there may have been as many as 3 million Taino Indians there. Within 15 years, the population had been cut to 100,000. By 1515, there were 50,000 left, and by 1550, less than 500.

Our next guest is a monk who spent much of his life documenting the plight of the native Americans. During the 1500s, he wrote several books on the subject, and begged the Spanish government to pass laws protecting the Indians. His name is Bartolome de Las Casas.

Mr. Las Casas, how do you explain the almost complete disappearance of the Tainos?

Bartolome de Las Casas: Greed.

Sarah: I take it you don't mean the Tainos' own greed.

Las Casas: Certainly not. As Columbus himself said, they willingly gave of their most prized possessions.

Sarah: I would too if someone jabbed a sword in my stomach.

Las Casas: Not only swords, but fierce dogs, guns, and hatchets for chopping off heads and limbs.

Columbus: These were the instruments of war!

Las Casas: And with what did the Tainos wage their end of the battle? Wooden spears and a few bows and wooden-tipped arrows?

Columbus: Excuse me, but the Indians were not all as peaceful as the first tribe I encountered. Many sought to murder us as soon as our backs were turned.

Las Casas: Your work was to ravage, kill, mangle, and destroy. It's no surprise that they tried to kill a Spaniard now and then. *(Applause)*

Sarah: So why all the killing?

Las Casas: As I said, Greed. Admiral Columbus had promised the King and Queen of Spain shiploads of gold from Asia. When he found only small bits of dust, he began to despair. On Hispaniola, he ordered all Indians 14 years and older to collect a quota of gold every three months. When they did, they received a copper token to wear about their necks. Any native without a token had a hand cut off.

Sarah: *(to Columbus)* Cut off? And you call them barbarians?

Columbus: This is ridiculous. They were savages and had to be dealt with as such. Give them freedom and they would revert to dancing, nakedness, idleness, and drunkenness.

Las Casas: They had no rum to drink until we arrived. And you gave them no chance to live in freedom. You immediately set them to work in mines and fields. Those who could get away, fled, and were hunted down by dogs. Hundreds, maybe thousands, took their own lives with poison. Others died on slaving ships en route from one island to another. One could have sailed from Cuba to Hispaniola without compass or chart, guiding oneself by the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships.

Sarah: I'm speechless. Back in a moment with the story of an Inca emperor who died at the hands of Mr. Pizarros. *(Applause)*

STAY TUNED FOR AN INCA KING

Sarah: The average life span of an Indian mine worker in New Spain - that's what we know as the Caribbean, and Central and South America - was 25 years!

Pizarro: You are suggesting we conquistadors were at fault? The Indians were weak in spirit and in body. Most of them died of disease.

La Casas: Diseases brought by us.

Pizarro: Perhaps, but we cannot be blamed for an act of God. After all, God chose to strike down the savages and not the Christians.

Sarah: OK, I hear these words "savages" and "barbarians" being thrown around. My next two guests will help us find out just how "savage" and "barbaric" these people were. From Peru, a former colleague of Mr. Pizarro, but a man who renounced the brutal ways of the conquistadors. He is Mancio Serra. And with him, the former ruler of the Inca empire, Atahualpa. *(Applause)*

Mr. Serra, I know the Inca empire was huge, stretching nearly 2,000 miles. How would you describe their civilization?

Mancio Serra: They were a highly developed people. Their kings ruled with an iron fist, but order and harmony reigned. Among them there was neither a thief nor a cheat. All kinds of resources were shared. Food was distributed so that no one went hungry. The elderly and the wounded in war were well cared for.

Pizarro: Hal! What about their leader, Atahualpa? He observed no rules of combat. During his conquests, he murdered thousands of prisoners.

Sarah: Atahualpa?

Atahualpa: It is the way of things. Violence is necessary to keep order.

Sarah: Speaking of killing prisoners, tell us about your own death.

Atahualpa: Certainly. It began when the king of the bearded monsters . . .

Sarah: Bearded monsters?

Atahualpa: The invaders. Their leader - this man called Pizarro - invited me to come for a feast. When I arrived with 5,000 of my men, the town was deserted. My attendants assured me the strangers were hiding out of fear. But soon, the sky exploded in thunder. The strangers came on large creatures known as horses and struck down my men with their lances.

Sarah: You were surrounded?

Atahualpa: Yes. Then I was held captive. When I realized that the invaders cared only about gold, I offered to fill the room with gold and silver in exchange for my freedom.

Sarah: How big was this room?

Pizarro: As I recall, the room was about 17 feet long and 12 feet long*wide*.

Atahualpa: In two months, I fulfilled my pledge.

Sarah: Did they let you go?

Atahualpa: No. I was to die from the beginning. Yet at the end, I was given a strange choice. I was to be burned, but if I accepted their god, I could die by strangling.

Sarah: How generous.

Atahualpa: I had told my people that my father, the sun, would send me back to earth after my death. I did not want them to see my body consumed by flames and think me wrong. So I decided to convert - and be strangled.

Sarah: What a story! We've got to take a break. When we come back, we'll hear from a Mexican woman who helped topple the empire of her own people.

BACK SOON WITH DONA MARINA

Sarah: Mexico had a population of 25 million when Mr. Cortes first arrived in 1519. By 1600, believe it or not, the Indian population had dropped to 1 million.

In light of those facts, I was surprised to hear that a native Mexican was prepared to speak today in support of Mr. Cortes. Our next guest is Dona Marina, an Aztec who served for many years as translator to Mr. Cortes. For her loyalty to Cortes, her own people called her a traitor. Dona Marina I'm intrigued. Why the support for Mr. C?

Dona Marina: To many of us, Don Hernando was a liberator. The Aztec war lords were not kind to their subjects. They demanded heavy taxes; they stole our daughters for mistresses and our sons for slaves. They took freely of our people as sacrifices to the gods. I myself was sold into slavery by the Aztecs.

Cortes: Many Mexican people hated the Aztecs. Without these rebels, I could not have conquered the Aztecs.

Las Casas: But the Mexicans agreed to help you only after you conquered them in battle!

Cortes: I tell you, these people believed me to be their liberator.

Sarah: Liberator? But you turned out to be as cruel as the Aztecs! After you conquered them, weren't the Mexicans enslaved?

Cortes: That was not my fault. I planned to keep the local Mexican kings in power, each of them serving under a Spanish ruler. But the other Spaniards in Mexico were greedy for gold and free labor. They removed me from power and gave the savages to Spanish landowners.

Sarah: *(turning to the audience)*: We've got some questions up here. You are?

Susan Halftown: Susan Halftown. My father was a member of the Sioux tribe in North America. We've been spending a lot of time arguing about who was more brutal, the Indians or the Spanish. But even if the Aztecs did perform sacrifices, or the Incas killed prisoners, why does that justify the Spanish coming in and taking away their land?

Sarah: Good question. Who'd like to try that one?

Columbus: It is obvious that all men are descended from Adam and Eve. Therefore the Pope, as head of the Christian Church, is ruler of the world. His choice, praise God, was to give the land that I discovered to the King and Queen of Spain.

Las Casas: Yes, but we had the right to do only one thing: preach the word of the Lord.

Pizarro: We did, and they refused to listen. Before each conquest, as ordered by the king, we read to them the law - that they must convert or be conquered.

Las Casas: That document was so absurd I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Speaking in a strange language, you asked the Indians to worship a strange god. If the Indians didn't say yes right then and there, you destroyed them.

Sarah: We're going to take a break. Stay tuned if you're wondering about how these events affect us now. *(Applause)*

FINALLY - A LEGACY OF SLAVERY

Sarah (in the audience): You have a question?

Juan Molina: Yes, I'd like to know how Mr. Las Casas was received in Spain. I mean, did anyone there have any sympathy for the Indians? Did they try to stop the brutality?

Las Casas: I actually found quite a bit of support for my pleas. My books were published widely. In Spain, many conferences were held and committees were formed to decide on a just manner of treating the Indians. In 1503, the King decreed that the Indians of the New World were not to be enslaved.

Pizarro: Hal Spain was 3,000 miles away. These laws didn't stop us.

Las Casas: I'm afraid he's right.

Sarah (in the audience): We have another question here.

Sandra Hawkins: There's one thing nobody's mentioned yet. The Indians were dying off, and the Spanish still wanted laborers. As Mr. Las Casas knows, by 1520, the Spanish were sending black Africans to the Caribbean as slaves.

Las Casas: Yes, it is true. In my younger days, I'm afraid that I thought the African inferior to the Indian. It seemed the lesser of evils to bring over black slaves in order to save the Indian. Before I died, I realized this was a tragic mistake.

Sarah: In fact, the Spanish and the Portuguese, and later the English and the Dutch, did bring over millions of black slaves. Today, many of the Caribbean nations are ruled by descendants of those slaves.

As for the Indians - nothing was to help them. By the 18th century, the Indians of the Caribbean were almost extinct. Today, on the mainland of Central and South America, Indian groups still exist, but in most countries, they live in poverty and are threatened with the loss of their traditional ways of life.

Many Latin American countries, however, are at least somewhat sensitive to the plight of their Indian populations. In Mexico, pictures of Mr. Cortes are banned from public places. Mr. Las Casas, on the other hand, has had a huge monument there for years. You might wonder why we in the U.S. have hardly heard of him at all.

I'm afraid we're out of time. Gentlemen and Dona Marina, thank you for being with us.

Story by Tod Olson