

Bartolomé de Las Casas debates the subjugation of the Indians, 1550

Introduction

This tract, a summary of a debate concerning the subjugation of Indians, contains the arguments of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, and Juan Gines Sepulveda, an influential Spanish philosopher, concerning the treatment of American Indians in the New World.

Las Casas came to Hispaniola, in the Caribbean, in 1502 with a land grant, ready to seek his fortune. A Dominican friar nurtured Las Casas's interest in the priesthood as well as his sympathy toward the suffering of the native inhabitants. In 1509, Las Casas renounced his land grant, released his slaves, and returned to Rome to take his religious vows. He returned to Hispaniola in 1512 as the first ordained priest in the Americas and denounced the Spanish exploitation of the Indians and the military conquest of the New World.

His efforts to end the *encomienda* system of land ownership and forced labor culminated in 1550, when Charles V convened the Council of Valladolid in Spain to consider whether Spanish colonists had the right to enslave Indians and take their lands.

Sepulveda argued against Las Casas on behalf of the colonists' property rights. Sepulveda rationalized Spanish treatment of American Indians by arguing that Indians were "natural slaves" and that Spanish presence in the New World would benefit them.

Citing the Bible and canon law, Las Casas responded, "All the World is Human!" He contradicted Sepulveda's assertions that the Indians were barbarous, that they committed crimes against natural law, that they oppressed and killed innocent people, and that wars should be waged against infidels. Las Casas managed to convince the theologians at Valladolid that the Spanish policy was unjust and had to change. However, his victory had no impact on the colonists, who continued to enslave American Indians.

Excerpts

Transcript of the title page

Aqui se contiene una disputa, o controversia: entre el Obispo don fray Bartholome de las Casas, o Casaus, obispo que fue de la ciudad Real de Chiapa, que es en las Indias, parte de la nueva España, y el doctor Gines de Sepulveda Coronista del Emperador nuestro señor: sobre que el doctor contendia: que las conquistas de las Indias contra los Indios eran licitas: y el obispo por el contrario defendio y affirmo aber sido y ser imposible no serlo: tiranicas, injustas y iniquas. La qual question se ventilo y disputo en presencia de muchos letrados theologos y juristas en una congregacion que mando su magestad juntar el año de mil y quinientos y cinquenta en la villa de Valladolid. Año. 1552.

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Translation of the title page

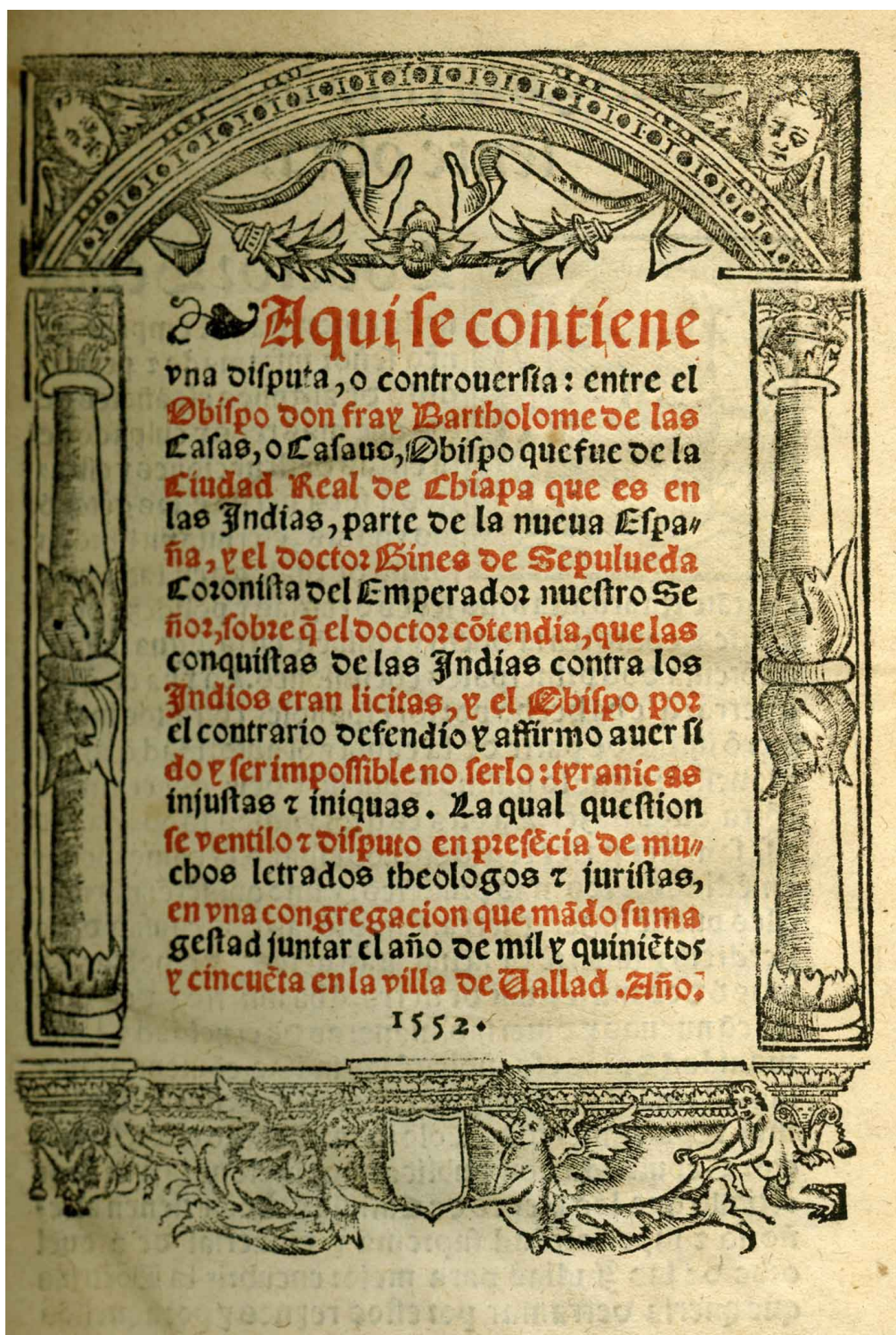
Here is contained a dispute, or controversy between Bishop Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, or Casaus, formerly bishop of the royal city of Chiapa which is in the Indies, a part of New Spain, and Dr. Gines de Sepulveda, chronicler to the Emperor, our lord, in which the doctor contended: that the conquests of the Indies against the Indians were lawful; and the bishop, on the contrary, contended and affirmed them to have been, and it was impossible for them not to be, tyrannies, unjust and iniquitous. Which question was examined and defended in the presence of many learned theologians and jurists in a council ordered by his Majesty to be held in the year one thousand and five hundred and fifty in the town of Valladolid. Year 1552.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction; examine the document image and answer the following questions based on your knowledge of American history.

1. In light of his training and the expectations of his superiors, why was Las Casas taking a very risky stand in supporting the American Indians?
2. If Bartolomé de Las Casas was alive today, to which current people might he direct his concern and attention? Explain your answer.

Image



Bartolomé de las Casas, Aquí se contiene una disputa . . . , 1552. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04220)