

The Black Legend

Duration

Two or three class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Teacher Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To describe the historical debate over Spain's effect on social and economic structures in the Spanish Empire in North America
- To read a primary source with speaker, audience, and context in mind

College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Topic 1.5: Labor, Slavery, and Caste in the Spanish Colonial System** (p. 42)
- **Learning Objective 1.E:** “Explain how the growth of the Spanish Empire in North America shaped the development of social and economic structures over time.”
- **Key Concept 1.2.II.B:** “In the encomienda system, Spanish colonial economies marshaled Native American labor to support plantation-based agriculture and extract precious metals and other resources.”

Student Activities

- Class reading of a primary source related to the Black Legend
- Discussion of how context can change the interpretation of a document

NOTES

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How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed as an introduction to critical analysis of primary documents and the Black Legend. Beginning in the 15th century, some writers began to argue that the way that Spain was criticized for its actions in the Americas was not in line with the level of criticism levied at other European nations who similarly mistreated or abused the native populations of the Americas. They argued that Spain was being unfairly condemned, in a process that they called the Black Legend, for actions that were not historically unique. This lesson explores the debate around the Black Legend as a way to provide depth to students' understanding of Spain's effect on the social and economic structures of North America. By the end of this lesson, students should have a stronger understanding of how contrasting historical interpretations can be analyzed within the context of U.S. history.

The central component of this lesson is a worksheet that uses a primary source about the Spanish in the Americas to help students realize how the interpretation of a document can change as context is incorporated. Students are asked to read a primary source that would seem to support the characterization of the Spanish Empire as cruel, rapacious, and blood-thirsty before investigating why and how this document could be interpreted in different ways.

We recommend that you begin this lesson with a brief discussion about your students' assumptions about the Spanish Empire in the Americas. What have they heard about the Spanish Empire in the Americas? How do they think the Spanish conquistadors related to the native population? What examples have they learned in their past history classes about life in the Spanish Empire in the Americas? Once you have spent some time establishing a benchmark for what students think about the Spanish Empire in North America, shift the conversation to why students think this way. The main focus of this lesson is exploring how people can form different interpretations of the same historical movement or event. Ask students to consider why they think about the Spanish Empire in North America in the way that they do. What is contributing to their ideas? How do they know if their perceptions are accurate? If there are different answers to this question in your class, use the opportunity to point out how historians rarely agree on historical interpretations.

This lesson also includes a homework assignment that reviews the Black Legend by building from class discussion.

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Historical Context

As part of their colonization efforts in North America, the Spanish Empire created structural systems that routinely exploited the American Indians, forcing them to work in difficult conditions and subjecting them to harsh physical punishments. The conditions for American Indians on the encomienda system were so notorious that Charles V, then king of Spain, was forced to issue a royal proclamation reminding the colonists that American Indians were laborers, not slaves. In some parts of the Spanish Empire, this proclamation was met with such disdain that encomienda owners rose up and killed the representatives of the Spanish Crown.

The conditions were so grim that some historians, such as Raphael Lemkin, have interpreted Spanish actions in the New World as a “cultural genocide” that intentionally devastated the indigenous population. For these historians, Spanish actions were uniquely destructive among European colonizers and explorers in the Americas.

On the other side of the historical debate are historians who argue that, while Spanish actions were reprehensible, they were actually remarkably similar to what other European nations were doing in their own colonial empires. For example, English settlers in North America brutalized American Indians and waged armed conflicts that resulted in the massacre of many American Indians. The Dutch required American Indians to convert to Christianity or face violence. The French punished religious dissidents brutally. In all of these European nations, the monarchs used violence to impose their will on the American Indians. Some historians point to examples like these to argue that characterizing Spain as uniquely destructive is a Black Legend (“la leyenda Negra”) that unfairly criticizes the Spanish Empire. Proponents of the idea of the Black Legend, such as Emilia Pardo Bazán, note that Spaniards were often described as “goldseekers” or “conquerers,” while other Europeans were often described using more judgment neutral terms like “colonist” or “settler.”

The disagreement over how to interpret Spanish actions is a long-standing conflict that can be traced back to the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1552, Bartolomé de las Casas published a sensational account of Spanish actions that included vivid woodcuts of the Spanish committing atrocities against the American Indians. From the moment it was published, detractors argued that its accounts were exaggerated. Flanders, a perpetual enemy of Spain, used the accusations of writers like de las Casas to frame its opposition to Spain in the Eighty Years’ War. Anti-Spanish propaganda also increased during the war in the Netherlands in the late 16th century, during which Spanish atrocities against the Dutch were described in vivid terms that directly paralleled the slaughter to the treatment of the American Indians.

NOTES

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Modern historians also participate in the Black Legend debate. Some, like Philip Wayne Powell, argue that the Black Legend continues to shape international relationships because it colors how the United States treats Latin American aggression by seeing it as uniquely hostile. Others, like Alfredo Alvar, have argued that the Black Legend is important because it tells how the Spanish thought others saw them, even if it does not present a historical reality. Finally, a group of scholars led by Benjamin Keen argued that the Black Legend never existed.

This class offers an opportunity to explore the idea of the Black Legend with your class. Encourage them to think about the how and why behind what we learn about the past. This is also a good opportunity to think about how different historians can come to widely different conclusions with the same sources.

NOTES

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This close up image from the Codex Kingsborough is a record of a complaint against an overly zealous encomienda owner.

The Black Legend

Primary Source

“And this was the great care they had of them, they sent the Males to the Mines to dig and bring away the Gold, which is an intollerable labor; but the Women they made use of to Manure and Till the ground, which is a toil most irksome even to Men of the strongest and most robust constitutions, allowing them no other food but Herbage, and such kind of unsubstantial nutriment, so that the Nursing Womens Milk was exsiccated and so dried up, that the young Infants lately brought forth, all perished, and females being separated from and debarred cohabitation with Men, there was no Prolification or raising up issue among them. The Men died in Mines, hunger starved and oppressed with labor, and the Women perished in the Fields, harrassed and broken with the like Evils and Calamities: Thus an infinite number of Inhabitants that formerly peopled this Island were exterminated and dwindled away to nothing by such Consumptions.”

Bartolome de las Casas, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, 1552

Based on your initial reading of the document, how would you characterize the social and economic structures in the Spanish Empire in North America?

Write or type your response in this area.

What do you think is the goal of this text?

Write or type your response in this area.

How could a document like this contribute to the Black Legend?

Write or type your response in this area.

Commentary

- ① This worksheet works best as a guided conversation with students. The Black Legend is based on the idea that primary sources about the Spanish Empire in the Americas can be interpreted in different ways based on historical context, perspective, and intent. It is designed to take students through the process of examining their own ideas about Spanish colonization by showing them a primary source and then adding in additional pieces of context that can (and should) shape how the legacy of Spain in the Americas is interpreted.
- ② Vegetarian food, typically plants
- ③ Additional children
- ④ Historians have concluded that the Spanish conquest of the Americas led, directly and indirectly, to the death of 8 million indigenous people.
- ⑤ Bartolome de las Casas wrote his book in 1542 for the Spanish monarch. It was not widely published until the end of his life in 1552.
- ⑥ This question provides a benchmark for whether students are thinking in terms of the Black Legend. Does this document support ideas that they already had? Are they surprised by its contents? Why or why not?
- ⑦ Students will most likely answer that the goal is to criticize the way Spanish are treating the American Indians. Encourage them to ask about why that criticism was being made in the first place.

Additional Context

This primary source account was written by Bartolome de las Casas, a former encomienda owner. In 1515 he gave up his encomienda and became a Dominican friar. He based his account on both firsthand experience and the experiences of his father, Pedro de las Casas, who had accompanied Christopher Columbus. He was explicit that the goal of his text was to curtail the abuses of the encomienda system in order to create a better relationship between the Spanish and the American Indians. From his perspective, an improved relationship would help the Spanish convert more American Indians to Christianity.

Based on this additional context, how would you evaluate this primary source?

8

Write or type your response in this area.

Do you have any concerns about its accuracy? Why or why not?

Write or type your response in this area.

- 8 At this point, students should be starting to think that the document is not the straightforward criticism that it appears to be. If the goal is to convert more American Indians, are Bartolome de las Casas's criticisms about their social and economic conditions less valid? Why or why not?

Additional Context

Bartolome de las Casas's focus on conversion was a result of his belief in a religious doctrine called "just war." Under this doctrine, war and violence could be justified if it was in pursuit of a higher religious goal. Medieval Europeans used this approach to justify multiple religious wars, including the Crusades. While Bartolome de las Casas felt that the abuse of the American Indians was not justified, he was not opposed to forced labor or slavery. In fact, he recommended that the Spanish Empire stop the abuses of the American Indians by importing more slaves from Africa to the Americas.

Based on this additional context, how does your understanding of the primary source change?

Write or type your response in this area.

How does the additional context inform your understanding of the goals of the document?

9

Write or type your response in this area.

- 9 Students should begin to realize that Bartolome de las Casas is not necessarily opposed to abuse and mistreatment across the board. He is only interested in stopping the abuses aimed at specific populations. What would he gain from stopping the abuse of American Indians? Were his goals purely altruistic? Why or why not?

Additional Context

Bartolome de las Casas's work was not widely accessible until the late 1500s, when it was quickly published in England and the Netherlands. Both countries declared war on Spain during the Eighty Years' War from 1568 to 1648. Dutch and English writers drew vivid parallels between the way the Spanish acted in the European war and the way they acted in the Americas. As an indicator of the book's popularity in England and the Netherlands, it was reprinted 33 times between 1578 and 1648.

Based on this additional context, how would you re-evaluate this primary source?

Write or type your response in this area.

Do you have any concerns about its accuracy? Why or why not?

⑩

Write or type your response in this area.

Should the Black Legend be reassessed? Why or why not?

Write or type your response in this area.

- ⑩ Students should be able to recognize that Bartolome de las Casas provided a powerful propaganda tool for Spain's enemies. They used his writing to characterize the Spanish as rapacious, cruel, and bloodthirsty. This characterization of their enemies during the Eighty Years' War became known as the Black Legend.

The Black Legend

Primary Source

“And this was the great care they had of them, they sent the Males to the Mines to dig and bring away the Gold, which is an intollerable labor; but the Women they made use of to Manure and Till the ground, which is a toil most irksome even to Men of the strongest and most robust constitutions, allowing them no other food but Herbage, and such kind of unsubstantial nutriment, so that the Nursing Womens Milk was exsiccated and so dried up, that the young Infants lately brought forth, all perished, and females being separated from and debarred cohabitation with Men, there was no Prolification or raising up issue among them. The Men died in Mines, hunger starved and oppressed with labor, and the Women perished in the Fields, harrassed and broken with the like Evils and Calamities: Thus an infinite number of Inhabitants that formerly peopled this Island were exterminated and dwindled away to nothing by such Consumptions.”

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Do you have any concerns about its accuracy? Why or why not?

Write or type your response in this area.

Should the Black Legend be reassessed? Why or why not?

Write or type your response in this area.

The Black Legend

Secondary Source

“Spawned in the international rivalry of the sixteenth century, La Leyenda Negra grew from its roots in the anti-Spanish propaganda disseminated by Spain’s rivals in the Dutch Lowlands, England, France, and Germany. Fueled by the Protestant Reformation and predicated on a simplistic and faulty analysis of historical information, the propaganda promoted the falsehood that historically Hispanics were uniquely cruel, bigoted, tyrannical, lazy, violent, treacherous, and depraved. Religious in character, the alleged depravity of Hispanics hinted at some unforgivable Original Sin that preyed upon the legitimacy of Hispanic culture throughout the world. Thus, the anti-Spanish propaganda of the past created the body of misconceptions known as the Black Legend and formed the basis of anti-Hispanic stereotypes of.”

Joseph Sánchez, *Comparative Colonialism, the Spanish Black Legend and Spain’s Legacy in the United States*, 2013

How would you describe the Black Legend in your own words?

Write or type your response in this area.

Based on your understanding of the Black Legend, do you think it was justified? Why or why not?

Write or type your response in this area.

What do you think are the effects of the Black Legend on the United States today?

Write or type your response in this area.

WORKSHEET

Primary Source

Based on your initial reading of the document, how would you characterize the social and economic structures in the Spanish Empire in North America?

This document represents Spanish actions in the Americas as deeply exploitative and unequal. It describes incredible cruelty and inhumanity in the Spanish pursuit of gold and other natural resources.

What do you think is the goal of this text?

The goal of this text is to criticize Spanish actions in the Americas. It highlights that the Spanish colonists had transgressed what would have been considered humane working conditions. The overall goal of this text seems to be to correct Spanish actions in the Americas.

How could a document like this contribute to the Black Legend?

Documents like this provided the foundation of the Black Legend by arguing that Spain was inhumanely cruel to the American Indians. The popularity of texts like this meant that Europeans were most familiar with Spanish abuses, even if other nations were committing similar atrocities in the New World.

Additional Context

Based on this additional context, how would you evaluate this primary source?

This document may be influenced by Bartolome de las Casas's religious goals. Since he is focused on converting the American Indians, his desire to stop the human rights abuses are not wholly altruistic. He has ulterior motives that may have led him to exaggerate the abuses.

Do you have any concerns about its accuracy? Why or why not?

Bartolome de las Casas would have been able to get more support for his cause if he described the abuses in vivid and gut-wrenching terms. This may have led him to exaggerate what he had seen or intentionally represent it in the most sensational manner possible.

Additional Context

Based on this additional context, how does your understanding of the primary source change?

Bartolome de las Casas is clearly not writing from a purely altruistic perspective. He is interested in protecting the American Indians because he feels that all people's lives have value. He is interested in protecting the American Indians because he thinks that they can serve his goals more if they are alive.

How does the additional context inform your understanding of the goals of the document?

Bartolome de las Casas is not necessarily opposed to abuse and mistreatment across the board. He is only interested in stopping the abuses aimed at specific populations.

Additional Context

Based on this additional context, how would you re-evaluate this primary source?

The primary source is more complicated than it appears. While the account was undeniably based in some truth, it was used as a propaganda tool by both Bartolome de las Casas and Spain's enemies. With this additional context, it is clear that the idea of Spain acting brutally in the Americas may have been popularized for a multitude of reasons.

Do you have any concerns about its accuracy? Why or why not?

Students should be able to recognize that Bartolome de las Casas provided a powerful propaganda tool for Spain's enemies. They used his writing to characterize the Spanish as rapacious, cruel, and bloodthirsty. This characterization of their enemies during the Eighty Years' War became the Black Legend.

Should the Black Legend be reassessed? Why or why not?

Answers will vary, but they should demonstrate an awareness of how the interpretation of documents can change based on historical context, intent, and audience.

HOMEWORK

Answers will vary.

How would you describe the Black Legend in your own words?

The Black Legend is the idea that the Spanish were uniquely cruel to American Indians during the period of contact and conquest. It represents the actions of the Spanish in consistently negative terms, while praising (or remaining neutral) on the actions of other European nations who treated the American Indians in similar ways.

Based on your understanding of the Black Legend, do you think it was justified? Why or why not?

The Black Legend says that the Spanish acted in ways that were unique among European explorers. It is not justified because other European nations were equally cruel to the native people of the Americas.

What do you think are the effects of the Black Legend on the United States today?

The Black Legend may be a contributor to the anti-immigration rhetoric aimed at people of Hispanic heritage or who speak Spanish.