

## Why the Indians Are Dying

### *Alonso de Zorita*

*For all the purported good intentions of Cortes and the early friars to avoid a demographic catastrophe like that which had plagued the Caribbean islands, the early decades of Spanish colonisation in the Americas proved to be one of history's greatest holocausts. In central Mexico, according to one estimate, the indigenous population declined by about 85 percent in the century after the military conquest. While it is generally agreed that the main cause of this decline was epidemics of Old World diseases to which the Indians had little immunity, it must also be recognised that the harsh system of tribute and labor extraction devised by the conquistadores and early settlers also played a significant, interactive role. Apart from the more egregious cases of exploitation, overworked and undernourished bodies were even more susceptible to the vectors of European disease.*

*Early on, the Spanish crown had ruled decisively that Indians could not be enslaved. Nevertheless, persistent demands by conquerors and settlers that they be rewarded for their efforts led to the system of encomienda, royal grants under which groups of Indians were obliged to provide tribute and labor to a Spanish trustee, or encomendero, who was supposed to be responsible for their spiritual conversion and welfare. As abuses of the system mounted, the Crown, both to stem the assault on the Indian community and to avert the threat of an autonomous American nobility, issued a series of laws and decrees that aimed to do away with the encomienda. Despite some success in this endeavor, exploitation of Indian labor became an enduring feature of colonial society.*

*Alonso de Zorita (ca. 1511-1585) was trained as a lawyer. He first came to the Americas in 1548 to take up a position on the Audiencia (the High Court and governing board) of Espanola, the Caribbean island where Columbus had established the first American settlement but which had since seen the near extinction of its native population. From his first days in the colonies, he angered the Spanish settlers with his denunciations of their cruelty to the Indians. In 1556 he was made an oidor [judge] of the Audiencia of New Spain, the most important in the colonies. Zorita would spend the next ten years in Mexico, a decade during which the Spanish crown accelerated its*

*efforts to wrest power from the encomenderos. After returning to Spain in 1566, he commenced work on his Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain, which he completed in 1585. Clearly, Zorita exaggerates the joys of the Indians' pre-Conquest life, and he badly overstates their supposed submissiveness and docility. Like his predecessor, the great defender of the Indians Bartolome de las Casas, Zorita likely reckoned that the threat to the Indian population was sufficiently grave and immediate to demand a strategy of exaggerated and overwrought rhetoric.*

In the old days [the Indians] performed their communal labor in their own towns. Their labor was lighter, and they were well treated. They did not have to leave their homes and families, and they ate food they were accustomed to eat and at the usual hours. They did their work together and with much merriment, for they are people who do little work alone, but together they accomplish something. . . .

The building of the temples and houses of the lords [*principales*] and public was always a common undertaking, and many people worked together with much merriment. They left their houses after the morning chill had passed, and after they had eaten what sufficed them, according to their habits and means. Each worked a little and did what he could, and no one hurried or mistreated him for it. They stopped work early, before the chill of the afternoon, both winter and summer, for they all went about naked or with so few clothes it was like wearing none. At the slightest rainfall they took cover, because they tremble with cold when the first drops fall. Thus they went about their work, cheerfully and harmoniously.

They returned to their houses, which, being very small, were cozy and took the place of clothing. Their wives had a fire ready and laid out food; and they took pleasure in the company of their wives and children. There was never any question of payment for this communal labor. In this same way, with much rejoicing and merriment and without undue exertion, they built the churches and monasteries of their towns. These are not as sumptuous as some have said, but accord with what is necessary and proper, with moderation in everything...

Neither drunkenness nor their well-organized communal labor is killing [the Indians] off. The cause is their labor on Spanish public works and their personal service to the Spaniards, which they fulfill in a manner contrary to their own ways and tempo of work. To make this clear, I shall relate some things that have been and are being done to the Indians...

What has destroyed and continues to destroy the Indians is their forced

labor in the construction of large stone masonry buildings in the Spaniards' towns. For this they are forced to leave their native climates, to come from tierra fria to tierra caliente, and vice versa, 20, 30, 40, and more leagues away. Their whole tempo of life, the time and mode of work, of eating and sleeping, are disrupted. They are forced to work many days and weeks, from dawn until after dusk, without any rest.

Once I saw, after the hour of vespers, a great number of Indians hauling a long heavy beam to a construction site owned by a very prominent man. When they stopped to rest, a Negro overseer went down the line with a leather strap in hand, whipping them all from first to last to hurry them on and keep them from resting; he did this not to gain time for some other work, for the day was over, but simply to keep up the universal evil habit of mistreating the Indians. Since the Negro struck with force and they were naked, with only their genitals covered, the lashes must have caused them cruel pain; but no one spoke or turned his head, for they are ever long-suffering and submissive. It is a routine thing to drive them, to work them without letting them pause for breath, and to harass them in every possible way...

They have been destroyed by the great and excessive tribute they have had to pay, for in their great fear of the Spaniards they have given all they had. Since the tribute was excessive and continually demanded, to make payment they sold their land at a low price, and their children as slaves. When they had nothing left with which to pay, many died for this in prison; if they managed to get out, they emerged in such sorry state that they died in a few days. Others died from being tortured to tell where there was gold or where they had hidden it. They have been treated bestially and unreasonably in all respects.

Their numbers have also been diminished by their enslavement for work in the mines and in the personal service of the Spaniards. In the first years there was such haste to make slaves that they poured into Mexico City from all directions, and throughout the Indies they were taken in flocks like sheep to be branded. The Spaniards pressed the Indian lords to bring in all the slaves, and such was the Indians' fear that to satisfy the Spaniards they brought their own vassals and even their own children when they had no others to offer. Much the same thing happens today in the provision of Indians on the pretext that they had risen in rebellion, contrary to Your Majesty's orders.

They have been reduced by the thousands by their toil in the gold and silver mines; and on the journey to the mines 80 or 100 leagues away they were loaded with heavy burdens to which they were not accustomed. They died in

the mines or along the road, of hunger and cold or extreme heat, and from carrying enormous loads of implements for the mines or other extremely heavy things; for the Spaniards, not satisfied with taking them so far away to work, must load them down on the way. Although the Indians brought some food from home, the amount was scanty, for they had no more; and it ran out on their arrival at the mines or on the return journey home. Countless numbers died, and many fled to the woods, abandoning their homes, wives, and children, and thus the towns on the way to the mines or around them became depopulated. The Spaniards still compel the Indians to go to the mines on the pretext that they are being sent to construct buildings there and are going voluntarily; these Spaniards claim that Your Majesty does not prohibit such labor, but only forbids work in the mines. In actual fact the Indians never go voluntarily, for they are forced to go under the repartimiento system<sup>1</sup> by order of the Audiencia, contrary to Your Majesty's orders. . . .

The Indians have also been laid low by the labor of making sheep, cattle, and pig farms, of fencing these farms, of putting up farm buildings, and by their labor on roads, bridges, watercourses, stone walls, and sugar mills. For this labor, in which they were occupied for many days and weeks, they were taken away from their homes, their accustomed tempo of work and mode of life were disrupted; and on top of everything else they had to supply the materials for these projects at their own cost and bring them on their own backs without receiving any pay or even food. Now they are paid, but so little that they cannot buy enough to eat, for they are still used for such labor with permission from the Audiencias...

They have [also] been destroyed by the household service they have had to give to the Spaniards. They still give this service in some places, or are hired out to the mines. Those whose turn it was to serve a week and provide the Spaniards with food and fuel sometimes had to start out two weeks beforehand; thus in order to serve one week they must spend four weeks in coming and going. The roads were filled with Indian men and women, exhausted, dying of hunger, weary and afflicted; and the roads were strewn with the bodies of men, women, and even their little ones, for they used them to carry food—something these people had never before done.

Yet another multitude has been killed off and continues to be killed off by being taken as carriers on conquests and expeditions, and still others to serve the soldiers. They were taken from their homes by force and separated from their women and children and kin, and few if any returned, for they perished in the

conquests or along the roads, or died on their return home. . . .

Needless to say, they were taken in collar chains, and mistreated along the way; and when an Indian, man or woman, was worn out from the burden he was carrying, the Spaniards cut off his head so as not have to stop to unchain him, and his load was distributed among the rest.

Yet another multitude perished in the seaports building ships for the Marques [Cortes] to send to California and the Spice Islands. By the thousands they were made to carry provisions, materials, and rigging on very long journeys of 40, 50, and more leagues. They trudged through forests and mountains unmercifully, and fined them, and took their food and whatever else they pleased. These officials also took pan of the supplies the Indians had gathered for the ships, so the Indians' work was never done. For when they had brought what was required of them, a Spanish judge would take what he pleased for his own trafficking, and order them to gather more for the ships.

Then there was the dike that was built in Mexico City,<sup>2</sup> and the fencing of a large part of the Valley of Toluca to protect the Spaniards' cattle, from which the Indians suffered incalculable damage. The dike, several Spaniards told me, was of no use whatever. All the people of the land were summoned, and they came from 30 and 40 leagues away. It was built at the Indians' expense, although it meant nothing to them even if it had been of use. It is always thus, for it is not enough that they give their labor and provide their own food; they must also bring and pay for all the materials for these public works. It was an incalculable waste of people as well as of their pitifully small means. They provided the earth, the stone, the stakes; thus they contributed both the labor and the materials though they received no benefit from this dike, whose cost has been estimated at 300,000 ducats.

It is said the numbers of laborers and masons occupied in this work was well over two million. Since the causeway is very long, the work took about four months, and each day a very great number of people were engaged in it. They worked hard all day in the water, mud, and cold, having no shelter by day or night. As a result, at the end of the week they returned home exhausted and fell ill from their ordeal. Countless numbers died. . . .

These are the things that have worn down the people of this land. They have resulted in disrupting their way of life, their routine of work, diet, and shelter, and in taking them from their towns and homes, their wives and children, their repose and harmony. I believe that their excessive labor, their exposure to hunger, cold, heat, and wind, their sleeping on the ground in the

open, in the cold and the night dew, are the cause of their plague of *cámaras* [a disease characterized by diarrhea]. There is no cure or relief for the disease, and they die on the fourth or fifth day. Death brings an end to their suffering, from which they are never free as long as they are alive.

I could mention other things that are causing the extinction of these wretched people, but the great increase in the number of farms owned by Spaniards is in itself a sufficient cause. Then, fifteen, and twenty years ago there were fewer farms, and there were many more Indians. The Indians were forced to work on them and suffered hardships therefrom, but since they were many and the farms few, it was not so noticeable. Now the Spanish farms are many and large and the Indians very few, and they must clear, cultivate, and weed as well as harvest and store the crops, so that all this labor now falls on the few that remain. There are ten times more Spaniards and Spanish farms and estates and ranches than there were, while there is barely one third as many Indians. And these few are continually being attacked by plagues, of which many die, whereas the work is continually increasing. Seeking escape from their oppression, many flee to the woods and mountains, leaving their fields, towns, and homes, and wander from place to place in search of a spot where they may find rest. But wherever they go they find hard work, want, and misfortune.

The Audiencias continually instruct the provincial capitals to send repartimientos of Indians for labor in the Spanish towns of their districts. On construction sites, farms, and cattle ranches, the Spaniards pay each Indian 2 1/2 or 3 reales a week. Some Indians come a distance of 20, 25, and more leagues, depending upon the provincial capital to which they are subject and the distance from that capital to the place where they must go to be assigned to employers. Consequently, to arrive on Monday they must leave their homes on Wednesday or Thursday of the week before. The Spaniards dismiss most of their Indians on Sunday, after Mass; those who worked very well, in the employers' opinion, they let go Saturday evening. As a result, the Indians do not reach their homes until the following Wednesday or Thursday. But many never see their homes again; they die on the road from the hardships and excessive labor they have had to endure almost without food, for the food they bring from home does not last them for so many days. Moreover, they have had to work without their poor mantles, for when they enter the employer's house or other place of work, he takes their mantles from them on the grounds that he must keep them as security that his Indians will not run away. In fine, in order to serve a week for 2 1/2 or 3 reales, the Indians must

spend two weeks or longer away from home.

Since the Spanish construction projects, farms, ranches, and herds are so numerous and large, the Audiencias outdo themselves dispatching orders to the corregidores and alcaldes mayores to provide Indian laborers for the Spaniards. These officials fully understand the injury this is causing and know that the Indians are dying out, but their only concern is to aid the Spaniards. It avails the principales naught to complain and cry out that they cannot provide all the people that are demanded of them; indeed, they are arrested, fined, and mistreated for their pains.

The religious warn of the consequences of what is taking place, but no one believes them. The invariable reply is: Let the order be carried out, let the Indians go and help the Spaniards. On account of this intolerable abuse the Indians are dying like flies; they die without confession and without religious instruction, for there is no time for such things. The fewer the Indians, the more burdens the Spaniards load on those who remain. Because of this and the ill treatment they receive, the Indians return home with their health shattered. Thus disease preys on them all year long, nay, all their lives, for its causes never cease.

When they go to the construction projects or other places of labor, they bring from home certain maize cakes or tortillas that are supposed to last them for the time they are gone. On the third or fourth day the tortillas begin to get moldy or sour; they grow bitter or rotten and get as dry as boards. This is the food the Indians must eat or die. And even of this food they do not have enough, some because of their poverty and others because they have no one to prepare their tortillas for them. They go to the farms and other places of work, where they are made to toil from dawn to dusk, in the raw cold of morning and afternoon, in wind and storm, without other food than those rotten or dried-out tortillas, and even of this they have not enough. They sleep on the ground in the open air, naked, without shelter. Even if they wished to buy food with their pitiful wages they could not, for they are not paid until they are laid off. At the season when the grain is stored, the employers make them carry the wheat or corn on their backs, each man carrying a fanega, after they have worked all day. After this, they must fetch water, sweep the house, take out the trash, and clean the stables. And when their work is done, they find the employer has docked their pay on some pretext or other. Let the Indian argue with the employer about this, and he will keep the Indian's mantle as well. Sometimes an enemy will break the jar in which an Indian carries water to his master's

house, in order to make him spill the water on the way, and the employer docks the Indian's wages for this.

So the Indian returns home worn out from his toil, minus his pay and his mantle, not to speak of the food that he had brought with him. He returns home famished, unhappy, distraught, and shattered in health. For these reasons pestilence always rages among the Indians. Arriving home, he gorges himself because of his great hunger, and this excess together with the poor physical condition in which he returns help to bring on the camaras or some other disease that quickly takes him off. The Indians will all die out very quickly if they do not obtain relief from these intolerable conditions.

There is another injury—and it is not a small one—that results from their journeys. Because the Indians are now so few and the demands for their labor so numerous, each Indian is assigned many turns at compulsory labor. Moreover, contrary to what Your Majesty has ordered, the officials make the Indians go at the season when they should be sowing or weeding their fields, which are their sole wealth and means of support. The Indian must plant and weed his field within eight days or risk the loss of all his crops. If he returns from work when the time for seeding or cultivation is past, it does him little good to seed or cultivate, for he does not reap half the crop he would have, had each task been done at the proper time. Moreover, most of the Indians return sick or fall sick upon their arrival, and since they cannot cultivate or clear their fields, they harvest nothing or very little. As a result they suffer hunger all year long, and they and their families fall ill and die. On top of this, the officials fine them for not working their fields, though this is not their fault, and they jailed and have to pay the costs. . . .

The ancient kings and lords never ruled in this way, never took the Indians from their towns, never disrupted their way of life and labor. I cannot believe that Your Majesty or the members of Your Majesty's Council know or have been informed about what is taking place. If they knew of it, they would surely take steps to preserve Your Majesty's miserable vassals and would not low the Indians to be entirely destroyed in order to gratify the wishes of the Spaniards. If the Indians should die out (and they are dying with terrible rapidity), those realms will very quickly become depopulated, as has already happened in the Antilles, the great province of Venezuela, and the whole coast of northern South America and other very extensive lands that have become depopulated in our time. The wishes of Your Majesty and his Royal Council are well known and are made very plain in the laws that are issued every day in favor of the poor

Indians and for their increase and preservation. But these laws are not obeyed and not enforced, wherefore there is no end to the destruction of the Indians, nor does anyone care what Your Majesty decrees, how many decrees, cédulas, and letters were sent by our lord, the Emperor, who is in glory, and how many necessary orders are sent by Your Majesty! How little good have all these orders done! Indeed, the more laws and decrees are sent, the worse is the condition of the Indians by reason of the false and sophistical interpretation that the Spanish officials give these laws, twisting their meaning to suit their own purposes. It seems to me that the saying of a certain philosopher well applies to this case: Where there is plenty of doctors and medicines, there is plenty of ill health. Just so, where there are many laws and judges, there is much injustice.

We have a multitude of laws, judges, viceroys, governors, presidentes, oidores, corregidores, alcaldes mayores, a million lieutenants, and yet another million alguariles. But this multitude is not what the Indians need, nor will it relieve their misery. Indeed, the more such men there are, the more enemies do the Indians have. For the more zeal these men display against the Indians, the more influence do they wield; the Spaniards call such men Fathers of the Country, saviors of the state, and proclaim them to be very just and upright. The more ill will such men show against the Indians and friars, the more titles and lying encomiums are heaped upon them. But let an official favor the Indians and the religious (who are bound together, one depending upon the other), and this alone suffices to make him odious and abhorrent to all. For the Spaniards care for one thing alone, and that is their advantage and they give not a rap whether these poor and miserable Indians live or die, though the whole being and welfare of the country depend upon them.

God has closed the eyes and darkened the minds of these Spaniards, so that they see with their eyes what is happening, yet do not see it, so that they perceive their own destruction, yet do not perceive it, and all because of their callousness and hardheartedness. I have known an oidor to say publicly from his dais, speaking in a loud voice, that if water were lacking to irrigate Spaniards' farms, they would have to be watered with the blood of Indians. I have heard others say that the Indians, and not the Spaniards, must labor, the dogs work and die, said these men, the Indians are numerous and rich. These officials say such things because they have not seen the Indians' sufferings and miseries, because they are content to sit in the cool shade and collect their pay. They also say these things to win the good will and gratitude of Spaniards, and also because they all have sons-in law, brothers-in-law, relatives or close friends among them. These

friends and relatives are rich in far ranches, and herds; and the officials control a major part of this wealth. That is what blinds them and makes them say what they say and do what they

### Notes

1. *Repartimiento* system: a system of compulsory, paid labor drafts. This officially sanctioned, rotating labor draft was supposed to provide a more humane and controllable means of extracting Indian labor than the *encomienda*. *Ed.*

3.. The greatest and most labor-intensive public-works project of the colonial period in New Spain was the so-called *desague*, a series of ambitious operations aimed at ending the periodic flooding with which the lake region of central Mexico was plagued. The *desague* was an off-and-on project involving, at various times, the building of dikes, drainage canals, and subterranean tunnels. Here, Zorita appears to refer to building of the Albarradón de Lazaro, a new dike built in 1555-1556 (see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* [Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1964], 236-52; and also the reading by Joel Simon in part VI of this volume). *Ed.*