



Prologue

excerpted from the book

American Holocaust

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In the darkness of an early July morning in 1945, on a desolate spot in the New Mexico desert named after a John Donne sonnet celebrating the Holy Trinity, the first atomic bomb was exploded. J. Robert Oppenheimer later remembered that the immense flash of light, followed by the thunderous roar, caused a few observers to laugh and others to cry. But most, he said, were silent. Oppenheimer himself recalled at that instant a line from the Bhagavad-Gita:

"I am become death, the shatterer of worlds."

There is no reason to think that anyone on board the Nina, the Pinta, or the Santa Maria, on an equally dark early morning four and a half centuries earlier, thought of those ominous lines from the ancient Sanskrit poem when the crews of the Spanish ships spied a flicker of light on the windward side of the island they would name after the Holy Saviour. But the intuition, had it occurred, would have been as appropriate then as it was when that first nuclear blast rocked the New Mexico desert sands.

In both instances-at the Trinity test site in 1945 and at San Salvador in 1492-those moments of achievement crowned years of intense personal struggle and adventure for their protagonists and were culminating points of ingenious technological achievement for their countries. But both instances also were prelude to orgies of human destructiveness that, each in its own way, attained a scale of devastation not previously witnessed in the entire history of the world.

Just twenty-one days after the first atomic test in the desert, the Japanese industrial city of Hiroshima was leveled by nuclear blast; never before had so many people-at least 130,000, probably many more-died from a single explosion. Just twenty-one years after Columbus's first landing in the Caribbean, the vastly populous island that the explorer had re-named Hispaniola was effectively desolate; nearly 8,000,000 people-those Columbus chose to call Indians-had been killed by violence, disease, and despair. It took a little longer, about the span of a single human generation, but what happened on Hispaniola was the equivalent of more than fifty Hiroshimas. And Hispaniola was only the beginning.

Within no more than a handful of generations following their first encounters with Europeans, the vast majority of the Western Hemisphere's native peoples had been exterminated. The pace and magnitude of their obliteration varied from place to place and from time to time, but for years now historical demographers have been uncovering, in region upon region, post-Columbian depopulation rates of between 90 and 98 percent with such regularity that an overall decline of 95 percent has become a working rule of thumb. What this means is that, on average, for every twenty natives alive at the moment of European contact-when the lands of the Americas teemed with numerous tens of millions of people-only one stood in their place when the bloodbath was over.

To put this in a contemporary context, the ratio of native survivorship in the Americas following European contact was less than half of what the human survivorship ratio would be in the United States today if every single white person and every single black person died. The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. That is why, as one historian aptly has said, far from the heroic and romantic heraldry that customarily is used to symbolize the European settlement of the Americas, the emblem most congruent with reality would be a pyramid of skulls.

Scholarly estimates of the size of the post-Columbian holocaust have climbed sharply in recent decades. Too often,

however, academic discussions of this ghastly event have reduced the devastated indigenous peoples and their cultures to statistical calculations in recondite demographic analyses. It is easy for this to happen. From the very beginning, merely taking the account of so mammoth a cataclysm seemed an impossible task. Wrote one Spanish adventurer-who arrived in the New World only two decades after Columbus's first landing, and who himself openly reveled in the torrent of native blood-there was neither "paper nor time enough to tell all that the [conquistadors] did to ruin the Indians and rob them and destroy the land." As a result, the very effort to describe the disaster's overwhelming magnitude has tended to obliterate both the writer's and the reader's sense of its truly horrific human element.

In an apparent effort to counteract this tendency, one writer, Tzvetan Todorov, begins his study of the events of 1492 and immediately thereafter with an epigraph from Diego de Landa's *Relacion de las cosas de Yucatan*:

The captain Alonso Lopez de Avila, brother-in-law of the adelantado Montejo, captured, during the war in Bacalan, a young Indian woman of lovely and gracious appearance. She had promised her husband, fearful lest they should kill him in the war, not to have relations with any other man but him, and so no persuasion was sufficient to prevent her from taking her own life to avoid being defiled by another man; and because of this they had her thrown to the dogs.

Todorov then dedicates his book "to the memory of a Mayan woman devoured by dogs."

It is important to try to hold in mind an image of that woman, and her brothers and sisters and the innumerable others who suffered similar fates, as one reads Todorov's book, or this one, or any other work on this subject-just as it is essential, as one reads about the Jewish Holocaust or the horrors of the African slave trade, to keep in mind the treasure of a single life in order to avoid becoming emotionally anesthetized by the sheer force of such overwhelming human evil and destruction. There is, for example, the case of a small Indian boy whose name no one knows today, and whose unmarked skeletal remains are hopelessly intermingled with those of hundreds of anonymous others in a mass grave on the American plains, but a boy who once played on the banks of a quiet creek in eastern Colorado-until the morning, in 1864, when the American soldiers came. Then, as one of the cavalymen later told it, while his compatriots were slaughtering and mutilating the bodies of all the women and all the children they could catch, he spotted the boy trying to flee:

There was one little child, probably three years old, just big enough to walk through the sand. The Indians had gone ahead, and this little child was behind following after them. The little fellow was perfectly naked, travelling on the sand. I saw one man get off his horse, at a distance of about seventy-five yards, and draw up his rifle and fire-he missed the child. Another man came up and said, "Let me try the son of a bitch; I can hit him." He got down off his horse, kneeled down and fired at the little child, but he missed him. A third man came up and made a similar remark, and fired, and the little fellow dropped.

We must do what we can to recapture and to try to understand, in human terms, what it was that was crushed, what it was that was butchered. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that much was lost. So close to total was the human incineration and carnage in the post-Columbian Americas, however, that of the tens of millions who were killed, few individual lives left sufficient traces for subsequent biographical representation...

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Moreover, the important question for the future in this case is not "can it happen again?" Rather, it is "can it be stopped?" For the genocide in the Americas, and in other places where the world's indigenous peoples survive, has never really ceased. As recently as 1986, the Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States observed that 40,000 people had simply "disappeared" in Guatemala during the preceding fifteen years. Another 100,000 had been openly murdered. That is the equivalent, in the United States, of more than 4,000,000 people slaughtered or removed under official government decree—a figure that is almost six times the number of American battle deaths in the Civil War, World War One, World War Two, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined.'

Almost all those dead and disappeared were Indians, direct descendants—as was that woman who was devoured by dogs—of the Mayas, creators of one of the most splendid civilizations that this earth has ever seen. Today, as five centuries ago, these people are being tortured and slaughtered, their homes and villages bombed and razed—while more than two-thirds of their rain forest homelands have now been intentionally burned and scraped into ruin.' The murder and destruction continue, with the aid and assistance of the United States, even as these words are being written and read. And many of the detailed accounts from contemporary observers read much like those recorded by the conquistadors' chroniclers nearly 500 years earlier.

"Children, two years, four years old, they just grabbed them and tore them in two," reports one witness to a military massacre of Indians in Guatemala in 1982. Recalls another victim of an even more recent assault on an Indian encampment:

With tourniquets they killed the children, of two years, of nine months, of six months. They killed and burned them all.... What they did [to my

father] was put a machete in here (pointing to his chest) and they cut open his heart, and they left him all burned up. This is the pain we shall never forget ... Better to die here with a bullet and not die in that way, like my father did."

Adds still another report, from a list of examples seemingly without end:

At about 1:00 p.m., the soldiers began to fire at the women inside the small church. The majority did not die there, but

were separated from their children, taken to their homes in groups, and killed, the majority apparently with machetes.... Then they returned to kill the children, whom they had left crying and screaming by themselves, without their mothers. Our informants, who were locked up in the courthouse, could see this through a hole in the window and through the doors carelessly left open by a guard. The soldiers cut open the children's stomachs with knives or they grabbed the children's little legs and smashed their heads with heavy sticks.... Then they continued with the men. They took them out, tied their hands, threw them on the ground, and shot them. The authorities of the area were killed inside the courthouse.... It was then that the survivors were able to escape, protected by the smoke of the fire which had been set to the building. Seven men, three of whom survived, managed to escape. It was 5:30 p.m..

In all, 352 Indians were killed in this massacre, at a time when 440 towns were being entirely destroyed by government troops, when almost 10,000 unarmed people were being killed or made to "disappear" annually, and when more than 1,000,000 of Guatemala's approximately 4,000,000 natives were being displaced by the deliberate burning and wasting of their ancestral lands. During such episodes of mass butchery, some children escape; only their parents and grandparents are killed. That is why it was reported in Guatemala in 1985 that "116,000 orphans had been tabulated by the judicial branch census throughout the country, the vast majority of them in the Indian townships of the western and central highlands."

Reminders are all around us, if we care to look, that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century extermination of the indigenous people of Hispaniola, brought on by European military assault and the importation of exotic diseases, was in part only an enormous prelude to human catastrophes that followed on other killing grounds, and continue to occur today—from the forests of Brazil and Paraguay and elsewhere in South and Central America, where direct government violence still slaughters thousands of Indian people year in and year out, to the reservations and urban slums of North America, where more sophisticated indirect government violence has precisely the same effect—all the while that Westerners engage in exultation over the 500th anniversary of the European discovery of America, the time and the place where all the killing began.

Other reminders surround us, as well, however, that there continues among indigenous peoples today the echo of their fifteenth and sixteenth century opposition to annihilation, when, despite the wanton killing by the European invaders and the carnage that followed the introduction of explosive disease epidemics, the natives resisted with an intensity the conquistadors found difficult to believe. "I do not know how to describe it," wrote Bernal Diaz del Castillo of the defiance the Spanish encountered in Mexico, despite the wasting of the native population by bloodbath and torture and disease, "for neither cannon nor muskets nor crossbows availed, nor hand-to-hand fighting, nor killing thirty or forty of them every time we charged, for they still fought on in as close ranks and with more energy than in the beginning."

Five centuries later that resistance remains, in various forms, throughout North and South and Central America, as it

does among indigenous peoples in other lands that have suffered from the Westerners' furious wrath. Compared with what they once were, the native peoples in most of these places are only remnants now. But also in each of those places, and in many more, the struggle for physical and cultural survival, and for recovery of a deserved pride and autonomy, continues unabated.

All the ongoing violence against the world's indigenous peoples, in whatever form-as well as the native peoples' various forms of resistance to that violence-will persist beyond our full understanding, however, and beyond our ability to engage and humanely come to grips with it, until we are able to comprehend the magnitude and the causes of the human destruction that virtually consumed the people of the Americas and other people in other subsequently colonized parts of the globe, beginning with Columbus's early morning sighting of landfall on October 12, 1492. That was the start of it all. This book is offered as one contribution to our necessary comprehension.

He'eia, O'ahu January 1992 D.E.S.

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