

Extended Reading Guide

Name: _____

Date: _____

“Columbus, the Indians & Human Progress”

Based on your previous experience, please respond to the statements below in the YOUR OPINION column before reading our text. While listening, determine whether the movie AGREES or DISAGREES with the statements at left. Please write the time and information that corresponds with the statement.

Statement	Your Opinion		Finding evidence in the Text		Text Evidence
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
					Provide text evidence that indicates whether or not the author agrees or disagrees with each statement.
The Arawak Indians knew how to make better metal than the Europeans.					
Europeans would do anything for resources.					
Columbus believed that God would help the Spanish steal gold and slaves.					
Even though Columbus and the Europeans made slaves of the Arawaks, they treated them well.					
Two years after the Spanish arrived in Haiti the population of the Arawaks had grown by 250,000 people.					
Arawaks that worked on encomiendas were paid and had great working conditions.					

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“Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress” - Excerpted from a People’s History of the US by Howard Zinn

Arawak men and women emerged from their villages onto the island's beaches and swam out to get a closer look at the strange big boat. When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them with food, water, and gifts.

Columbus later wrote of this in his *log*:

"They... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they **exchanged** for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned.... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.... They do not **bear arms**, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of **ignorance**. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane.... They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could **subjugate** them all and make them do whatever we want."

These Arawaks of the Bahama Islands were much like Indians on the mainland. They were remarkable for their **hospitality** and their belief in sharing. Sharing was unfamiliar to Europeans of the **Renaissance**. Europeans wanted **resources**, and they would do just about anything to get them.

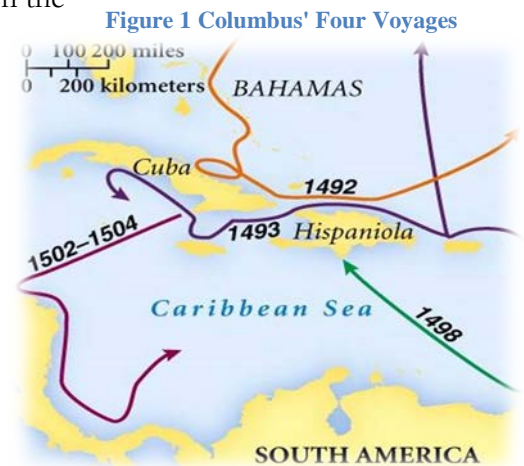
Columbus wrote:

"As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts."

The information that Columbus wanted most was: **Where is the gold?**

The Indians, Columbus reported, "are so naive and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no.... they offer to share with anyone...." He concluded his report by asking for a little help from their Majesties, and in return he would bring them from his next voyage "as much gold as they need . . . and as many slaves as they ask." He was full of religious talk: "Thus the eternal God, our Lord, gives victory to those who follow His way over **apparent** impossibilities."

Because of Columbus's **exaggerated** report and promises, his second expedition was given seventeen ships and more than twelve hundred men. The aim was clear: slaves and gold. They went from island to island in the Caribbean, taking Indians as **captives**. But as word spread of the



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Europeans' *intent* they found more and more empty villages. On Haiti, they found that the sailors left behind at Fort Navidad had been killed in a battle with the Indians. Columbus' men roamed the island in gangs looking for gold, taking women and children as slaves for sex and labor.

From his base on Haiti, Columbus sent many *expeditions* into the interior. They found no gold fields, but had to fill up the ships returning to Spain with some kind of resource. In the year 1495, they went on a great slave *raid*. They *rounded* up 1,500 Arawak men, women, and children, put them in pens guarded by Spaniards and dogs, then picked the five hundred best *specimens* to load onto ships.

Of those five hundred, two hundred died on route. The rest arrived alive in Spain and were put up for sale by the bishop of the town. Columbus later wrote: "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."



But too many of the slaves died in *captivity*. Columbus was desperate to pay back investors. He had to fill his ships with gold. In the province of Cicao on Haiti Columbus and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist. They ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death.

The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold around was bits of dust *garnered* from the streams.

So they *fled*, were hunted down with dogs, and were killed.

Trying to put together an army of *resistance*, the Arawaks faced Spaniards who had armor, muskets, swords, horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners they hanged them or burned them to death. Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began, with cassava poison. Infants were killed to save them from the Spaniards. In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead.

When it became clear that there was no gold left, the Indians were taken as slave labor on huge estates called *encomiendas*. They were worked at a *ferocious* pace, and died by the thousands. By the year 1515, there were perhaps fifty thousand Indians left. By 1550, there were five hundred. A report of the year 1650 shows *none* of the original Arawaks or their *descendants* left on the island

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The chief source of information about what happened on the islands is Bartolome de las Casas, who, as a young priest, participated in the conquest of Cuba. For a time he owned a plantation on which Indian slaves worked, but he gave that up and became a *critic* of Spanish *cruelty*.

In Book Two of his History of the Indies, Las Casas tells about the treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards. It is a unique *primary source* account and deserves to be quoted at length:

"Endless *testimonies* . . . prove the mild and *pacific temperament* of the natives.... But our work was to ravage, kill, mangle and destroy; small wonder, then, if they tried to kill one of us now and then.... The admiral, it is true, was blind as those who came after him, and he was so *anxious* to please the King that he committed *irreparable* crimes against the Indians..."

Las Casas tells how the Spaniards "grew more *conceited* every day" and after a while refused to walk any distance. They "rode the backs of Indians if they were in a hurry" or were carried on hammocks by Indians running in relays. "In this case they also had Indians carry large leaves to shade them from the sun and others to fan them with goose wings."

Total control led to total cruelty. The Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades." Las Casas tells how "two of these so-called Christians met two Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys."

The Indians' attempts to defend themselves failed. And when they ran off into the hills they were found and killed. So, Las Casas reports. "they suffered and died in the mines and other labors in desperate silence, knowing not a soul in the world to whom they could turn for help." He describes their work in the mines:

"... mountains are stripped from top to bottom and bottom to top a thousand times; they dig, split rocks, move stones, and carry dirt on their backs to wash it in the rivers, while those who wash gold stay in the water all the time with their backs bent so constantly it breaks them; and when water invades the mines, the most arduous task of all is to dry the mines by scooping up pans full of water and throwing it up outside...."

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After each six or eight months' work in the mines, which was the time required of each crew to dig enough gold for melting, up to a third of the men died. While the men were sent many miles away to the mines, the wives remained to work the soil, forced into the excruciating job of digging and making thousands of hills for cassava plants.

Thus husbands and wives were together only once every eight or ten months and when they met they were so exhausted and depressed on both sides . . . they ceased to procreate. As for the newly born, they died early because their mothers, overworked and ***famished***, had no milk to nurse them, and for this reason, while I was in Cuba, 7,000 children died in three months. Some mothers even drowned their babies from sheer desperation.... In this way, husbands died in the mines, wives died at work, and children died from lack of milk . . . and in a short time this land which was so great, so powerful and fertile ... was ***depopulated***.... My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write...."

When he arrived on Hispaniola in 1508, Las Casas says, "there were 60,000 people living on this island, including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had ***perished*** from war, slavery, and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this? I myself writing it as a knowledgeable eyewitness can hardly believe it...."

So began the history, five hundred years ago, of the European ***invasion*** of the Indian settlements in the Americas. When we read the history books given to children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure-there is no bloodshed-and Columbus Day is a celebration

Development

Hero

Exploration

Or

or

Or

Catastrophe?

Villain?

Exploitation?

The treatment of heroes (Columbus) and their victims (the Arawaks) the quiet acceptance of conquest and murder in the name of progress-is only one aspect of a certain approach to history. This approach is told from the ***perspective*** of governments, conquerors, diplomats, leaders. The victims are forgotten.

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When the Pilgrims came to New England they too were coming not to vacant land but to territory inhabited by tribes of Indians



The Indian population of 10 million that lived north of Mexico when Columbus came would ultimately be reduced to less than a million. Huge numbers of Indians would die from diseases introduced by the whites. A Dutch traveler in New Netherland wrote in 1656 that "the Indians . . . affirm, that before the arrival of the Christians, and before the smallpox broke out amongst them, they were ten times as numerous as they now are, and that their population had been melted down by this disease, whereof nine-tenths of them have died." When the English first settled Martha's Vineyard in 1642, the Wampanoags there numbered perhaps three thousand. There were no wars on that island, but

by 1764, only 313 Indians were left there. Similarly, Block Island Indians numbered perhaps 1,200 to 1,500 in 1662, and by 1774 were reduced to fifty-one.

Behind the English invasion of North America, behind their massacre of Indians, their deception, their brutality, was that special powerful drive born in civilizations based on private property. It was a morally ambiguous drive; the need for space, for land, was a real human need. But in conditions of scarcity, in a barbarous *epoch* of history ruled by *competition*, this human need was transformed into the murder of whole peoples.