

Columbus and Las Casas

The first chapter in *Voices* provides students with a perspective that many have never encountered. By reading the words of Columbus, de Las Casas, and Galeano, students experience a wide array of emotions. The ensuing discussions may be painful, yet they are also enlightening. These previously unheard perspectives tell them more about the Arawak¹ people and in so doing, encourage students to use their own voices by asking, “Why haven’t I heard these voices before? Why have I only learned half of the story of Columbus and European contact? How could the Spanish have committed such atrocities?”

Some students insist that their previous teachers have “lied” to them. Others believe that their teachers may not have had a complete understanding of the story of Columbus or that they simply never learned the history. In the end, most students agree that an honest, balanced presentation of a diversity of voices is absolutely essential in classroom discussions at all levels of education—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary.

Document-Based Questions

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

1. What new information did you learn about Columbus from these four diary entries? How does it differ from earlier opinions and images that you had of Columbus?
2. What does Columbus think of the native population in terms of its physical and mental conditions, its worth to the king and queen of Spain, and its relationship with the European explorers?
3. What is Columbus’s plan for the island of Hispaniola? How does he explain how his plan will affect the native population? What do you think is missing from his plan?

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

1. Why do you think Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote these two accounts? To whom do you think he wrote them?
2. De Las Casas wrote these accounts fifty and sixty years respectively after Columbus initially arrived in Hispanola. Do you think the intervening years may have influenced his perceptions? How and why? What happens when someone writes down an account after most of the consequences of an event are known?
3. How do these two readings change your understanding of the consequences of European contact on the native people of the Western Hemisphere? Does this view make the Spanish explorers any less heroic? How and why?
4. Whose opinions do you think were most prominent during the late fifteenth century—those of Columbus or those of Las Casas? How and why?
5. Do you think that Las Casas's voice was heard at the Royal Council of Spain in 1550? Who do you think would have opposed him or supported him?

EDUARDO GALEANO

1. How did Eduardo Galeano use historical sources to support his re-imagining of the native experience after Columbus's "discovery"?
2. How does Galeano's description of the landing of Columbus compare and contrast with the descriptions given by Columbus and de Las Casas?
3. What does Galeano's account tell you about the fate of the enslaved Arawak/Tainos whom Columbus took to Spain?
4. How does Galeano describe the Pope? What, in his eyes, is the Pope's interest and complicity in both the goals and consequences of Columbus's voyages?
5. What does Galeano mean when he writes in his entry of 1493 on Santa Cruz Island that Columbus "has again planted the cross and gallows"? Do you agree or disagree? How and why?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 1, “Columbus and Las Casas”

After reading Chapter 1 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are six possible main points.

1. Columbus’s arrival in the Caribbean was an invasion of a very old world, not the discovery of a “New World.”
2. Despite Euro-American claims to the contrary, Indian peoples were highly civilized before, during, and after contact.
3. Although the colonists believed they were helping native peoples progress from savagery to civilization, the end result was genocide.
4. The Americas were first explored and then colonized by the Europeans for economic gain and political conquest.
5. While the vast majority of Europeans supported the exploration, invasion, and colonization of the Americas, voices of dissent did exist.
6. The quest toward progress must be examined from different perspectives. Actions noted as “progress” by the conquering Europeans were believed to be destructive by the native populations.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 1, “Columbus and Las Casas,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 1, “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 1 in both books. Following are four additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

7. To portray Columbus as a hero and his successors as discoverers and the rightful leaders of “civilized” peoples not only de-emphasizes their role in genocide but also justifies their actions and motives.

8. From the early days of colonization, Europeans used divide-and-conquer techniques to turn the Indians against one another.
9. Columbus planted the ideological seeds that came to characterize the European colonization of North America: the quest for wealth and power was noble and courageous; white domination of the nonwhite races was natural and inevitable; and Christians were superior to non-Christians.
10. Columbus introduced two tactics that influenced race relations in the Americas: taking land, wealth, and labor from indigenous peoples by force, and advancing the transatlantic slave trade.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 1, they can also be rewritten to be included as evaluation tools.

1. How would you contrast the viewpoints of Columbus and de Las Casas in regard to the “native people called Indians”? Do you think Columbus and de Las Casas agree or disagree about the goals of the Spanish explorers? How and why?
2. What does the fictional account of Galeano add to or subtract from your understanding of the Arawak/Taino people? How useful is historical fiction to your understanding of history in general?
3. Some historians have referred to the actions of Columbus and those who followed him as “genocidal.” What is genocide? Using specific citations from at least two voices in this chapter, support or refute this accusation of genocide.
4. What do you think are the qualifications that are required before a nation can be considered “civilized”? Do you think the definition of “civilized” has changed in the last 400 years? If so, how? In reading the description of the Arawak/Taino in de Las Casas and Galeano, do you find any indication that these people were uncivilized? How and why do you think that Euro-American colonists thought that they were uncivilized?

5. Given the voices you have read in this chapter, how do you think we should commemorate Columbus Day?
6. What European cultural, political, economic, and spiritual values are exposed in these voices? How do you think they compared and contrasted with the values of the Arawak/Taino people?
7. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the six themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
8. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read the first chapter in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on how the materials in both chapters help students to formulate and articulate their answers.

9. Of the voices in Chapter 1 in both books, who represents the one percent of the elite discussed in “The Coming Revolt of the Guards” in Chapter 24 of *A People's History*? Whose are the “unimportant” voices? Can you find quotes to support your positions?
10. In many traditional history books, the years between 1898 and World War I are known as “The Age of Imperialism.” How would you define imperialism? Given what you have read in both first chapters in *A People's History* and in *Voices*, do you think imperialism first arrived in the Americas in the late nineteenth century? Why do you think textbooks refer to late nineteenth-century imperialism as a new type of foreign policy?
11. How do the voices in Chapter 1 of *Voices* reinforce the major points made in Chapter 1 of *A People's History*?
12. Given what you have learned about the cultural and economic values of the Arawak/Taino and the Spanish explorers, do you think there could have been a relationship different from that of victims and conquerors? Or do you think that such interaction was inevitable? How and why?

13. There is relatively little disagreement among historians about what happened to the Tainos. Why do you think this story is not more widely taught in school?
14. Given what you have learned in these chapters, why do you think Columbus Day is an official holiday for federal employees in the United States?
15. How did the colonists justify taking Indian land? How are their justifications similar and dissimilar to the justifications Columbus makes for his actions in Hispaniola?
16. What is “that special powerful drive born in civilizations based on private property” (p. 16) that Howard Zinn describes in “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress”? How will the issue of private property shape the ongoing battle between the Euro-Americans and the indigenous peoples of North America?
17. Do you think it is “inevitable” that the writing of history take sides? Explain.

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Using a search engine of choice, find a website that includes primary documents about early Spanish exploration in the Americas. Find at least one other primary document that provides more information about Spanish contact with American Indians. What new information did you acquire about early relationships between the Spanish and American Indians?
2. Using a search engine of choice, discover what you can about the descendants of the Arawak/Taino people. What new historical and contemporary information did you acquire about the people and their nation?

3. Justify the role of “progress” from the Spanish perspective, using specific phrases and explanations from any of the primary documents in Chapter 1. Then reverse your position and refute your justifications by using the phrases and words of those who suffered at the hands of such “progress.”
4. Watch any feature-length movie that deals with the topics discussed in Chapter 1 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*. How did the movie(s) reinforce or refute the voices that you learned about in these chapters? What parts of the movie do you feel were historically accurate? Inaccurate? Why do you think the movie was made? Who do you think was its intended audience?
5. Recent scholarship has emphasized the role of the European explorers and settlers in the environmental degradation and destruction of the Caribbean and North America. In *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* by Kirkpatrick Sale (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), the author describes a “Columbian legacy” of environmental destructiveness. The Arawak/Taino people are characterized as living in perfect harmony with the environment, while Europeans are depicted as a people who are at war with nature. Find out more about this discussion of environmental degradation, especially in terms of its historical accuracy.
6. Much speculation exists about Columbus the man—his origins, religious beliefs, and goals—and what Columbus really hoped for from his voyages. Using this extensive website devoted to Columbus—www.win.tue.nl/cs/fm/engels/discovery/columbus.html—pick a few key sites to learn more about what Columbus hoped to gain from his voyages. Compare this information with what you have read in Chapters 1 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*.
7. Using excerpts from Columbus's journal and from José Barreiro's, “A Note on Tainos: Whither Progress?” (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/41/013.html>), write a diary entry from the point of view of a Taino during the first few days or weeks of their encounter with the Spaniards.
8. Read and critique together Jane Yolen's children's book *Encounter*. Discussion questions to ponder include: How does this story more or less accurately explain the first European/Taino encounter as told from a Taino boy's perspective? How does this story differ from traditional stories of contact? Is it important for young children to gain a more balanced perspec-

tive of the Columbus story that includes mention of genocide and violence, or is this story better left to the secondary schools to tell?

9. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. President William Henry Harrison proclaimed October 21, 1893, as the original Columbus Day—a national holiday—and designated schools to be the main sites of celebration. Research the original motivations behind creating the Pledge, as well as its original wording. Why was its creation tied directly to Columbus? What subsequent role did the Knights of Columbus have in making further changes to the Pledge? Who are the Knights of Columbus and what role do they play in keeping the legacy of Columbus alive in the United States today?
10. Read Howard Zinn's article, "Unsung Heroes" (www.theexperiment.org/articles.php?news_id=570). Who are some of his "unsung heroes"? Why does he feel that we should not be teaching about Columbus as a hero? Do you agree or disagree? Explain. Why does Zinn feel that it is important for students to learn about the unsung heroes in their classrooms? Do you think his advice is sound? How and why?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. On page 29 in *Voices*, Howard Zinn writes, "Profit was the driving force behind Columbus's expedition and behind his actions after he landed." In the voices you read about in Chapter 1, what evidence can you find to support this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Do you think the actions of Columbus and other Spanish explorers referred to in these primary documents can be defined as acts of genocide? How and why?
3. Who do you think are the heroes in the primary documents you have read? If you were alive in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, do you think your answers would be any different? How and why?
4. Explain the ways in which Chapter 1 in *Voices* reinforces any of the overall themes we discussed in "Main Points in *Voices*."
5. How would you define progress? Do you believe that it was inevitable that

Euro-American progress be achieved at the expense of the Indian people of North America? How and why? In the twenty-first century, can you identify any group of people who may be achieving, or trying to achieve, progress at the expense of another group of people?

6. How has reading the voices in Chapter 1 broadened your understanding about early relationships between the Spanish explorers and the American Indians?
7. What voices in the first chapter in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Write a letter to one of the people you met in Chapter 1—Columbus, de Las Casas, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, Pope Alexander VI, and so forth. Tell your correspondent how you responded to his or her role in the “discovery” of the Americas by Columbus. Explain how you think he or she might have altered that role.
2. Imagine that de Las Casas has sent his observations about the effect of Columbus’s expedition on the Arawak/Taino people to the Pope. Write a letter from the Pope to de Las Casas that represents not only the Pope’s reaction to this information but also the Catholic Church’s position on exploration and discovery in a “New World” populated by non-Christians.
3. Rewrite the portion of a traditional children’s book to more accurately tell the story of the encounter between Columbus and the Arawak/Taino people.
4. Stage a trial of Christopher Columbus. Create a defense that bases its case on the traditional interpretations of Columbus and his goals for exploration and a prosecution that bases its case on the violation of human rights.

NOTE

- 1 Some debate continues about the use of the appellation Arawak or Taino for the people with whom Columbus initially came into contact. The dis-

inction between the two is that Arawak refers to a linguistic group that spreads into South America, while the Taino are a cultural subset of the Arawak that include people living in what is now Puerto Rico, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn uses Arawak—the term that was widely used in the 1980s and early 1990s. Today, Taino is the preferred usage for the people whom Columbus encountered.