

24 Gloom, Doom, and a Bit of Cheer

Great Plague

The Black Death raged through Europe and Asia in the 14th century and killed more people than any war. It began in China and spread west. One estimate says at least 40 percent of the population of Asia, Europe, and North Africa died in 20 years. About 90 percent of those who got the plague died. The same kind of thing happened when smallpox germs came to America. Today, with antibiotics, the death rate from these diseases is about 5 percent, and smallpox seems to have been eradicated (which means "wiped out," or "eliminated," or "finished").



Europeans had figured out how to sail to America, but not how to cure bad diseases.

Remember, Amerigo Vespucci said, "I have found a continent more densely peopled...than our Europe or Asia or Africa." Well, all those people were in trouble. Historians guess there were at least 20 million Indians in Mexico when the first Spaniards arrived. No one knows how many died after the Europeans came, but almost everyone agrees it was more than three-quarters of the Indian population. Imagine: if you were a Native American living then, three out of every four people you knew would be dead.

It was an accident that did most of the killing—the accident of disease. No one intended it. Millions of Indians were killed by the germs that came with the Europeans and Africans. Some say only two million Mexican Indians survived. European diseases had a similar effect on Native Americans everywhere. Few people understood the importance of cleanliness or how to combat infections.

People were used to epidemics. They just shrugged their shoulders and called them "God's will." In the 14th century Europe suffered a terrible plague called the Black Death. Europeans looked on helplessly as one out of every three of them died.

So the European adventure in the New World began with this terrible accident of disease and death. But there were other things, which weren't accidents, that also made life difficult for the native peoples. The Europeans came to America to expand their world and to enrich themselves. They came as conquerors and colonists.

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A colony is a region controlled by a foreign country. The conquerors saw themselves as parents and their colonies as children. Spain became a "mother country." Mexico was its colony. (The Mexicans didn't think they were children, but no one asked how they felt.) Mexico was ruled by Spain in a way that was good for the parent, but not always good for the child.

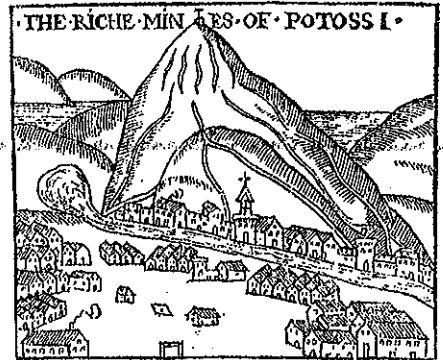
It wasn't all bad, though. Spaniards brought their religious faith and their architecture to Mexico and South America. They brought their language, their arts, and their elegant manners. They brought learning: the first printing press arrived in Mexico City in 1539, and a university in 1551. They encouraged truth-telling: they let their historians write the good and the bad about what was happening in America. They built magnificent

churches and palaces. They ended the terrible blood sacrifices that had been part of the Indian religion in Middle America.

They tried to make America Spanish. But the nations they created were neither Spanish nor Indian. They were a hybrid; that means "a mixture." Spaniards married Indians, and their children were called *mestizos* (Spanish for "mixed"). Spaniards married black people, and their children were *mulattoes* (from the Spanish word for "mule"; a mule is the offspring of a donkey and a horse). Soon all these people were living together in Mexico, Peru, and other Spanish colonies.

The Spanish colonies were not friendly with one another. Back in the 15th and 16th centuries people in different parts of Spain didn't get along very well. In America their differences grew wider. The Spaniards never built good roads from one colony to another. (That would have been difficult to do with the many mountains and jungles about.) That is one reason there never was a United States of South America.

Today South America is mostly filled with separate Spanish-speaking countries. The Spanish might have made all of North America a colony if they had found gold in the north. They didn't, although they tried hard enough.



Europeans poured into the Americas in search of wealth. Sometimes, as in Peru's silver mines at Potosí, they found it. Some found riches in tobacco or sugarcane instead. But many just died still searching.

The people of Brazil, the largest country in South America, don't speak Spanish. Because Brazil became a colony of Portugal, Portuguese is the Brazilian language. People in three small countries on the northern coast of South America speak three other languages. See if you can discover the names of those countries and their languages.

The life of many Incas born after the Spanish invaded—like the young noblewoman on the left—was very different from their grandparents' lives. It was much poorer and harder.



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