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COLUMBUS DAY:

“A national holiday in the USA, held in most states on the Monday nearest the 12 October,

in commemoration of Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America (12 Oct 1492). It is also celebrated in several countries of Central and South America.” (The Penguin Encyclopedia, 2004)

adapted from Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States (NY: Harper Collins, 1999).

Columbus and his men sighted land in the Caribbean on 12 October 1492. After they were met by the Arawak Indians and then went ashore, Columbus wrote in his log: “They do not bear arms, and do not know them, (…) They would make fine servants (…) With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.” He later 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.”

From his base on Haiti, after his second voyage to the Americas, Columbus sent expedition after expedition into the interior. In the year 1495, they went on a great slave raid, rounded up fifteen hundred 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 en route. The rest arrived alive in Spain and were put up for sale by the archdeacon of the town.

On Haiti, Columbus 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, known later as 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.

    The chief source - and, on many matters the only source - of information about what happened on the islands after Columbus came is Bartolomé 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 vehement critic of Spanish cruelty. Las Casas transcribed Columbus's journal and, in his fifties, began a multivolume History of the Indies.

    In Book Two of his History of the Indies, Las Casas (who at first urged replacing Indians by black slaves, thinking they were stronger and would survive, but later relented when he saw the effects on blacks) tells about the treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards. “Endless testimonies (…) prove the mild and pacific temperament of the natives (…) But our work was to exasperate, ravage, kill, mangle and destroy (…) 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 (…)”

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 (…) 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 (…)"

    Thus began the history, five hundred years ago, of the European invasion of the Indian settlements in the Americas. That beginning, when you read Las Casas - even if his figures are exaggerations (were there 3 million Indians to begin with, as he says, or less than a million, as some historians have calculated, or 8 million as others now believe?) - is conquest, slavery, death. 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.

Compare Howard Zinn’s account of Columbus with the biographical entries in most dictionaries and encyclopedias.