

Imperial Rivalries, Part Three: Religious Strife and the New World

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Engraving by Theodor de Bry of the battle between two Florida Native American tribes in the 1560s. The French assisted the Utina tribe against the Potano tribe. Photo from Library of Congress.

The third in a three-part series

Background

The Protestant Reformation was a religious revolution in the 1500s. Protestants challenged the authority of the pope and the Catholic Church that he led. The Protestant Reformation changed Europe in many important ways. Before the Reformation, Catholicism was the only

kind of Christianity in Western Europe. After it, there were many new kinds of Protestant groups. The Reformation triggered years of bloody wars between Catholics and Protestants. The Thirty Years' War alone may have cost Germany 40 percent of its population.

Conflict between Catholics and Protestants

It is impossible to overstate the significance of religious strife in post-Reformation Europe. After the Reformation, northern European Protestants were eager to establish claims in new territories so that they could prevent the spread of the faith now known as Roman Catholicism. Under Queen Elizabeth, I, a daughter of Henry VIII, the English renewed their longstanding effort to colonize Ireland, which had begun in the twelfth century but had never fully succeeded. Elizabeth's commanders, fueled by the idea that Irish Christianity was inferior to their own and thus needed to be eradicated, employed brutal tactics on the battlefield. This experience shaped the mindset of some of the English who later joined missions across the Atlantic.

The English, who would eventually gain control of the Atlantic coast of North America between Canada and Florida, made their contest with Rome a central part of their arguments for conquest and colonization. They were aided, as it turned out, by a report written by a one-time slaveholder turned Dominican missionary named Bartolomé de Las Casas, who in 1552 published (in Seville) a book called *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. The book contained lurid details about torture and murder perpetrated by Spanish conquistadors in the Indies, which Las Casas urged the Spanish court to recognize in order to halt such violent tactics. When the book appeared in an English-language translation in London in 1583, its purpose had less to do with changing Spanish tactics. It became a testimony to the inherently barbarous nature of Iberian Catholics, a theme picked up by other English authors in the 1580s and 1590s. These texts helped prompt reluctant Protestants to commit precious resources to the creation of overseas colonies, thereby expanding the European imperial contest for dominance in the Atlantic basin.

Exploration bookshop

Although Europeans looking westward across the Atlantic were in constant competition for lands, riches, and souls, they shared information about new discoveries with surprising frequency. When Columbus returned from his first journey, his initial testimony quickly appeared in a book now known to scholars as the *Barcelona Letter of 1493*, after the place where a publisher first printed it. Soon editions in other languages appeared, including one published in Basel, Switzerland, also in 1493, which included crude woodcuts created by an artist who had read the text and tried to create a visual rendering of Columbus's initial encounter with the Arawaks or Tainos. By 1500, descriptions of Columbus's voyages had spread across Europe.

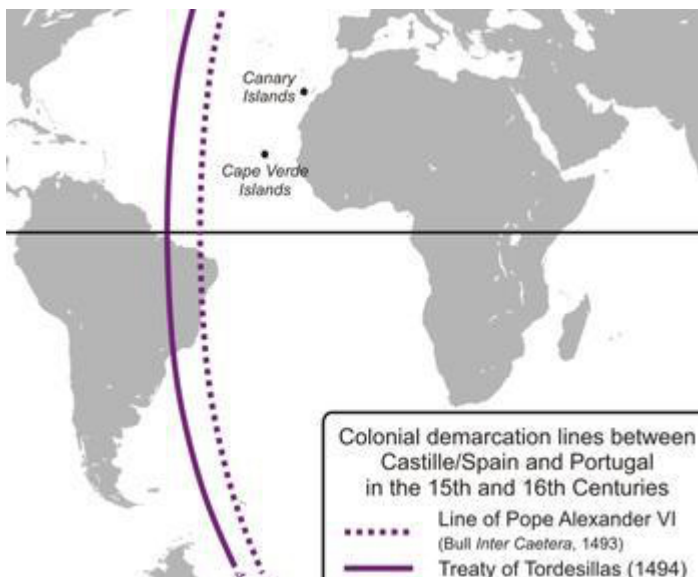
The spread of works about Columbus was only the beginning. Over the course of the sixteenth century, when printing presses proliferated across Europe, scores of new books testified to both the opportunities and dangers of the Western Hemisphere. One of those books was written by a young English mathematician named Thomas Harriot, who had traveled to the outer banks of modern North Carolina, in 1585. In 1588 Harriot produced a small book rich with details about the region he had seen, the peoples who lived there, and the natural resources that could be extracted from its landscape. Harriot called his book *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Two years later, an avid promoter of English colonization named Richard Hakluyt the younger (to differentiate him from his cousin) took the text from Harriot's book and worked with a Flemish engraver based in Frankfurt-am-Main, Theodor de Bry, to produce the first fully illustrated published account of any Native American population. In 1590 English, French, German, and Latin versions all rolled off de Bry's presses.



What could explain such a publishing strategy? After all, France was still a Catholic nation, as were parts of German-speaking central Europe, so a book extolling the virtues of territory claimed by the English might only feed the desire of English foes to seize the region. Yet Hakluyt and the others embraced the multi-language edition because they recognized that the European scientific community needed to know about new discoveries. The scholars among

them could read Latin, but by the late sixteenth century vernacular languages had also come to be important in the transmission of knowledge, as people who were not scholars became interested in the world around them and the new discoveries.

The four-language edition of Harriot's Brief and True Report serves as a cautionary tale for scholars trying to understand European imperial rivalries during the initial colonization of the Americas. Europeans competed fiercely for territories and souls that they believed they could and should conquer. They also mounted legal arguments about which European nation could justly claim which parts of the non-European world. These arguments included a tract written by a Dutch jurist named Hugo Grotius, published in 1609 as *Mare Liberum* (the Free Sea), which aimed at undermining the Treaty of Tordesillas. Grotius asserted that the Spanish and Portuguese could not lay permanent claim to territories based on a geographical line drawn through the ocean because no one could own the sea.



By the time the English founded Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, imperial rivals jostled for control of the resources of the Atlantic basin. Eventually European contests would spawn American battles too, with far-ranging consequences for the Native peoples who came into contact with newcomers eager to establish a firm grip over the Western Hemisphere.

Peter C. Mancall is a professor of history at the University of Southern California. His publications include "Fatal Journey: The Final Expedition of Henry Hudson — A Tale of Mutiny and Murder in the Arctic" (2009), "Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America" (2007) and "Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology" (2006). He is currently working on "American Origins," which will be the first volume of the "Oxford History of the United States."

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the third paragraph of the article.

The book contained lurid details about torture and murder perpetrated by Spanish conquistadors in the Indies, which Las Casas urged the Spanish court to recognize in order to halt such violent tactics. When the book appeared in an English-language translation in London in 1583, its purpose had less to do with changing Spanish tactics. It became a testimony to the inherently barbarous nature of Iberian Catholics, a theme picked up by other English authors in the 1580s and 1590s. These texts helped prompt reluctant Protestants to commit precious resources to the creation of overseas colonies, thereby expanding the European imperial contest for dominance in the Atlantic basin.

Which idea is BEST supported by this selection?

- (A) Las Casas inadvertently caused greater colonization of the Americas with the publication of his book.
- (B) Las Casas intended to spark an imperial contest by encouraging Protestants to use valuable resources.
- (C) Spanish conquistadors were forced to change their treatment of Native Americans as a result of Las Casas' book.
- (D) Spanish Catholics in the Americas were quickly overtaken by Protestants due to the information presented in Las Casas' book.

- 2 Which sentence from the article shows that the exploration of the New World coincided with a growing public desire to understand the world?
- (A) Over the course of the sixteenth century, when printing presses proliferated across Europe, scores of new books testified to both the opportunities and dangers of the Western Hemisphere.
 - (B) Yet Hakluyt and the others embraced the multi-language edition because they recognized that the European scientific community needed to know about new discoveries.
 - (C) The scholars among them could read Latin, but by the late sixteenth century vernacular languages had also come to be important in the transmission of knowledge, as people who were not scholars became interested in the world around them and the new discoveries.
 - (D) Eventually European contests would spawn American battles too, with far-ranging consequences for the Native peoples who came into contact with newcomers eager to establish a firm grip over the Western Hemisphere.
- 3 Look at the map near the bottom of the article.
How might Hugo Grotius have used the map to prove his point?
- (A) by arguing that books about the Americas needed to be written in multiple languages
 - (B) by arguing that nations like France and England were entitled to their own demarcations
 - (C) by showing that most of the demarcation lines ran through ocean rather than land
 - (D) by showing that the pope had given Portugal less land than the Treaty of Tordesillas
- 4 Which of the following topics is emphasized by the article but NOT by the images included with it?
- (A) the influence of the pope on colonization of the Americas
 - (B) the influence of Europeans on conflicts with Native Americans
 - (C) the influence of published material in shaping ideas about Native Americans
 - (D) the influence of the Protestant Reformation in shaping ideas about colonization