

**Primary Source Excerpt: “Treatment of the Indians”
from *History of the Indies* (Bartolomé de las Casas, 1528)**

(A) In that year of 1500, ...the King determined to send a new governor to Hispaniola**, which at the time was the only seat of government in the Indies. The new governor was fray Nicolás de Ovando, Knight of Alcantara, and at that time comendador¹ of Lares.

(B) At first, the Indians were forced to stay six months away at work; later, the time was extended to eight months and this was called a shift, at the end of which they brought all the gold for minting. The King's part was subtracted and the rest went to individuals, but for years no one kept a single peso because they owed it all to merchants and other creditors, so that the anguish and torments endured by the Indians in mining that infernal gold were consumed entirely by God and no one prospered. During the minting period, the Indians were allowed to go home, a few days' journey on foot.

(C) One can imagine their state when they arrived after eight months, and those who found their wives there must have cried, lamenting their condition together. How could they even rest, since they had to provide for the needs of their family when their land had gone to weeds? Of those who had worked in the mines, a bare 10 percent survived to start the journey home. Many Spaniards had no scruples about making them work on Sundays and holidays, if not in the mines then on minor tasks such as building and repairing houses, carrying firewood, etc.

(D) They fed them cassava bread, which is adequate nutrition only when supplemented with meat, fish or other more substantial food. The minero² killed a pig once a week but he kept more than half for himself and had the leftover apportioned and cooked daily for thirty or forty Indians, which came to a bite of meat the size of a walnut per individual, and they dipped the cassava in this as well as in the broth...

(E) I believe the above clearly demonstrates that the Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom when they are allowed to graze in the fields. But our Spaniards gave no such opportunity to Indians and truly considered them perpetual slaves, since the Indians had not the free will to dispose of their persons but instead were disposed of according to Spanish greed and cruelty, not as men in captivity but as beasts tied to a rope to prevent free movement. When they were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and had no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and to die.

(F) When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless, giving them some cassava for the twenty- to eighty-league journey. They would go then, falling into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon

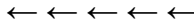
others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry." And this was the freedom, the good treatment and the Christianity that Indians received.

(G) About eight years passed under the comendador's rule and this disorder had time to grow; no one gave it a thought and the multitude of people who originally lived on this island...was consumed at such a rate that in those eight years 90 per cent had perished. From here this sweeping plague went to San Juan, Jamaica, Cuba and the continent, spreading destruction over the whole hemisphere.

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1. "comendador" – Spanish title granting an individual the authority to rule an encomienda
 2. "minero" – official in charge of the mine



**"Hispaniola"



Name: _____ Hour: _____

Primary Source Excerpt: “Treatment of the Indians,” from *History of the Indies* (Bartolomé de las Casas, 1528)

1. Based on the title of this primary source excerpt, what do you expect it to be ABOUT?
2. (a) What, if anything, do you already know about the author? (b) What can you INFER about the author before reading the document? {Hint: consider the name, the time period, and the topic.}
3. Referring to Paragraph (A)....
 - (a) What do those two asterisks (**) mean after the word “Hispaniola”?
 - (b) What about that little number one after “comendador”? What’s up with that?
4. Referring to Paragraph (B)...

Even if we don’t understand every word, or the exact economics involved, what THREE general statements can we make about the working conditions of the Amerindians under the Spanish at this time?
5. Referring to Paragraph (C)...
 - (a) Assume not everyone is familiar with the word “lamenting.” Does it look like it’s important enough that we should look it up, can we infer its meaning from context, or is it not that important? Explain your choice.
 - (b) Assume not everyone is familiar with the word “scruples.” Does it look like it’s important enough that we should look it up, can we infer its meaning from context, or is it not that important? Explain your choice.
6. Summarize Paragraph (C) in a single, clear sentence.
7. Referring to Paragraph (D)...
 - (a) Assume not everyone is familiar with “cassava bread.” Does this look like something we should look up, can we infer enough about it from context to get the idea, or is it not that important? Explain your choice.
 - (b) What’s up with that little number after “minero”? Why is it there and what can I learn from it?
8. Summarize Paragraph (D) in a single, clear sentence.
9. Referring to Paragraph (E)...
 - (a) The author writes that he believes “the above clearly demonstrates that...”. What can we infer from his decision to frame his information this way? In other words, what can we guess about WHY he’s writing this stuff, based on “I believe this information proves...”?
 - (b) What can we infer about the author based on his use of the phrase “our Spaniards”?
 - (c) In what way are the Amerindians treated even worse than “men in captivity” (slaves) according to Las Casas?

Background Knowledge: Amerindians across any part of the western hemisphere didn't do well with manual labor. They made poor slaves for many reasons, but one of the biggest was that they simply didn't have the raw endurance for it. They hadn't evolved for that sort of brutal physical work. Add the many new illnesses brought in by Europeans, and it's no surprise that so many got sick or died when forced to do heavy labor.

10. Referring to Paragraph (F)...

(a) The Spaniards gave sick workers "some cassava" for their long journey home. We may not know much about "cassava," but what's ONE thing we DO know about it from earlier in the document?

(b) Look at the last sentence of this paragraph again. What sort of tone is Las Casas using here? What can we infer about his audience or the reason for this letter based on the language used here?

11. Summarize Paragraph (F) in a single, clear sentence.

12. Summarize Paragraph (G) in a single, clear sentence.

