

# *The Bloody Trail of Columbus Day*

Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale

**O**n October 12, 1992 there will be two celebrations. One will be for the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' "discovery of America," and the United States, Spain, the Vatican, and many European and Latin American governments are preparing for the event. The other will be the commemoration of 500 years of indigenous resistance to genocide and colonialism in the western hemisphere, and organizations of indigenous peoples all over these continents are preparing for this event.

When Christopher Columbus landed here, he found the Arawak and Taino peoples he encountered remarkable (by European standards, anyway) for their gentleness, their hospitality, their generosity, their belief in sharing. Some modern theoreticians propose that Columbus called these people "indios," not because he thought he had found India, but because he felt them to be "people of god."

"They are a gentle and comely people," he wrote. "They are so naive and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone...They brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned..."

Columbus, however, did not let his admiration for these "gentle and comely people" prevent him from taking many of them back to Spain in chains. "With fifty men," he wrote, "we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want." And that's what he did. He set in motion what Bartolomé de las

Casas, a friar who fought for half a century to save the People from the conquistadores, called "the beginning of the bloody trail of conquest across the Americas."

Columbus wasn't nearly the first to land here, only one of the first to exploit the land and its people. He built Puerto de Navidad, the first European military base in the western hemisphere. From Puerto de Navidad, in Haiti, Columbus' men roamed the island in gangs, looking for gold and committing brutalities of every sort, taking women and children as slaves for sex and labor. In 1495, he and his men rounded up some 1,500 Arawak women, men, and children, and selected the fittest 500 to load onto ships. Some 200 died en route to Spain, and the remaining 300, upon arrival, were put up for sale by an archdeacon. Most of them died in captivity.

There was organized resistance to colonialism, even then. Virtually the entire island rose up in revolt, but the people's bows and arrows and fishbone-tipped spears (which were the only weapons they had ever needed) were no match for the crossbows, knives, artillery, cavalry, and dogs of the conquistadores,

and the people were quickly defeated. All prisoners were hanged or burned to death. And many of those who survived the cold steel succumbed to the germ warfare of European diseases.

Terrorized and demoralized, the People were subjected to the payment of a tribute: people over 14 years of age were forced to pay enough gold to fill a hawk's bell measure every three months—or be killed by having their hands cut off. In despair, with no gold left, the people fled their homes for the mountains, leaving their crops unplanted, preferring to starve to death. Most of those trying to get to the mountains were hunted down with dogs and killed, as an example to the others. One by one, all of the indigenous leaders were tortured, impaled, hanged, burned at the stake. Then the mass suicides began, as Arawak people killed themselves with casava poison.

The people continued to fall victim to the conquistadores' greed and lust—and Christian piety. De las Casas reports how the Spanish constructed low, wide gallows on which they strung up the people, their feet almost touching the ground. Then they put burning green wood at their feet. Thirteen Arawak people were hanged each time, de las Casas said, "in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles."

The people died, as they lived, with great dignity. Hatuey, a Taino leader, fled with his people from Haiti to Cuba. With the Spaniards right behind, the people did a mock dance of

worship before a basket of gold, and then heaved it into the river. Captured, tied to a stake, and ordered to be burned alive, Hatuey was offered eternal life in heaven if he recanted. He asked the friar if all Spaniards went to heaven, and when the friar answered that only the good ones did, Hatuey replied, "The best are good for nothing, and I will not go where there is a chance of meeting one of them. I would prefer then to go to hell."

The conquest of the islands—Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Antilles, the Bahamas—and the slaughter of their people raged on. Millions of good and true people died like flies, from exhaustion, torture, famine, and disease.

The Arawak people and the Taino people are all but gone. But the struggle continues. Today, indigenous peoples in these continents are still battling for land, independence, and self-determination. From Big Mountain to Akwesasne to the Black Hills to Guatemala to the Amazon rainforest, Native peoples are fighting for the right to live on their land, to speak their languages, to practice their religions, to govern themselves, to live with dignity and in harmony with nature. They are fighting a bloodline that runs from Columbus all the way to Arco, Exxon, Peabody, General Electric, and all the other conquistadores that continue to pillage and plunder the people and the land.

And the beginning of this struggle is what will be commemorated on October 12, 1992.

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