

500 years after Columbus: The Legacy of Genocide

The year 1992 will be a time of governments, corporations and religious institutions attempting to celebrate the voyage of Christopher Columbus to the Caribbean. The gala events surrounding the Columbus Quincentennial (1492-1992) will serve to reinforce the epidemic historical amnesia in this country. Any party honoring the Columbus expedition only will obscure the true history of the genocidal era which began in 1492.

At a time when numerous Indian nations in this hemisphere are engaged in a desperate final stand to defend their land, resources and culture, the dominant society appears intent on losing itself in a frivolous attempt to mystify the history of the clash between Indians nations and the Europeans plunderers.

Simply, there is nothing to celebrate in the 500th year since the Columbus slave trading expedition sailed into the Western Hemisphere.

Jack Weatherford, an anthropology professor at Macalester College in St. Paul who has written about the contributions Indians have made to civilization, discussed the legacy of the Columbus voyage in an opinion piece published last year. He pointed out that the Spanish monarchy loaned Columbus venture capital on the condition that the debt be repaid with riches from the "New World."

"This pressing need to repay his debt underlies the frantic tone of Columbus' diaries as he raced from one Caribbean island to the next, stealing anything of value," according to Weatherford.

"After he failed to contact the emperor of China, the traders of India or the merchants of Japan, Columbus decided to pay for his voyage in the one important commodity he had found in ample supply — human lives. He seized 1,200 Taino Indians from the island of Hispaniola, crammed as many onto his ships as would fit and sent them to Spain, where they were paraded naked through the streets of Seville and sold as slaves in

1495. Columbus tore children from their parents, husbands from wives. On board Columbus' slave ships, hundreds died; the sailors tossed the Indian bodies into the Atlantic.

"Because Columbus captured more Indian slaves than he could transport to Spain in his small ships, he put them to work in mines and plantations which he, his family and followers created throughout the Caribbean. His marauding band hunted Indians for sport and profit — beating, raping, torturing, killing and then using the Indian bodies as food for their hunting dogs. Within four years of Columbus' arrival on Hispaniola, his men had killed or exported one-third of the original Indian population of 300,000. Within another 50 years, the Taino people had been made extinct — the first casualties of the holocaust of American Indians. The plantation owners then turned to the American mainland and to Africa for new slaves to follow the tragic path of the Taino.

"This was the great cultural encounter initiated by Christopher Columbus. This is the event we celebrate each year on Columbus Day."

Weatherford's summary gives proper credit to Columbus: He "opened the Atlantic slave trade and launched one of the greatest waves of genocide known in history."

Within a society that glorifies historical malefactors like Columbus, it is left to teachers like Weatherford, and those at Heart of the Earth Survival School, to tell the truth in the hope that we can learn from the past and heal the wounds caused by injustice.

We should be mindful of what lies ahead in 1992, and join those groups already organizing to spoil the big party being planned to honor Columbus.

— *Mordecai Specktor*