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Author

Kuzmin, Aleksandr

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Greed Over Humanity: Bullionism in the Colonial Conquest and Genocide of Amerindian Civilizations

Aleksandr Kuzmin

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Aleksandr Kuzmin

Dr. Rodney Worrell

HIST104: Introductory History of the Caribbean

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Greed Over Humanity: Bullionism in the Colonial Conquest and Genocide of Amerindian Civilizations

Amidst a time defined by overwhelming contemporary upheavals—namely, the climate crisis, escalating global conflicts, and the rapidly expanding influence of artificial intelligence—why should humanity concern itself with the past? The past is, after all, irretrievable. However, as this research paper will emphasize, the past is not merely a closed chapter; it is a living essence that imbues the present and subtly directs the unfolding of the future. Engaging with the past is, therefore, not a mere exercise in nostalgia but rather a critical process of understanding, resistance, and responsibility. This intellectual reflection becomes particularly vital given the historical ramifications endured by Indigenous communities, whose pasts have been forcibly rewritten, silenced, or erased.

Ranging from colonial legal frameworks such as the Doctrine of Discovery to divine imperialistic movements like Manifest Destiny—these detrimental ideologies have permeated the very foundation of settler colonialism, justifying expansionist pursuits and, subsequently, the systematic subjugation of indigenous nations worldwide. In contemporary times, this imperialist ideology persists. Indigenous nations across the globe continue to confront challenges related to sovereignty, self-determination, and the complex process of debunking deliberately manufactured “shopworn” tropes—false myths which tend to (1) essentialize, (2) diminish, and (3) seek to assimilate Indigeneity into mainstream culture. Among the most pervasive colonial

myths is the belief that “all the real Indians died off” (Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker 76). Although assimilationist policies such as boarding schools, state encouraged intermarriage, and territorial dispossession have indeed contributed to a drastic decline in Native populations, the narrative that Indigenous peoples no longer exist completely disregards the ongoing revitalization and resilience of indigenous peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker 76-77). Indigeneity is not a static condition but rather a fluid process of emergence, characterized by its historical context and potential for both significant cultural identification and political mobilization (Starn 192).

This research essay, through the combination of relevant Caribbean literature and the juxtaposition of diverse historical accounts, underscores how the European pursuit of riches, fame, and land heralded a turbulent epoch, characterized by the systematic implementation of forced labor, widespread genocidal conquest, and severe devastation of Ameridian civilization. Moreover, by illuminating not only the frequently discussed European perspective—but, more importantly, Indigenous viewpoints—this paper offers a constructive epistemological reassessment of post-colonial legacy. To fully achieve the objectives outlined above, it will become integral to provide supportive historical context and dispel many problematic stereotypes (i.e., shopworn tropes) attributed to Christopher Columbus.

Before critically examining the nature of interaction among European settlers and Indigenous peoples—more specifically, how these initially pure relationships quickly devolved into hostile engagements—it is imperative to provide a broader historical overview pertaining to the genesis of socioeconomic ideology in Europe. During the early 15th century, economic principles of mercantilism and bullionism propelled the ethically egoistic pursuit of gold, fame, and land into the Caribbean and Americas. For powerful competing nations like Spain, France,

and Britain, economic supremacy was the essential ingredient for global dominance (Barth 22-23). According to Jonathan Barth, mercantilism emphasized the state's political role in regulating trade to ensure precious metals like silver and gold remained implementable within the state's respected borders (Barth 22). Bullionism, which similarly functioned as a driving economic force during the colonial period, refers to the belief that a nation's wealth comes from the physical accumulation of gold and silver it can acquire (Barth 12). The combination of mercantilism and bullionism principles fundamentally redefined Europe's political, social, and economic systems, assuring a guaranteed method of gaining an advantage over the competition (Barth 12).

Consequently, vanguard countries like Spain and England experienced tremendous financial profit that was primarily driven by resource extraction of precious metals in the Americas and the eventual establishment of profitable sugar and tobacco plantations in the Caribbean. With bullionism and mercantilism at the core of their ambitions, newly ascended monarchs Isabella of Spain and Henry V of England assertively desired to increase their nations' power and economic prestige. Ironically, this pursuit of riches functioned as a double-edged sword. With the extreme influx of silver in European societies, not only did the commercial value of precious metals plummet (i.e., inflation rates skyrocketed), but the flood of newly acquired wealth additionally encouraged corruption and decadence (Barth 19).

Overall, both of these monetary-driven ideologies contributed to empowering European governments in various eco-political frameworks: financing state-building programs, military campaigns, and encouraging colonization efforts (Barth 22-23). To facilitate expansive resource extraction, human labor was required. By utilizing forced labor (i.e., the encomienda system, indentured servitude, and slavery), the wealth extracted from colonial plantations rapidly

developed into a prized mercantilist asset (Barth 13). In their colonial endeavors, the vanguard nations of Spain and Portugal inevitably encountered self-sustaining Amerindian societies of the Taino, Kalinago, and Arawak. Neglecting the very foundational tenets upon which Christianity is founded—human equality and life—for which these nations so proudly stood, their ambitions, nonetheless, overlooked these basic Christian doctrines. Consequently, on the revolutionary date of 1492, Spanish arrival in the Bahamas tragically led to the exploitation, slavery, and ethnocide of native populations (Carew 17).

Having outlined how prevailing monetary ideologies operated as a catalyst for the eventual conquest of the Caribbean, it is equally important to underscore another pivotal factor making long-distance exploration possible: technological maritime breakthroughs during the Renaissance. After a period of devastating stagnation and decline (i.e., the medieval era), Europe entered the Renaissance—a time of rebirth and renewal. During this era of maritime technological advancements, including improvements in shipbuilding, the use of gunpowder, star altitude navigation techniques, and, most notably, the influence of Columbus' four transatlantic voyages—Europe became directly oriented towards westward expansion. However, such notable advancements in technology would have been inconceivable without the contributions of Moorish and Jewish scholars, whose advances in multifarious fields of philosophy, science, medicine, and mathematics played a pivotal role in the intellectual and technological foundation for Europe's revival (Carew 45-46).

Postcolonial misinterpretation has heavily influenced the general public’s knowledge of world history. One of the most consequential distortions of the past is directly correlated to the legacy of Italian navigator Christopher Columbus. In numerous Western narratives, Columbus is often ignorantly credited with the "discovery" of the New World. For instance, during his second

term in 1988, President Reagan signed the Columbus Day Proclamation. This proclamation established Columbus as an intrinsic cultural symbol—thus deeply institutionalizing the figure of Columbus in America's education, history, and legacy (West and Kling 46). However, how can a single individual acquire ownership of traditionally sovereign land that is already inhabited by an advanced Amerindian civilization? As anti-colonialist writer Dr. Jan Carew asserts, the term “discovery” is synonymous with conquest (Carew 14). Moreover, the claim of "discovering" the “New World" blatantly implies there was no history worth noting before October 12, 1492 (Carew 13-14). However, for thousands of years, the Caribbean was inhabited by a culture that was, on the contrary, full of history.

Another deceptively pervasive narrative suggests that Columbus was ahead of his time and operated as an essential driving force of global development. Indeed, even according to highly influential early historical figures such as Bartolomé de las Casas, a prominent Italian priest, Christopher Columbus was considered a “man of his time.” In response to this ethnocentric statement, Dr. Carew asks the following question: “Was there a time anywhere on earth when unbridled greed for gold, the repayment of infinite kindness and hospitality with slavery, theft and genocide were acceptable in even the most primitive of human societies?” (Carew 16). Thus, if Columbus was indeed a “man of his time,” then this era of “discovery” was undeniably one of the darkest chapters in humanity’s history.

While the general populace continues to debate his legacy, one fact remains indisputable: Columbus remains among the most recognized historical figures. Accordingly, several questions must be asked: who exactly is Columbus, and what compelled him to embark on his fateful journey to the so-called New World? Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy. He came from a family of respected wool weavers and taught himself the valuable skills of navigation,

mapmaking, and Latin. In his early years, Christopher was driven by a desire to find a westward sea route to Asia's lucrative markets. After years of Portuguese rejection, Columbus finally managed to win the support of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. While interpersonal engagements such as travel, trade, and making commercial profit are not inherently malevolent pursuits, Columbus's lasting achievements were those attained in his later years: "His real achievement was that with a person bordering on fanaticism, an overriding ambition, a lust for gold and glory and a gift of eloquence, he managed to convince the rulers of Spain to finance what he himself described pompously as his 'Enterprise of the Indies.'" (Carew 28)

During the first voyage in 1492, Columbus was confident in finally achieving his original task of finding Asia. Unbeknownst to him, Columbus's flagship (Santa María) had arrived at land previously unknown to Europe—a land rich with unfamiliar crops, resounding natural beauty, and, most importantly, flourishing human presence. As history books unfold, the Bahamas marked the site of Columbus's first encounter with Taíno society. Preliminary curiosity quickly diverged into ill-favored sentiments: "a thousand would not stand before three of our men" (Columbus 114). On the second voyage, Columbus returned more ambitiously, this time arriving with 1,200 battle-hardened Spanish soldiers. Utilizing weapons of mass destruction such as crossbows, muskets, swords, armor, and gunpowder—Columbus launched a violent campaign against the Taíno (Carew 147). By 1495, complete open warfare ensued, leading to the subjugation and enslavement of the indigenous population. Despite the Taíno's unrelenting bravery, their rudimentary weaponry—reflective of their peaceful societal structure and environment—was ineffective against advanced Spanish technology. On one hand, Taino society welcomed strangers with hospitality and open arms. On the other hand, Europeans introduced slavery, disease, and ecologically invasive animals—all of which adversely transformed the

ingenious built environment (Carew 145).

Initial contact between European and Amerindian nations marked a revolutionary moment in history, albeit some research suggests Vikings had already set foot in the New World centuries earlier (Godfrey 43). Regardless of the exact preliminary encounter, the long separation between these two worlds raises an intriguing question: What were Amerindian societies like before European contact? While it is difficult to accurately portray life in the Caribbean before the 15th century (e.g., lack of written record and loss of evidence), in his book *The Rape of Paradise: Columbus and the Origins of Racism in the Americas*, Caribbean scholar Carew employs a combination of indigenous oral histories, archaeological evidence, and post-colonial analysis to present a more accurate portrayal of indigenous Caribbean societies.

The Caribbean is divided into the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The Greater Antilles—which was home to the Taino—encompasses the larger islands of Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. In contrast, the Lesser Antilles consists of smaller islands stretching from the Virgin Islands to the coast of South America. Furthermore, this latter region also diverges into the Leeward and Windward Islands inhabited by the Kalinago people. Far before European contact in the 15th century, Caribbean societies such as the Taino and Kalinago had prosperously inhabited the Greater and Lesser Antilles for nearly 7,000 years. These near-utopian societies, despite the evil humans are capable of, as Carew suggests, resembled paradise on earth: "...their agricultural technologies, their art of governance, their civilized treatment of women and children and their society from which every vestige of violence had been expunged" (Carew 165).

Taino civilization established an agriculturally advanced society well-adapted to the lush landscape. In fact, their mastery over the environment and abundance of nutritious fruits and

vegetables offered much insight to European agriculture (Carew 157). The Conuco system, for example, was utilized to prevent soil erosion and maximize yield (Carew 158). In contrast to the Taino, the Kalinago of the Lesser Antilles maintained a stronger, warrior-like society, which similarly excelled in elements of navigation and inter-island trade (Carew 161). In the Lesser Antilles Island of Barbados, indigenous nations such as the Kalinago and Arawak developed comprehensive government structures and agricultural techniques suited to their environment. In 1627, the arrival of the English settlers to the Leeward island of Barbados marked profound changes, leading to displacement and enslavement of the Kalinago and Arawak (Handler 38). On one occasion, a small group of Arawaks voluntarily arrived from Guyana to assist in crop cultivation. However, their noble efforts were taken for granted. The Arawaks were maliciously tricked and subjugated into enslavement under Barbados's laws (Handler 38-39, 61). Despite colonization and ethnocide, indigenous agricultural practices have endured, underscoring the effectiveness and resilience of these techniques (Hoffman 214).

Spaniards had commenced open warfare against the indigenous population. Peaceful native societies, that is, ones not requiring extensive warfare technology, were limited to bow and arrow resistance. The majority (but not all) of their resistance movements proved to be no match for Spanish forces equipped with crossbows, knives, artillery, cavalry, and hunting dogs (Williams 32). Apart from direct confrontation, silent killers like disease, starvation, and forced labor additionally contributed to the severe decline in population (Bianchine and Russo 225). Therefore, military conquest alone was not the sole contributor to indigenous decline; the introduction of Old-World diseases such as smallpox, measles, and syphilis proved to be even more reckoning.

As estimated, the population of Amerindian civilizations in the Western Hemisphere was reduced from a whopping 72 million to a mere 4 million (Carew 15). On the islands of Hispaniola, Williams estimates that the population decreased from an estimated 300,000 in 1492 to 14,000 by 1514 (Williams 33). As is evident by the numbers, the indigenous population did not merely suffer casualties but instead decimated. To combat this self-constructed phenomenon, Spain sought alternative labor sources, leading to the utilization of white indentured servants and eventually the importation of African slaves (Carew 151). It is worth noting that not all Europeans supported genocide, for example. The religious figure Las Cases exemplified notable efforts to "save the Indians," albeit he was impartial in his teachings, "Las Cases refused to sacrifice the welfare of the Indians to the greed of the Spaniards. He consented, however, to sacrifice the well-being of the Negroes to the preservation of the Indians. What he gave to humanity with one hand, he took away with the other" (Williams 36-37).

The profound numerical figures not only reflect a demographic tragedy but also the horrific real narrative accompanying the statistics. The use of strictly quantitative statistics—that is, used without oral stories and qualitative historical research—often fails to capture the overarching nature of research. Therefore, to understand the better picture, it is essential to provide qualitative descriptions of the horrors:

> For the greed of gold, ornaments were torn from neck and ear... the meanest Spaniard might violate the family of the most exalted chief... fortunes were lost on the ability of a swordsman to run an Indian through the body at a designated spot... children were snatched from their mother's arms and dashed against the rocks as they passed... babies were snatched from their mother's breasts, and a

> brave Spaniard's strength was tested by his ability to tear an infant into two pieces by pulling apart its tiny legs. (Carew 262-263)

To sustain the colony's extensive extraction of wealth, forced labor became an essential factor. This endeavor resulted in unchecked labor conditions exemplified through the Spanish encomienda system. In numerous ways, the encomienda system was an alternative term for slavery. The Tainos found themselves subjugated to brutal working conditions, abuse, starvation, and death. The Spanish Crown prioritized satisfying colonists' demands of resource extraction (e.g., bullionism and mercantilism) to ensure the feasibility of the colony (Williams 33). Fueled by an insatiable lust for gold, land, and wealth, entire islands were depopulated, tribes eliminated, and families torn apart. Curious Amerindian civilizations welcomed strangers, sharing their agricultural knowledge and environmental expertise. In return, colonists set in motion one of the darkest events in human history. Despite intentional attempts to obscure the truth, this dark chapter did in fact occur. The past is gone, but it has manufactured the present. Looking towards the future, humanity should critically challenge colonialism and learn from the past to never make the same mistakes again.

The revitalization of traditional indigenous practices greatly contributes to the decolonization praxis. For example, the Hupa coming-of-age ceremony, known as the "Flower Dance," represents a "decolonial praxis" by challenging settler colonialism through Indigenous cultural practices centered on ceremony. This ongoing revitalization of women's coming-of-age ceremonies serves as a vital tool for (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riteing Native feminisms (Baldy 126). In a similar light, political anthropologist and Mohawk tribe member Audra Simpson utilized a combination of political theory and ethnography in her study of the Mohawks in Kahnawake, Quebec. Simpson highlighted how Mohawk communities have struggled to

maintain their political independence in both the United States and Canada. Simpson emphasized three key points: (1) multiple sovereignties exist, (2) ethnographic refusal can be a powerful response, and (3) current academic fields often overlook Indigenous politics by viewing colonialism as outdated (Simpson 11, 12, 98–99). In conclusion, humanity must accept cultural and geographical differences, embracing the factual teachings of Christianity for which numerous modern countries now stand.

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