

We know Columbus landed in the Caribbean, but what of the people there?

By Bill Bigelow, Zinn Education Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.23.18

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Image 1. This Eurocentric engraving by Theodore de Bry in 1592 formed part of his America Series and showed Christopher Columbus landing on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1492. De Bry published 25 books based on firsthand observations by explorers but never visited the New World. In this image we can see how he shows Columbus in a position of power and control. His books became famous and greatly influenced the European perception of the New World, Africa and Asia.

Early in my high school U.S. history classes, I would ask students about "that guy some people say discovered America." All my students knew that the correct answer was Christopher Columbus. Every time I asked this question, some student would break into the sing-song rhyme, "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue" — and others would join in.

"Right. So who did he supposedly discover?" I asked.

In almost 30 years of teaching, the best anyone could come up with was: "Indians."

I brushed that answer away: "Yes, but be specific. What were their names? Which nationality?" I never had a student say, "The Taínos."

"So what does this tell us?" I asked. "What does it say that we all know Columbus' name, but none of us knows the nationality of the people who were here first? And there were millions of them."

This erasure of huge swaths of humanity is a fundamental feature of the school curriculum, but also of the broader mainstream political discourse. We usually think about the curriculum as what is taught in school, but just as important — perhaps more important — is what is not taught. This includes the people whose lives have been made invisible.

Columbus Changes The Lives Of The Tainos

For the Taíno people of the Caribbean, their erasure began almost immediately with Columbus' arrival. It was not curricular, it was flesh and blood.

"With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want," Columbus wrote in his journal on his third day in the Americas. In 1494, Columbus launched the trans-Atlantic slave trade, sending at least two dozen enslaved Taínos to Spain. The next year, Columbus launched massive slave raids, rounding up 1,600 Taínos, from which the "best" 500, perhaps 550, were selected to be shipped to Spain. Of the hundreds of captives left over, "whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased," one eyewitness wrote, "and this was done."



My students and I read and talked about this erasure — these horrific attacks on Taínos. Because Columbus' policies of enslavement, terrorism and ultimately mass murder are so shocking, it's tempting to focus only on Taíno deaths. However, those deaths can seem abstract and distant unless we learn something about Taíno lives.

Resistance To Columbus Was Futile

The Taínos were not literate in the traditional sense, and so wrote nothing about themselves, but Columbus' journal offers intriguing, if limited, details. In the journal of his first voyage, Columbus wrote that Taíno homes were "well swept and clean, and their furnishing very well arranged; all were made of very beautiful palm branches." After a little more than three months traveling from island to island, Columbus concluded that the Taíno people are "the best people in the world, and beyond all the mildest... a people so full of love and without greed... They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the softest and gentlest voices in the world, and they are always smiling."

Columbus' portrait of the mild, soft and gentle Taíno might conceal that they also strongly resisted the Columbus regime, once its deadly nature became clear. This resistance has been called the first anti-colonial guerrilla war in the Americas. It began as early as Columbus' first trip back to Spain, when he left 39 Spaniards at his La Navidad settlement, in present-day Haiti. In response to the Spaniards' greed, the Taínos killed all 39 Spaniards and burned their fort.



If Columbus' first trip, with three vessels and maybe 100 men, was an exploratory probe, the second trip, with 17 ships and between 1,200 and 1,500 men, was a full-scale invasion. Columbus instituted a tribute system for the Taínos, demanding they give him certain amounts of gold and cotton. Those who refused were brutally punished.

The Taínos fought back, raiding Spanish forts and killing defenders. They continuously resisted the heavily armed Spaniards for almost a year, from May 1495 to March 1496, but uprisings and resistance continued through 1503.

Textbook Writers Edit History

In their quest for a happy ending to this grim first chapter in European colonialism in the Americas, textbook writers ignore the Taíno resistance. Instead, they focus on how Columbus' travels introduced new foods from the Americas to Europe.

Despite textbook attempts to conclude the story with a smiley-face, there is no happy ending. However, there is a hopeful one — found in the remarkable resilience of the Taíno people. Contrary to some scholarship, the Taínos were not all killed off by Columbus or later occupiers, and today members of the Taíno, along with people in the Caribbean who claim Taíno ancestry, are reviving and celebrating their culture.

According to Christina M. González, the Taíno revival began around the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival, she wrote in the fall 2018 issue of *American Indian*. The renaissance focuses on language, art, religion, agriculture, fishing, cooking and, of course, rethinking Taíno history.

Genocide In Two Forms

Columbus' treatment of the Taíno people meets the definition of genocide. There has also been a curricular genocide — erasing the memory of the Taíno from our nation's classrooms. How else can we explain students' universal recognition of Columbus and almost total ignorance of the name Taíno?

As we work to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day in our communities and schools, let's work to remember the people who were here first. Their lives mattered 500 years ago, and they matter today.

Bill Bigelow is curriculum editor of Rethinking Schools magazine and co-director of the Zinn Education Project.

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the section "Columbus Changes The Lives Of The Taínos."

"With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want," Columbus wrote in his journal on his third day in the Americas. In 1494, Columbus launched the trans-Atlantic slave trade, sending at least two dozen enslaved Taínos to Spain. The next year, Columbus launched massive slave raids, rounding up 1,600 Taínos, from which the "best" 500, perhaps 550, were selected to be shipped to Spain. Of the hundreds of captives left over, "whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased," one eyewitness wrote, "and this was done."

What is the MAIN reason the author includes the first sentence in the paragraph?

- (A) to establish the number of men who arrived in the Americas with Columbus
- (B) to point out that Columbus wrote about the Taíno people soon after he arrived in the Americas
- (C) to point out that it took three days after arriving in the Americas before Columbus wrote in his journal
- (D) to establish that Columbus likely intended to enslave the Taíno from the time he arrived

2 Read the section "Resistance To Columbus Was Futile."

What is the MOST LIKELY reason the author included information about the 39 Spaniards killed by the Taínos?

- (A) to explain why Columbus thought the Taínos needed and deserved to be enslaved and killed
- (B) to show that the Taínos were not just a meek people who accepted ill treatment without resistance
- (C) to explain that the relationship could have been peaceful if Columbus had not asked for so much gold
- (D) to suggest that the Taíno were to blame for the ensuing wars between them and Columbus

3 Which answer choice BEST explains WHY the author wrote this article?

- (A) to suggest that U.S. history classes tend to focus on positive information about Columbus and omit any negative information
- (B) to compare two different ways that teachers of U.S. history can approach the topic of Columbus' arrival in the Americas
- (C) to explain that there are members of the Taíno people who survived Columbus' efforts to brutally kill them
- (D) to make a case that U.S. history textbooks should include information about the lives and deaths of Taínos, not just Columbus

4 How does the author respond to Columbus' positive portrait of the Taino people?

- (A) He states that Columbus' portrait of the Taíno people was completely inaccurate.
- (B) He points out that Columbus' portrait of the Taíno people was not complete.
- (C) He stresses that Columbus' portrait of the Taíno people communicated love for them.
- (D) He emphasizes that Columbus' portrait of the Taíno people was made before he met them.

Answer Key

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