

## The Conquest of Barbarism

The current round of Columbus-bashing, keyed to the 1992 quincentenary of his first landing in the New World, has been so extreme as to become almost a parody of itself.

Thus, we have Jacques Cousteau, the underwater naturalist, demanding a “Nuremberg Trial” for Columbus, on the grounds that the explorer committed intentional genocide against the Indians; while at the same time, he blithely calls for reduction of the world’s population by *350,000 people per day* [!], on the grounds that nothing less will avert an ecological catastrophe.

In this book, Caponnetto shows compellingly that the new surge of libels which portray the Spanish role in the Americas as unrelieved rapine and murder against idyllic Indian communities—what best-selling author Kirkpatrick Sale puffed in his 1990 *Conquest of Paradise*—is indeed merely the latest in a sequence of Black Legends, deeply colored by anti-Catholic propaganda from the British and Dutch East India Companies, the “noble savage” indigenism of the French Enlightenment, and the Marxist-allied “cultural relativism” of the last hundred years of anthropology.

The enormous range of subject matter and subsumed polemic—the writer is a conservative Argentinian Catholic doing battle alike with Marxists, Liberation Theologists, Protestantism, liberal Catholics, Anglo-American financial imperialism—makes the book read more like a syllabus than a primer.

This can be frustrating for the reader who does not have the time to read beyond this one book. Caponnetto’s passionate and incisive ironies lead the reader to a thirst for the real story of the evangelizers who successfully brought to the New World a much higher standard of civilization than anything that came before, or, for that matter, than anything the modern Columbus-bashers preach. And unfortunately, often just at such moments,

the book drops the matter with a tantalizing, “further explanation is very lengthy; see the specialized bibliography.”

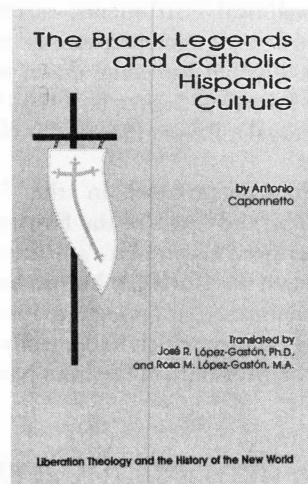
Nonetheless, the book is a rich roadmap for the person who *can* delve further, and the condensed ironies are as powerful as anything that can be found anywhere on these subjects. On the double standard of the “indigenist” propagandists, for instance: “If the Spanish kill in just war, it is genocide. If the horrible Aztec wars to get prisoners for sacrifice to their gods and some of the routine native abuses against weaker tribes are discovered, one must extend a cloak of cultural understanding. If thousands of enslaved Indians died working on the construction of Pharaoh-like monuments for a despotic state, one speaks of the architectural wonders of the natives.”

It would be easy to find a limitation in the book in its fervent vision of an “Hispanidad” which borders on a “blood and soil” form of mysticism. Thus, Castile is the “absolute land under the absolute sky”; it is “the synthesis of the space and time of Hispanidad, the passion for the imperishable and an imperial destiny. It is not a region, enterprise, or accidental problem. Castile is something perennial, like the Hispanidad that it represents.”

The reason such criticism should be judicious is that Caponnetto almost always couples these extravagant passages with a crucial and legitimate point: that the critics of “Hispanidad” are almost never criticizing anything having to do with Spain itself, but rather Spain’s “incarnation of ‘go forth and preach’”; that is, they deny an inherent legitimacy to the historical process of evangelization which spread Christianity to the New World. In this sense, the critics are ultimately defending barbarism.

### Medieval vs. Renaissance

There is, however, a much more serious flaw to Caponnetto’s work. He



**The Black Legends and Catholic Hispanic Culture**  
by Antonio Caponnetto  
translated by  
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counterposes “the medieval” to “the Renaissance,” and insists that “the Spain of the Discovery . . . is of strongly medieval character.” “It is erroneous to say that Spain the Discoverer was a modern nation of the Renaissance. . . . [T]he verbs to discover, to civilize, and to evangelize are conjugated in the medieval idiom.”

This is a crucial error. The project “to discover, to civilize, and to evangelize” was in fact a *European-wide Renaissance project*, which found its most concentrated expression in the deliberations of the Council of Florence of 1437-1441, and the activities of its principal figures, most notably Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, in the quarter-century extending from roughly 1440 to 1465.

The Portuguese and later Spanish circles which accepted the challenge of “showing devotion to God by making the seas navigable,” in the language of Renaissance Pope Nicolaus V’s Papal Bull of 1455, and the challenge of a universal evangelization, sponsored one of the greatest scientific “breakouts” in history—the nested achievements in shipbuilding (the car-

avel), nautical instruments, cartography and navigation/astronomy techniques—which has come down to us as the School of Sagres (c. 1416-1490) of Portugal's Prince Henry the Navigator.

Columbus arrived in the New World on the decks of the Florentine Renaissance. Caponnetto's failure to appreciate the Christian humanism of the Renaissance, as opposed to the secular humanism which he correctly opposes, deprives him of the most power-

ful epistemological weapon which Western Christianity has to confront the very Black Legends which he so trenchantly dissects.

Despite this weakness, Caponnetto himself points in the right direction—one based on the Council of Florence program—in a passage which can only be seconded: "There was an encounter between two worlds, an encounter which—besides all the traumatic aspects which are usually emphasized—one of the worlds, the Old, gloriously

embodied in 'Hispanidad,' had the enormous merit of bringing to the other ideas which were unknown to it concerning the dignity of the creature made in the image and likeness of the Creator. These ideas—patrimony of Christianity and spread by eminent scholars—... were the true program of life, the genuine anti-genocidal plan for which Spain fought during three centuries of civilization, evangelization, and fervent commitment."

—Timothy Rush

## The Imperial Origins of Central Asia's Thirty Years War

On November 15 and 16, 1992, the *Washington Post* featured a two-part series titled "The Afghan Archive" by correspondent Michael Dobbs. Dobbs' articles, based on newly declassified Politburo documents, indicate that in 1979 there was significant opposition within the Politburo to what was to become Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan.

According to Politburo documents, the split was between Soviet political leaders—in particular, Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin—on the one hand, and the KGB faction headed by the "forward-looking" (i.e., expansionist or empire-building) Yuri Andropov, on the other. Andropov even went so far as to argue that a prolonged war was to be expected and not feared.

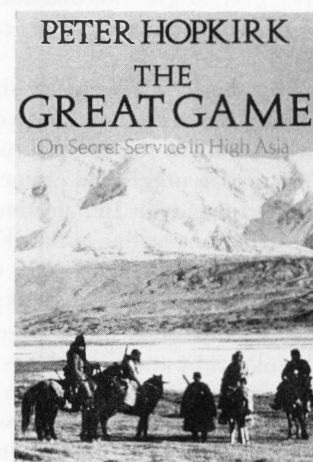
Andropov's "forward-looking" philosophy regarding Central Asia (the area which includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kirgizstan, as well as the Transcaucasus) was the mirror-image of the outlook of a faction of British political and military officers stationed in India in the nineteenth century, who believed that it was their duty to bring Central Asia into the British sphere of influence, before Imperial Russia brought it under theirs. A parallel faction existed as well in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia. There was constant friction between Tsar Alexander II's Russian Foreign Ministry headed by Prince Alexander

Gorchakov, who opposed such military expansionism, and the intrigues of the Venetian-inspired Prince Nikolai Ignatiev, who was attempting to advance Russian military interests in Central Asia.

The name given to the application of this "geopolitical," imperial outlook to Central Asia, was "the great game," a phrase first coined by Lt. Arthur Conolly of the 6th Bengal Native Light Cavalry, and later immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his novel *Kim*.

Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game* tells the story of that century, with a decidedly British bias. Britain's goal during this period was to maintain its commercial interest in Asia, which at the time was primarily opium (not mentioned by Hopkirk!), and to monopolize the trade from and to Asia. Britain's political and military agents viewed Central Asia as its buffer against Imperial Russia—which they believed would invade India if it could find an overland route suitable to that purpose. Its agents were constantly attempting, either through diplomatic or military means, to negotiate friendship treaties with the major khanates in the region. Through such treaties, Britain hoped to shut the door on any Russian operations in the region.

Hopkirk informs the reader in his Prologue that *The Great Game* is intended to be the story of "individuals," and that "this book does not pretend to be a history of Anglo-Russian relations" in the nineteenth century. The



**The Great Game:  
The Struggle for Empire  
in Central Asia**  
by Peter Hopkirk  
Kodansha Ltd. (Japan), 1992  
576 pages, hardbound, \$30.00

author's chosen perspective has the effect of further muddling the reader's historical perspective, since the individuals involved, far from being simply British officers on hunting holiday or merchants looking for new markets as he portrays them, were in fact high-level intelligence personnel connected either to London or Calcutta, whose object was reconnaissance into the areas just beyond India's northernmost and northwestern borders. By focusing on individuals in this manner, Hopkirk avoids the essential analysis of how larger historical forces and the