

How Advanced Spanish Technology Vanquished Aztec Civilization in 1521

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HY420: Senior Essay

April 20, 2019

The Aztec civilization has displayed numerous civil advancements, making it one of the most remarkable societies in the world. However, according to historians, the Empire crumbled at the hands of Spanish Conquistadors in 1522 CE. This essay investigates how a modest group of Spaniards managed to overthrow a sophisticated civilization so rapid and so definitely in such a short time. Various exploration of historical records alluded to the Spanish reigning superior over the Aztec opposition thanks to their advanced military and warfare tactics. This offers an explanation to the rapid overthrow of the Aztecs.

The Aztec Civilization began as a tribe of hunters and gathers that inhabited Northern Mesoamerica, modern day Mexico and the American Southwest. Their arrival came after the fall of the previously dominant civilization, the Toltecs. After the fall of the Toltecs, the Aztecs were able to culturally root and flourish as the dominant civilization. Through conquest and commerce Aztec leaders came to rule over six million people: earning a historical label of being one of the most successful empires on earth. The Aztec community and its leaders developed a well “...established society that was extremely adaptable, had stable infrastructures, and that also made many advancements beyond the rest of the world in calendars and time.”¹ Therefore, the Aztec civilization was intended to be an empire that would dominate the region for generations. Additionally, it executed “...sophisticated systems of agriculture, which included intensive cultivations of land and irrigation methods that helped propel a well balanced community surrounding their city states.”² City states, known as Altepl, were

¹ Prescott, William. 1843. 3.

² Prescott, William. 1843. 6.

previously conquered and then controlled by Aztec society. Aztecs were able to build and improve the previous standard of living, beneficially separating it from other civilizations.

As for religion, the Aztecs were polytheistic, the belief in many gods. Religion was a preponderant factor, guiding the basis of everyday life throughout the empire. Because of this, religion shaped the Aztec culture, regulating commerce, impacting politics, and even inspiring the belief that Aztec Civilization viewed warfare as a means to acquiring tribute from their victims. Tributary can be defined as “a pre-modern state in a particular type of subordinate relationship to a more powerful state which involved the sending of a regular token of submission to the superior power.”³ The daily routine of human sacrifice would take place in order to fulfill the duty of making their gods happy. The Aztecs believed the act of human sacrifice was a precursor to the sun setting at night and the sun rising in the morning.

Overtime, historian Inga Clendinnen who writes the most detailed and credible accounts on the Aztec community described the analysis of “Aztec ceremony through performance art, combining key experiences and concerns of ritual killings.”⁴ Life within this great civilization was depicted as barbaric. This brutish cultural tag stemmed from the ongoing struggles in maintaining an incredibly complex social structure. Clendinnen draws out an overwhelming image of how some scholars suggest the dominance of the civilization for nearly 300 years. Additionally, Jacques Soustelle book, *In the Daily life of THE AZTECS: On the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, provides a thorough summary of the Aztec culture. He states, “the Aztec civilization believed warfare to be religious and mythical connotations that possessed cosmic

³ Google Thesaurus.

⁴ Clendinnen, Inga. 1991. 1-3.

duty: it was symbolized by the double graph *atl-tlachinoli* ('water'- that is, 'blood'- and 'conflagration')."⁵ Soustelle's interpretation illustrates how the Aztec civilization was based upon a system of tribute that focused on using blood from human sacrifice to fulfill the god's desires. Additionally, the author concludes by offering insight to Aztec person perception. The Aztecs thought themselves to be barbarians who derived their warlike qualities from their nomadic ancestors to conquer and defeat civilized groups of people from their own homelands.⁶ A barbarian is a person from an uncivilized culture, who makes a living by invading and generally unleashing physical dominance on more civilized lands.

Significantly, Aztec warriors had a completely different approach to warfare than most civilizations. Forms of battle consisted of hand to hand combat with "specialists with ropes."⁷ This battle technique required the warrior to capture his enemy alive. This led the Aztec warriors to attempt to non-fatally injure the enemy or knock the enemy unconscious. This is significant because the majority of battle techniques that belonged to other civilizations consisted of only killing the enemy. Through this momentary preservation of their enemy's lives, Aztecs could use them for daily sacrifices. They were able to see the sun rise every morning, without the spilling of their own blood.

Led by Hernan Cortés, the Spanish Empire reached the Mexican coast at Yucatan in 1519. Their expedition to Mexico was part of a larger Spanish colonization of the New World. Spain was looking to expand its rule, building on twenty-five years of permanent Spanish

⁵ Soustelle, Jacques. 1955. 203.

⁶ Soustelle, Jacques. 1955. 205.

⁷ Soustelle, Jacques. 1955. 210.

settlement and exploration in the Caribbean.⁸ In the following centuries, the world became more technologically advanced, allowing European countries, to begin conquests westward. For Spain, conquistadors sought to expand their power by exploring the New World and finding riches in the early fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Eventually, the Spanish explorations led to the discovery of Mexico, and the encountering of the native peoples of Mexico. Interested in settling and claiming the new territory, the Spaniards initially approached the indigenous people on the coast of Yucatan. Drawing from their European roots, Cortés and his men initially thought the Mexican cities were inferior culturally, religiously, and technologically. In fact, the most important goals the Spanish Conquistadors valued two criteria: converting the native people of Mexico to the Spanish religion of Catholicism, and focusing on the concept of conquest. Viewing Spanish warfare through a historical lens, it is obvious that their tactics were driven by conquest. A conquest state is the “subjugation and control of a place by the use of military force.”⁹ Conquest is important to note in Spanish history because the conversion to Catholicism was imperative. Catholicism was the guide to living a proper human life, according to the Spaniards.

For decades, the Aztec civilization ruled central Mexico in a dominant fashion. Using intelligence, communication, and special warfare techniques, Aztecs succeeded from generation to generation. The fall of the Aztec Empire is a highly debated topic among historians. Was it the psychological confrontation and the strategic warfare that led to the ease of the conquest. Some say it was technological growth that the Aztec civilization failed to keep

⁸ Spanish Exploration and Settlement.

⁹ Google Thesaurus.

up with. Historians also bring up the Tlaxcalan alliance and the lethal spread of small pox as another source of Aztec collapse. All of these could be multi-factorial in the defeat of the Aztec civilization. However, these theories, along with first hand evidence, will help historians achieve a greater understanding of how the Aztec civilization was annihilated.

To explain the defeat of the Aztec empire in 1521 CE by the Spanish Conquistadors, it is first necessary to examine the nature of warfare during the sixteenth century. This will permit the comparison to how Westerners portrayed warfare during the same time period.

Furthermore, I will look through the lens of various accounts told by historians, specifically analyzing recovered manuscripts documenting the fall of the Aztec civilization in the early sixteenth century. To achieve this, it is best to analyze Primary sources because scholars have a different opinion on how, for decades, the Aztec civilization ruled central Mexico. Using intelligence, communication, and a system based upon tribute, the Aztecs were a strong, successful society for a long time. As time continued, Aztec warfare eventually caught up to the Aztec community, wrecking havoc in many forms. Additionally, these sources are essential in proving psychological confrontation as the reason for Spanish victory. Even though they were outnumbered by the millions, it was the military confrontation that overcame the defeat of the Aztecs.

These sources focus on the military confrontation but can be used to provide evidence to the rest of the theories. Three primary documents will be used in this essay to draw comparisons of first hand evidence obtained from the Aztec and Spanish documented accounts during the 16th century. The first primary source, *Aztec Warfare*, by Ross Hassig, displays published accounts from sixteenth century chronicles of Aztec conquests and lists old Aztec

tributaries. Additionally, Hassig is considered to be the most credible author from historians today. Secondly, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, provides an Aztec warriors' interpretation of how the Aztec Civilization fell to the Spanish Conquistadors seven years after the defeat of their capital city, Tenochtitlan. Scriptures were written in the Aztec language of Nahuatl and finally translated in 1959, nearly four centuries later. The third primary source, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, by Bernal Diaz, analyzes a first person Spanish account of the events leading from the expeditions to determine what happened in Mexico during the sixteenth century. He was a soldier of Hernan Cortés, who was present on the journey when the Spanish army conquered the capital city of Tenochtitlan. These reconstructions and analyses of Aztec and Spanish conquests were found and recorded dating back to the sixteenth century. These interpretations allow us to look at how military confrontation/warfare led to the fall of Aztec Civilization.

According to scholar Ross Hassig, the Spanish Conquistadors inflicted the fall of the Aztec Civilization in 1521. Led by Hernan Cortés, advanced military technology was utilized in Spanish warfare.¹⁰ At first glance, Montezuma, the Aztec king, believed the gods had sent Cortés and his Spanish troops as a blessing. Their "divine" appearance consisted of impressive weapons. Spanish weaponry consisted of cannons, and soldiers on horseback, each equipped with heavy steel armor and piercing swords. First, Cortez outsmarted the Aztec elite by killing two-thousand soldiers after their first meeting. By seizing his main defense, the Spanish took the Aztec king ransom, sparing his life in exchange for gold. However, the Aztecs "gave the ransom the Spanish wanted but the Spaniards kept the king. Before the ransom happened,

¹⁰ Hassig, Ross. 1995.

Montezuma decided that he could take out the small Spanish group. He attacked but couldn't quite accomplish the fall of the Spaniards." It is significant to reiterate the tributary war tactics of the Aztecs in this situation. Compared to the Spanish, a monolithic empire, the mindset of fighting soldiers was vastly different. The Aztec Civilization "focused on capturing their captives to try and sacrifice them."¹² Yet their enemy focused on frightening the Aztecs. In addition to strategic warfare, small pox spread rapidly throughout the New World. European disease proved detrimental to many indigenous populations across Mexico. Biologically, native people lacked the knowledge to recognize and treat these alien diseases. Additionally, from the alliance with the Tlaxcalans, they used their advanced military weapons to attack the capital city of the Aztec empire from all sides, destroying all that remained of the once great Aztec Empire.

Hassigs' book, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* offers and interpretation and analysis of the conquests, told by manuscripts by the Aztec warriors. Drawing out the military and religious aspect of the Aztec Civilization allows the reader to get a better understanding of how the Aztec empire was the last great civilization to dominate central Mexico. Ongoing debates revolve around the effectiveness of how the Aztec empire was so successful. Hassigs' interpretations of Aztec history offer a valuable understanding of how conquering and enslaving prisoners was a hard task because of the unique way the hierarchy of Aztec warriors' approached warfare.

The Aztecs' success came from a stable hierarchy that was unopposed by society. The Aztec civilization believed and worshiped their ultimate god Huitzilpochtli. This is important

¹² Hassig, Ross. 1995. 36.

because in Ross Hassigs' book, he outlines the government system the Aztecs abided by. For example,

“The king was the commander in chief and often led the army in battle himself.” After the king there was a hierarchy that consisted of the woman snake, cihuacoatl ‘the king's most trusted advisor’. Next was the supreme council which included four main officers, these officers lead the surrounding conquered towns. Lastly, in the hierarchical system, the warriors. The warriors mainly consisted of men that were a main part of the Aztec culture and surrounding communities. All men were usually expected to actively participate and fight for their ultimate leaders ‘The Gods.’”¹³

The military system was so successful over the years because the commander in chief was always leading the army into battle, giving warriors a sense of confidence and empirical pride. Additionally, the education system was operated by military leaders who educated their young children from birth. This educational system proved valuable because young men were trained in special military compounds and then directly guided into battle. As a final point, the threat of being invaded wasn't an issue thanks to observant and loyal eyes throughout the cities. The Aztec hierarchy had merchants, messengers and spies constructively informing establishments that the Aztec military will come and intervene if any issues arose. Ron Hassigs' book on Aztec warfare explains the significance of Aztec methods and perception of warfare, which allowed them to dominate central Mexico and the American Southwest for many years.

Significantly, we have a primary source as credible as Hassigs accounts when it comes to the research he has done. It is important to acknowledge that De Gomara supported Hassig. In his book, *Cortes, The Life of the Conqueror* by his Secretary, Francisco Lopez De Gomara, provides an in depth understanding of the documented accounts on Spanish military warfare by

¹³ Hassig, Ross. 1995. 43.

Hernan Cortés' secretary De Gomara. It is important to note, that Spanish warfare was mainly motivated by conquest and the rewards that resulted from brutal action. Lopez De Gomara documented a military technique used by the Spanish that was never seen by the natives in Mexico during the battle and capture of Potonchan. Potonchan, a Chontal Maya city, was the first establishment encountered by Cortés and his men. De Gomara stated,

“The enemy, who had for some time been shooting their arrows and darts at them, and throwing stones, with their slings by hand, seeing their foes upon them, fought bravely from their ramparts, plying their spears and shooting many arrows through the loop holes and openings in the wall wounding twenty Spaniards.”¹⁴

Upon arrival, Cortés and his men built a wall, forcing native military to cross the Tabasco River to attack. Spaniards had an advantage over the two sides because the native people lacked experienced military knowledge, and decided to penetrate the obstacle directly. Falling into their foreseen plan, the Spaniards used military tactics and advanced weapons to kill the natives. As stated by the Spanish secretary,

“When the three hunted Spaniards in the ambushade heard the firing, which was their signal to attack, they rushed upon the town and, since all its men were occupied with the enemy in front of them and with this trying to drive them into the river, the three hundred met no resistance and ran in shouting and striking down everyone they encountered.”¹⁵

Dividing his forces, Cortés and his men used military techniques the natives have never seen. Additionally, the use of advanced weapons such as horses, crossbows, and cannons played a key role in the first victory in Potonchan, Mexico.

¹⁴ Simpson, Lesley. 1964. 41.

¹⁵ Simpson, Lesley. 1964. 41.

In *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account Of The Conquest of Mexico*, author Miguel Leon-Portilla informs his audience of the challenges that the Aztec Empire experienced when combating the Spanish Conquistadors. Through the translation of the Aztec language of Nahuas, the world was able to understand how the Aztec empire collapsed from the Aztec perspective. These accounts were translated by a Spanish priest who discovered them seven years after the fall of the civilization. The visions illustrated in the manuscripts obtained in 1528 help people today conceptualize both the positive and negative issues of the Aztec Civilization. The first “chapter” of the documents describes Aztec insight on the initial Spanish arrival. The Aztecs viewed the conquistadors as, “white men who must be Quetzalcoatl and other gods, returning at last from across the waters known as the Gulf of Mexico”.¹⁶ This insight aids the reader to recognize the contradictory reality of how the Aztec people believed their civilization fell to the Spanish in the sixteenth century.

The author acknowledges historical information regarding the evidence obtained from Aztec civilization. The first historical issue historians debate today is the bad fortune caste upon the Aztec from their gods. For example, a bad omen appeared in the sky ten years before the arrival of the Spaniards. As reported, “It was like a flaming ear of corn, or a fiery signal, or the blaze of day break; it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky.”¹⁷ This omen shocked the Aztec to a great extent. “To the natives, these marvels augured their death and ruin, signifying that the end of the world was coming and that the other peoples would be created to inhabit earth.”¹⁸ After receiving the omen, the Aztec society was in a distressed

¹⁶ Leon-Portilla, Miquel. 1962. Xxv.

¹⁷ Broken Spears, 1528. 4.

¹⁸ Leon-Portilla, Miquel 1962. 11.

state. Scholars today say the Aztec civilization was vulnerable for years before the arrival of the Spaniards, due to this psychological scattering of their divine relations. The writings of omens help the reader grasp a better understanding of how the gods played a small role in the falling of the Aztec civilization.

Upon the arrival of the Spaniards to Mexico, the misconception of the Aztec people in believing the Spaniards to be gods is important because an in-depth analysis of the meeting between Montezuma and Hernan Cortés, are told from an Aztec perspective. Described by the Aztecs in 1528, Montezuma was very welcoming and thankful to their gods, that allowed the sublime meeting to commence. In response, Cortés, misled the king, saying “we have come to your house in Mexico as friends.”¹⁹ Cortés and the Spaniards used this meeting to their advantage because they were greeted as gods, acting as the gods that the Aztec Civilization had been anticipating this for many years. From Cortés’ position, the Spanish were able to obtain Aztec cultural values in weeks by observing Aztec culture and society. After the first meeting, Montezuma sent messengers and gifts of a “golden shield, pierced in the middle, with quetzal feathers around the rim and a pendent of the same feathers.”²⁰ Initially, the Spaniards were not pleased with the king’s gifts. The Aztec accounts say Cortés asked the messengers, “Is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?”²¹ The Aztecs were trying to give the Spaniards gifts and make them feel welcome, but instead they achieved the opposite goal. Additionally, Montezuma brought the strangers captives and sacrificed them in front of the

¹⁹ Broken Spears. 1528. 65.

²⁰ Broken Spears. 1528. 24.

²¹ Broken Spears. 1528. 26.

Spaniards because the king of the Aztec empire thought of the Spaniards to be gods.²² In response to the sacrifice, “the Spanish spat on the ground, and refused to eat the food because they were sickened by it.”²³ Once again, the welcoming rituals performed by the Aztecs seemed barbaric to the Spanish. In short, the two civilizations could not understand each other and had many different perceptions on life. This scene exemplified the vast distinction in religious backgrounds between the two, ultimately eliminating any hope for religious conformity.

Throughout the book, the Aztec accounts told by a Spanish priest emphasized the Spanish action of forming alliances with other city states that were envious of the Aztec empire. Plotting together, the alliances were finalized by one common goal; the obliteration of the Aztec Empire.

In the chapter, *The Spaniards March on Tlaxcala and Cholula*, the Spaniards advanced military warfare had frightened civilization in Mexico to such an extent, that nearby cities like Tlaxcala had no other choice than to join the Spanish force. Another example, the city of Otomies, along with their allies the Cholulas, met the Spaniards in battle. Historical Aztec accounts state “they (the Spanish) utterly destroyed them. They divided their ranks, fired their cannons at them, attacked them with their swords and shot them with their crossbows.”²⁴ Not simply eliminating a few troops, but slaughtering all that stood against them. The Spaniards’ advanced weapons and military tactics overwhelmed the native tribes of the Cholulas and Otomies to such an extent that distant Aztec cities heard the news, even from hundreds of miles away. Due to Spanish intent, the technology was never witnessed by the native cities of

²² Leon-Portilla. 1962. 30.

²³ Broken Spears. 1528. 32.

²⁴ Broken Spears. 1528. 38.

Mexico, eliminating any potential knowledge. More importantly, Spanish technology frightened the native tribes of Mexico because they had no idea how to defeat men on horses, compete with crossbows, and deflect cannons being shot at them.

After the victory amongst the Cholulas and their neighbors, the Otomies, a web of contradictions brewed between neighboring cities. They had to choose if they were to become allies or fight against the Spanish. Deciding to side with the Spanish, the tribe of the Tlaxcala intensified the long tensions and hostilities between the enemy city of Tenochtitlan. Documents translated by a Spanish recorder from 1528 tell of Munoz Camargo, a Talaxcaltec, who drew out the historical value in the relationship between the Tlaxcala and Spanish. He states, “the city of Cholula brought their own destruction on themselves by not surrendering to Cortés and treacherously murdering the envoy from Tlaxcala, Patlahuatzin, who advised them to form an alliance with the Spaniards.”²⁵ By forming an alliance with other city states Cortés and the Spaniards expanded their knowledge base of the indigenous relations in Mexico. Additionally, these connections gave the Spanish an inside source on how the Aztec warriors used technology in combat.

With that being said, *Broken Spears* leads its readers to focus on the primary evidence recorded by Aztec civilians regarding the conquering process. Fascination and terror of the Spaniards advanced warfare and alliance strength characterized their remarks.

Moving forward in time, in the chapter “Spaniards arrive in Tenochtitlan”, recognizes a major point in history where the Spanish conquered the capital city. After the Spaniards inhabited the capital city of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish were victims of their own greed.

²⁵Broken Spears. 1528. 38.

According to *Aztec Accounts*, “they entered the hall of treasures, it was if they have arrived in paradise.”²⁶ This paradise fulfilled their greatest desires in life.

Keep in mind, the desire for gold and riches was one of the main reasons why the Spaniards decided to set sail west in the fifteenth century. The want for treasure drove Cortes and his men to massacre the Aztec elite in the main temple during the Fiesta of Toxcatl. Here, the Spaniards overthrew the king by surprise.²⁶ In Aztec society it is common ritual to “send shields, arrows and cloaks of a special kind”²⁷ to the enemy. This exchange was always commenced when a war or battle was going to happen in Aztec culture. Going against Aztec religious beliefs, the Spanish Conquistadors decided to attack the Aztecs before the customary ritual warning, taking the Aztec king hostage.

The death of Montezuma has been questioned. As documented by the Aztecs, an “Indian killed him with a stone from his sling, but the palace servants declared that the Spaniards put him to death by stabbing him on the abdomen with their swords.”²⁸ Soon after the death of the king, the Aztec Empire rallied, and was able to push the Spanish and its allies back to Tlaxcala. The Spanish soon fled back to Spain. Therefore, the Aztecs were efficient in electing a new king after the drama of war settled. Assuming the Spanish would never return, they felt confident in their complete recovery, having time and peace on their side.

Another explanation for the ease of the conquest focuses on the spread of small pox. The plague spread rapidly after the Spaniards left Tenochtitlan. According to Aztec civilians,

²⁶ Broken Spears. 1528. 68.

²⁶ Leon-Portilla, Miquel. 1962.

²⁷ Leon-Portilla, Miquel. 1962.

²⁸ Broken Spears. 1528. 90.

“the illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even heads.”²⁹

Disease impacted millions of people in Central Mexico, making the kingdom tremendously weak and vulnerable to an unknown approaching threat.

Eight months after the attack on the capital city, the Spaniards returned with advanced military weapons. The Aztec accounts state, “The cannons were mounted in ships, and our people were terrified at the sight, they gathered their children in canoes and fled helter-skelter across the lake.”³⁰

The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico, by Miquel Leon-Portilla, has proven to be a successful source in primary accounts told by the Aztec civilians on their defeat by the Spanish Empire. The authors’ in-depth analysis and challenges the reader to look closely at how the Aztec Civilization viewed the arrival of the Spaniards. Eventually, the Spanish technology proved too advanced for the Aztecs to defend against and/or retaliate.

The True History of The Conquest of New Spain, by Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, consists of Castillo’s personal experiences. He was a soldier of Cortés, dedicating his life to help conquer the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.³¹ Castillo shares recollection of the events leading from the first expeditions, which aid in determining what happened in Mexico from a Spaniard’s perspective. Castillo explicitly talks about the rise of the rich history of the Spanish Conquistadors. From daily duties to brother-like relationship among soldiers, Castillo allows the reader to step into a Conquistador’s boots.. The authors, Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey, also help explain in the conquest of “New Spain” through a series of chapters: “I am Bernal Diaz del Castillo, I am the

²⁹ Broken Spears. 1528. 93.

³⁰ Broken Spears. 1528. 96-97.

³¹ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630.

Spaniard”, “We left for Tlaxcala”, “Our road was through Cholula”, “For Ninety-Three days We Were Constantly Battling”. Within these chapters Castillo narrates the Spanish journey alongside Hernan Cortés

Burke and Humphrey, draw on historical information from Bernal Diaz del Castillo’s conquest within the Aztec Civilization, accentuating the emotional ties the Spaniards felt for treasure and riches. For example, the first encounter that “New Spain” (conquered Aztec land) experienced was an attack of Indians that were separate from the previous Aztec city state. This is important because Castillo guides the reader to credit the intelligence of Cortés’ military warfare and technological strategy.

In the chapter, “On the Tenth day of February 1519, We Set Sail”, the Spanish reached the island of Cozumel and made contact with the natives of the island. Encountering the natives for the first time, Cortés and his men attempted to make peace. Quickly backfiring, Cortés recognized that he was vastly outnumbered, so he commanded “the horses (to be) quickly released from the ships to land, and the escopeteros, crossbowmen, and all the soldiers to be fully ready with arms.”³² Once the Indian attack began, they easily defeated the native tribe, thanks to Cortés’ quick backup. Similar to reports in *Broken Spears*, Spain’s horses and crossbowmen easily defeated the enemy, crediting technological advancements along with military expertise to have overwhelming effects on the natives.

It is important to point out the gift given to Cortés and his men by a native tribe, because she was the interpreter for Hernan Cortés.³³ Dona Marina was “a Mexican woman who

³² Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 41.

³³ Burke, Humphrey, 1630. 54.

played a key role as interpreter, advisor, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes.³⁴ This is how the Spanish communicated with the native populations. In the chapter, “We Left for Tlaxcala”, the Spanish formed an alliance between the Tlaxcala, Bernal Diaz stated they had “formed a Mexican alliance with Cempoala, through Dona Marina and the best and most adventurous way was through the province of Tlaxcala, because their friends and mortal enemies of the Mexicans.”³⁵ This allowed the Spaniards to gain knowledge and stories of the greatness of Aztec Civilization and King Montezuma. For example,

“They talked about the great fortress of Mexico and how the houses were built in water. He said that to enter the city there were three causeways, and in each causeway four or five openings through which the water passed from one side to the other. Then he talked about the great amount of gold, silver, chalchui stones, and riches that Montezuma had, and he never stopped talking about how great of a lord he was. Nevertheless, however much they talked about his great fortress and bridges, since it is the nature of us Spanish soldiers, we still wanted to try our luck, although it seemed to us an impossible venture.”³⁶

The first of many Spanish victories came after their arrival in Tlaxcala. With the help of their allies, they faced numerous Aztec city states on their path towards the Aztec capital. A battle between the Spaniards and the native tribes of Mexico called the “Cempoals and Xicotenga” was documented. Bernal Diaz states, “It seems that those Indians, Xicotenga, sent with the food, were spies who were to look at our huts, horses, and artillery and see how many of us were in each hut, our comings and goings, everything was there in the camp.”³⁷ At first glance, Cortés knew something was not right due to the fact that the “visitors stayed all day and

³⁴ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica.

³⁵ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 108.

³⁶ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 110.

³⁷ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 136.

night with no purpose.”³⁸ At this point, the Cempoals and Xicotenga were likely astonished by the horses and artillery force with Cortés military capacity.

On the other hand, Cortes and his army recognized the deceit and slaughtered the enemy at night when they tried to attack the Spanish army.³⁹ This is important in Spanish history today because the alliance between the Tlaxcalaś and Spaniards began after the war on native tribes. The Tlaxcalaś knew they couldn’t defeat Cortés and his army, so instead of surrendering to them, the native people of Tlaxcala begged for forgiveness and pledged loyalty to the Spanish. It is said by Bernal Diaz that Cortés pardoned the Tlaxcalaś and their allies because “he had known well of the Tlaxcalaś for years, before we came to these lands, that they were good people, and for that reason he was astonished when they came out to attack us.”⁴⁰ Small detailed accounts like this help display Cortés as a very intelligent leader. He was proficient in knowing when it was time to attack a civilization. His alliance with the Tlaxcalaś was beneficial and strong but ultimately used advanced technology to take down enemies. Their ongoing loyalty was essential in acquiring more riches and land.

After the victory in Tlaxcala, native cities everywhere heard the result of the Cempoals and Xicotenga battle. Word even reached Montezuma, and “he sent four ambassadors, all chieftains, bearing presents of rich golden jewels made into many kinds of objects, well worth two thousand pesos, and ten loads of cloaks with very fine leatherwork.”⁴¹ Cortés and the Spaniards left their allied city of Tlaxcala, ambitiously seeking adventure and a meeting with

³⁸ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 136.

³⁹ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 136-138.

⁴⁰ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 146.

⁴¹ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 160.

“the Great Lord of Mexico”. Through peace and victory, Cortes and his army have seen and heard of stories of the riches presented by Montezuma. Knowing this, they wanted to set out on a route for Tenochtitlan.

Below is the route taken by Cortés and his army to the capital city of Tenochtitlan. The Spanish Conquistadors had a great amount of will and strength to adventure deep into the Aztec Civilization.



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In the chapter, “The Great Montezuma Stepped Out of the Litter”, Bernal Diaz writes about the first encounter of Cortés and Montezuma. He states,

“The two showed each other great respect, they offered each other hands and Cortes brought out a necklace he had in hand, made of some glass stones called margaritas, which sparkled with many colors within, and it came strung on some cords of gold with musk so that it would give off a good scent. Through the interpreter, Dona Marina, she told him that his heart now rejoiced having seen so great a prince, that he took it as great

⁴² The economist. 2014.

kindness that he had come in person to receive him and the favors he continually does for him.”⁴³

The importance of the first encounter was crucial towards Hernan Cortés because Montezuma saw him as the god named Quetzalcoatl, according to a Spanish Conquistador named Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagun who witnessed the meeting in 1519.⁴⁴ The belief of Cortés being intimidated by Montezuma is still debated today. Yet the strategic planning of Cortés, drawing on goodwill, shows Cortés wanted to be respected by Montezuma. Additionally, Bernal Diaz states “Montezuma was very polite with words and ordered his two nephews who supported his arms, to show us to our lodgings and Montezuma returned back to the city, to where Montezuma put a very rich necklace of gold on him.”⁴⁵ Coming from an Aztec perspective, the pure joy of meeting and having a god in Montezuma’s presence was unprecedented for the Aztecs. Therefore, Cortes and his army were fortunate to be welcomed as guests of one of the most dominant civilizations in Mesoamerica. But, this is also where the Aztec civilization made a major mistake. Letting in Spanish Conquistadors, who drooled over their many riches, was an invitation that led to their doom

In the chapter, “To Secure Our Lives, We Should Seize Montezuma,” Castillo relates the relationship between the Spanish and Aztec Empire became hostile when the Aztec people sacrificed living humans to their gods. Bernal Diaz states, “it smelled so much like a slaughterhouse, we could not wait to get away from such a bad stench and worse sight. Half laughing our captain said to Montezuma through our interpreter,

⁴³ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 192-193.

⁴⁴ Sahagun, Bernardino de. 1577.

⁴⁵ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 193-194.

'Lord Montezuma: I do not see how such a great lord and wise man as your grace has not come to the conclusion that your idols are not gods, but evil things called devils.'" ⁴⁶ To call out the Aztec religious beliefs of sacrifice was controversial, especially when he was in the presence of their gods. Montezuma replied half angrily, "If I had believed that you were going to say such dishonorable things as you have, I would not have shown you my gods." ⁴⁷ The arguing was detrimental to both parties because the relationship beforehand looked promising. Knowing he was vulnerable, Cortés and his army needed to act fast in order to stay alive. Therefore, the Spaniards took Montezuma hostage and used him to rule Tenochtitlan as how they saw fit. In conclusion, Bernal Diaz doesn't confess how they killed the king, but only the retreat of the Spanish army. ⁴⁸

In the late chapters of "The True History of The Conquest of New Spain", Bernal Diaz guides his audience along through the Spanish victory of Tenochtitlan. With the help of their allies, the Tlaxcalans and Spanish Conquistadors fought together in battle, until they were forced to retreat from the Aztec city because of the limited weapons and able-bodied men. Cortés and his men knew they needed to retreat to their closest shelter, the home of the Tlaxcala. This was the only option for the Spanish because they had ships and allied support there. Bernal Diaz describes battles between the Aztec Empire and Spanish Conquistadors on the road back to Tlaxcala. For example, "They began to surround us and hurl many stones from slings and spears and arrows, and used their broadswords, and they also killed a horse and

⁴⁶ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 196.

⁴⁷ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 214.

⁴⁸ Burke, Humphrey. 1630.

wounded many of our men.”⁴⁹ As mentioned previously, these battle encounters were approached differently towards the Spanish army because Aztec warriors were trained to capture the Spaniards alive. In order to venture back to Tlaxcala, the Spaniards used their advanced military weapons and a strategic plan to achieve their freedom:

“The horses, in groups of five, broke through them, and all of us charged together. Oh, what a thing it was to see, this so dreadful and fierce battle! How we moved, all mixed up with them at close quarters, how we slashed and thrust at them with our swords, and because the field was flat, how the horseman lanced at will, charging and returning, and although both they and the horses were wounded, they did not stop battling as the bravest of men!”⁵⁰

Along with the specific formation, Cortés and his army used strategic military planning by sending scouts in front of his army to make sure they were always prepared for what was to come. Additionally, the Spaniards and their allies stayed in the cities they conquered on the way back to Tlaxcala.

After the killing of Montezuma and its civilization, Bernal Diaz tells his audience that the Spaniards needed to go back to Spain in order to regroup and gather more men in order to be able to conquer the Aztecs. In Castillo’s last chapter, “For Ninety-Three Days We Were Constantly Battling”, Cortés and the Spanish army along with the Tlaxcalans decided to ambush Tenochtitlan as a final push for victory. As documented, Bernal Diaz talks about Cortes being a military genius. For example,

“When Cortes saw that there was a great number of enemies, he made as if he was retreating and ordered their friends to get off the causeway so the enemy might believe they were retreating. All the native forces went after him in the causeway, attacking him. When Cortes saw they somewhat passed beyond the houses where the ambush was, he ordered two cannons

⁴⁹ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 323.

⁵⁰ Castillo, Bernal Diaz. 1630. 344.

discharged close together, which was the signal for us to come ambush. The horseman came out first, then all our soldiers came out and we fell on the enemy at leisure” (Bernal Diaz, 426).

The technology of cannons and horses saved the Spanish Conquistadors from death.

Eventually, the fall and surrender of the Aztec capital came eight months after the ambushes.

Conceptually parallel to all these theories, scholars have posed both positive and negative arguments about the conquest of the Spanish empire in the sixteenth century. As mentioned earlier, these two societies have been based on a series of common assumptions, interests, and institutions that have not fostered a close degree of comparison amongst each other. Knowledgeable scholars debate the collapse of the Aztec empire as shown above but often credit Hassig to have the best outlook on how the Spaniards advanced military technology/warfare defeated the Aztec Empire. Using additional sources, along with first hand evidence from *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited by Miguel Leon-Portilla, Ross Hassigs’ book, *Aztec Warfare*, and *The True History Of The Conquest of New Spain* by Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, will help us reach a conclusion of how the Aztec Civilization was truly overthrown.

The books *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, by Bernal Diaz and *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of The Conquest of Mexico*, (transcribed by a Spanish priest through documented Aztec accounts) analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the two empires. Primary documents from both the Aztec civilians and recorded accounts from the sixteenth century refer Spanish warfare and technology destroyed the natives of Mexico. It is important to acknowledge that the Spaniards and Mexicans were complete opposites when it came to the concept of warfare. As for similarities, the Aztecs “victims of tribute” and Spanish

“colonial rule” were fostered on expansionism in ways that made both their empires dominant for so many years. The underlying fact that the Aztec cities captured their enemies in combat benefited the Spanish because the natives of Mexico had to be very close in order to try and injure and capture the Spaniards alive. For instance, the Spanish were able to fight off their enemies because they used advanced technology such as horses, swords, cannons, and crossbowmen within a close range. In this case, the Spaniards and indigenous people used different combat techniques of the natives to attack, but close proximity was required.

Secondly, Spaniards “belief in worshiping one god” and Aztecs’ “belief in worshipping many gods” the fact they were both deeply religious. These two similarities help bring out the peace between the two sides and how they built their culture and society.

On the other hand, the Aztec and Spanish empires had a lot of differences. These include the psychological confusion of the Aztecs, leading them to believe the Spanish were differed in many ways. Additionally, the Spaniards knew they were more technologically advanced and used this to their advantage by first defeating the enemy during combat. However, showing off their horses and advanced weaponry to the natives of Mexico encouraged Spanish victories in open battle. Therefore, psychological confrontation, allying with the Tlaxcalans, and small pox all contributed to, but was not the largest factor in the Spanish defeat of the Aztec Civilization.

The ability of Hernan Cortés and his small army of six-hundred Spanish Conquistadors to conquer the Aztec Empire helps us understand the Spaniards advanced military tactics and weapons that they used on the battlefield. Horses, swords, cannons, and crossbowmen at such

a close range allowed the Spanish to conquer thirty million Aztecs. In the end, the Spanish military and its advanced technology led to Aztec defeat and Spanish victory.

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