

THE FALL OF THE AZTEC AND INCA EMPIRES

While Brazil remained a backwater in the 1500s, Mexico and Peru drew the Spaniards like powerful magnets, becoming the two great poles of Spanish colonization. For three centuries, Mexico and Peru

would remain the richest and most populous places in the Americas, but first their indigenous rulers had to be defeated. The Aztec and Inca emperors commanded tens of thousands of warriors and vast material resources. Their precipitous defeat at the hands of a few hundred Spanish adventurers is unparalleled in world history. Several circumstances conspired to make it possible.

In 1519, when they first set foot in Mexico, the Spaniards already knew a lot about America. After all, a full generation had passed since they began settling the Caribbean islands where Columbus made landfall: Hispaniola (today divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and Cuba. The initial Spanish experience there with the semisedentary Arawak people, who were not so different from the Tupi, had begun with trading but rapidly degenerated into slaving. The outcome was similar to what had transpired on the Brazilian coast. Disease and abuse decimated the Caribbean's indigenous people within a generation. Soon they would cease to exist altogether, to be replaced by African slaves.

The Spanish invaders were not soldiers but undisciplined adventurers seeking private fortunes. The first to arrive laid claim to the indigenous inhabitants and, eventually, the land, leaving little for the next wave of adventurers. These had to conquer somewhere else. Operating from the Caribbean bases, Spanish newcomers began to explore the coast of Central and South America, crossed Panama, and found the Pacific Ocean, making contact with many different indigenous groups and beginning to hear rumors of glittering, mysterious empires in the mountains beyond the Caribbean. So it was that, by the time he found the Aztec Empire, the Spanish leader Hernán Cortés had already been dealing with indigenous Americans for fifteen years.

In the conquest of Mexico, no other single Spanish advantage outweighed the simple fact that Cortés more or less knew what was happening, whereas Mexica leaders, including Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, had no earthly idea who, or what, the Spaniards might be. For centuries the story has circulated that Moctezuma suspected the Spaniards were gods from Aztec mythology, that Cortés himself could be Quetzalcoatl, a white-skinned deity whose coming had been

foretold in prophecy. That story now appears to be incorrect, however, because it originated several decades after the arrival of the Spaniards. Although repeated a thousand times, it should now be corrected. On the other hand, the list of never-before-seen things that the Spanish brought was long and intimidating: tall-masted sailing ships, ferocious attack dogs, horses of monstrous size, cannon belching fire and thunder, steel blades, and body armor. The Mexica had never seen Europeans or Africans (who were always present among the conquistadors), and had no prior clue that such strange-looking people even existed. Logically, they regarded these outlandish invaders as beings from outside the world they knew. Searching for a name to call the Spaniards, the Mexica used the Nahuatl word *teul*, which at the time was routinely translated into Spanish as *dios*, or “god.” Since the word *teul* could be used for a spirit or demon, it did not imply adoration, but it clearly implied supernatural power. The Spaniards’ humanity, vulnerability, and hostile intentions did not become clear until Cortés and his expedition had been welcomed into Tenochtitlan, where they took Moctezuma hostage. By the middle of 1521, smallpox and indigenous allies had helped Cortés annihilate Tenochtitlan, and the Aztec Empire as a whole quickly collapsed.

It took more fighting to overthrow the Inca Empire. Still, the stunningly rapid and complete Spanish triumph in both cases calls for explanation. Once again, experience was on the Spanish side. The leader of the Peruvian expedition, Francisco Pizarro, was another seasoned conquistador who, like Cortés (his distant relative), employed a tried-and-true maneuver, something the Spanish had been practicing since their first Caribbean encounters with indigenous people, when he treacherously took the Inca ruler Atahualpa hostage in 1532. Then, too, the Spanish advantage in military technology must be recalled. Horses, steel, and (less importantly) gunpowder gave the invaders a devastating superiority of force, man for man, against warriors armed only with bravery and stone-edged weapons. Spanish weaponry produced staggering death tolls. Indigenous warriors, meanwhile, focused on taking captives, if possible, unharmed. At one point, the Spanish under Cortés massacred ten times their number in a few hours at the Aztec tributary city of Cholula. Later they did spectacular mayhem at

Spanish military advantages came from their Old World heritage, which included gunpowder from China and horses from Asia. Old World microbes were Spanish allies, too.

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Neither the Incas nor the Aztecs could have been defeated with-out the aid of the Spaniards' indigenous allies. In Mexico, Aztec taxes and tributes had weighed heavily on the shoulders of other Nahuatl- speaking city- states. Tributary city- states had furnished sacrificial victims for the Aztec state religion, the ideology that glorified Aztec imperial expansion and bathed the pyramids of Tenochtitlan in the blood of thousands. As a result, Cortés found ready alliances, most notably with the nearby indigenous city of Tlaxcala, an old rival of Tenochtitlan. Eager to end Aztec rule, rival cities sent thousands of warriors to help Cortés.

Pizarro, too, used indigenous allies to topple the Inca Empire. Unlike the Aztecs, the Incas had imposed a centralized power that

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broke up rival city-states and resettled their populations. While the Aztecs had merely imposed tributes, the Incas administered, building roads and storage facilities and garrisons. Like the Aztecs, and like the Spanish and Portuguese, too, the Incas had a state religion that provided an ideological justification for empire.

Aztec and Inca treasures soon attracted Spaniards by the thousands. The defeat of Aztec and Inca power was only the first step in establishing Spanish dominion over the mainland. Now the Spanish had to colonize, to assert effective control over large populations and sprawling territories, over the civilizations that underlay the Aztec and Inca empires and that remained in place after their destruction. This was a gradual process, requiring several generations and contrasting markedly with the pattern of colonization on the Brazilian coast.