

Alvarado, Cortés's second-in-command. Mounted on their strange, monstrous beasts, the Spanish rode at the forefront of an army of perhaps twenty thousand Tlaxcalans. In November 1519, they entered Tenochtitlan, brushing by the objections of the startled and indecisive *tlatoani*, the famous Motecuhzoma (pronounced a bit like Mo-tayk-SZU-ma; he is better known, inaccurately, as Montezuma).

Tenochtitlan dazzled its invaders—it was bigger than Paris, Europe's greatest metropolis. The Spaniards gawped like yokels at the wide streets, ornately carved buildings, and markets bright with goods from hundreds of miles away. Boats flitted like butterflies around the three grand causeways that linked Tenochtitlan to the mainland. Long aqueducts conveyed water from the distant mountains across the lake and into the city. Even more astounding than the great temples and immense banners and colorful promenades were the botanical gardens—none existed in Europe. The same novelty attended the force of a thousand men that kept the crowded streets immaculate. (Streets that weren't ankle-deep in sewage! The conquistadors had never conceived of such a thing.)

And the whole of this wealth and power, Cortés subsequently explained to the Spanish king, flowed into the hands of Motecuhzoma.

Can there be anything more magnificent than that this barbarian lord should have all the things to be found under the heavens in his domain, fashioned in gold and silver and jewel and feathers? And so realistic in gold and silver that no smith in the world could have done better? And in jewels so fine that it is impossible to imagine with what instruments they were cut so perfectly? . . . In Spain there is nothing to compare with it.

Dazzled as he was, Cortés was also aware that with a single command Motecuhzoma could order his army "to obliterate all memory of us." The Spaniards counteracted this threat by inventing a pretext to seize the *tlatoani* in his own palace, making him first their captive and then their puppet.

In both Europe and Mesoamerica kings ruled by the dispensation of the heavens. The Mexica reacted to the sacrilegious abduction of their leader with the same baffled horror with which Europeans later reacted to Cromwell's execution of Charles I in 1649. Not wanting to

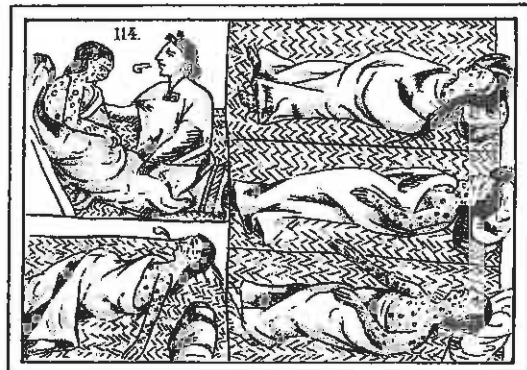
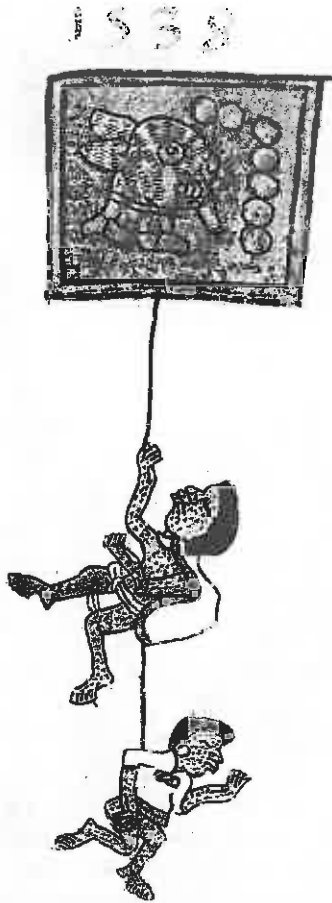


An enormous, opulent city of canals and (mostly) artificial islands in the middle of a great mountain lake, the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan stunned the conquistadors when they first saw it. This reconstruction, a mural by the artist Miguel Covarrubias, in Mexico City's great archaeology museum, underplays the busyness of the city; eyewitness accounts report that clouds of boats darted around its edges and through its canals.

act in a way that could result in Motecuhzoma's death, the Mexica took seven months to mount a counterattack. Fearing the worst, the debased *tlatoani* made a begging public appearance on behalf of the Spanish. He soon died, either murdered by the Spaniards (according to Mexica accounts) or slain by his own countrymen (as Spanish chronicles tell it). Soon after came the long-delayed assault. Under the leadership of a vigorous new *tlatoani*, Cuitlahuac, the Indians forced the invaders into narrow alleys where horses were of little advantage. Under a pitiless hail of spears, darts, and arrows, Cortés and his men retreated down the long causeways that linked the island city to the mainland. In a single brutal night the Mexica utterly vanquished Cortés, killing three-quarters of his men. Although the Alliance destroyed the causeways in front of the Spaniards, the remnants of the invaders were able to cross the gaps because they were so choked with the dead that the men could walk on the bodies of their countrymen. Because the Mexica did not view the goal of warfare as wiping out enemies to the last man, they did not hunt down the last Spaniards. A costly mistake: Cortés was among the escapees.

A man of unfathomable determination, Cortés never thought of giving up. He persuaded several other vassal states to join his anti-

Sixteenth-century Mexica drawings of smallpox, the disease that destroyed the empire by crippling the defenders of Tenochtitlan in the battle against Cortés and his native allies. "An epidemic broke out, a sickness of pustules," begins the account in Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain* (ca. 1575, in James Lockhart's translation). "Large bumps spread on people, some were entirely covered. They spread everywhere, on the face, the head, the chest, etc. . . . [Victims] could no longer walk about, but lay in their dwellings and sleeping places, no longer able to move or stir. They were unable to change position, to stretch out on their sides or face down, or raise their heads. . . . The pustules that covered people caused great desolation; very many people died of them, and many just starved to death; starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer." The drawing at left, from a sixteenth-century codex, is a winter-count-like depiction of a year dominated by smallpox; two men lie dying or dead, their bodies spotted with pustules. The drawing below, from the *General History*, shows cries of pain escaping from victims' lips.



Alliance alliance with Tlaxcala. Negotiating furiously, he assembled a force of as many as 200,000 men and built thirteen big ships in an audacious plan to assault Tenochtitlan from the water. He followed this plan and ever after has been identified by history as the city's conqueror. But all of his bold resolve would have come to nothing without the vast indigenous army whose leaders believed they could use the Spanish presence to catalyze the destruction of the Triple Alliance. And even this enormous force might not have overcome the empire if while Cortés was building his ships Tenochtitlan had not been swept by smallpox in the same pandemic that later wiped out Tawantinsuyu. Without any apparent volition by Cortés, the great city lost at least a third of its population to the epidemic, including Cuitlahuac.

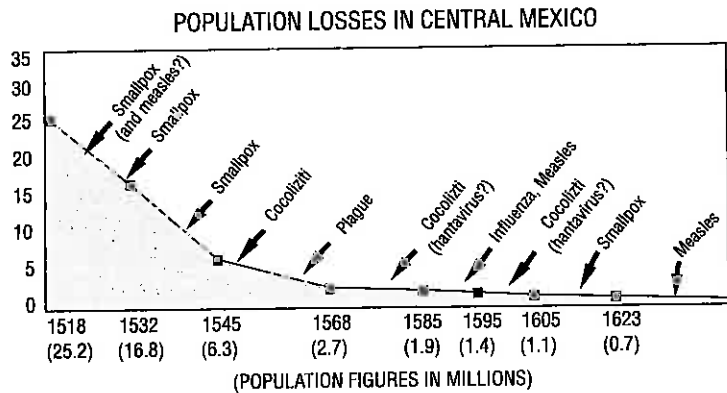
When Cortés and his Indian allies finally attacked, the Mexica resisted so fiercely despite their weakness that the siege has often been described as the costliest battle in history—casualty estimates range up to 100,000. Absent smallpox, it seems likely that Cortés would have lost. In the event, he was able to take the city only by systematically destroying it. The Alliance capitulated on August 21, 1521. It was the end of an imperial tradition that dated back to Teotihuacan a millennium before.

Cortés was directly responsible for much of the carnage in Tenochtitlan, but the war was only a small part of a larger catastrophe for which blame is harder to assign. When Cortés landed, according to the Berkeley researchers Cook and Borah, 25.2 million people lived in central Mexico, an area of about 200,000 square miles. After Cortés, the population of the entire region collapsed. By 1620–25, it was 730,000, "approximately 3 percent of its size at the time that he first landed." Cook and Borah calculated that the area did not recover its fifteenth-century population until the late 1960s.

From Bartolomé de Las Casas on, Europeans have known that their arrival brought about a catastrophe for Native Americans. "We, Christians, have destroyed so many kingdoms," reflected Pedro Cieza de León, the traveler in postconquest Peru. "For wherever the Spaniards have passed, conquering and discovering, it is as though a fire had gone, destroying everything in its path." And since Las Casas historians, clerics, and political activists have debated whether Europeans and their descendants in the Americas are morally culpable for the enor-

mous Indian losses. Indeed, some writers have employed the loaded term "holocaust" to describe the contact and its aftermath. Following in its train, inevitably, has come an even more potent label: genocide.

Europe's defenders argue that the mass deaths cannot be described as genocide. The epidemics often were not even known to Europeans, still less deliberately caused by them. For that reason, they fall into a different moral class than the Jewish Holocaust, which was a state policy of mass murder. "Very probably the greatest demographic disaster in history, the depopulation of the New World, for all its terror and



Berkeley researchers Cook and Borah spent decades reconstructing the population of the former Triple Alliance realm in the wake of the Spanish conquest. By combining colonial-era data from many sources, the two men estimated that the number of people in the region fell from 25.2 million in 1518, just before Cortés arrived, to about 700,000 in 1623—a 97 percent drop in little more than a century. (Each marked date is one for which they presented a population estimate.) Using parish records, Mexican demographer Elsa Malvido calculated the sequence of epidemics in the region, portions of which are shown here. Dates are approximate, because epidemics would last several years. The identification of some diseases is uncertain as well; for example, sixteenth-century Spaniards lumped together what today are seen as distinct maladies under the rubric "plague." In addition, native populations were repeatedly struck by "cocoliztli," a disease the Spanish did not know but that scientists have suggested might be a rat-borne hantavirus—spread, in part, by the postconquest collapse of Indian sanitation measures. Both reconstructions are tentative, but the combined picture of catastrophic depopulation has convinced most researchers in the field.

death, was largely an *unintended* tragedy," wrote Steven Katz in his monumental *Holocaust in Historical Context*. The wave of Indian deaths, in his view, was "a tragedy that occurred despite the sincere and indisputable desire of the Europeans to keep the Indian population alive."

Katz overstates his case. True, the conquistadors did not want the Indians to die off en masse. But that desire did not stem from humanitarian motives. Instead, the Spanish wanted native peoples to use as a source of forced labor. In fact, the Indian deaths were such a severe financial blow to the colonies that they led, according to Borah, to an "economic depression" that lasted "more than a century." To resupply themselves with labor, the Spaniards began importing slaves from Africa.

Later on, some of the newcomers indeed campaigned in favor of eradicating natives. The poet-physician Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., for instance, regarded the Indian as but "a sketch in red crayon of a rudimentary manhood." To the "problem of his relation to the white race," Holmes said, there was one solution: "extermination." Following such impulses, a few Spanish—and a few French, Portuguese, and British—deliberately spread disease. Many more treated Indians cruelly, murderously so, killing countless thousands. But the pain and death caused from the deliberate epidemics, lethal cruelty, and egregious racism pale in comparison to those caused by the great waves of disease, a means of subjugation that the Europeans could not control and in many cases did not know they had. How can they be morally culpable for it?

Not so fast, say the activists. Europeans may not have known about microbes, but they thoroughly understood infectious disease. Almost 150 years before Columbus set sail, a Tartar army besieged the Genoese city of Kaffa. Then the Black Death visited. To the defenders' joy, their attackers began dying off. But triumph turned to terror when the Tartar khan catapulted the dead bodies of his men over the city walls, deliberately creating an epidemic inside. The Genoese fled Kaffa, leaving it open to the Tartars. But they did not run away fast enough; their ships spread the disease to every port they visited.

Coming from places that had suffered many such experiences, Europeans fully grasped the potential consequences of smallpox. "And what was their collective response to this understanding?" asked Ward Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Did they recoil in horror and say, "Wait a minute, we've got to halt the process, or at least slow it down until we can get a handle on how to prevent these effects"? Nope. Their response pretty much across-the-board was to accelerate their rate of arrival, and to spread out as much as was humanly possible.

But this, too, overstates the case. Neither European nor Indian had a secular understanding of disease. "Sickness was the physical manifestation of the will of God," Robert Crease, a philosopher of science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, told me. "You could pass it on to someone, but doing that was like passing on evil, or bad luck, or a bad spirit—the transmission also reflected God's will." The conquistadors knew the potential impact of disease, but its *actual* impact, which they could not control, was in the hands of God.

The Mexica agreed. In all the indigenous accounts of the conquest and its aftermath, the anthropologist J. Jorge Klor de Alva observed, the Mexica lament their losses, but, "the Spaniards are rarely judged in moral terms, and Cortés is only sporadically considered a villain. It seems to be commonly understood"—at least by this bleakly philosophical, imperially minded group—"that the Spaniards did what any other group would have done or would have been expected to do if the opportunity had existed."

Famously, the conquistador Bernal Díaz de Castillo ticked off the reasons he and others joined Cortés: "to serve God and His Majesty [the king of Spain], to give light to those who were in darkness, and to grow rich, as all men desire to do." In Díaz's list, spiritual and material motivations were equally important. Cortés was constantly preoccupied by the search for gold, but he also had to be restrained by the priests accompanying him from promulgating the Gospel in circumstances sure to anger native leaders. After the destruction of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish court and intellectual elite were convulsed with argument for a century about whether the conversions were worth the suffering inflicted. Many believed that even if Indians died soon after conversion, good could still occur. "Christianity is not about getting healthy, it's about getting saved," Crease said, summarizing. Today few Christians would endorse this argument, but that doesn't make it any easier to assign the correct degree of blame to their ancestors.

In an editorial about Black's analysis of Indian HLA profiles, Jean-

Claude Salomon, a medical researcher at France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, asked if the likely inevitability of native deaths could "reduce the historical guilt of Europeans." In a sense it does, Salomon wrote. But it did not let the invaders off the hook—they caused huge numbers of deaths, and knew that they had done it. "Those who carried the microbes across the Atlantic were responsible, but not guilty," Salomon concluded. Guilt is not readily passed down the generations, but responsibility can be. A first step toward satisfying that responsibility for Europeans and their descendants in North and South America would be to treat indigenous people today with respect—something that, alas, cannot yet be taken for granted. Recognizing and obeying past treaties wouldn't be a bad idea, either.