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THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

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Two chains

As the Caribbean descended into a violent, low-profit disappointment, Spaniards began increasingly to explore the circum-Caribbean coastlines. Their discoveries there led to the forging of two great chains of conquest.

The first chain led from Cuba onto the Mexican mainland. Voyages of 1517 and 1518 explored and landed on the coast of the Yucatan peninsula, the closest mainland point to Cuba. The sponsor was the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, who held the title of adelantado. Therefore when he commissioned one of the island's *encomenderos* (conquistador-settlers with rights to native labor and tribute) to lead a third expedition in 1519, he empowered the chosen leader, Hernando Cortés, to explore, not

invade. The chain was thus a system of patronage, running from the king in Spain down to the lesser captains risking their lives at sea or in the jungles of the Americas; the link from jungle to court was not supposed to be direct, but paradoxically part of what made the chain strong were the continual attempts by Spaniards of lesser rank to grasp that chain and pull themselves closer to its royal source.

Suspecting that Cortés would attempt to do just that, bypassing his patronage and seeking direct royal support, Velázquez tried at the last minute, in vain, to stop the expedition sailing from Cuba. Once his five hundred men had landed on the Mexican mainland (via Cozumel and a quick sail along the Yucatec coast), Cortés grounded most of his eleven ships and formally declared direct allegiance to the king. He founded a city (a ritual act only), creating a town council whose votes of support lent a veneer of legality to his actions. It would be six years before Cortés would receive royal approval, in person in Spain, for his revolt against Velázquez and his war against the Aztecs.

The first Spanish invaders of Mexico moved slowly toward the capital city of what was—they were soon to discover—an impressive regional empire. They were few in number and ill equipped: their armor was an encumbrance (though steel swords were effective weapons, which had a remarkable impact in battle compared with the obsidian-studded clubs favored by native armies); their firearms and horses were few and of limited usefulness in the mountainous, city-studded terrain; and they had no means of renewing their supplies or munitions. They also had little chance to acclimatize to the almost unimaginable weather, environments, landscapes, foods, and diseases they encountered. And they were at the mercy of potential enemies who might have wiped them out, had they so wished.

So what saved them? Three circumstances: first, they were among peoples whose cultures predisposed them to receive

strangers hospitably, and even with awe; second, they profited from the antagonisms between indigenous communities whose hatred of each other far outweighed any suspicions they might have felt toward the newcomers; third, it is arguable that most natives—while appreciating the newcomers as potential allies and esteeming them for the magic or sanctity their strangeness suggested—underestimated the threat they represented.

Indigenous polities contended for Spanish friendship, offering gifts of food and women, and engaging in restrained forms of trial by combat to test their prowess and evaluate them as allies. Most notably the Tlaxcalans—the Aztecs' principal rivals and foes—tested the conquistadors in battle and then appropriated them as allies, using them to assist in the massacre of hated neighbors in the city of Cholula.

The Conquistadors Cortés thus found common ground with local lords. The Spaniards wanted to move on to the Valley of Mexico to confront the Aztec emperor with as many native allies as possible. Native rulers were eager to see the Spaniards leave their communities and were willing to hedge their bets on the possibility of the collapse of the Aztec Empire. Some, like the Totonacs, were subject to the Aztec Empire and quick to rebel against it. Others, like the Tlaxcalans, had resisted Aztec expansion and were eventually persuaded to take a chance on destroying their old enemies. The initiative in forging the alliance that eventually overthrew Aztec hegemony did not—could not—come from Cortés, who knew nothing of indigenous politics and could not speak any indigenous language. He relied on the native woman who acted as his interpreter, called *doña Marina* by Spaniards and *Malinche* by Nahuas. In native accounts of the conquest, she occupies a central role, at the very least a guiding and often a commanding one.

A combined force, in which Tlaxcalans and their own allies accompanied Spaniards, advanced toward Tenochtitlán. In November 1519 they entered the city as guests of Moctezuma. Conversing through Cortés's interpreter, the emperor delivered

a welcoming speech to Cortés that the latter claimed to interpret (in a letter to the king) as a speech of surrender. Intrigued by these foreigners who had disrupted a corner of his empire, Moctezuma sought to display his majesty through hospitality. But the Spaniards, outnumbered and fearful, soon resorted to treachery and terror; in what was effectively a coup d'état, Cortés seized and imprisoned Moctezuma and ordered that anyone who so much as raised a hand against the Spanish and their allies be publicly cut to pieces and fed to the dogs. These were stock tactics developed by conquistadors in the course of their decades of Caribbean slave raiding, tactics that proved even more effective against mainland imperial peoples who depended on their divinely sanctioned kings. The use of terror was not only a workable strategy, it was also a psychological necessity for the tiny, beleaguered band of conquistadors, surrounded by unfamiliar perils and cut off from all hope of help from home.

Over the next eight months the Spanish and Tlaxcalan invaders, partially contained within the center of the city, survived, precariously and increasingly restively. Cortés continued to use displays of defiance and bravado to good effect. He ordered that images of the Virgin Mary be placed atop Aztec temples to assert the power of the invaders' god. He also took a contingent of Spaniards and native allies back to the Gulf Coast to confront a company of Velázquez supporters that had sailed from Cuba to challenge Cortés; they were defeated, and most joined Cortés, who returned to Tenochtitlán to find that the stalemate had shifted in favor of the Aztecs. Led by Pedro de Alvarado, the Spaniards were under siege.

The desperate Spaniards exhibited Moctezuma to the people. The gesture failed. The monarch died, murdered by the Spaniards or perhaps, as they later claimed, stoned to death by the mob. On the night of June 30, 1520, the invaders attempted to flee the city undetected. But Aztec warriors were waiting, and they killed about half the Spaniards and thousands of Tlaxcalan and other native allies. Cortés and his bedraggled Spanish forces eventually

regrouped with Tlaxcalan assistance, but it would be more than a year before Tenochtitlán and its twin city of Tlatelolco fell. Cut off from the mainland, the Aztecs faced disease and starvation, then attack by land and water. Boats, built on the shores of Lake Texcoco and armed with cannon, policed the lake and helped pound remaining Aztec warrior contingents in canoes. The city was taken and pillaged, block by block, revealing not gold but piles of bodies, victims of sickness, starvation, and siege warfare. Even then, Cortés did not feel strong enough to proclaim the end of the Aztec world, but he tried to reassure incumbent elites, seeking a basis of accommodation with them and confirming Moctezuma's heir in the role of paramount. In and around the empire, however, people realized that the old days were over. In outlying areas, communities formerly cowed by the Aztecs resumed old rivalries and conflicts. The effect was to increase the Spaniards' power, since, as strangers uninvolved in traditional politics, they were much in demand as the arbitrators of disputes.

By the end of 1521, the old Aztec Empire was destroyed. But its framework of trade routes, tribute lists, and diplomatic relations between ruling families remained in place. Spaniards immediately sought to make use of that framework and convert it into an elemental part of the structure of their own empire in Mesoamerica—which they renamed the Kingdom of New Spain. In most communities, the Spaniards came to an understanding with existing elites, without any need for violence—a fact the historiographical tradition has ignored or suppressed, perhaps because of the conquistadors' misleading focus on their own prowess. The Aztecs had themselves employed a chain of conquest in the region. The Spaniards used that chain—and even used Aztec warriors, survivors of the war who joined other Nahuatl allies—to expand the frontiers of New Spain. In the 1520s, just as Mexico City began to rise, reconstructed with a fresh look in a new, Spanish-inspired style, from the rubble of Tenochtitlán, so did a new Spanish-Mexican empire spring from the ashes of the old empire of the Mexica.