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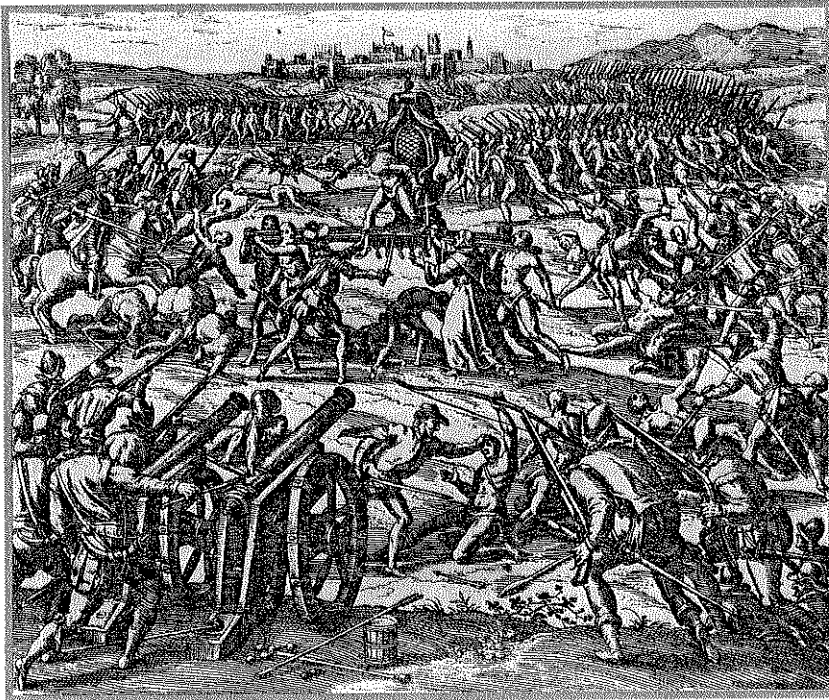
HOW SPAIN  
BECAME A  
WORLD POWER  
1492-1763

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## A New World



At the time of the conquest there was no Christian God nor king of Spain here, nor was there any justice, and so the Spaniards and the Indians gave themselves up to plundering and robbing, so that there was great hunger and very many people died throughout the kingdom.

Felipe Guaman Poma,  
*New Chronicle and Good Government* (1614)

Like all states in the process of expansion, that of Spain resorted to procedures of conquest and occupation. The recovery of Naples for the Crown of Aragon, and the incorporation of Navarre with that of Castile, would not have taken place without the use of an army and all the attendant consequences of death, disruption and destruction. However, the Italian campaigns had demonstrated already that Castile had few resources to spend on an expansionist programme. In the New World, the nature of the enterprise ruled out from the very beginning any use of military force by the crown. Neither Ferdinand nor Charles V perceived the American venture as one of 'conquest'. When the Spaniards extended their energies to the lands beyond the ocean, they did not – despite the proud claims of their chroniclers – conquer them. The occupation and development of the New World was a little more complex than a mere act of subjugation.

Not a single Spanish army was expended on 'conquest'. When Spaniards established their control, they did so through the sporadic efforts of small groups of adventurers whom the crown later attempted to bring under its control. These men, who proudly assumed the description of 'conquistadors', were often not even soldiers. The group of men that seized the Inca emperor at Cajamarca in 1532, was made up of artisans, notaries, traders, seamen, gentry and peasants, a small

cross-section of immigrants to America and in some measure a reflection of peninsular society itself. Similar groups were in action at other points in the New World. Most of them, especially the leaders, were *encomenderos* (132 of the 150 adventurers who accompanied Valdivia to Chile were *encomenderos*). This meant that they were engaged on their expedition by virtue of the crown conceding them an *encomienda*, a contract that gave the recipient rights to demand tribute and labour from the natives, and obliged him to serve and defend the crown and instruct the natives in the Christian faith. The wording of the contract frequently specified a form of feudal service, 'with arms and a horse',<sup>1</sup> making it evidently a military agreement. Thanks to the *encomienda*, the Crown was able to mount a military operation in the New World without the necessity, which it would in any case not have been able to fulfil, of sending an army there. The almost total dependence of the 'conquest' period on private enterprise was emphasized by the historian Oviedo, who as we have seen commented that 'almost never do Their Majesties put their income and cash into these new discoveries'. It was an all-important aspect that the *encomenderos* did not forget.

Moreover, the so-called 'conquest' of the Americas was never completed. The *encomenderos* were at no time in a position to subjugate the native populations systematically or occupy more than a fragment of the lands into which they had intruded. They were too few in number and their efforts too dispersed. Well over two centuries after the period of alleged conquest, and long after cartographers had drawn up maps in which the virtual totality of America was depicted as being 'Spanish', Spaniards in reality controlled only a tiny part of the continent, mainly the fertile coastal areas of the Caribbean and the Pacific. The fact is fundamental to understanding the nature of Spain's role in America. The overseas empire was a fragile enterprise that produced many significant benefits – mainly from the gold and silver mines – but that Spaniards by no means succeeded in controlling entirely.

Finally, the early Spaniards in the New World insisted that they had won what they had won through the traditional right, recognized in Old World societies, of 'conquest', but they were very soon disabused of this notion. The clergy who advised the Crown stated that Spaniards had no right to burst in like robbers, seize what they liked, and proclaim that they had 'conquered' it. On the Sunday before Christmas 1511 a

Dominican friar, Antonio de Montesinos, went into the pulpit of the church in Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, and denounced those Spaniards who had *encomiendas* of Indians. Other clergy, foremost among them another Dominican friar, Bartolomé de las Casas, subsequently joined in the campaign. In 1512 King Ferdinand sanctioned the issue of the Laws of Burgos, which attempted to regulate the activity of colonizers and the condition of the Indians. No one in the nascent colony took any notice of the laws, but out of them arose a special document drawn up by a member of the royal council, Juan López de Palacios Rubios, and known as the *requerimiento* (requirement), which based Spanish claims to authority not on simple conquest but on the donation of the new lands to Spain by the pope.

The document was meant to be read out publicly to Indians who would not accept the Spanish claims. Employed on numerous occasions by Spanish expeditions, it claimed that God had given the world to the papacy, that the pope in turn had given 'these isles and mainland' to the rulers of Spain, and that if the natives did not accept the Spanish obedience and the Christian religion they would be treated as rebels, dispossessed of their property and enslaved. Las Casas commented that when he first read the document he did not know 'whether to laugh or cry', and certainly many Spaniards thought the *requerimiento* ridiculous.<sup>2</sup> The author of the text himself realized that it was farcical. Fernández de Oviedo reported that Palacios Rubios 'could not stop laughing when I told him what some commanders had done with it'. In fact Oviedo had personally criticized one specific case, that of Pedrarias Dávila, first governor of Castilla del Oro (Tierra Firme), one of whose captains read out the document to a group of uncomprehending Indians. 'It seems to me', Oviedo told Dávila, 'that these Indians have no wish to listen to the theology of this Requirement, nor do you have any obligation to make them try and understand it; keep it for when we have some of these Indians in a cage, then they can study it at leisure.'<sup>3</sup> A report made by Alonso Zuazo to Charles V explained how the reading was done: 'the *requerimiento* was read in Spanish, of which the Indians did not understand a word. Moreover it was read at such a distance that had they understood the language they could not have heard what was being said.'<sup>4</sup> Where feasible the document was translated for the benefit of the listeners. Since the interpreters themselves did not understand what the document said, the final result was little short of grotesque.

It is tempting to consider the coming of the Europeans in terms of their ultimate success. Traditional accounts have therefore, with good reason, emphasized the factors that seemed to give them superiority. Spaniards are supposed to have had an advanced political civilization, a uniquely vital religious mentality, and a burning urge to battle against the heathen. Their feats have been explained by their superior technology, and their single-minded pursuit of gold. Some of these factors were no doubt present, but they did not necessarily culminate in success, for the history of the Spaniards was also one of immense failures. In perspective, of course, many of the participants in the conquest refused to admit any failure. Old, blind and living modestly in retirement on his lands in Guatemala, the historian and conquistador Bernal Díaz could reminisce: 'I often pause to consider the heroic actions of that time. I seem to see them present before my eyes, and I believe that we performed them not of our own volition but by the guidance of God.'<sup>5</sup> The Spaniards' own chroniclers combined to foster a myth of a successful God-given conquest. The reality was more complex: there were specific 'successes', but the general picture was one of a need to adapt to circumstances that were not always favourable. Between success and failure, the Spanish enterprise in the New World, the first of its type to be undertaken by any European nation, took on characteristics of its own.

From the Caribbean the Spaniards made sporadic ventures to the north and south. In the south from 1509 onwards they made contact with the indigenous population of the mainland (called *Tierra Firme*) and began to find evidence of the use of precious metals. In the north they settled further islands (Cuba in 1511) and also made contact with the mainland of Mexico. Governor Velázquez sent out expeditions from Cuba northwards to the Gulf coast and to the Yucatan (which Ponce de León reached in 1513). In this area of the Caribbean the decisive event was the success of Cortés in discovering and subduing (1519–21) a rich and powerful civilization in the interior of the continent. Mexico fell to the Spaniards a quarter of a century after their discovery of America. The feat sparked off a fever among other restless groups of Spaniards, who dispersed throughout the continent in search of riches. This second phase of the conquistadors, during which some of the most spectacular discoveries of the time were made, occupied another quarter of a century.

Mainland America was home to extensive and highly developed

civilizations that in central Mexico and the Andes took on the form of 'empires', in which local communities made regular payments of tribute to the ultimate overlords, the Mexica in their island city of Tenochtitlan (centre of a Nahuatl confederation that dominated the peoples of Mexico) and the Incas in the Andes. In these empires the noble class had special privileges, religion had a pervasive ceremonial role, and landed property tended to be controlled by communal bodies (called *calpulli* in Mexico and *ayllu* in Peru). Outside these imperial areas the vastness of America was peopled by numerous sedentary and non-sedentary peoples whom the Spaniards barely got to know.

'On Holy Thursday 1519 (April 21)', the companion in arms of Hernando Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recorded in his chronicle, 'we arrived with all the fleet at the port of San Juan de Ulúa. The royal standards were raised on the flagship, and within half an hour of our anchoring two large canoes came out to us full of Mexica Indians. They said that their lord, a servant of the great Montezuma, had sent them to find out what kind of men we were and what we were seeking, also to say that if we required anything for ourselves or our ships, we were to tell them and they would supply it.'<sup>6</sup> On this courteous note the Mexicas welcomed the small expedition that had sailed from Cuba a few months before and worked its way up the Yucatan coast. In February the expedition chanced to encounter a Spaniard, Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatan but had settled in the area and married a Maya wife. Shortly after, a local Maya chief had presented the Spaniards with twenty female slaves. One of them, renamed Marina, was a Mexica whose mother tongue was Nahuatl but who had also learned the local Maya dialect during captivity. Aguilar and Marina turned out to be a godsend for Cortés. When dealing with Mayas, Aguilar interpreted from their language for the Spaniards. When contact was made with the Nahuas, Marina – in the period before she began to learn Spanish – interpreted what they said, and Aguilar translated her words to Cortés.

For some time past the Indians had been receiving reliable information of the strangers who had come to their shores. They had many doubts, however, about the way to receive them. Cortés had landed with four hundred soldiers, sixteen horsemen, some artillery and a firm conviction that the land he now trod belonged by right to his sovereign king. The natives overwhelmed Cortés and his men with gifts, priceless gold and ornaments 'and many other things that I cannot remember, since all this

was very long ago', reminisced Bernal Díaz. For Cortés, however, the gifts served merely to confirm him in his principal objective, to get the Mexicas to recognize the rulers of Castile as their overlords. If achieved, the objective would strengthen his own position. Very soon after his arrival, he decided to renounce the authority of Velázquez and rely exclusively on the support of the crown in Spain. So began the fascinating chain of events whereby the Spaniards worked their way through the terrain of Mexico, allying with some tribes and terrorizing others, until eventually in November they entered the mighty city of Tenochtitlan, with its population of at least a quarter of a million people, and faced the great Montezuma.

A respectable historical tradition has presented the Mexicas as overcome with doubt and fear at the coming of the white gods. The native sources, written a generation after the conquest, were anxious to explain, through the medium of symbols and omens, why the collapse of their civilization took place. 'Ten years before the Spaniards came to this land, a wonderful and terrifying thing resembling a flame of fire appeared in the sky.'<sup>7</sup> The Nahuatl account spoke of the appearance of eight omens, for eight was a standard amount in Nahua usage, and the omens were treated as a sort of prologue to the story rather than as symbols of impending doom. The first contact was, as Bernal Díaz has indicated, cordial. During the progress to Tenochtitlan the Spaniards made many friends. At their first stop on the coast, at Cempoala, they won the alliance of the Totonacs by defying the messengers sent by Montezuma. In August 1519 they were at Tlaxcala, a Nahua city that was traditionally hostile to Tenochtitlan and where the leaders resisted the Spaniards by force until they realized that the newcomers were by no means friends of the hated Montezuma. After three weeks of negotiation and contact with the Tlaxcalans, the Spaniards managed to seal an alliance that was to have decisive consequences. The Tlaxcalans were eager to use the strangers to help them in their own wish to overthrow the hegemony of the Mexicas. Unwilling to become simply a tool of the Tlaxcalans, however, Cortés insisted on deciding his own route towards Tenochtitlan, and his men, accompanied by a large force of five thousand Tlaxcalans, headed for the city of Cholula.

The Cholulans, faithful allies of the Mexicas but enemies of Tlaxcala, had already planned with Montezuma's agents to lay a trap for the Spaniards. Cortés was unaware of any danger, and believed that he

could also win over the Cholulans. But after three days in the city, he began to have suspicions, and told his men that 'we must keep on the alert, for they are up to some mischief'. Fortunately, Cempoalan and Tlaxcalan agents who accompanied him were able to reveal details of secret movements being made by the Cholulans. The next day Cortés and his men made signs of preparing to leave, and summoned the Cholulan warriors into a central courtyard. The Spaniards and their allies then sprang their own trap, and launched a merciless attack on the warriors. 'They attacked them with spears and killed as many as they could, and their allies the Indians possibly killed even more, while the Cholulans carried neither offensive nor defensive weapons and in consequence died miserably.' Thousands of Tlaxcalans poured into the city and executed a bloody revenge on their enemies, until Cortés managed to put a stop to the killing. Possibly over three thousand Cholulans died in five hours of fighting.

The massacre caused a great impression throughout the region. 'All the peoples in Mexico and in all the areas to which the Spaniards went, all of them were distressed and distraught; it was as if the earth shook, all went in fear and terror.' Cortés was concerned to leave behind him a peaceful and friendly Cholula, and succeeded over the next few days not only in consolidating this but also in arranging peace between the Cholulans and the Tlaxcalans. He now had the chief cities of the plain on his side, and made plans to advance to Mexico. He did so, however, using a strategy that could have undone the Spaniards. He chose to approach Tenochtitlan with a relatively small force, his own 450 Spaniards, and a support of probably 1,000 Indians as porters and guides. 'The Spaniards with all the Indians who were their allies came in a great crowd in squadrons, making a great noise and shooting off their guns; their weapons glittered from far off and caused great fear in those who were looking on.' Very many writers, both Nahua and Spanish, have described their entry into the legendary capital, passing through the city of Iztapalapan. Cortés was preceded by five files of his men, last of all the musketeers, who 'when they went into the great palace repeatedly shot off their arquebuses. They exploded, sputtered, thundered. Smoke spread, it grew dark with smoke, every place filled with smoke.'<sup>8</sup> Behind the Spaniards came 'those from the other side of the mountains, the Tlaxcalans, the people of Tlilihquitepec, of Huexotzinco, came following behind. They came outfitted for war . . . they went crouching, hitting

their mouths with their hands and yelling, singing in Tocuillan style, whistling, shaking their heads. Some dragged the large cannons, which went resting on wooden wheels, making a clamour as they came.'

Montezuma gave a traditional greeting of welcome, which Cortés reported to his emperor as a speech of homage. Montezuma's speech was indeed fulsome enough to permit such an interpretation. 'This is your house and these are your palaces,' he said to Cortés, 'take them and rest in them with all your captains and companions.' In the subsequent six months that they were in the city, the Spaniards effectively controlled Montezuma but were themselves wholly vulnerable. The Mexica leaders, resigned but sullen and indignant, became outraged when Cortés began ordering the destructions of their statues. At this stage Montezuma informed Cortés of the arrival of more Spaniards at Veracruz, eighteen vessels from Cuba under the command of Pánfilo de Narváez, who had been sent by governor Velázquez to arrest Cortés and take charge. Cortés at once decided to leave Tenochtitlan for the coast, taking most of his men with him in order to confront the superior forces of Narváez, and leaving behind Pedro de Alvarado with enough men to protect Montezuma. It was not an easy decision, for Montezuma had warned him that the Mexica leaders were plotting to kill all the Spaniards. Bernal Díaz describes the state of permanent alarm faced by the men. They got used to sleeping fully clothed and fully armed, or even not sleeping at all. Díaz never reverted to sleeping normally again. 'I always lie down fully dressed,' he wrote many years afterwards, 'what is more, I can only sleep for a short time at night, I have to get up and look at the sky and stars and walk around for a bit in the dew.'

Cortés left Tenochtitlan in May 1520 and went out to meet Narváez, whose forces he defeated in a quick action that he had preceded by secret overtures to the incoming Spaniards. Narváez was wounded and lost an eye; five men were killed on his side and four on that of Cortés. Most of the Spaniards agreed to join Cortés, who at this moment received a message brought from Tenochtitlan by two Tlaxcalans, saying that Alvarado and his men were in serious trouble as a result of an attack they had made on the Mexica chiefs during a festival. Cortés hurried back to the capital. 'There were over one thousand three hundred soldiers,' writes Díaz, 'counting Narváez's people and our own, also some ninety-six horses, eighty bowmen and as many musketeers. In addition the Tlaxcalan chiefs gave us two thousand warriors. We arrived

at Mexico on 24 June 1520.' However, they found the city openly in revolt against the Spaniards, and after bitter fighting in the streets were forced to consider withdrawing. The situation became untenable when the Mexica chiefs elected a new emperor, and Montezuma himself was killed during an attack with stones. Assailed by thousands of Mexicas, the Spaniards fled in total disorder. On that fatal night, or 'Noche Triste' as it came to be called, of 10 July,<sup>9</sup> the Spaniards lost around eight hundred men, five Spanish women, and over a thousand Tlaxcalan allies. After the retreat the Indian allies complained to Marina that if the Spaniards withdrew the Mexicas would finish them off. But Cortés told them, 'Don't worry, if I leave I shall be back soon, and I shall destroy the Mexicas.' This greatly solaced the Tlaxcalans. 'When the Spaniards had gone to sleep, far into the night wind instruments were being played, wooden flutes and wooden fifes, and there was drumming, war drumming.'<sup>10</sup> The Spaniards had to take a rest in Tlaxcala, for 'they were too few to go to battle again with the Mexicas'.

The preparations for an attack on Tenochtitlan took some eight months.<sup>11</sup> From his base at Tlaxcala, Cortés gave first priority to replenishing his meagre forces, which he achieved thanks to men and supplies that arrived on the coast in subsequent weeks from Cuba, Jamaica and Spain. 'To Tlaxcala came Spanish soldiers with many horses as well as arms and munitions, and this encouraged the Captain to get ready again to go back and conquer Mexico.' The Tlaxcalans also began a programme of building boats with which to ferry men across the lake of Tenochtitlan. Cortés, with the support of the Tlaxcalans, carried out raids on neighbouring towns. By the end of 1520 a large part of the plain of Anahuac, including the cities of Tlaxcala, Cholula and Huejotzingo, had with Spanish help established an alliance against the Mexica, whose empire was now in a state of collapse. The next step in the campaign was to break up the union between the cities of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco, the basis of power of the Mexica state. Just after Christmas 1520, ten thousand Tlaxcalan warriors escorted Cortés and his men on a march towards Texcoco. The ruler of the city, Ixtlilxochitl, seeing how the tide of power in Anahuac was turning against the Mexica, greeted Cortés warmly and promised his support. All was now set for the attack on Tenochtitlan. In March and April several successful sorties were made against towns adjacent to the capital that were friendly to the Mexica. By the end of April the city of Tenochtitlan stood alone

against its enemies. The brigantines built for the Spaniards were, from their base at Texcoco, in command of the northwest shore of the lake. A formal siege was begun in the second week of May 1521.

The situation had changed dramatically since Cortés's first landing on the coast with four hundred men and the power of the entire Nahua people ranged against him. His band of Spaniards was now not much bigger, just over nine hundred men thanks to recent arrivals. But he had on his side the majority of the cities that had been vassals and allies of the Mexica. The Indian historian of Texcoco, Alva Ixtlilxochitl, reported that just before the siege the ruler of Texcoco reviewed his men, and 'on the same day the Tlaxcalans, Huejotzingoans and Cholulans also reviewed their troops, each lord with his vassals, and in all there were more than three hundred thousand men'.<sup>12</sup> The total Indian forces supporting the Spaniards were a vast army that could be supplemented from the rear whenever necessary, whereas the Mexica in their island city were cut off from outside help. The city, now ruled by Montezuma's nephew Cuauhtemoc, had also been suffering an epidemic of smallpox, apparently brought to the region by one of Narváez's soldiers. As the siege progressed, lakeside towns that had initially supplied the capital came forward to Cortés and offered him their support. Despite their situation, the Mexica resisted their attackers for three and a half months, in a desperate struggle that cost tens of thousands of lives and impelled the attackers to destroy the city systematically as they entered, as the only way of reducing the defenders. Finally, Cuauhtemoc was captured as he attempted to flee. Tenochtitlan perished with thousands of corpses within it, and it took three days for the survivors to be evacuated.

'When the news spread through the provinces that Mexico was destroyed', Bernal Díaz recalled, 'the lords could not believe it, they sent chieftains to congratulate Cortés and yield themselves as subjects to His Majesty and to see if the city, which they had so dreaded, was really razed to the ground.' A Nahua song lamented that

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow  
Are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco  
Where once we saw warriors and wise men.

Cortés and his men achieved immortal fame. They became folk heroes within their own lifetime, not only in Spain but in every European nation. Who were these men? They were for the most part young: Cortés

was aged thirty-four at the time, Bernal Díaz only twenty-four. An examination of nearly two-thirds<sup>13</sup> of the Europeans who took part in the conquest of Tenochtitlan shows that ninety-four per cent were Spaniards and six per cent from other nations, mostly Portuguese and Genoese, with a sprinkling of Greeks and Netherlanders. At least two were black. Of just over five hundred Spaniards whose places of origin are known, one third came from Andalusia, the rest principally from Extremadura, Old Castile and León. A long historical tradition has tended to present the early Spaniards in America as the scum of the earth, but it cannot be credited. By the same token there is no foundation to the legend, common in much Spanish historical writing, that they were hidalgos. The men who made it to the New World, survived the Atlantic crossing, and lived through the travails of hostile tribes and a savage climate, were robust, intelligent and (if they were lucky) survivors. Out of five hundred of the Spaniards who were at Tenochtitlan nearly eighty-five per cent could sign their names, a piece of evidence that often indicates literacy. Much less is known of their professional status. The callings of only thirteen per cent of the five hundred can be identified: they were principally artisans, sailors, soldiers and scribes.<sup>14</sup>

The fame of having helped to overthrow Mexico was the only profit gained by many of the Spaniards. After the fall of the great city, reported Bernal Díaz, 'we were all disappointed when we saw how little gold there was and how poor our shares would be'. They quarrelled among themselves, and most went off to seek treasure elsewhere. 'When we realized', Díaz wrote, 'that there were no gold mines or cotton in the towns around Mexico, we thought of it as a poor land, and went off to colonize other provinces.' The majority of those who took part in the fall of Tenochtitlan ended their days in poverty.<sup>15</sup> Nor were they fortunate enough, like Bernal Díaz, to live long. Up to eight hundred Spaniards died in the Noche Triste, and over half of all the known conquistadors who took part in the campaigns died during wars against the Mexicas.<sup>16</sup> Overthrowing the American empires was an extremely costly undertaking, and did not always bring rewards to those who took part in the enterprise.