

EMPIRE

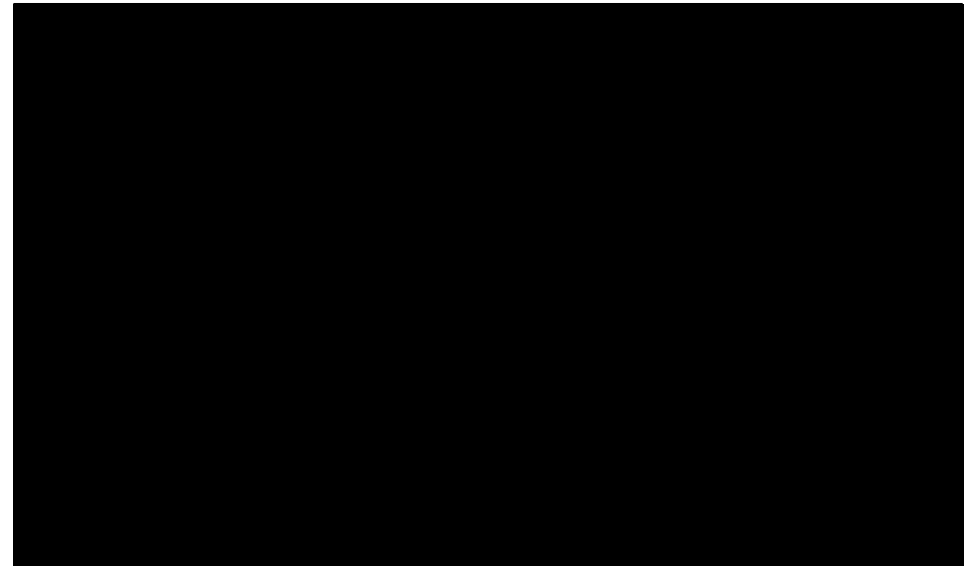
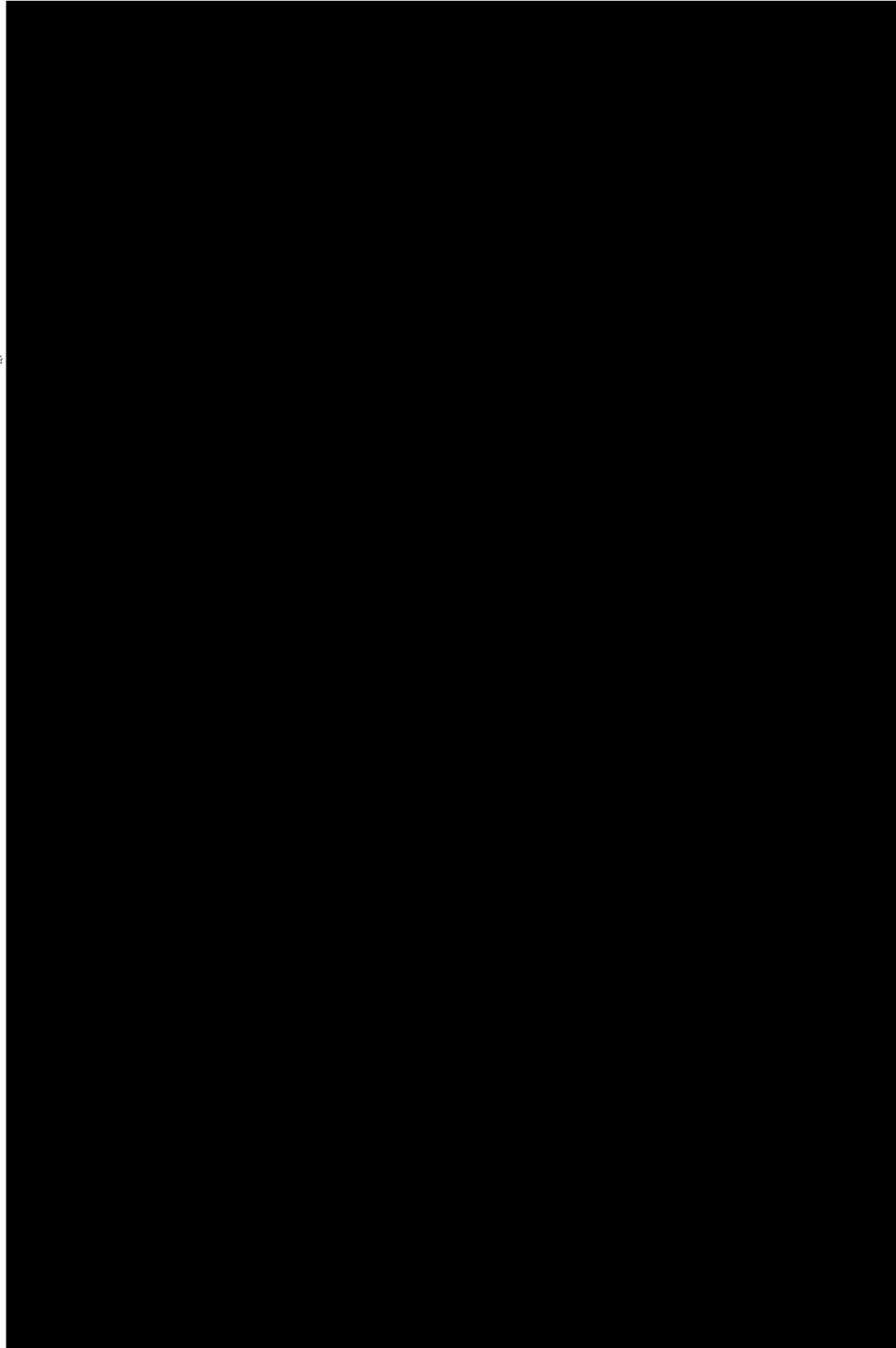
+++++

HOW SPAIN
BECAME A
WORLD POWER
1492-1763

+++++

HENRY KAMEN

 HarperCollins *Publishers*



The successes of the Spaniards came less from military superiority than from an ability to adapt to seemingly unfavourable conditions. They were always very few in number, in contingents of between two hundred and five hundred men, faced by unfamiliar terrain, inadequate food supplies, and a far more numerous enemy. In such circumstances they had to use their few resources with the maximum of skill. Cortés's brilliant march to Mexico set a pattern that most subsequent adventurers attempted to emulate. Firearms and (when available) cannon were of strictly limited use: they were insufficient in number, and rendered easily unreliable by lack of powder or tropical rain. Cortés tended to employ them with the specific purpose of inducing fear rather than of killing. The Spaniards enjoyed, in the circumstances, little effective technological superiority, and in any case were often more vulnerable to the arrows of skilled indigenous archers than the latter were to European firearms. The few horses brought from Europe were infinitely more valuable. A larger animal than any known to the Indians, the mounted horse gave advantages of height, mobility and speed that easily demolished opposition. In Pizarro's campaign against the Incas, the bulk of a few charging horses easily crushed the massed ranks of the enemy and always guaranteed victory. Apart from the tools of conquest, however, there were three fundamental factors that no historian can fail to emphasize.

First, the Spaniards soon learnt to use against their enemy all the symbols of the supernatural environment that enveloped friend and foe

alike. Second, they enjoyed a superior mobility by sea that served to isolate and defeat enemies. Finally, and most important of all, the conquerors always worked hand in hand with native peoples who opposed the ruling empire.

The supernatural omens seem to have favoured the Spaniards from the beginning. It is possible, of course, that this version of events in Mexico and Peru developed much later and was a way, exploited by the Spaniards and accepted by native writers, of rationalizing the conquest through hindsight. The songs that survived from the Nahua peoples seem to support the vision of a civilization that had little hope in the future,³⁰ though many recent scholars have questioned this view. Spanish chroniclers conveyed the idea that Cortés was viewed as a returning god (the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl) and that the Spaniards as a race were treated as gods. A similar idea may be found in sources relating to the Incas. Other indigenous sources that describe the coming of the Spaniards, however, do not always support the idea and may be interpreted in different ways.

The Europeans came from the sea and owed their success to it. The American peoples were at home in their rivers and lakes, and traded actively along the seacoasts, but never developed an ocean-going capacity. By contrast the Europeans – like the Arabs – had a long familiarity with the sea, which gave them an exceptional mobility. At key moments of their adventure in the New World, they were capable of suddenly bringing in supplies and reinforcements out of nowhere and dramatically changing the course of events.

An enduring legend of the early Atlantic empire was the superhuman capacity of the conquerors. An early chronicler and witness of the great events in Peru, Cieza de León, commented: ‘who can tell of the unheard-of exploits of so few Spaniards in so vast a land?’³¹ ‘Hernando Cortés with less than a thousand men overthrew a great empire’, wrote a veteran of the American frontier, Vargas Machuca, ‘Quesada with a hundred and sixty Spaniards conquered the kingdom of New Granada.’³² An official historian, Gómara, continued in his *History of the Indies* with the same extravagant story, written for the eyes of the emperor: ‘never has a king or a people ventured so far or conquered so much in so small a time as our people have done, nor have any others achieved or accomplished what we have done, in feats of arms, in navigations, and in the preaching of the holy gospel’. Virtually all the

chroniclers of the period exercised their imaginations in playing the numbers game. In doing so, they created for their fellow countrymen (and for many historians even today) an ineffaceable image of Spanish valour, prowess and racial superiority. Among the very few conquerors who protested against this was Bernal Díaz, indignant at the exaggerated role given to Cortés by the official historian Gómara.

It is unjust to minimize the astonishing daring of the conquerors. But it is also essential to remember that Spanish military success was made possible only by the help of native Americans.³³ The conquest of some indigenous Americans by others laid the basis of the Spanish empire. The help was of two kinds, on a humble level, from men of service, and on a more elevated level, from military allies. Men of service were the hundreds of natives who carried out indispensable duties of carrying baggage and supplies, searching for food and water, tending animals, preparing meals and attending to all the needs of the Spaniards. Without such support the efforts of the latter would quite simply have been in vain and they would never have attained their objectives. Without Indians to help him, Balboa would never have reached the Pacific. The Indians were often used to performing such services for their own lords, but in the major Spanish expeditions they were more usually forced to help, and over-exploited until they died. After the fall of Tenochtitlan, when Alvarado went southwards he took with him three hundred Spaniards, but the effective bulk of his force consisted of nearly twenty thousand Indians, according to a native chronicler.³⁴ His journey by sea and land to Ecuador was effected by five hundred Spaniards, but they had with them three thousand Indian slaves from Guatemala. Valdivia’s first expedition into Chile, in 1540, consisted of only 150 Spaniards. It would nevertheless have been impossible without the indigenous guides and the one thousand native porters who went along.

The crucial help was, of course, that from military allies. Both against the Mexicas and the Incas the Spaniards were able to count on alliances with native peoples, who exploited the situation for their own purposes. The Inca Huascar expressed his support for Pizarro, and later his brother Manco also took the Spanish side. ‘If the Incas had not favoured the Spaniards’, commented a witness of the capture of Atahualpa, ‘it would have been impossible to win this kingdom.’³⁵ Allies supplied valuable information, acted as spies and scouts, recruited service helpers, and advised on questions of terrain and climate. A memorial from the people

of Huejotzingo in New Spain to Philip II in 1560 explains in detail how that city helped Cortés:

We took all our nobles and all of our vassals to aid the Spaniards. We helped them not only in warfare but also we gave them everything they needed. We fed and clothed them, we would go carrying in our arms and on our backs those whom they wounded in war or were simply very ill, and we did all the tasks in preparing for war. And it was we who worked so that they could conquer the Mexica with boats; we gave them the wood and pitch with which the Spaniards made the boats.³⁶

Above all, the Indian allies fought. Their substantial numbers invariably tipped the balance of a contest in favour of the Spaniards. Cortés made his first recorded use of Indian auxiliaries in the assault on Tlaxcala in September 1519, when in addition to his own men he had the help of four hundred men from Cempoala and three hundred from Ixtacmaxtitlan. By the time that Cortés undertook the siege of Tenochtitlan in 1521, he was as we have seen helped by a vast army that made the fall of the Mexican capital inevitable. Meanwhile, he had gained the aid of an unexpected ally: a smallpox epidemic, which reached the city after having devastated Hispaniola in 1519. Thousands died, enough to affect the Mexica battle capacity. 'When the plague lessened somewhat', the Nahuatl chronicler reported, 'the Spaniards came back. They had been gone two hundred days. And the people of Xaltocan, Quauhtitlan, Tenanyocan, Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, and Coyoacan all entered in here.'³⁷

At the siege the massed ranks of the Tlaxcalan allies sang; 'Aid our lords, those who dress in iron, they are besieging the city, they are besieging the Mexican nation, let us go forward with courage!'³⁸ The message that Marina gave to the Mexicas after the great siege of Tenochtitlan had commenced was unequivocal. They should hand over Cuauhtemoc, they should cease fighting. 'Here', she said, pointing to the Indians who accompanied the Spaniards, 'are the rulers of Tlaxcala, Huejotzingo, Cholula, Chalco, Acolhuacan, Cuernavaca, Xochimilco, Mizquic, Cuitlahuac, and Culhuacan.'³⁹ Should the Mexicas attempt to resist such a powerful alliance of enemies? In later years, the native allies did not fail the Spaniards. We have seen that Tlaxcalan soldiers took part in Alvarado's march to Guatemala in 1524, and six years later they aided Nuño de Guzmán in western Mexico.⁴⁰ Almagro's expedition to Chile in 1535 was made possible by the twelve thousand Andean war-

riors he took with him from the area of Cusco and Charcas. Gonzalo Pizarro's venture to the Amazon turned out to be ill-fated, but its preparation had been made possible by ten thousand natives who accompanied him from Quito. In one combat in Chile in 1576 two thousand natives aided the thirty Spaniards; in another in 1578 one thousand natives supported the Spaniards.⁴¹ Three thousand Tlaxcalans joined Cortés's expedition to Honduras in 1524.

The Spanish campaigns, it is clear, were made possible only by massive help from native Americans, who were rightly proud of their contribution. Like the original Spaniards, the Tlaxcalan lords after the conquest enjoyed the right to title themselves 'conquistador'. But conquest was always incomplete. There were obviously territories, principally in the Caribbean, that were taken over wholly by the newcomers because the indigenous population ceased to exist. Throughout the mainland, by contrast, Spaniards rarely 'conquered' more than a limited area where they could survive, usually on the coasts or in a focal centre, such as the Nahuatl and Inca cities. Beyond these areas they found it difficult to subjugate the natives, and continued for generations in an uneasy relationship with vast unconquered areas of America. Many regions remained free of Spanish control simply because the Spaniards had had no reason to intrude. For example, when Pizarro's envoys were making their way from Cajamarca to Cusco there were tribes that did not consider it necessary to impede them, so they were left alone; 'and so', as the tribes stated later, 'nobody came to this region to conquer it, because no resistance was ever offered'.⁴² Literally and legally, they were never conquered; they did not feel, therefore, that they should be treated as a conquered people.