

Explaining the Conquests
from Peter Bakewell, *A History of Latin America*, pp. 96-100

The period of the major military conquests by the Spanish, roughly 1520-40, must rank as the most tumultuous twenty years in the history of the Americas. Never before or since can so many lives have been so thoroughly shaken. The Spaniards' actions may be admired or deplored; but those on both sides of that moral question continue to be fascinated by them, and by the manner of their execution. How could so few dispose of so many? Why did such mighty political structures collapse at what, comparatively speaking, was a mere touch?

The answers are many, and no generally accepted ranking exists of their importance. Any list must, though, include the Spaniards' technological advantages. Their steel swords and steel-tipped pikes were more durable and generally more damaging than any hand-held weapon that they faced. Swords and long pikes probably gave them a greater advantage in close combat than even firearms provided. The guns, both the few light cannon and the more numerous arquebuses that they had, were slow to reload. The alarm caused by their noise and smoke may well have been of greater effect than the injuries inflicted by the shot. But even this scare value was transient; after the first few encounters, native warriors grew used to gunfire. More fearsome were clearly the Spaniards' animals of war: large mastiffs, used especially in the islands to pursue and bring down foes; and, of course, horses--"The mighty horse, which, with mounted man, a monstrous beast appeared, six footed." The Mexicans, lacking large domestic animals, were particularly awed by these, and tended to regard them as touched by the divine. Horses gave the invaders the tremendous advantage of height in combat; riders could strike down on the Indians. After battle, horses enabled pursuit at speeds unknown to the native people. (Though hardly martial creatures, pigs should not be omitted here. Live pigs carried aboard ship, then driven along with the conquering bands, provided the Spaniards with protein in a familiar form.) Finally, the invaders had the great advantage over the natives of being able to move themselves and their equipment over water with ease and relatively great speed. Ocean-going ships were fundamental to the expansion of conquest. And in the particular case of the Aztec contest, the ingenious building of brigantines for use on the lake was central to Spanish success.

The Spanish also had the advantage of better battle tactics. Native attacks were mainly mass charges, whereas the Spaniards fought in disciplined ranks, with pikes facing forward. As the first Indians fell before these, the efforts of men behind them were blocked. Again, and more telling, at least in Mexico, the two sides fought with different purposes: the Spaniards to kill, the Aztecs to take prisoners for sacrifice.

Then there were contrasts of strategy. The Spaniards developed in the islands the practice of the knock-out blow; they aimed from the start to destroy whatever central command the opposition might possess. First, of course, it was essential to identify and locate this authority; hence in part

Cortés's and Pizarro's long delays on the coast before their inland advances, as they probed as best they could the politics of their targets. Once the goal was in view, the invaders acted with a purposeful directness that the native side usually lacked, or did not develop until it was too late.

Another, connected, political aim was to identify the enemy's internal foes, to find the strains in the political structure. Cortés was possibly the most adept at this of all conquistadores; but to play native rivals off against each other was the aim of all Spanish leaders. Even Pedro de Alvarado - not, to judge by his performance in Tenochtitlan in May 1520, the most subtle of them - managed it with great success in 1524 against political calculators contending Maya groups in his conquest of Guatemala. In Peru, Pizarro did not receive as much active native aid as Cortés in Mexico. But he benefited greatly from the enmity between Atahualpa and Huascar, contenders for the Inca throne. Huascar's base and support were in Cuzco; Atahualpa's in Quito, far to the north. Pizarro's force came on the scene as Atahualpa, prevailing in the war of succession, was advancing south toward Cuzco. Even after his capture by the Spaniards, Atahualpa was able to order Huascar executed. Consequently, Huascar's followers tended to see Pizarro, if not as a friend, at least as the enemy of their enemy; and did not resist the Spaniards' further advance into Peru. At least two Andean ethnic groups, moreover, did fight with the Spaniards against Inca resistance, avenging, as they saw it, earlier defeat and humiliation by Cuzco. These were the Chachapoyas people of northern Peru, and the Huanca of the center. Again, in 1534, Pizarro's lieutenant Belalcazar, campaigning to subdue Quito, which remnants of Atahualpa's forces still controlled, found an active ally there in the Canyari Indians. These had suffered severely at Atahualpa's hands. Like parallel groups in Mexico resentful of the Aztecs, they fought now for the Spanish "with savage glee. "

To these quite concrete advantages of weapons, native supporters, tactics, and strategy enjoyed by the Spanish must be added intangibles of psychology, especially of the Indian perception of the invaders. One of the most tantalizing questions about the Aztec defeat is whether, as some sources report, Moctezuma took the Spanish as agents of the man-god Quetzalcoatl, who, legend had it, had departed eastward from Mexico several centuries before, promising he would return to claim the land as his inheritance. The year of Cortés's arrival was, by some accounts, the appointed date. Similar predictions were made by several other native cultures that the Spanish would overcome. It is possible, even likely, that such stories were post-conquest inventions of the vanquished, intended to explain, or explain away, their defeats. Nonetheless, often enough the Spanish were ascribed some degree of divinity when they first appeared. This is no surprise. The native cultures they overcame generally did not make any solid distinction between the earthly and the divine. The Spanish, unfamiliar in appearance and speech, possessing ships, guns, and horses, acting in unconventional and mysterious ways, were good candidates for some measure of deification. This made wariness in treating them still more advisable; hesitation thus plagued native decisions about dealing with the invasions.

Enormous advantages may have come to the Spaniards simply because they acted, unwittingly, so unconventionally. War in Mexico, for instance, was ruled by protocol. Foes announced their

coming attacks, sending ambassadors. The Spanish did not. Wars did not begin in the late summer, the time of harvest. Cortés started his march on Tenochtitlan in August. Splendid gifts of the sort that Moctezuma kept sending to Cortés were intended to convey Aztec wealth and power, and hence to dismay the enemy. The Spaniards were simply drawn onward by them. There was no apparent reason why the Spaniards should attack. Mexicans understood war as a contest between the populations of cities, who fought to gain tribute, and captives to be offered to the gods. The Spanish, men of no city, had no place in such a pattern. They sought not to capture, but to kill; and from there to proceed to absolute domination, a notion alien to Mexicans. For all these reasons, and others, it is possible that Moctezuma made the ultimately fatal mistake of letting the Spanish into Tenochtitlan simply because confusion prevented him from conceiving how dangerous they were. In South America, the Incas suffered from similarly fatal misapprehensions. One was that no serious threat could come from the coast. Atahualpa had no precedent to warn him of the possibility of reinforcement over the sea. The sea, conversely, had always seemed a limit to the possible power of the coast. The Incas' world, the territory of their empire, was the Andes. That, with few exceptions, was where redoubtable enemies were. Pizarro, approaching up the mountain slopes from the Pacific, was not ignored, but tolerated, even seen as entering a trap. But the disaster befell the trappers, not the intended victim.

The conquests, then, give the impression that the native peoples (especially, perhaps, the advanced ones) were at a greater psychological than technological disadvantage. They simply could not comprehend quickly enough the threat that suddenly confronted them. Patterns of behavior and thought military, religious, political--bound them to an inadequate set of responses to the new, exotic challenge. There were, naturally, some exceptions, especially in more immediately practical matters. The Aztecs learned to avoid cannon fire by running in zig-zags rather than straight lines; they tried, with some success, to destroy horses by digging pits lined with sharp stakes. Going further still, the Inca leader Manco by 1536 had learned to ride a captured horse in battle. But at the deeper, vital level of understanding the invaders, their actions, and their aims, the native leaders largely failed. Their responses to invasion were therefore slow, hesitant, and confused. The Spanish did not understand the native cultures either, of course, in any profound sense--the intricacies of Aztec religion, or of Inca succession, for example. But they had little need to do so. The simplicity of their purpose (kill, take booty, and above all seize the center) gave their efforts a focus that the opposition lacked. Their technological superiority, in weapons, methods of fighting, and transport, enabled them to realize their purpose. The Spanish had the immense advantage of being on new ground. In total contrast to the Indians, they were away from the familiar surroundings that restrained or conditioned action. Here is another of the liberties that Spaniards found in the New World.

Historians have commonly, and properly, seen much that is medieval in the organization and practice of Spanish exploration and conquest. A clear example is Cortés's exploitation in 1519 of the traditional prerogatives of Spanish towns to bolster his own political and legal position. But in a broader sense the leading conquistadores seem fully men of the Renaissance, imitating, if unconsciously, the political style of Ferdinand: pragmatic, subordinating means to ends, agile

extemporizers rather than servants of tradition. The same contrast between incisive invaders and bemused non-Europeans recurred time and again over the following three or more centuries as the European expansion proceeded. The Spanish were simply the first to bring what proved to be the terrible weapon of empiricism to bear on non-European cultures--the empiricism that was one of the enduring mental products of the late Renaissance.

The conquests, especially those on the mainland, need therefore a many-sided explanation. The native states were certainly populous, but their peoples were not united. The states existed as structures sustained by many counter-acting tensions. If only a few of these strains were altered, the whole edifice tottered. The native people managed to blunt some parts of the Spanish technical edge; but in aggregate that edge remained throughout a crucial advantage. Above all, the invaders brought an advantage in mentality, one that allowed them to apply their technical superiority to maximum effect, and which, more importantly, overtaxed native powers of adaptability. The Spaniards acted and fought in ways that broke the American rules; the Indians could not decipher and absorb the new, alien rules quickly enough to save themselves.

Still, when all the explaining is done, the conquests remain a conundrum. The overwhelming of the Aztecs and the Incas remains an amazing, barely credible, feat; to be wondered at, if not approved. Despite the flaws in native polities, the Spaniards often found themselves fighting vastly larger forces. How could several thousand Tlaxcalans, for instance, fail to crush Cortés's few hundred by simple weight of numbers? Time after time, the Spanish escaped being crushed, though they were sometimes badly bruised. Each escape, each campaign, seems a close-run thing when seen in isolation. Failure seems an imminent possibility in nearly every case. Yet failure never came. And if the period of military conquest is regarded as a whole, an opposing view emerges: one of the inexorability of Spanish advance. On the ceiling of the Hospicio Cabafias in Guadalajara, the modern Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco shows Cortés as a man-machine, a striding figure of steel with great bolts for its joints. Perhaps he had in mind the post-conquest vision that the Mexica retained of the Spaniards' entry into Tenochtitlan in 1519: "some came all in iron; they came turned into iron; they came gleaming." Certainly, nothing could convey more dramatically than Orozco's picture the relentlessness of Spanish advance through the Indies that the story of the conquests as a whole conveys.

The contrast between looming failure in particular campaigns and broad success in the conquest as a whole is perhaps a false one. Every disaster avoided, and every threat finessed, reinforced in the Spanish an energizing sense of the rightness of their actions, fortified by the belief that God blessed their enterprise; that, indeed, they were enacting divine will. And as among the conquistadores this belief in divine justification grew, so among the natives sureness of their cause, of their gods' power, indeed of their understanding of the universe and its workings, dwindled. This shifting balance of confidence was the invaders' final advantage.