

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 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....

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.