The Shortcomings of the Aztec Empire During the Spanish Conquest

Although both sides of the conflict between the Aztec Empire and the Spanish Conquistador suffered similar losses, the Conquistadors were able to defeat the Aztecs and claim them as a part of New Spain. The naivety of the Aztec King Motecuhzoma, also called Montezuma by the Spanish, led the Spanish to be able to march into the city unopposed. The death of King Motecuhzoma sparked the beginning of many Aztec leaders to die in the conflict. The technology of the Aztecs was not created to combat gunpowder weapons or large projectiles. The Spaniards had also endured plagues and diseases. They knew how to treat the diseases they carried, the Aztecs did not and were decimated by an outbreak in the city. The Aztec Empire lost to the Conquistadors due to a combination of the lack of consistent, central leadership, a lower level of technology, and disease.

The Aztec leader Motecuhzoma presented the Spaniards with gifts many times before they arrived at the city of Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards thanked him for such offerings and requested to meet with him face to face. When the messengers he sent to greet the Spanish informed him of this, he desired to flee the city and evade the people he considered to be gods. He called together a group of trusted counselors to discuss what he would do and they advised him on places he could hide. After deciding on the location he would prefer to hide in, he “lost his strength and his spirit, and could do nothing” to try to hide so he resolved to wait for the Spaniards to arrive (León-Portilla 35-36). Many times, Motecuhzoma tried sending magicians to either halt the advance of the Spaniards or to harm them in some way. One party of magicians returned from their mission before reaching the Spanish and reported to Motecuhzoma that they had seen a god and that he revealed to them the fate of the city. The vision the party had seen was of Tenochtitlan in flames. Motecuhzoma became distressed and asked the magicians “[w]hat help is there now, my friends? Is there a mountain for us to climb? Should we run away? We are Mexicanos: would this bring any glory to the Mexican nation?” (León-Portilla 54). Twice Motecuhzoma mentions leaving the city to evade confrontation with the Spaniards they considered to be gods.

Upon reaching Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards took Motecuhzoma hostage. While imprisoned, Motecuhzoma still made attempts to maintain his role as the king of Mexico. The Spaniards arrived in the city before the fiesta of Huitzilopochtli. The citizens of Tenochtitlan wished to honor this tradition and sent a delegation of representatives to the place Motecuhzoma was imprisoned and asked for permission to carry on with the fiesta. He granted permission and the people set to work on the preparations. When the festival began, the Spanish attacked the celebrants. When the Aztecs heard of the attack on the temple, they began to fight against the Spanish. Motecuhzoma sent a messenger to the temple to tell the Aztecs “[w]e must not fight them. We are not their equals in battle. Put down your shields and arrows… We are not strong enough to defeat them. Stop fighting and return to your homes.” to which they responded “[w]ho is Motecuhzoma to give us orders? We are no longer his slaves” (León-Portilla 78). Motecuhzoma was losing his control as the king of Mexico. During the battle against the Spaniards, Motecuhzoma tried one more time to convince the Aztecs to cease fighting, “but they cursed him and shouted that he was a traitor to his country” (León-Portilla 90). The Aztecs turned on Motecuhzoma and he lost complete control over the country. They no longer recognized him as their leader.

After the death of Motecuhzoma, the Aztecs did not have a single, central leader for the duration of the conquest of Mexico. Before the arrival of the Spanish, Motecuhzoma demanded an audience with his brother, his nephew, and the other nobles. His brother and the other nobles warned him not to welcome the strangers into the city because “[t]hey will cast you out of it and overthrow your rule, and when you try to recover what you have lost, it will be too late” (León-Portilla 61). During the fight against the Spaniards, while Motecuhzoma was the king, the Aztec nobility struggled against the will of Motecuhzoma, which was to not fight back against the Spanish. After his death, a new king was elected. Many of their leaders served until their deaths due to plague or conflict with the Spanish. Disheartened by the events of the conquest, the last Aztec king, Cuauhtemoc, surrendered to the Spaniards and ended the siege of Tenochtitlan claiming “you have already destroyed my city and killed my people” (León-Portilla 61).

Motecuhzoma was not prepared to, nor did he intend to, fight back against the Spaniards. He welcomed them into the city without suspecting ill intentions from them. According to *The Broken Spears*, he believed they were the Aztec gods returning to the city and offered the city back to the gods. According to *The Conquest of New Spain*, Motecuhzoma invited the Spaniards into the city and introduced them to the Aztec religion when they asked him to. The Spaniards challenged the Aztec gods, to which Motecuhzoma took great offense and expelled them from the temple. After being welcomed into the city by the king, the Spanish took advantage of the hospitality of their hosts and ambushed them many times before being driven out and being forced to resupply and replenish the army. Because of the political climate of Europe, the Spanish had improved their technology to enforce control over the lands the conquered and to capture and increase the lands they owned while the Aztecs focused more on the traditions of their ancestors.

Cortes and his men arrived in Mexico bearing technology that was unfamiliar to the Aztecs, as well as more advanced. The Spanish crossed the Atlantic in ships, which the Aztecs referred to as “towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea” (León-Portilla 13). The Aztec’s knowledge of waterborne vessels consisted of canoes. The Spanish possessed many longer-range weapons and projectiles. The Spanish used firearms which, when fired, frightened Motecuhzoma’s messengers into fainting on the Spanish ship. The Spanish also had cannons and catapults which were used during the siege of Tenochtitlan. The main method of combat for the Aztecs was hand-to-hand, guerrilla warfare. The Aztecs had javelins and slings to use for long range, but they mainly relied on shields and macanas, which were “a sort of flattened club edged with sharp pieces of obsidian” (León-Portilla 126). The shield was the extent of the Aztecs’ armor. The Aztecs described the Spaniards as iron-clad: “[t]heir trappings and arms are all made of iron. They dress in iron and wear iron casques on their heads. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron” (León-Portilla 30). Inside one of Motecuhzoma’s houses was an armory containing many close-quarters weapons which were recorded by the Spanish after being admitted into the city. These weapons included “shields large and small, and a sort of broadsword, and two-handed swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords, and lances longer than ours, with five foot blades consisting of many knives. Even when these are driven at a buckler or a shield they are not deflected. In fact they cut like razors,” (Díaz 228). The Aztecs engaged mainly in melee combat, not in long range the way the Spaniards did. The Spaniards were able to fire on the Aztecs from their ships and the Aztecs could return fire, but not with the same destructive effect of the cannons or catapults. The Aztecs were not equipped to treat any European diseases. They had never encountered the Europeans and were unable to build any immunity, cure, or vaccinate against the diseases of which the Spanish could be carriers.

The Spaniards won initial battles, but the Aztecs won subsequent battles and drove the Spanish out of the city temporarily, though they were convinced the Spanish would not return. After the Spaniards retreated from Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs repaired the temples and celebrated their holidays as they would have normally. Shortly after the celebration, a plague of small pox broke out in Tenochtitlan. The plague “lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people” (León-Portilla 92-93). Aztecs died due to the disease itself and due to starvation. Many people were too weak and in too much pain to move and were unable to feed themselves. The soldiers were weakened and some blinded by the plague. When Cortes returned to Tenochtitlan with reinforcements, he laid siege to the plague-weakened city and the Aztecs surrendered eighty days later.

The Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish Conquistadors because of a combination of inconsistent leadership on the Aztecs’ side, the higher level of technology the Spanish possessed, and disease that the Spanish brought to the city. The leadership of Motecuhzoma once the Spanish arrived became weaker the more the Spanish attacked the citizens of Tenochtitlan. He quickly lost control of the population. The difference in the styles of weaponry also aided the Spanish in defeating the Aztecs. The Aztecs were accustomed to fighting with swords and clubs while the Spanish fought with firearms and wore armor. The Spanish brought small pox with them from Europe and the Aztecs had no immunity to it. Many of the Aztecs died to small pox and crippled many of the survivors.

Works Cited

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