The Tale of Two Contradicting Societies

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History 100

November 15, 2016

On November 8, 1519, the Aztec Empire peacefully welcomed to their land a small group of men that later implemented the destruction of their what seemed to be a stable, indestructible empire. This group of men, led by Don Hernando Cortes, overpowered a society of high military power, proving the motivating influence of the underdog by the surrender of the Aztec capital on August 13, 1521. Through *The Broken Spears* by Miguel Leon-Portilla, accounts of the fall of the Aztec Empire are presented through the perspective of the Aztecs; contrary to that text, in *The* *Conquest of New Spain* by Bernal Diaz, the perspective of the Spaniards is presented, creating a better understanding of each point of view on the fall of the empire. Through these sources, and others, it has been demonstrated the implementation of this destruction was facilitated by the exposure of the strengths of the underdogs, the Spaniards, and the weaknesses of the military titleholders, the Aztecs. The foundation of the ability for the Spaniards to conquer the greatly populated and largely rehearsed militaristic empire, was made possible by the religious beliefs of the two societies, the allies of the Spaniards, the spread of disease throughout the Aztec empire, and the capture of Montezuma.

Religion in 16th century was not proven to always be a main influential factor in conflict in Europe; instead, it was a justification. However, in contrast to that, religion was one main factor that facilitated the fall of the Aztec Empire in 1521. The religious beliefs of the Aztecs and the Spaniards proved to be contradicting. In Ross Hassig’s *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest,* he states that, “the conquest was also a conflict waged by Christians and non-Christians” (Hassig 12). The Spaniards were strong minded Christians that believed sacrifice to gods was considered evil and that conversion was necessary; and, contrary to that, the Aztecs were polytheistic, non-Christians that performed sacrificial rituals. Evil described these sacrificial rituals in the minds of the Spaniards. This only provoked and encouraged the Spaniards to conquer the Aztec Empire. Their minds were motivated religiously in the sense of conversion, but justified politically. It is stated that “Cortes’ aim in forcing even superficial religious conversions was primarily political, both to justify his actions to the Spanish throne and to cement his alliances in Mexico” (Hassig 75). The religious motivations and beliefs, and the action of conversion, in the conquest of the Spaniards, was legally justifiable through their war with the Aztecs. Therefore, at first, the contradicting religious background and beliefs of the Spaniards and the Aztecs was at first a legal precursor for the Spaniards to intrude upon the Aztecs. However, the polytheistic religion of the Aztec empire blinded them from the true intentions of the Spaniard men. The majority of the Aztec empire worshiped “a whole pantheon of separate deities” (Portilla xliii). However, in *The Broken Spears,* a class of wise men named the tlamantine supported the belief of only one God; however, this God was still worshiped under multiple names. Therefore, the Spaniards still viewed the Aztecs as a completely polytheistic nation. (Portilla xliii). The aspect of this polytheistic nation that the Spaniards viewed as completely evil were the sacrifices to their gods, that were encouraged through their religious beliefs. Through David Carrasco’s book, “City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization”, it is stated that “Aztec settlements in particular were organized around ceremonial complexes, which served as theaters for many kinds of performances, including the ritual slaughter of humans and animals” (Carrasco 1). A scaring fact that was also presented in this text, was that over one-third of women and children in the Aztec empire were sacrificed (Carrasco 3). These rituals were motivated by the need for the Aztecs to communicate with their gods, and the need to receive the social and political benefits from them (Carrasco 3). Portilla presents a scene in *The Broken Spears* involving Montezuma sending his Spaniard captives to be sacrificed right in front of Cortes and his men. Thus, a city organized around sacrifice and a king that killed their own people in front of them, would only motivate a societal group such as the Spaniards to conquer even more. The religious beliefs of the Aztec’s blind-sided them from noticing danger walk into their territory. Don Hernando Cortes and his men were mistaken for the gods of the Aztec religion. In *The Broken Spear,* it is presented that:

“The Aztecs […] thought the strangers were Quetzalcoatl and other gods returning from over the sea, while the Spaniards- despite their amazement at the splendors of Tenochtitlan- considered the Aztecs barbarians and thought only of seizing their riches and of forcing them to become Christians and Spanish subjects” ( Portilla xxxiii).

This quote presents how due to the religious beliefs of the Aztecs, they were blinded from realizing whom the Spaniards truly were and that their intentions were to conquer; and, also, it presents how the obliviousness of the Aztecs did not discourage the mission of their conquest, rather it accelerated it. The contradicting religious beliefs of the Spaniards and the Aztec’s encouraged and justified the acts of the Spaniards; however, inhibited the success of the Aztecs.

The religious motivations of the Spaniards were supported by the alliances the Spaniards formed throughout their journey. Don Hernando Cortes formed alliances with native tribes in Mexico to take the attention of the true intention and conquest of him and his men. The manipulation of these tribes convinced them to fight with each other, rather than fight the Spaniards. Cortes tried to stay on the “good side” of these tribes to keep a low profile as him and his troops journeyed through Mexico. The Tlaxcaltecas and the Cempohuallans are two examples of the alliances made by Cortes and his men during their journey. The Spaniards arrived in Tlaxcala and were informed that Cholula was a native tribe full of brave people similar to the Aztecs and that they were the Aztec’s friends (Portilla 40). They decided to march with the Tlaxcaltecas to Cholula which resulted in the massacre of Cholula. After this occurrence, the Spaniards took advantage of these alliances and made sure the accomplices did not leave their side, because of the underlying worry that the tribe will make another alliance with someone else. Therefore, after the massacre of Cholula, “the Spanish troops and the Tlaxcaltecas marched out in good military order” (Portilla 43). Another alliance formed was the Spaniards and the Cempohuallans. This alliance was formed through the Spaniards volunteering soldiers and military weapons to help them against Tizapantzinco, a native tribe that’s Aztec barrack was destroying their crops (Hassig 74). This decision took a lot of thought on Cortes’s part because of his fear of tarnishing their friendship with the Totonacs by isolating the Aztecs (Hassig 74). This action paved the alliance formed between the Spaniards and the Cempohuallans and created a dependence on the Spaniards. Thus, from this, “Cortes took advantage of the dependence on the Spaniards to increase the division between the Aztecs and the Totonacs and simultaneously to tie Cempohullan’s rulers to him” (75). The Spaniards schemed their alliances to better themselves through military power, and degrade their enemy, the Aztecs, through slight exploitations of their own alliances. The manipulation of the native tribes was a tactic of Cortes that helped facilitate the conquering of the Aztec Empire.

Another aspect of the foundation on which the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs, was the spread of disease throughout the Aztec Empire. The disease that spread throughout the empire was small pox. Small pox was an uncommon disease to Central Mexico and its surrounding areas; therefore, there was no immunity to this disease implemented into their society. Ross Hassig, author of *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* describes the disease cycle of small pox as a twelve-day incubation period, a three to five-day period of fevers and aches, an eight-day period of rash, followed by a six-day cycle of the scabbing and falling off of the rash, then the fever would return. The cycle takes twenty-six days to be completed; however, if serious enough to result in death this occurs in the last four or five days of the twenty-six-day cycle (Hassig 124). This disease “reached the valley of Mexico after mid- October, lasted about sixty to seventy days in Tenochtitlan, and burned itself out by early December” (Hassig 124). From this outburst, “some 40 percent of the population of central Mexico died within the year” (124). There were mild cases of this disease however, that resulted in sores on their skin and even left some survivors completely blind (Portilla 93). This factor of luck helped out Cortes and the Spaniards by creating a weakness upon the Aztec Empire. The spread of the disease did strike the alliances of Cortes; however, it did not affect his military power and strength “because proportionality, the same number died everywhere” (Hassig 130). Therefore, the amount of people that would’ve died in the allied tribes would have matched the amount that died for the Aztecs. However, in favor of Cortes, Tenochtitlan was in confusion from the two royal successions that occurred with in the span of eighty days due to small pox. (Hassig 130). Due, to this fact, Cortes found more motivation to make his move.

A tactical factor of the foundation of the conquest was Cortes’ action to capture Montezuma. The reasoning for the confrontation of Cortes and Montezuma sparked from Cortes’ inquiry that Montezuma told his warriors and people to attack his people during the assacre of Cholula. Because of this verbal accusation, Cortes tells Montezuma, “Everything will be forgiven, provided you will now come quietly with us to our quarters, and make no protest” (Castillo 246). Montezuma is then kept in captivity in a palace where he is fully served and accounted for. From this captivity Cortes turned Montezuma’s own people against him. He did this by asking favors of Montezuma in a religious sense. Cortes asked Montezuma to stop his daily human sacrifices, yet he did not do this. Thus, he and his captains begged of Montezuma to remove the gods from their temples and place a cross instead. He didn’t completely go for this idea at first, but eventually they negotiated and “after a good deal of discussion [the] altar was set up some distance from their accursed idols with great reverence and thanks to God from all of [them]” (Castillo 276). This religious movement through Montezuma’s captivity foreshadowed just the beginning of the conquering of the Spaniards on the Aztec Empire.

The largely populated, strongly militaristic Aztec Empire was conquered by the handful of Spaniards that were so nicely welcomed into Mexico on November 8, 1519. The Spaniards exposed the weaknesses of the Aztec Empire and took advantage of the opportunities and strengths. The misconception of Cortes and his men and the spread of small pox throughout the Aztec Empire were two of the weaknesses that were exposed; and, in contrast, the strengths of the Spaniards were military tactics such as the manipulations of the native tribes and the capture of Montezuma. Through the exposure of the strengths and weakness of these two societies, it is now clear how the handful of Spaniards conquered the Aztec Empire.

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