

Manipulation and the Conquest of New Spain

The Columbian Exchange - an encounter that altered the fate of the rest of human existence, is described in both The Conquest of New Spain, an account by Spanish explorer, Bernal Diaz, and The Broken Spears, an account from the native point of view. Described in The Broken Spears, “It was the first direct encounter between one of the most extraordinary pre-Columbian cultures and the strangers who would eventually destroy it” (Leon-Portilla, XXV). After comparing the two novels, it is apparent that the primary advantage the Spanish had over the Aztecs was their use of manipulation in conquering the empire. The Spanish were able to conquer the Aztecs because the conquistadors had a number of unbeatable advantages including their manipulation of cultural differences, spread of disease, and use of weaponry.

The Aztecs were faced with many disadvantages before the Spanish explorers even placed a foot on Aztec land, but their initial reaction to the coming of these foreign people truly set the tone for the overall taking of the Aztec people. With no recollection or idea of who or what these foreign people were, it would be expected to initially believe that these Spanish explorers were actually Quetzalcoatl, or Gods of the Aztec people. The attitude of the Aztecs in the coming of their god, is best shown when Motecuhzoma says, “He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed” (Leon-Portilla, 23). They brought these strangers gifts, and came with an attitude of reverence, already submitting themselves to the fate of the Spanish. This initial attitude set the tone for what eventually led to complete submission of Spanish control. When they honored these “strangers” as inhuman, spiritual figures that required respect, they immediately accepted Spanish authority. This act showed the Spanish people that the Aztecs

could easily be manipulated, and it would be very easy to use their cultural differences to divide and eventually conquer them.

Not only did their view of the Spanish as gods affect their relationship, but the Spanish's ability to use their religion to control the Aztec people also led to the successful Spanish conquest of Mexico. It is well known that the Spanish came over not only with a goal to find gold, but also to spread the Christian religion and convert the native people. For example, Cortes used the act of submitting to the Christian religion a requirement to forming a friendly relationship, and exhibited this when he told them, "if they wished to be our brothers they must throw their idols out of this temple, for they were very evil and led them astray" (Cohen, 62). He was specifically successful in the baptism of Prince Ixtlilxochitl of Tezcoco, who was even able to convince, or more of force, his mother to abandon all ways of their previous religious doctrine and be baptised in the Christian faith. In this forceful quote by the prince himself, it demonstrates the willingness of the Aztec people to comply with the Spanish conquistadors, and overall accept the idea of Spanish dominance. After a conversation with her son, the prince's mother says tells him "he must have lost his mind to let himself be won over so easily by that handful of barbarians, the conquistadors", and he replies telling her "she would receive the sacrament, even against her will, because nothing was important except the life of the soul" (Leon-Portilla, 60). Sharing the same religion says a lot about the future relationship of this village and the conquistadors, and further plays into the fact that the Spanish had an authority over the Aztecs, which contributed to the way they asserted their control over the empire.

Another aspect in which religion played into the conquering of the Aztecs, was their complete trust in their god to protect them from the enemy. This total confidence that their gods

would save them was a major factor in the immediate fall of some of the earliest villages in the conquest. This belief is best demonstrated in this quote: “their faith in the idol was so complete that they believed it would ravage their enemies with the fire and thunder of heaven, and drown them in a vast flood of water” (Leon-Portilla, 60). They continued to shout insults, and wait for their gods to save their village, even saying, “Let the strangers come! We will see if they are so powerful! Our god Quetzalcoatl is here with us, and they can never defeat him” (Leon-Portilla, 60). Their confidence, lack of preparation, and lack of retaliation, all led to the final conquering of these villages by the much more aggressive and barbarian Spanish.

The success of the Spanish had to do with more than just cultural differences between these two groups, but also biological differences, specifically the effect of an intermingling of two different types of people. The Spanish interference with the Aztec population began to take a physical toll on the people as the spread of illness threatened to wipe out their kind. In Leon Portilla’s interpretation he talks about the eruption of a plague that changed the power of the Aztec civilization, “A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved in their beds” (Leon-Portilla, 98-99). This collision of cultures led to the decline of the Aztec population, and not only lessened their numbers, but overall weakened their civilization, yet again making them inferior to the Spanish conquistadors. Though mentioned with less severity, even the Spanish account speaks of the spread of disease among the Indians when the author says, “One of Narvaez’ followers, a black man, was suffering from smallpox, and a severe epidemic spread among the Indians..” (Cohen, 202).

The most obvious factor that led to the success of the Spanish empire, were the tangible advantages they had over the Aztecs, such as weapons or horses, and their ability to manipulate these foreign objects to intimidate their enemy. There are countless times in both accounts where the author speaks of the indian's reaction to these devices. Beginning with the meeting between the messengers of Motecuhzoma and the Spanish, the explorers were using these weapons as a way to intimidate them, "...the great cannon was fired off. The messengers lost their senses and fainted away" (Leon-Portilla, 26). The introduction of these unknown devices assisted in making the explorers come off as inhuman figures and people to be feared. The Spanish continued to use this to their advantage, "Cortes pretended that he wished to speak to them and some other *Caciques* again, just before the cannon was fired. The two governors and the rest of the Indians were frightened by this strange happening.." (Cohen, 91). The fact that the Spanish used their guns and horses as a scare tactic is a testament to their method of intimidation and manipulation. The Spanish were able to outthink the Aztecs in this way, and play into their naive use of weaponry. This isn't to say that the Aztec nation did not put up a fair fight, the battle was brutal on both sides for sure, but the Aztecs surely did not play into the manipulation factor of war as much as the Spanish. This advantage was huge for the Spanish and was a huge contributor to their success.

A testament to why the Aztecs were conquered, were the motives behind the Spanish conquest, and the degree to which they were willing to go to achieve success. The Spanish arrived with the objective to find gold, spread their version of Christianity, and eventually conquer the land. It is obvious in the text of both books that the conquerors were extremely greedy, ruthless individuals with their primary goal being to make money. This attitude is best

demonstrated in the account from the indians, for their version includes a truer recount of the story. As soon as the foreigners were believed to be gods, they were treated with gifts, and proceeded to extract the gold from these offerings, exhibiting their greed for wealth. “The truth is that they longed and lusted for gold, their bodies swelled with greed, and their hunger ravenous; they hungered like pigs for that gold” (Leon-Portilla, 50). The reason this led to their success, was they generally had no intentions of befriending tribes, or living in harmony with these people. Both books have examples in which some tribes were considered friends, and lived in peace, but overall the attitudes of the Spanish constituted a ruthless greed for wealth, and complete control. They were tough, and had no respect for the Aztec people, even saying “You cannot deceive us; you cannot make fools of us. You cannot frighten us; you cannot blind our eyes..” This hostile tone and approach to the conquering of the Aztecs is something that led to their triumph.

The recounts of the conquest from opposing sides truly highlight the difference of attitude between the Aztecs and Spanish. The success of the Spanish comes down to one main tactic - manipulation. With an intelligent approach to the conquest, they were successfully able to use the cultural differences between them to work in their favor, including contrasting religious practices, weaponry, biological makeup, and even their motives of exploration. Though the Aztec civilization was able to physically fight back with strong and capable men, the Spanish outsmarted the empire and were able to assert their dominance, eventually taking the entire empire as New Spain.