A Living Legend: How Cortes and the Spaniards defeated the Aztec Empire

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At first glance, the conquest of New Spain was an odd victory for the Spaniards. Hundreds of thousands of Aztec warriors were defeated by a mere 600 Spanish warriors. The differences between the two groups were evident throughout both books. The Spaniards arrived for battle dressed in “glistening iron from head to foot” and with their dogs running ahead (Leon-Portilla 41). This presence struck fear into any opponent that crossed their path. The leadership and harshness displayed in battle by the Spaniards put the Aztecs at a disadvantage, for they were naïve and unaware of the cruelty the Spaniards were capable of. Their leadership was no match for Spain’s. The Spaniards were led by a fearless leader, Don Hernanado Cortes. Under his leadership, present-day Mexico, which was then New Spain, was confiscated from the Aztecs. The Aztec Empire and its populous army were mainly defeated by native allies, the leadership of Cortés, and diseases.

One thing that the Spaniards were significantly better at was forming allies. The copious Aztec tribes acted too independently of one another. Perhaps if had they joined forces rather than violently murdering one another, they would have had a better chance of keeping their homeland. An example of this was the *Massacre of Cholula,* when the Spaniards brutally murdered the Indians of Cholula. This massacre could have been brought on by the Cholula Indians showing force to Cortes, but the informants of Sahagun agreed that it was because the Tlaxcaltecas inspired the attack (Leon-Portilla 38). This is only one example of betrayal within the Aztec tribes, there were many more to follow because everyone was trying to save themselves. The Tlaxcaltecas feared for their lives after the Spaniards defeated the powerful Otomies, so they “joined with them as allies and even game them their daughters” (Leon-Portilla 39). This partnership gave the Spaniards an upper hand in battle because other tribes trusted the Tlaxcaltecas and they used that to stealth up on their victims. Becoming an ally provided protection for the Aztecs, which Cortes recorded in a list of rules given to the Spanish soldiers (Díaz 354). The fear that the Spaniards induced the Aztecs with combined with native alliances was a leading factor in the success of the Spaniards.

The Spanish warriors would attack a city and then destroy their temples and religious figures. This took a toll on the Aztecs because they thought their gods would reign down on those who threatened them. After noticing bad omens and seeing their temples get destroyed, they began to look for another religious entity. The conquistadors were so powerful that they convinced the Aztecs that they were “gods.” The Spaniards were so fearful and successful in conquest that people felt forced to follow them, like a godly figure. The people of Mexico were very cautious of how they treated these strange gods, such as delivering them gold to please them (Leon-Portilla 51). They would welcome them into their cities and allow them to feast with their families (Leon-Portilla 58). Cortes was very appreciative of their submission and his idea of a reward was teaching them about the Christian faith. For those who refused to convert, he would suggest punishment to their leaders. He proposed to Ixtlilxochitl to cut off his mother’s head after she refused to go with him to be baptized (Leon-Portilla 60). By converting them to Christianity he had a sort of ownership over them and he was their leader, which was another way that he conquered.

For those that were not as submissive, Cortes saw to it that they suffered. He was relentless in the pursuit to create allies that would benefit the conquest of New Spain. Anyone who got in his way would die a cruel, brutal death. As soon as the Spaniards conquered one city they would immediately move on to the next. This angered many of his soldiers because many of them were wounded and they feared that they were too weak to engage in battle so soon. However, Cortes had no fear and reassured them that their perseverance and courage would carry them to victory. The size of his army made no difference to him. A strategy often used by Cortes was to hold hostage or kill the leader of the city or district to create chaos among the people. He figured out that the people of the city were much easier to defeat without the presence of a unified voice directing them, as well as their warriors. Cortes used a number of intelligent techniques to attract, manipulate, and fool his enemies until they died in battle or surrendered.

The final prominent factor in the defeat of the Aztecs had nothing to do with combat. After the Spaniards left the city of Tenochtitlan, a terrible outbreak of Small Pox arrived. The outbreak lasted for seventy days and took the lives of many Aztecs. The victims of the disease were covered in painful sores that kept them from being able to move. People also died from starvation because others were too sick to go search for food or care for them in the slightest. Those with milder cases were scarred or lost their vision permanently (Leon-Portilla 93). The disease spread so easily that cases were reported from Cuatlan to Chalco. Small Pox weakened the power of cities and significantly reduced the populations of the affected cities. During this time, the Spaniards finally had an opportunity to strengthen themselves and were prepared for battle. This plague was a key part of the success of the Spaniards.

The Conquest of New Spain was remembered as one of the greatest takeovers of the Pre-Columbian era. It was remarkable how such a small army of Spaniards could besiege such a large army like the Aztecs. The reason for their success can be credited to their ability to form allies, Cortes’ fearless leadership, and the aftermath of a plague.

Bibliography

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