

Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire

Hernán Cortés de Monroy y Pizarro, 1st Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca

1485 – December 2, 1547) was a Spanish conquistador who led an expedition that caused the fall of the Aztec Empire and brought large portions of mainland Mexico under the rule of the King of Castile in the early 16th century. Cortés was part of the generation of Spanish colonizers that began the first phase of the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

Born in Medellín, Spain, to a family of lesser nobility, Cortés chose to pursue a livelihood in the New World. He went to Hispaniola and later to Cuba, where he received an encomienda and, for a short time, became alcalde (magistrate) of the second Spanish town founded on the island. In 1519, he was elected captain of the third expedition to the mainland, an expedition which he partly funded. His enmity with the Governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, resulted in the recall of the expedition at the last moment, an order which Cortés ignored. Arriving on the continent, Cortés executed a successful strategy of allying with some indigenous peoples against others. He also used a native woman, Doña Marina, as an interpreter; she would later bear Cortés a son. When the Governor of Cuba sent emissaries to arrest Cortés, he fought them and won, using the extra troops as reinforcements. Cortés wrote letters directly to the king asking to be acknowledged for his successes instead of punished for mutiny. After he overthrew the Aztec Empire, Cortés was awarded the title of Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, while the more prestigious title of Viceroy was given to a high-ranking nobleman, Antonio de Mendoza. Cortés returned to Spain in 1541 where he died peacefully but embittered six years later.

Because of the controversial undertakings of Cortés and the scarcity of reliable sources of information about him, it has become difficult to assert anything definitive about his personality and motivations. Early lionizing of the conquistadors did not encourage deep examination of Cortés. Later reconsideration of the conquistadors' character in the context of modern anti-colonial sentiment also did little to expand understanding of Cortés as an individual. As a result of these historical trends, descriptions of Cortés tend to be simplistic, and either damning or idealizing.

In 1518 Velázquez put him in command of an expedition to explore and secure the interior of

Mexico for colonization. At the last minute, due to the old gripe between Velázquez and Cortés, he changed his mind and revoked his charter. Cortés ignored the orders and went ahead anyway, in February 1519, in an act of open mutiny. Accompanied by about 11 ships, 500 men, 13 horses and a small number of cannons, he landed in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mayan territory.[7] There, he met Geronimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who had survived from a shipwreck and joined the troops.[7] Geronimo de Aguilar, a Franciscan priest, had learned Maya during his captivity, and could thus translate for Cortés. In March 1519, Cortés formally claimed the land for the Spanish crown. He stopped in Trinidad to hire more soldiers and obtain more horses. Then he proceeded to Tabasco and won a battle against the natives, who did not want to welcome the Spaniards, during which time he received from the vanquished twenty young indigenous women and he converted them all.[8] Among these women was La Malinche, his future mistress and mother of his child Martín. Malinche knew both the (Aztec) Nahuatl language and Maya, thus enabling Hernán Cortés to communicate in both. She became a very valuable interpreter and counselor. Through her help, Cortés learned from the Tabascans about the wealthy Aztec Empire and its riches.

In July 1519, his men took over Veracruz: by this act, Cortés dismissed the authority of the Governor of Cuba to place himself directly under the orders of Charles V.[7] In order to eliminate any ideas of retreat, Cortés scuttled his ships. In Veracruz, he met some of Moctezuma's tributaries and asked them to arrange a meeting with Moctezuma. Moctezuma repeatedly turned down the meeting, but Cortés was determined. Leaving a hundred men in Veracruz, Cortés marched on Tenochtitlan in mid-August 1519, along with 600 men, 15 horsemen, 15 cannons, and hundreds of indigenous carriers and warriors.[7] On the way to Tenochtitlan, Cortés made alliances with native American tribes such as the Nahuas of Tlaxcala, the Tlaxcaltec, who surrounded the Spanish and about 2,000 porters on a hilltop and the Totonacs of Cempoala. In October 1519, Cortés and his men, accompanied by about 3,000 Tlaxcalteca, marched to Cholula, the second largest city in central Mexico. Cortés, either in a pre-meditated effort to instill fear upon the Aztecs waiting for him at Tenochtitlan or (as he later claimed when under investigation) wishing to make an example when he feared native treachery, infamously massacred thousands of unarmed members of the nobility gathered at the central plaza, then partially burned the city.

By the time he arrived in Tenochtitlan the Spaniards had a large army. On November 8, 1519, they were peacefully received by the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma II, due to Mexican tradition and diplomatic customs. Moctezuma deliberately let Cortés enter the heart of the Aztec Empire, hoping to get to know their weaknesses better and to crush them later.[7] He gave lavish gifts in gold to the Spaniards which enticed them to plunder vast amounts of gold. In his letters to Charles V, Cortés claimed to have learned at this point that he was considered by the Aztecs to be either an emissary of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl or Quetzalcoatl himself — a belief which has been contested by a few modern historians.[9] But quickly Cortés learned that Spaniards on the coast had been attacked, and decided to take Moctezuma as a hostage in his own palace, requesting him to swear allegiance to Charles V.

Meanwhile, Velasquez sent another expedition, led by Pánfilo de Narváez, to oppose Cortés, arriving in Mexico in April 1520 with 1,100 men.[7] Cortés left 200 men in Tenochtitlan and took the rest to confront Narvaez. He overcame Narváez, despite his numerical inferiority, and convinced the rest of Narvaez's men to join him.[7] In Mexico, one of Cortés's lieutenants Pedro de Alvarado, committed a massacre in the Main Temple, triggering a local rebellion. Cortés speedily returned to Mexico and proposed an armistice, attempting to support himself on Moctezuma, but the latter was stoned to death by his subjects on July 1, 1520 and Cortés decided to flee for Tlaxcala. During the Noche Triste (30 June-1 July 1520), the Spaniards managed a narrow escape from Tenochtitlan across the causeway, while their backguard was being massacred. Much of the treasure looted by Cortés was lost (as well as his artillery) during this panicked escape from Tenochtitlán.[7] After a battle in Otumba, they managed to reach Tlaxcala, after having lost 870 men.[7] With the assistance of their allies, Cortés's men finally prevailed with reinforcements arriving from Cuba. Cortés began a policy of attrition towards the island city of Tenochtitlán cutting off supplies and subduing the Aztecs' allied cities thus changing the balance and organizing the siege of Tenochtitlán, destroying the city.

In January 1521, Cortés countered a conspiracy against him, headed by Villafana, who was hanged.[7] Finally, with the capture of Cuauhtémoc, the Tlatoani (ruler) of Tenochtitlán, on 13 August 1521, the Aztec Empire disappeared, and Cortés was able to claim it for Spain, thus renaming the city Mexico City. From 1521 to 1524, Cortés personally governed Mexico.[7]

Many historical sources have conveyed an impression that Cortés was unjustly treated by the Spanish Crown, and that he received nothing but ingratitude for his role in establishing New Spain. This picture is the one Cortés presents in his letters and in the later biography written by Gomara. However, there may be more to the picture than this. Cortés's own greed and vanity may have played a part in his deteriorating position with the king

"Cortés personally was not ungenerously rewarded, but he speedily complained of insufficient compensation to himself and his comrades. Thinking himself beyond reach of restraint, he disobeyed many of the orders of the Crown, and, what was more imprudent, said so in a letter to the emperor, dated October 15, 1524 (Ycazbalceta, "Documentos para la Historia de México", Mexico, 1858, I). In this letter Cortés, besides recalling in a rather abrupt manner that the conquest of Mexico was due to him alone, deliberately acknowledges his disobedience in terms which could not fail to create a most unfavourable impression."

[10]King Charles I of Spain, who had become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1519,

appointed Cortés as governor, captain general and chief justice of the newly conquered territory, dubbed "New Spain of the Ocean Sea". But also, much to the dismay of Cortés, four royal officials were appointed at the same time to assist him in his governing — in effect submitting him to close observation and administration. Cortés initiated the construction of Mexico City, destroying Aztec temples and buildings and then rebuilding on the Aztec ruins what soon became the most important European city in the Americas. Cortés managed the founding of new cities and appointed men to extend Spanish rule to all of New Spain, imposing the encomienda land tenure system in 1524.[7] He also supported efforts to evangelize the indigenous people to Christianity and sponsored new explorations. He then spent the next seven years establishing peace among the Indians of Mexico and developing mines and farmlands. Cortés was one of the first Spaniards to attempt to grow sugar in Mexico and one of the first to import African slaves to early colonial Mexico. At the time of his death his estate contained at least 200 slaves who were either native Africans or of African descent.[citation needed]

In 1523, the Crown (possibly influenced by Cortés's enemy, Bishop Fonseca),[11] sent a military force under the command of Francisco de Garay to conquer and settle the northern part of Mexico, the region of Pánuco. This was another setback for Cortés who mentioned this in his fourth letter to the King in which he describes himself as the victim of a conspiracy by his archenemies Diego Velázquez, Diego Columbus and Bishop Fonseca as well as Francisco Garay. The influence of Garay was effectively stopped by this appeal to the King who sent out a decree forbidding Garay to interfere in the politics of New Spain, causing him to give up without a fight.

From 1524 to 1526, Cortés headed an expedition to Honduras where he defeated Cristóbal de Olid, who had claimed Honduras as his own under the influence of the Governor of Cuba Diego Velázquez. Fearing that Cuauhtémoc might head an insurrection in Mexico, he brought him with him in Honduras and hanged him during the journey. Raging over Olid's treason, Cortés issued a decree to arrest Velázquez, whom he was sure was behind Olid's treason. This, however, only served to further estrange the Crown of Castile and the Council of Indies, both of which were already beginning to feel anxious about Cortés's rising power.[12]

Cortés's fifth letter to Charles V attempts to justify his conduct, concludes with a bitter attack on "various and powerful rivals and enemies" who have "obscured the eyes of your Majesty." [13] Unfortunately, the Holy Roman Emperor had little time for distant colonies (much of Charles's reign was taken up with wars with France, the German Protestants and the expanding Ottoman Empire), [14] except insofar as they contributed to finance his wars. In 1521, year of the Conquest, Charles V was attending to matters in his German domains and Spain was ruled by Bishop (later Pope) Adrian of Utrecht, who functioned as regent. Velázquez and Fonseca persuaded the regent to appoint a commissioner with powers, (a Juez de residencia, Luis

Ponce de León), to investigate Cortés's conduct and even arrest him. Cortés was once quoted as saying that it was "more difficult to contend against (his) own countrymen than against the Aztecs."^[citation needed] Governor Diego Velázquez continued to be a thorn in his side, teaming up with Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, chief of the Spanish colonial department, to undermine him in the Council of the Indies.

A few days after Cortés's return from his expedition, Ponce de León suspended Cortés from his office of governor of New Spain. The Licentiate then fell ill and died shortly after his arrival, appointing Marcos de Aguilar as *alcalde mayor*. The aged Aguilar also became sick and appointed Alonso de Estrada governor, who was confirmed in his functions by a royal decree in August 1527. Cortés, suspected of poisoning them, refrained from taking over the government. Estrada sent Diego de Figueroa to the south; but de Figueroa raided graveyards and extorted contributions, meeting his end when the ship carrying these treasures sunk. Albornoz persuaded Alonso de Estrada to release Salazar and Chirinos. When Cortés complained angrily after one of his adherent's hand was cut off, Estrada ordered him exiled. Cortés sailed for Spain in 1528 to appeal to Emperor Charles V.

First return to Spain (1528)

In 1528, Cortés returned to Spain to appeal to the justice of his master, Charles V. Juan Altamirano and Alonso Valiente stayed in Mexico and acted as Cortés' representatives during his absence. Cortés presented himself with great splendor before Charles V's court. By this time Charles V had returned and Cortés forthrightly responded to his enemy's charges. Denying he had held back on gold due the crown, he showed that he had contributed more than the quinto (one-fifth) required. Indeed, he had spent lavishly to rebuild Tenochtitlán, damaged during the siege that brought down the Aztec empire.

He was received by Charles with every distinction, and decorated with the order of Santiago. In return for his efforts in expanding the still young Spanish Empire, Cortés was rewarded in 1529 by being named the "Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca" (Marquis of the Oaxaca Valley), a noble title and senorial estate which was passed down to his descendants until 1811. The Oaxaca Valley was one of the wealthiest region of New Spain, and Cortés had 23 000 vassals.^[7] Although confirmed in his land holdings and vassals, he was not reinstated as governor and was never again given any important office in the administration of New Spain. During his travel to Spain, his property was mismanaged by abusive colonial administrators. He sided with local natives in a lawsuit. The natives documented the abuses in the Huexotzinco Codex.

Return to Mexico

Cortés returned to Mexico in 1530 with new titles and honors, but with diminished power, a viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza, having been entrusted in 1535 with the administration of civil affairs, although Cortés still retained military authority, with permission to continue his conquests. This division of power led to continual dissension, and caused the failure of several enterprises in which Cortés was engaged.

On returning to Mexico, Cortés found the country in a state of anarchy. There was a strong suspicion in court circles of an intended rebellion by Cortés, and a charge was brought against him that cast a fatal blight upon his character and plans. He was accused of murdering his first wife. The proceedings of the investigation were kept secret. No report, either exonerating or condemning Cortés, was published. Had the Government declared him innocent, it would have greatly increased his popularity; had it declared him a criminal, a crisis would have been precipitated by the accused and his party. Silence was the only safe policy, but that silence is suggestive that grave danger was feared from his influence.

After reasserting his position and reestablishing some sort of order, Cortés retired to his estates at Cuernavaca, about 30 miles (48 km) south of Mexico City. There he concentrated on the building of his palace and on Pacific exploration. Remaining in Mexico between 1530 and 1541, Cortés quarreled with Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán and disputed the right to explore the territory that is today California with Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy. In 1536, Cortés explored the northwestern part of Mexico and discovered the Baja California Peninsula. Cortés also spent time exploring the Pacific coast of Mexico. The Gulf of California was originally named the Sea of Cortes by its discoverer Francisco de Ulloa in 1539. This was the last major expedition by Cortés.

Second return to Spain

After his exploration of Baja California, Cortés returned to Spain in 1541, hoping to confound his angry civilians, who had brought many lawsuits against him (for debts, abuse of power, etc.).

On his return he was utterly neglected, and could scarcely obtain an audience. On one occasion he forced his way through a crowd that surrounded the emperor's carriage, and mounted on the

footstep. The emperor, astounded at such audacity, demanded of him who he was. "I am a man," replied Cortés proudly, "who has given you more provinces than your ancestors left you cities."

Having spent a great deal of his own money to finance expeditions, he was now heavily in debt. In February 1544 he made a claim on the royal treasury, but was given a royal runaround for the next three years. Disgusted, he decided to return to Mexico in 1547. When he reached Seville, he was stricken with dysentery. He died in Castilleja de la Cuesta, Seville province, on December 2, 1547, from a case of pleurisy at the age of 62.

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