



The Conquest of Tenochtitlan, Anon., late 17th century

Dancing Across the Water

*He came dancing across the water
With his galleons and guns...
Cortez, Cortez—What a killer.
Neil Young, Cortez the Killer*

THE POPULAR MYTH THAT THE naive Aztecs fell prey to the Conquistadors of Spain because their mythology convinced them the imposing, steel-helmeted Cortés personified their exiled god, Quetzalcoatl, is just that—a myth, and a rather convenient one for would-be apologists of genocide.

On the other hand, in the vast, cosmic, cyclical mythology of the Aztecs, the return of Quetzalcoatl from wherever the gods reposed was an event prophesied to herald the imminent destruction of the world. And that, in a nutshell, was what Cortés' soldiers and his native allies brought to millions of Aztecs and their culture.

November 8, 1519 was a fateful day in history, the day on which Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, known today as Montezuma, and Hernán Cortés came face to face for the first time on the wide, wooden causeway outside the magnificent Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan—a teeming metropolis, larger than Seville, Spain's largest city at the time—and the center of an empire of 16 million people covering 80,000 square miles.

To the victors go not only the spoils but the opportunity to write the history, and for centuries the widely accepted story was that Montezuma—leader of a civilization barely two hundred years old when Europeans first arrived—immediately accepted the 'divine right' of the invaders to the Aztec's land and succumbed to the vastly superior weapons, technology, and culture of the Spanish.

In reality however, despite the enlistment of between 10,000 and 40,000 Tlaxcalan and other native allies to their cause, the Spanish were still outnumbered by at least ten to one. Sensing the status of Montezuma, Cortés seized the Aztec ruler shortly after their meeting and took control of the city.

Months later, on the fabled ‘Night of Sorrows,’ simmering hostilities erupted into outright warfare. Montezuma was killed during the heated battle for the city, during which, according to Spanish accounts, “the blood of Aztec warriors ran like water.”

While the weapons of the Spanish were indeed formidable for the time, the galleons King Charles sent across the ocean carried not only *conquistadores* but even more fatefully, rats, viruses and bacilli—carriers of the plague, which would either kill or disable two thirds of native population.

Even so, the Spanish killed more than 200,000 Aztecs in the Battle of Tenochtitlan. And while disease was a major factor in the decline of the native population, the Aztecs were prevented from ever recovering (as Europe eventually did after the Black Death) by the imposition by the Spanish of slavery.

One disaster inevitably leads to another, and to compensate for the huge loss of slave labor to warfare and starvation, the Spanish initiated the Caribbean—and later, the Transatlantic—slave trade, the greatest forced mass migration in human history.

One need not ask what drove Cortés to order most of his ships disabled upon arrival, leaving no escape route for his 500 soldiers. For Cortés—and even more so for Pizarro and others who followed—it was *gold*. As Cortés remarked to Aztec emissaries when the Spanish first came ashore, “I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can only be cured with gold!”

(Ironically, the Aztecs regarded gold as nothing special, giving more value to the cascade of flowers adorning the causeway.)

Perhaps even more than material wealth, however, the invaders were driven by the promise of eternal, *spiritual* riches.

Cortés was a devout Christian, fervently believing that the Aztecs should “worship the true [Christian] God with fervor, faith and diligence,” and the Spanish endeavored to annihilate their culture, educating them in Christianity and Spanish and converting them through baptism and sheer force.

Even as Catholicism in Europe was reeling from the unceasing attacks of Protestant reformers, Christian priests and churches were multiplying in Spanish and Portuguese America, where the continent’s survivors were bowing down to Catholic saints and surrogates for their now obsolete deities.

The entire colonial enterprise was both sanctioned and sanctified—arguably only made possible—by the Catholic Church.

Unlike the relatively swift defeat of the Aztecs, the conquest of the Mayans took over a century—even with diseases again taking a tragic toll—and the vast continents to the north and south even longer. But by the late 17th century, the population of native America had fallen from an estimated 145 million to no more than 15 million.

The meeting of Cortés and Montezuma was far more than a clash of civilizations: it was a clash of world views. Horses, guns and armor may have been alien to the Aztecs, but what was utterly incomprehensible was the bearded entity within the armor, an entity that looked and behaved like a human being, but—carrying the banner of a strange, bloodthirsty god—killed without purpose, took without giving anything in return, and existed entirely apart from tribe or kin. ■