Fall of Tenochtitlan

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Siege of Tenochtitlan
Part of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire

"Conquista de México por Cortés". Unknown artist, second half of the 17th century. Note that the depiction of the Aztecs' clothing and weaponry is inaccurate.

Date	May 26 - August 13, 1521
Location	Tenochtitlan, present-day Mexico City, Mexico
Result	Decisive Spanish and Tlaxcallan victory

Belligerents	
Spain Tlaxcallān	Aztec Empire
Commanders and leaders	
Hernán Cortés Pedro de Alvarado	Cuitláhuac † Cuauhtémoc (POW)

Strength	
16 guns[1] 13 brigantines 80,000–200,000 native allies 86–96 cavalry 900–1,300 infantry[1]	300,000 warriors[2](including war *acallis*)
Casualties and losses	
450–860 Spanish[1] 20,000 Tlaxcallan	100,000 warriors 100,000 civilians

Aztec civilization

Aztec society

Nahuatl language

Religion · Mythology · Philosophy · Calendars

Human sacrifice · Medicine

Aztec history

Aztlán · Codices · Warfare

Aztec Triple Alliance

Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire

Fall of Tenochtitlan · La Noche Triste

Montezuma II · Hernán Cortés

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The **siege of Tenochtitlan**, the capital of the Aztec Empire, came about in 1521 through the manipulation of local factions and divisions by Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés. Though numerous battles were fought between the Aztecs and the Spanish army, which was composed of predominantly indigenous peoples, it was the siege of Tenochtitlan that was the final, decisive battle that led to the downfall of the Aztec civilization and marked the end of the first phase of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. The conquest of Mexico was part of the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

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[edit] Early events

[edit] The road to Tenochtitlan

In April 1519 Hernán Cortés, the Chief Magistrate of Santiago, Cuba, came upon the coast of Mexico at a point he called Vera Cruz with 508 soldiers, 100 sailors and 14 small cannons. Governor Velazquez, the highest Spanish authority in the Americas, called for Cortés to lead an expedition into Mexico after reports from a few previous expeditions to Yucatán caught the interest of the Spanish in Cuba.[3] Velázquez then revoked Cortés' right to lead the expedition and soon after sent an army led by Pánfilo de Narvaez to take Cortés into custody. Cortés lacked the authority to execute his plan, a fact that would return to haunt him when he returned to Spain.

As he moved inland Cortés came into contact with a number of polities who resented the repressive Aztec rule; Cortés clashed with some of these polities, among them the Totonacs and Tlaxcalans, who surrounded his army on a hilltop for two agonizing weeks, protected by the fire from his cannons. Bernal Diaz del Castillo wrote that his numerically inferior force probably would not have survived if it were not for Xicotencatl the Elder and his wish to form an alliance with the Spaniards against the Aztecs.[4]

It once was widely believed that the Aztecs first thought Cortés was Quetzalcoatl, a mythical god prophesied to return to Mexico--coincidentally in the same year Cortés landed and from the same direction he came. This is now believed to be an invention of the conquerors, and scholars agree that the Aztecs were well aware that Cortés was not a god.[5]

Aztec leader Moctezuma sent a group of noblemen and other emissaries to meet Cortés at Quauhtechcac. These emissaries brought golden jewelry as a gift, which greatly pleased the Spaniards.[6] According to the Florentine Codex, Lib. 12, f.6r., Moctezuma also ordered that his messengers carry the highly symbolic *penacho* (headdress) of Quetzalcoatl de Tula to Cortés and place it on his person. As news about the strangers reached the capital city, Moctezuma became

increasingly fearful and considered fleeing the city but resigned himself to what he considered to be the fate of his people.[7]

Cortés continued on his march towards Tenochtitlan. Before entering the city, on November 8, 1519 Cortés and his troops prepared themselves for battle, armoring themselves and their horses, and arranging themselves in proper military rank. Four horsemen were at the lead of the procession. Behind these horsemen were five more contingents: foot soldiers with iron swords and wooden or leather shields; horsemen in cuirasses, armed with iron lances, swords, and wooden shields; crossbowmen; more horsemen; soldiers armed with arquebuses; lastly, native peoples from Tlaxcalan, Tliliuhquitepec, and Huexotzinco. The indigenous soldiers wore cotton armor and were armed with shields and crossbows; many carried provisions in baskets or bundles while others escorted the cannons on wooden carts.

Cortés' army entered the city on the flower-covered causeway (Iztapalapa) associated with the god Quetzalcoatl. Cortés was amicably received by Moctezuma, who told him, "You have come to sit on your throne." The captive woman Malinalli Tenépal, also known as La Malinche or Doña Marina, translated from Nahuatl to Maya chontal; the Spaniard Gerónimo de Aguilar translated from Maya chontal to Spanish.

Moctezuma was later taken hostage as a safety measure by the vastly outnumbered Spanish. According to all eyewitness accounts, Moctezuma initially refused to leave his palace but after a series of threats from and debates with the Spanish captains, he agreed to move to the Axayáctal palace with his retinue. The first captain assigned to guard him was none other than Pedro de Alvarado. Other Aztec lords were also detained by the Spanish.[6] The palace was surrounded by over 100 Spanish soldiers in order to prevent any attempt to rescue the Huey Tlatoani (emperor).[8]

[edit] Tensions mount between Aztecs and Spaniards

It is uncertain why Moctezuma cooperated so readily with the Spaniards. It is possible he feared losing his life or political power. It could also have been a tactical move: Moctezuma may have wanted to gather more information on the Spaniards, or to wait for the end of the agricultural season and strike at the beginning of the war season.[*clarification needed*] However, he did not carry out either of these actions even though high-ranking military leaders such as his brother Cuitlahuac and nephew Cacamatzin urged him to do so. With Moctezuma captive, Cortés did not need to worry about being cut off from supplies or being attacked. He also assumed that he could control the Aztecs through Moctezuma. However, Cortés had little knowledge of the ruling system of the Aztecs; Moctezuma was not all-powerful as Cortés imagined. Being appointed to the throne and maintaining the position was dependent on the king's ability to rule decisively; he could easily be replaced by another noble if he failed to do so. At any sign of weakness, Aztec nobles within Tenochtitlan and in other Aztec tributaries were liable to rebel. As Moctezuma made orders as demanded by Cortés, such as commanding tribute to be gathered and given to the Spaniards, his authority was slipping, and quickly his people began to turn against him.[1]

Cortés and his army were permitted to stay in the Palace of Axayacatl, and tensions continued to grow. While the Spaniards were in Tenochtitlan, Velazquez assembled a force of nineteen ships,

more than 800 soldiers, twenty cannons, eighty horsemen, one-hundred and twenty crossbowmen, and eighty arquebusiers under the command of Pánfilo de Narvaez to capture Cortés and return him to Cuba. Velazquez felt that Cortés had exceeded his authority, and had been aware of Cortés's misconduct for nearly a year. He had to wait for favorable winds, though, and was unable to send any forces until spring. Narvaez's troops landed at San Juan de Ulúa on the Mexican coast around April 20, 1520.[9]

After Cortés became aware of their arrival, he brought a small force of about two hundred to Narvaez's camp in Cempohuallan on May 27. Cortés ambushed Narvaez's camp late at night, taking Narvaez hostage and easily gaining his surrender.[*clarification needed*] Evidence suggests that the two were in the midst of negotiations at the time, and Narvaez was not expecting an attack. Cortés had also divided Narvaez's forces with promises of the vast wealth in Tenochtitlan, inducing them to surrender more quickly. Narvaez was imprisoned in Vera Cruz, and his army was integrated into Cortés's forces.[1]

[edit] Rapid deterioration of relations

[edit] Massacre at the festival of Tóxcatl

During Cortés's absence, Pedro de Alvarado was left in command in Tenochtitlan with 120 soldiers.[10]

At this time, the Aztecs began to prepare for the annual festival of Toxcatl in early May, in honor of Tezcatlipoca, otherwise known as the Smoking Mirror or the Omnipotent Power. They honored this God during the onset of the dry season so that the god would fill dry streambeds and cause rain to fall on crops. Moctezuma secured the consent of Cortes to hold the festival, and, after Cortes left for the coast to deal with Panfilo de Narvaez, Moctezuma confirmed with Pedro de Alvarado, the conquistador who Cortes had left in charge, for permission to hold the festival. Alvarado agreed to allow the festival on the condition that there were no human sacrifices. This condition was naïve. The Toxcatl festival featured human sacrifice as part of its climactic rituals to ensure that there would be water during the dry season. The act of prohibiting human sacrifice during this most sacred of religious festivals was as absurd as prohibiting communion during a Catholic mass. [11]

Before the festival, Alvarado encountered a group of women building a statue of Huitzilopochtli and the image unsettled him, and he became suspicious about the eventuality of human sacrifice. He tortured priests and nobles and discovered that the Aztecs were planning a revolt. Unable to assert control over events, he sequestered Moctezuma and increased the guards around the Aztec Emperor. [12]

By the day of the festival, the Aztecs had gathered on the Patio of Dances. Alvarado had sixty of his men as well as many of his Tlaxcalan allies into positions around the patio. The Aztecs initiated the Serpent Dance. The euphoric dancing as well as the accompanying flute and drum playing disturbed Alvarado about the potential for revolt. He ordered the gates closed and initiated the killing of many thousands of Aztec nobles, warriors and priests. [13]

Alvarado, the conquistadors and the Tlaxcalans retreated to their base in the Palace of Axayacatl and secured the entrances. Alvarado ordered his men to shoot their cannons, crossbows and harquebuses into the gathering crowd. The Aztec revolt became more widespread as a result. Alvarado forced Moctezuma to appeal to the crowd outside the Palace and this appeal temporarily calmed them. [14]

The massacre had the result of resolutely turning all the Aztecs against the Spanish and completely undermining Moctezuma's authority. [15]

[edit] Aztec revolt

When it became more clear what was happening to the Aztecs outside the Temple, the alarm was sounded. Aztec warriors came running, and fired darts and launched spears at the Spanish forces.[6] This may have been due to the fact that their military infrastructure was severely damaged after the attack on the festival, as the most elite and seasoned warriors were killed.[1]

Alvarado sent for word to Cortés of the events, and Cortés came back to Tenochtitlan on June 24 with 1,300 soldiers, 96 horses, 80 crossbowmen, and 80 arquebusiers. Cortés also came with 2,000 Tlaxcalan warriors on the journey.[1] Cortés entered the palace unscathed, the Aztecs had planned to ambush them. The Aztecs stopped sending food and supplies to the Spanish. They became suspicious and watched for people trying to sneak supplies to them; many innocent people were slaughtered because they were suspected of helping them.[16] The roads were shut and the causeway bridges became raised. The Aztecs halted any Spanish attacks or attempts to leave the palace. Every Spanish soldier that was not killed was wounded.[1]

Cortés failed to grasp the full extent of the situation, as the attack on the festival was the last straw for the Aztecs, who now were completely against Moctezuma and the Spanish. Thus, the military gains of the attack also had a serious political cost for Cortés.[1]

Cortés attempted to parley with the Aztecs, and after this failed he sent Moctezuma to tell his people to stop fighting. However, the Aztecs refused.[16] The Spanish asserted that Moctezuma was stoned to death by his own people as he attempted to speak with them.[17] The Aztecs claimed that Moctezuma was murdered by the Spanish.[1][1][16] Two other local rulers were found strangled as well.[18] Moctezuma's younger brother Cuitláhuac, who had been ruler of Ixtlapalapan until then, was chosen to be the new Tlatoani.[1]

[edit] La Noche Triste and the Spanish flight to Tlaxcalan

Main articles: La Noche Triste and Battle of Otumba

This major Aztec victory is still remembered as "La Noche Triste," The Night of Sorrows. Popular tales say that Cortés wept under a tree the night of the massacre of his troops at the hands of the Aztecs.

Though a flight from the city would make Cortés appear weak before his indigenous allies, it was this or death for the Spanish forces. Cortés and his men were in the center of the city, and

would most likely have to fight their way out no matter what direction they took. Cortés wanted to flee to Tlaxcalan, so a path directly east would have been most favorable. Nevertheless, this would require hundreds of canoes to move all of Cortés's people and supplies, which he was unable to procure in his position. Thus, Cortés had to choose among three land routes: north to Tlatelolco, which was the least dangerous path but required the longest trip through the city; south to Coyohuacan and Ixtlapalapan, two towns that would not welcome the Spanish; or west to Tlacopan, which required the shortest trip through Tenochtitlan, though they would not be welcome there either. Cortés decided on the causeway to Tlacopan, needing the quickest route out of Tenochtitlan with all his provisions and people.[1]

Heavy rains and a moonless night provided some cover for the escaping Spanish.[18] On that "Sad Night," July 1, 1520, the Spanish forces exited the palace first with their indigenous allies close behind, bringing as much treasure as possible. Cortés had hoped to go undetected by muffling the horses' hooves and carrying wooden boards to cross the canals. The Spanish forces were able to pass through the first three canals, the Tecpantzinco, Tzapotlan, and Atenchicalco.[16]

However, they were discovered on the fourth canal at Mixcoatechialtitlan. One account says a woman fetching water saw them and alerted the city, another says it was a sentry. Some Aztecs set out in canoes, others by road to Nonchualco then Tlacopan to cut the Spanish off. The Aztecs attacked the fleeing Spanish on the Tlacopan causeway from canoes, shooting arrows at them. The Spanish fired their crossbows and arquebuses, but were unable to see their attackers or get into formation. Many Spaniards leaped into the water and drowned, weighed down by armor and booty.[16] When faced with a gap in the causeway, Alvarado made the famous "leap of Alvarado" using a spear to get to the other side. Approximately a third of the Spaniards succeeding in reaching the mainland, while the remaining ones died in battle or were captured and later sacrificed on Aztec altars. After crossing over the bridge, the surviving Spanish had little reprieve before the Aztecs appeared to attack and chase them towards Tlacopan. When they arrived at Tlacopan, a good number of Spanish had been killed, as well as most of the indigenous warriors, and some of the horses; all of the cannons and most of the crossbows were lost.[1] The Spanish finally found refuge in Otancalpolco, where they were aided by the Teocalhueyacans. The morning after, the Aztecs returned to recover the spoils from the canals.[16]

To reach Tlaxcalan, Cortés had to bring his troops around Lake Texcoco. Though the Spanish were under attack the entire trip, because Cortés took his troops through the northern towns, they were at an advantage. The northern valley was less populous, travel was difficult, and it was still the agricultural season, so the attacks on Cortés's forces were not very heavy. As Cortés arrived in more densely inhabited areas east of the lake, the attacks were more forceful.[1]

Before reaching Tlaxcalan, the scanty Spanish forces arrived at the plain of Otumba Valley (Otompan), where they were met by a vast Aztec army intent on their destruction. The Aztecs intended to cut short the Spanish retreat from Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs had underestimated the shock value of the Spanish caballeros because all they had seen was the horses traveling on the wet paved streets of Tenochtitlan. They had never seen them used in open battle on the plains. Despite the overwhelming numbers of Aztecs and the general poor condition of the Spanish survivors, Cortés snatched victory from the jaws of defeat when he spotted the Aztec general in his ornate and colourful feather costume and immediately charged him with several horsemen,

killing the Aztec commander. There were heavy losses for the Spanish, but in the end they were victorious. The Aztecs retreated.[18]

When Cortés finally reached Tlaxcala five days after fleeing Tenochtitlan, he had lost over 860 Spanish soldiers, over a thousand Tlaxcalans, as well as Spanish women who had accompanied Narvaezs troop.[1] Cortés claimed only 15 Spaniards were lost along with 2,000 native allies. Than Cano, another primary source, gives 1150 Spaniards dead, though this figure was most likely more than the total number of Spanish. Francisco López de Gómara, Cortés' chaplain, estimated 450 Spaniards and 4,000 allies had died. Other sources estimate that nearly half of the Spanish and almost all of the natives were killed or wounded.[18]

The women survivors included Cortés's translator and lover Doña Marina, María Estrada and two of Moctezuma's daughters who had been given to Cortés, including the emperor's favorite and reportedly most beautiful daughter Tecuichpotzin (later Doña Isabel Moctezuma). A third daughter died, leaving behind her infant by Cortés, the mysterious second "María" named in his will.

[edit] Both sides attempt to recover

[edit] Shifting alliances

Cuitlahuac was elected to be the new King after Moctezuma's death. Immediately, it was necessary for him to prove his power and authority to keep the tributaries from revolting. Usually, the new king would take his army on a campaign before coronation; this demonstration would solidify necessary ties. However, Cuitlahuac was not in a position to do this, as it was not yet war season; therefore, allegiance to the Spanish seemed to be a good option for many tributaries. The Aztec empire was very susceptible to division: most of the tributary states were divided internally, and their loyalty to the Aztecs was based on their own interests or the possibility of punishment.

It was necessary for Cortés, too, to rebuild his alliances after his escape from Tenochtitlan before he could try again to take the city. He started with the Tlaxcalans. Tlaxcalan was an autonomous state, and a fierce enemy of the Aztecs. Another strong motivation to join forces with the Spanish was that Tlaxcalan was encircled by Aztec tributaries. The Tlaxcalans could have crushed the Spaniards at this point. In fact, the Aztecs sent emissaries promising peace and prosperity if they would do just that. The Tlaxcalans leaders rebuffed the overtures of the Aztec emissaries, deciding to continue their friendship with Cortés.

Cortés managed to negotiate an alliance; however, the Tlaxcalans required heavy concessions from Cortés for their continued support, which he was to provide after they defeated the Aztecs. They expected the Spanish to pay for their supplies, to have the city of Cholula, an equal share of any of the spoils, the right to build a citadel in Tenochtitlan, and finally, to be exempted from any future tribute. Cortés was willing to promise anything and in the name of the King of Spain, and agreed to their demands, though the Spanish complained about having to pay for their food and water with their gold and other jewels with which they had escaped Tenochtitlan. The Spanish authorities later disowned this treaty with the Tlaxcalans.

that were useful for contributing food, laborers, and supplies. This only worsened the position of the Aztecs. Throughout the siege, the Aztecs had little aid from outside of Tenochtitlan. The remaining loyal tributaries had difficulty sending forces, because it would leave them vulnerable to Spanish attack. Many of these loyal tributaries were surrounded by the Spanish.

Though the tributaries often went back and forth in their loyalties at any sign of change, the Spanish tried hard not to lose any allies. They feared a "snowball effect," in that if one tributary left, others might follow. Thus, they brutally crushed any tributaries who tried to send help to Tenochtitlan. Any shipments of food and water were intercepted, and even those trying to fish in the lake were attacked.[1] Many Aztecs drank salt water because of their severe thirst and contracted dysentery. The famine was so severe that the Aztecs ate anything, even wood, leather, and bricks for sustenance.[6]

The Spanish continued to push closer to Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs changed tactics as often as the Spanish did, preventing Cortés's forces from being entirely victorious. However, the Aztecs were severely worn down. They had no new troops, supplies, food, nor water. The Spanish received a large amount of supplies from Vera Cruz, and, somewhat renewed, finally entered Tenochtitlan.[1]

[edit] Fall of Tenochtitlan

[edit] The Aztecs' last stand

"The Last Days of Tenochtitlan, Conquest of Mexico by Cortez", a 19th century painting by William de Leftwich Dodge.

The Spanish forces and their allies advanced into the city. Their advance was slow and painful. Aztec warriors attacked them from every angle, in front, behind, even above.[1] The fighting was street by street and even building by building. But, despite their bravery and inflicting heavy casualites on the Spanish, the Aztecs could not halt the Spanish advance. While the fighting in the city raged, the Aztecs cut out the hearts of 70 Spanish prisoners at the altar at Huichilobos. By August, many of the people of the city had fled Tlatelolco.[16] Cortés sent emissaries to negotiate with the Tlatelolcas to join his side, but the Tlatelolcas remained loyal to the Aztecs.

T