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Effects of Diseases on the Conquest Led by Cortes

The Columbian Exchange allowed for many aspects of Native American and European cultures to be exchanged as well as many foods and goods which sparked great economic success in multiple countries. Alongside the positive things that came out of the Columbian Exchange, many negative things occurred as well. Primarily, these negative things consisted of conquest and diseases. Upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his crew, many different diseases began to spread to the Native Americans, such as smallpox, measles, malaria, and chickenpox. The Native Americans had no resistances to these diseases, which caused most of the Native American population to die out. Due to the spread of diseases from European explorers, Native Americans would have been able to defend against the European invasions and retain their cultures and economies.

In the year 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of Hispaniola. With his arrival came the trade of plants and animals as well as the spread of diseases among the Native Americans. Christopher Columbus and his crew soon discovered gold and people who could be converted to Christianity on the island of Hispaniola, which he promptly relayed to the Spanish royalty. This sparked a great pilgrimage of missionaries and conquerors from Spain to the Americas, which contributed to the spread of diseases to the Americas. These diseases reached the Native American populations and began killing swiftly. “Between 1492 and 1650 the Native

American population may have declined by as much as 90% as the result of virgin-soil epidemics” (“European Diseases”). Alongside the spread of disease, the Spanish conquerors, called conquistadors, were wildly interested in taking the wealth of the indigenous peoples, and began to conquer major Native American tribes and nations. Along the way, the conquistadors enslaved many small groups of people. These were all major contributing factors in the decline of the Native Americans, but the diseases stand out as the primary reason for the destruction of many cultures such as the Aztec empire.

The military success of Hernan Cortes, the explorer and conquistador responsible for destroying the Aztec empire, is attributed to many factors. While the main factors are normally his reliance on the local populations for soldiers and Cortes’ resemblance of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, the real reason behind the success of Cortes was the spread of disease throughout the Aztec empire. This is because of two reasons: demoralization of Aztec soldiers and a dwindling number of people available to become soldiers. The Spanish immunity to smallpox demoralized the Aztecs, because the susceptibility of the Aztecs to smallpox was massive compared to that of the Spanish, leading to the belief that the Spanish were invincible gods. Also the dying Aztec population could not provide enough soldiers to the defense effort and thus could not defeat the advanced technology of the Spaniards. After Cortes had captured the capital city of Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs had no chance to regroup and overthrow the Spanish ruling over them, as “Central Mexico’s population fell from just under 15 million in 1519 to approximately 1.5 million a century later” (Nunn and Qian 3), a decrease of ninety percent.

Other views on the conquest of the Aztecs state that it was not the diseases that allowed for Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, but rather the Spanish reliance on local tribes which were at

war with the Aztecs. Although they did have experienced knowledge of the landscape around them, the local populations were killed off just as rapidly as the Aztecs. “Before [malaria and yellow fever] arrived, the most thickly inhabited terrain north of Mexico was what is now the southeastern United States, and the wet forests of Mesoamerica and Amazonia held millions of people. After malaria and yellow fever, these previously salubrious areas became inhospitable” (Mann 79). Still yet oppositions to the idea of diseases being the main cause of the Aztec defeat cite the Aztec leader Montezuma II’s belief that Cortes was a god sent to collect gold from the Aztec people. However, these claims are often disputed by historians, for there is no record of Montezuma acting in this manner until fifty years later.

The cause of defeat for the Aztecs was not the superior combat prowess of Hernan Cortes and his men; the large numbers of people, including Aztec soldiers, who were killed by the diseases brought into Aztec lands were the cause of the Aztec defeat. While the Columbian Exchange brought many goods, foods, and cultures, it also brought many diseases to the Americas. With the diseased people being unable to defend their homelands, conquistadors such as Hernan Cortes were able to defeat large empires with relatively small forces. Despite the overwhelming evidence that leans toward the disease explanation, others still assert that Cortes’ military success was caused by his enlistment of local tribes at war with the Aztecs or by a misunderstanding surrounding Cortes and his resemblance of the light-skinned god Quetzalcoatl, but many historians are very skeptical of these claims.

Works Cited

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