

Swords and Alliances: The Pivotal Meeting of Europeans and Amerindians in Mesoamerica

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In the early 16th century, Hernán Cortés embarked on an expedition that would shape history in the Americas. The Spanish conquistador was eager to appropriate new lands for the crown, convert indigenous people to Christianity, and reap the spoils of the war by plundering from conquered lands. He would employ advanced weaponry and strategic alliances to defeat the formidable Aztec Empire. Equipped with superior military technology and employing adept diplomatic maneuvers, he forged alliances with indigenous tribes, most notably the Tlaxcalans, to orchestrate the downfall of the Aztec Empire. This paper explores the intricate interplay between advanced weaponry and strategic alliances in the conquest of the Aztecs, shedding light on the dynamic forces that converged to shape this transformative event. As we delve into the military strategies and diplomatic tactics employed by Cortés, a nuanced understanding emerges of the complex factors that contributed to the Spanish victory and the ultimate downfall of the Aztec Empire.

The Aztec empire was formed by three powerful city-states, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, known as the Triple Alliance. They ruled over many different subjugated states and forced them to pay extravagant taxes and demanded regular tributes from them. These tributes were often human beings that were used as sacrifices to their gods. Increased competition between the elites of the three city-states for resources and power led Tenochtitlan to consolidate the leading position within the alliance. “On the eve of the Spanish conquest, the Aztec Empire was the most militarily, politically and economically powerful state in Mesoamerica.” (Alfani, 2023).

In 1519, Cortés landed with an expeditionary force on the Yucatán Peninsula. He brought with him around 600 soldiers and sailors, swords, spears, crossbows, matchlock guns and horses. They quickly defeated a local Mayan tribe and acquired a slave girl named Malintzin who spoke

the language of the Aztecs as well as the Mayan dialect. One of Cortés's men spoke the same Mayan dialect and she became instrumental in communicating with the indigenous people. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2023). With the help of Malintzin, Cortéz began communicating with other indigenous people and learned that many of the subject tribes of the Aztec empire were disgruntled and did not appreciate having to offer tributes for human sacrifice meant to appease the gods. Aztec weapons were primarily made from obsidian and wood. (Nichols, 2016, 10). For this reason, many of the tribes saw the value of the Spaniards superior metal weaponry, armor, firearms, and cavalry.

It dawned on the Totonacs and subsequently the Tlaxcalans, both disaffected with Aztec rule, that the Spaniards could be an invaluable complement to their own force structure. With their far superior armor and splendid swords, the Spaniards could penetrate at any point on a Native American line that they chose. If mounted on their scary horses, so much the better. Given their inferior numbers, however, they needed protection from being surrounded or worn down by attrition. The Iberio-Totonac-Tlaxcalan army that emerged from negotiations featured the Spaniards as a strike force and their Native American allies as responsible for scouting, security, and the lion's share of holding the line. (Brown, 2019).

In this way, Cortéz found himself to be the leader of a significant Native American uprising against Aztec dominance. The Spanish making up only a minor portion, were largely outnumbered by the allied forces throughout the conquest. It's crucial to emphasize the significant influence that the weaponry of the Spaniards had on the decision of the Totonacs and the Tlaxcalans to join forces. The Aztec's obsidian-bladed weapons, though sharp, proved ineffective against the conquistadors' armor. The formidable offensive capabilities of the Spanish, combined with their defensive strengths, made them a formidable force. Recognizing the immense value in aligning with the Spaniards, the tribes rallied with them by the thousands to form a sizable army.

This army set its sights on the city of Tenochtitlán, the metropolis of the Aztecs, aiming to conquer the city and overthrow Montezuma, the Aztec leader. At the time, Tenochtitlán stood as one of the world's largest cities, boasting approximately one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants. To provide perspective, the most populous city in Europe during that era was Paris, home to two hundred and sixty thousand citizens. (Mundy, 2015). Montezuma extended a welcome to Cortés and his army in an effort to placate the Spanish while gauging the size of their military force. However, Cortés seized control, reducing Montezuma to the status of a puppet king. Learning of an impending arrest party due to his perceived breach of expedition terms, Cortés confronted and defeated them in a surprise attack. Subsequently, he successfully persuaded the soldiers to join him in his quest to overthrow the Aztec empire. Upon returning to Tenochtitlán, Cortés faced a rebellion, resulting in a violent expulsion known as La Noche Triste. They were forced into retreat and regroup. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2023).

Cortés and his conquistadores had introduced smallpox to the Aztecs and the disease claimed over half the city's inhabitants during his absence. Cortés rallied additional troops and returned to besiege Tenochtitlán, deploying around eight hundred conquistadores, tens of thousands of indigenous warriors, and thirteen ships. The city, situated on an artificial island in Lake Texcoco, made it possible for Cortés's ships to encircle it. Advanced weaponry played a key role here as each ship was loaded with cannons and they were used to launch multiple assaults against the Aztec capital. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2023).

Following a relentless assault spanning ninety-three days and the deprivation of the Aztecs' food and water supply, Cortés and his forces successfully breached the city's defenses. What ensued was a brutal massacre in the streets, accompanied by widespread looting, arson, and the destruction of temples. Cortés formally claimed the city on August 13, 1521. (Newberry

Library, 2023) The devastating impact of smallpox continued to wreak havoc among the indigenous population, severely diminishing their ability to resist the Spanish forces. The technological disparity, with the Spanish possessing gunpowder and steel weapons while the indigenous people wielded obsidian-bladed weaponry, hastened the swift demise of the Aztec empire. Over the subsequent three years, the entirety of the Aztec empire succumbed to Spanish dominance, marking the establishment of New Spain and the imposition of Spanish rule across Mesoamerica. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2023).

In conclusion, the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs was characterized by a convergence of advanced weaponry, strategic alliances, and the devastating impact of disease. Hernán Cortés, with advanced weaponry and diplomatic acumen, navigated a complex web of alliances, ultimately orchestrating the fall of the mighty Aztec Empire. The asymmetry in technology, notably the introduction of gunpowder and steel weapons against the Aztec's traditional obsidian blades, played a decisive role in the conquest. The savage sack of the city by the Spanish and indigenous army, underscores the complex and brutal dynamics at play. Smallpox, introduced by the Spanish, further tipped the scales, decimating the indigenous population. In the aftermath, and with the most formidable opposition defeated, the Spanish were able to swiftly conquer the whole of Mesoamerica and its indigenous people.

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