The Success of Hernando Cortes

How was it that Hernando Cortes was able to so effectively conquer the entirety of the Aztec Empire with so few men against so highly stacked odds? His success can be attributed to a variety of different reasons. In combination, these reasons allowed him to have the upper hand in the conquest of Mexico. Arguably these reasons can be sorted into three different categories. To begin with, the arrival of the Spanish brought along several diseases which the native population had up until then no prior experience with. The most notable of these diseases being Smallpox, which so drastically reduced the Aztec population and leadership capabilities that at times Cortes was able to move about unopposed. Additionally, the Spaniard’s superior tactics and weaponry played a major role in the conquest of Mexico. Leading to their unparalleled success on the battlefield. The final predominant reason for the Spanish success was due to the Aztecs harsh tribute system that subjugated and oppressed the neighboring populations, leaving the Aztecs very unpopular with the people of Mexico. Ultimately leading to subjugated tribes acting against Aztec interests and allying with Cortes, the most notable being the Tlaxcalans who made up the majority of his combined army. This relentless tribute system allowed Cortes to act as a means to an end for the other tribal communities. These three reasons all worked together
to allow Cortes to conquer the largest Meso-American Empire to date with only 500 original men.

To begin with, the Spanish introduction of European diseases, smallpox among them, is still to this day one of the most tragic periods of Mexican history. With its first recording coming from Central Mexico in August of 1520, in a report to Charles V by Vasquez de Ayllon. This disease had such a significant impact on the native populations because Mexico at that time was what historians refer to as a, “virgin soil population,” Having had no prior experience with this disease nobody had any immunity to it. The pure viciousness of this disease was even shocking to the Spaniards that witnessed it. This was because smallpox in New Spain was a blind killer, affecting people of all ages and demographics, as opposed to in Europe, where it almost always stayed within certain age and social ranges. When smallpox was prevalent in Tenochtitlan, it affected both the poor and the high classes, even killing Cuitlahuac, leading to the election of Cuauhtémoc to power. An example of the extent of damage that this disease caused is voiced by Pomar, the historian of the city of Texcoco, reporting that the entire city, having surrendered to Cortes without a struggle, had around 15,000 citizens before the conquest but was reduced to barely 600 by the time he wrote the report. Of course, there is often a lot of exaggeration or bias involved when reading these reports, but it gives you an example of just how serious of an endemic this truly was. But to some involved, it was not so much a horrible tragedy as an advantageous opportunity. The pestilence of measles and smallpox was so severe and cruel that more than one-fourth of the Indian people in all the land died- and this loss had the effect of hastening the end of the fighting because there died a great quantity of men and warriors and many lords and captains and valiant men against whom we would have had to fight and deal with as enemies, and miraculously Our Lord killed them and
removed them from before us. (Vázquez de Tápia, McCaa) Cortes capitalized on this disease frequently, using it to soften the battlefield. It actually benefitted Cortes so much that he was able to move around often unimpeded, or faced in battle against a fraction of the forces he would have found otherwise.

Secondly, the Spaniard’s superior tactics and weaponry came to play a massive role both on and off the battlefield. To understand why this was so significant you need to understand the differences in styles between the two sides. For the Aztecs, warfare was not so much an unfortunate circumstance as a cultural way of life and political tool. Culturally, it was a way for men to show their valor and potentially move up in social standing. They would very often fight in staged battles called “flower wars” (xochiyaoyotl) which was designed for the showing of individual valor and prowess in battle. When in battle though, the end goal was hardly ever to kill the enemy. they would fight merely to incapacitate and capture the opposing warrior for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. Typically the more men an Aztec warrior captured, the higher up in prestige he would climb, hopefully living long enough to ultimately join the warrior organizations like the jaguars and eagles, which were not unlike medieval European orders of knighthood. As for the Mexica’s tactics, it was a far cry from what we are used to nowadays. Because of the culture of individual combat, the Aztecs employed very open battle formations (usually around six feet between people) that would leave them unhindered and able to more effectively use their weapons. The Spanish on the other hand, employed much different styles of fighting. Spanish tactics were an outgrowth of their experiences in the Reconquista and Italian campaigns, which involved the precise movement of groups of men on the battlefield. They were able to exploit
these tight formations of men due to the weapons that they used such as firearms, cannons, pikes, and crossbows all allowed them to fight in close proximity of each other without fear of accidentally harming one another. When these two styles of combat were finally pitted against each other, the result is fairly one-sided. The outcome for the Indians was catastrophic at best. They were neither equipped nor prepared to handle the aggression of European warfare. The weapons the Spaniards used gave the native’s quilted armor no chance of protection, and the psychological effects of the firearms and cannons left them terrified at the destruction it was capable of. The Spaniards tactics and tight formations left them at a complete loss as to how they could inflict any damage or fight them one on one like they were used to. Added with the European style of warfare where you straight out kill the man in front of you went against everything the Aztecs were taught about warfare. And finally, the use of cavalry was immensely effective in not only breaking up the loose formations of the Indian armies, but psychologically terrifying them with these giant beasts that had never been seen before. Despite the Mexica experience in warfare, the little tactical advantages of the Spaniards all added up and put the Aztecs at a distinct disadvantage to complete the most unprecedented battlefield success ever seen in that day and age.

Lastly and most importantly, is the harsh tribute system the Aztecs used on all their subjugated regions. Which ultimately caused them to ally with Cortes to bring about the eventual defeat of the entire empire. What started it all was the Aztecs had almost no provincial infrastructure. With nothing resembling roads or convenient ways to move about within the empire, there was no possible way that they could keep up the steady flow of tribute that the Aztecs demanded. Because of this, and their deep-rooted warrior culture, military coercion and
the intermittent waging of wars was literally the only thing holding together the Aztec empire, while simultaneously giving them not only the tribute they demanded but also a way to always have sacrifices on hand. While this served the purposes of the main state, it made the other tributary regions despise them immensely, with many neighboring regions, like the Tlaxcalans, being at constant war with the Aztecs for years. When Cortes arrived onto the scene in 1519, the Tlaxcalan Indians first responded by fighting them, but seeing as how proficient they were in combat, they sued for peace. What they saw in Cortes was a means to an end, and their only chance at breaking the power hold of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans allied with Cortes, bringing in more and more Indian allies as they went along, ultimately becoming the vast majority of his fighting force, with between 75,000 and 100,000 allies by Cortes’ final siege of Tenochtitlan. Besides being more soldiers at his back, Cortes also was able to glean much information from them about the Aztecs and their city of Tenochtitlan, such as the number of bridges they would encounter, the depth of the water, and even the main routes through the city. This goes to show, that without the assistance of his Indian allies, Cortes would have had absolutely no chance of ever defeating the Aztec empire.

Cortes’ success in conquering the Aztec empire is attributed to three vital reasons, the introduction of crippling diseases such as smallpox, the Spaniards superior tactics and weaponry which gave them unparalleled success on the battlefield, and finally the Aztec’s harsh tribute system which led to many subjugated Indians allying with Cortes. In combination, these three reasons gave Cortes the upper hand he needed to bring down the largest Meso-American empire in existence to date.
Bibliography


