



The above photo shows an early twentieth century mural of the *encomienda* system painted by Diego Rivera. It hangs in the National Palace in Mexico City.

Photo by Tamara Spike

Unit materials are based on Dr. Nancy Fitch's lesson plan for the American Historical Association's "Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age" project at

<http://www.historians.org/TI/LessonPlans/ca/Fitch/>

## NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

### Essay Module

### The Spanish Conquest of Mexico

© 2011, 2012 The Department of History & Philosophy, North Georgia College & State University. No Use without prior permission.

## Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Understand how Spain's historical background influenced their ideas about conquest and American Indians.
- 2) Explain and discuss the lasting and transformational influence of the Columbian Exchange.
- 3) Understand that the conquest of the New World was often a two-way process, not simple domination of Europeans over Americans.
- 4) Understand the ways in which Europeans consolidated their power in the New World

## Introduction

The Spanish "discovery" of the New World and the conquest of Mexico mark the start of the dramatic transformation of the New World, the foundation of the Spanish Empire, and the beginnings of its rise to global prominence. The domination of the New World was a transformational event for Europeans and indigenous Americans alike. For Europeans, discovery and colonization of the New World led to a period of global prominence and prosperity. For indigenous Americans, discovery and conquest were disastrous. Exploitation, disease, and loss of social organization led to the "**great dying**," the loss of between 90 and 95 per cent of the native population of the Americas in the first 150 years after contact. Moreover, discovery led to a process of ecological transformation. The introduction of European farming techniques and cattle, sheep, and other European domesticates resulted in rapid soil erosion and deforestation.

Most world history textbooks contain surprisingly little about the Spanish conquest of the New World, dismissing it in a few paragraphs. The collapse of complex, densely populated empires such as those of the Aztec and the Inca are portrayed as inevitable, the Spanish as destined to be dominant. In the case of the Aztec Empire, many of the texts cling to a long-held belief that the Aztec emperor **Moctezuma** willingly submitted to the Spanish because he believed that the conquistador **Hernán Cortés** was not a man, but an incarnation of the god Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent. Deeper examination of Nahua (Aztec) and Spanish sources show that both tell quite a different story. The conquest was a long, bitter struggle between two powers waging a complex war. How did such a powerful empire defending its very existence fall to a few hundred Spaniards fighting in dangerous and completely unfamiliar circumstances? The answers to this question include differences in military tactics and technology, disease, and Spanish ability to exploit political and religious divisiveness within the Aztec Empire.

This unit will explore the processes of conquest and transformation of the New World, using the earliest Spanish experiences in the New World and the conquest of the Aztec as an example of the patterns of conquest and exploitation that repeated themselves throughout the New World. We will see that "the conquest of America was not a monologue, but a dialogue

between cultures, each of which had many voices that often spoke in unison, but just as often were diverse and divisive. . . . Each side of that discourse was hard-pressed to prove its superiority. . . . [Conquest] is a story of contestation, of mediation and negotiation between cultures and between social groups . . . all of whom fundamentally depended on the other for their own self-definition.”<sup>1</sup>

## Spain before contact: al-Andalus

The Spanish came to the Americas with well-established ideas about how to successfully conquer a region and establish political, economic, religious, and cultural hegemony. In 711, Muslim Berbers (**Moors**) crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from Africa, invading and conquering much of the Iberian Peninsula. Spain became known as al-Andalus, and effectively became part of the Islamic world for the next seven hundred years. During this era, Spain prospered. Economically, it had access to luxury goods through trade with the Muslim empires to the east. Spaniards also enjoyed a high standard of living because of access to new technologies from the Islamic world such as covered sewers, advanced medical practices (unheard of in the rest of Europe), and perhaps most importantly, paper, a product which helped to create a highly literate population. Culturally, Spain was a melting pot, home to not only Muslims and Christians, but also to a relatively large Jewish population. During this era, many parts of Spain, particularly the city of Toledo, were known for religious tolerance and sharing between the scholarly traditions of the three religions.

Although much of Spain flourished as al-Andalus, many Christians chafed under Muslim rule and mounted a resistance movement centered on local Christian nobility. This movement became the **Reconquista** (reconquest). It reached its pinnacle under the direction of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, the monarchs of the two greatest kingdoms of the peninsula. Together, they led the Spanish to victory and completed the Reconquista in 1492 with the sack of the city of Grenada, taking it back from the Moors. For the Spanish, the Reconquista was not just political and military, but also religious. They saw themselves as Christian warriors redeeming Spain as a Christian kingdom. After the military conquest, Ferdinand and Isabella sought to complete the religious reconquest of Spain by issuing an ultimatum to the Muslim and Jewish populations of Spain: convert or leave. For Spaniards of the late fifteenth century, to be Spanish was to be Christian. There could be no other option. This idea became very evident as the Spanish expanded into the New World.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ramon Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), xvii-xviii.

## Global Transformations after Contact: The Columbian Exchange and the Great Dying

Like other Western European nations, Spain in the fifteenth century sought to explore, expand, and dominate newly accessed areas and routes of trade. Spain gained its first opportunity to do so in the Caribbean, where Christopher Columbus first landed in 1492. The Portuguese were also expanding at this time and in 1494, Castile and Portugal signed the **Treaty of Tordesillas** demarcating where each country had the right to expand. Spain received the majority of the New World; the Portuguese gained some of Brazil, as well as Africa and southern Asia.

Within twenty years, Spanish explorers in search of gold had claimed the major islands of the Caribbean and brutally suppressed the native peoples. They encouraged immigration from Spain and brought animals and plants that they considered indispensable to their way of life, and introduced useful New World goods to Europe. Additionally, Spaniards also brought new diseases and pathogens to the New World, which would induce tremendous demographic changes. Together, this transfer of people, plants, animals, and disease is known as the **Columbian Exchange**, a process which transformed foodways, populations, culture, and ecology all over the world.

Perhaps the greatest transformation of the Columbian Exchange was the introduction of Old World diseases to the native peoples of the New World, who lacked immunities to these diseases. Smallpox, measles, chicken pox, influenza, typhus, yellow fever, and malaria were among the diseases which contributed to the “**great dying**,” the loss of between 90 and 95% of the native population of the Americas. Epidemics of disease after disease swept through the New World, traveling far ahead of the Europeans themselves along indigenous trade routes. People who survived one disease often fell victim to the next as a result of a weakened immune system. Still others died of starvation in the aftermath of the epidemics, for with so many sick, there were never enough healthy people available to secure the food supply. Of all of the diseases introduced to the Americas, smallpox proved one of the most lethal. Epidemiologists estimate that as much as half of the population of the Caribbean and Central America died as a result of the first epidemic in 1518. Many European settlers all over the Americas, including Spanish and English colonists, saw the depopulation as an act of God which freed land and resources and quelled resistance against the Christianization of the Americas.

The movement of people in the Columbian Exchange involved the entirety of the **Atlantic World**. Although very few indigenous Americans left for the Old World, European settlers from all over the continent made their way to the New World, most coming from Spain and England. However, the vast majority of people who made the voyage across the Atlantic from Old World to New were not colonists or settlers, but enslaved Africans. The Atlantic Slave trade was itself a destructive and transformational process which will be discussed in a later chapter.

The exchange of plants and foods changed diet of peoples all over the world. European settlers brought foods that they considered vital to their identity and to their survival. The Spanish, for

example, focused much of their early agricultural efforts in the Caribbean on raising wheat for bread and grapes for wine. Although more Old World foods came to the New World than vice versa (see sidebar), New World products such as corn, potatoes, and manioc became staple foods all over the world. In particular, corn and manioc became the basis of many diets in Africa, and corn and sweet potatoes found great popularity in Asia. Finally, the potato became a tremendously important food in Ireland. Some scholars link the rise in global population in the 1700s to the introduction of these three high caloric, relatively easy-to-grow foods.

Europeans brought domesticated animals to the Americas along with Old World plants. European agricultural systems heavily relied on the labor of draft animals such as oxen, and the European diet relied on the products of domesticates such as cows, pigs, chickens, and other fowl. The introduction of these domesticates transformed the Americas in a myriad of ways. Farmers cleared great fields of land to house the animals and changed the landscape; they also introduced new crops such as oats and grasses to feed their livestock. Other grasses and weeds were introduced unintentionally when animals (having been fed Old World grasses and plants during their voyage across the Atlantic) stepped off of the ship and emptied their bowels. While domesticates were a vital part of the Old World agricultural systems, they were a tremendous blow to Native American agriculturalists. European farmers planted all of their crops in monocrop, fenced fields and tended them very closely; Indians planted many foods together in small, unfenced plots over a wide area and left them mostly untended: if one plot failed, others would certainly grow and produce. Pigs, cattle, and sheep saw these untended, unfenced crops as a smorgasbord planted just for them. Synergistically, the spread of disease as a part of the Columbian Exchange may also have been hastened by the introduction of many European domesticated animals to the Americas. Close contact between humans and animals often facilitates the transfer of disease.

## The Spanish in the Caribbean

The Caribbean served as a Spanish base of operations for the next thirty years; it is here that they formed their first ideas about the Americas and its inhabitants. During these first years, the Spanish struggled to establish processes and policies by which they could gain wealth and power for themselves and the Crown, and converts for their faith. Sometimes these goals worked hand in hand; more often they worked against each other. This tension was summed up in by conquistador and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who wrote, "We came for the glory of God and to get rich!"

The colonial economy of Spanish America was an economy of exploitation in two senses. First, the organization of labor within the Spanish empire involved structures of highly dependent servitude or slavery. Second, the resources of the continent were exploited for the economic advantage of Spain under the economic system of **mercantilism**. The early conquistadors were interested primarily in gold; they soon devised a series of institutions to exploit Native American labor. The first and most important was the **encomienda**, a formal grant by the Crown of the right to the labor of a specific number of Native Americans for a particular time. It

usually involved a few hundred Indians, but sometimes numbered in the thousands. The practice began in the Caribbean and spread as lands were conquered and peoples subdued. As Indians died of disease and overwork, Spaniards resupplied their labor force through slave raids in Central and South America. Areas such as Nicaragua were especially hard hit by these raids, and were soon depopulated.

The institution of *encomienda* was intended to harness Indian labor while simultaneously Christianizing and “civilizing” them; *encomienda* holders were granted labor, but in return they were charged with making sure that the natives were taught the Christian faith, baptized, and taught to live like Spaniards. Few *encomienda* holders were willing to spend the time and effort Christianizing their charges or the money to bring a priest to do it on their behalf. Ultimately, *encomienda* became little more than a system of slavery. The Spanish Crown disliked the *encomienda*; the monarchy was distressed by the reports that Indians were mistreated, and feared the *encomienda* holders were attempting to transform themselves into a new, powerful nobility in the Americas. The king did not want any competition in the Americas.

Roman Catholic priests and friars followed in the steps of the military conquerors. As the Church lost some of the faithful in Europe to the Protestant Reformation, they gained vast new lands and peoples to convert in the Americas. As a result of the Reconquista, the relationship between political authority and religious authority was extremely close in Spain and Spanish America. Ferdinand and Isabella were given the title “*Reyes Católicos*” (Catholic monarchs) and power to direct much of the activities of the Church in the New World. Soon, friars from mendicant orders such as Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits were arriving in the New World to convert the natives. The effort to Christianize Native Americans began in earnest in 1511, when a Dominican named Antonio de Montesinos gave a sermon in which he was said to have preached to his Spanish congregants, “you all are in mortal sin . . . on account of the cruelty and tyranny with which you use these innocent people. Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Must you not love them as you love yourselves?” These questions reverberated throughout the Spanish world and profoundly influenced the ensuing debate between the proponents of Indian labor and the proponents of converting the Indians.

The friars began their conversion efforts with the **caciques**, the Spanish term for indigenous political leaders, hoping that their subjects would convert as well. Caciques converted for many reasons: some out of desire to be identified with the powerful Spanish, some for protection against enemies, some because of the gifts that the friars heaped upon them. Some caciques converted from faith; others were compelled to convert under physical threat. Friars also concentrated their early efforts on children, hoping that they would grow up Christian and raise their own children in the faith. The initial efforts at conversion focused on outward rituals, not internal beliefs. The friars believed words and rituals would “open a path to God.” For that matter, many native peoples also believed that rituals opened a door to the spiritual realm. In densely populated areas, mass baptisms would be held where hundreds would be brought into the fold at once. Friars made an effort to knit practices of traditional agricultural cycles into Christian ritual and liken the saints to native gods: for example, John the Baptist was compared

to river and water gods. This blending of religious beliefs, symbols, rituals—sometimes intentional, sometimes not—is known as **syncretism**.

Real tension existed between the early Spanish conquerors and the church officials who sought to minister to the Native Americans. The encomienda holders sought to gain wealth and viewed Indians as a means to an end; many of the friars saw themselves as protectors of the natives and fought against the harsh conditions the encomenderos imposed on the natives.

**Bartolomé de las Casas** was one of the most active and successful of the friars who spoke out against mistreatment of native peoples. Las Casas helped to create the New Laws, which outlawed encomienda. The New Laws were hailed by the Church as the end of the Indian labor problem, but soon after, another exploitive system of labor took its place. Las Casas then journeyed to Seville to argue the case of the Indians before the Spanish Crown in 1550, and published *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a short book describing the harsh treatment of the Indians, in 1552. His public criticism of Spanish treatment of the Indians played a part in the creation of the **Black Legend**, an idea held by much of early modern Europe that the Catholic Spanish were cruel and intolerant. The English especially used this idea to justify their later incursions into the Spanish New World. Although Las Casas deplored the system of encomienda, he recognized that there was a need for labor, so he suggested that African slaves be imported for labor. Towards the end of his life, Las Casas was said to have regretted this suggestion as he saw the system of slavery that took the place of Indian labor.

## The Spanish Conquest of Mexico

During the early 1500s, Spaniards began to explore the coasts of the North American mainland. There they found indigenous groups that were more organized, populous, and wealthy than those in the Caribbean. Hoping to gain access to this wealth, Governor of Cuba Diego Velasquez appointed Hernán Cortés leader of an expedition charged with exploring the mainland's interior in 1519. Cortés immediately began gathering materials, supplies, ships, and men for the expedition, and ran up a tremendous bill. Velasquez also received reports that Cortés was acting pretentious and flaunting his new power in unbecoming ways. Having second thoughts about Cortés's leadership abilities, Velasquez sent an emissary to relieve him of command. However, Cortés was forewarned, and avoided receiving the orders by setting sail for western Cuba, where he continued supplying his force, which consisted of 508 men, 16 horses, and a handful of cannon.

Cortés and his men first made landfall in Cozumel, in the Yucatán peninsula. There, the Spaniards met with a mixed reaction from local Maya peoples; some fought against the Spaniards, some ignored them as best as they could, and some were friendly to the new arrivals, gifting them with food and women. One of those young women, baptized by the Spaniards as Marina, would be very important for the future of the conquest. Doña Marina became Cortés's interpreter and advisor. She spoke fluent Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. As Cortés's interpreter, she played a crucial role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico. She became his lover and bore him a son, Martín. Ultimately, Cortés married her off to another Spaniard of

his party. Marina is better remembered to history by a Spanish/Nahuatl corruption of her name: La Malinche.

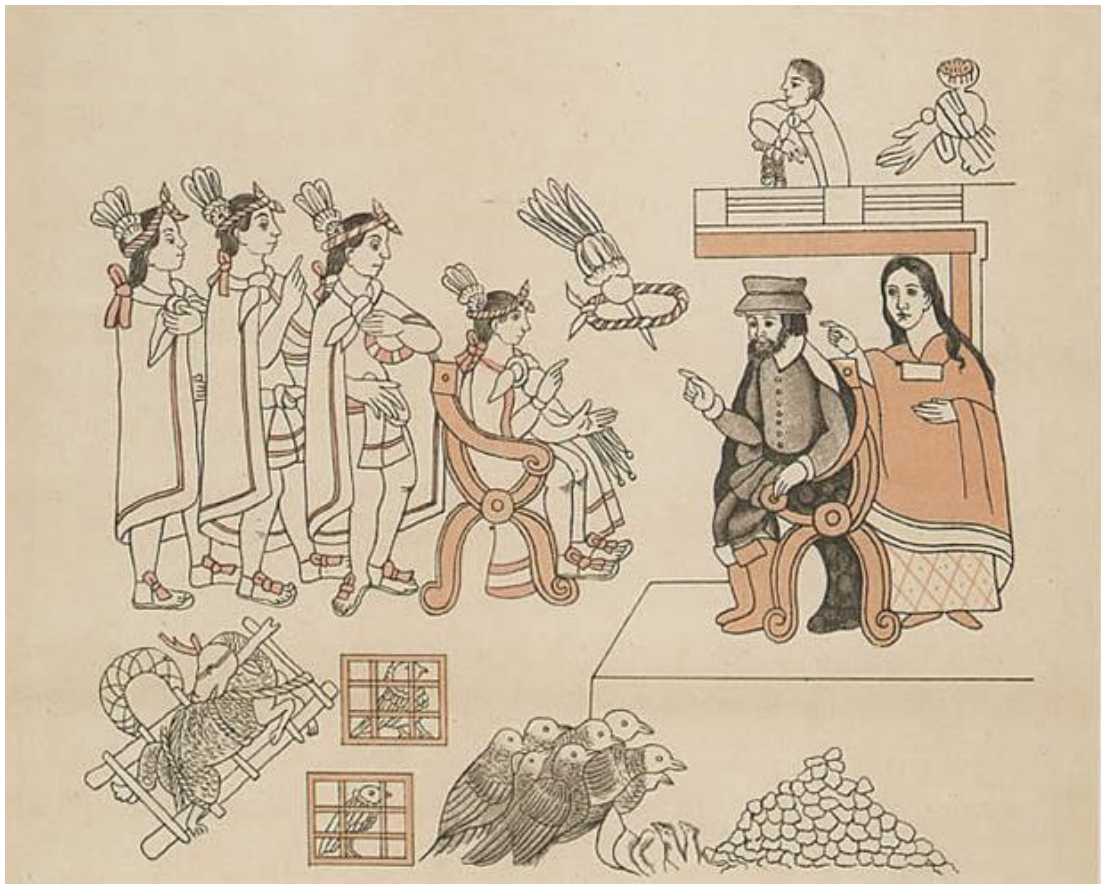
The Aztecs made contact with Cortés at Veracruz. Moctezuma had heard reports of the strangers, and sent emissaries bringing gifts to make contact. Cortés was unsatisfied with the luxurious goods, which included an elaborate headdress of quetzal feathers. After clapping the messengers in irons and scaring them by shooting off the harquebus cannon, he gave them a message to take to Moctezuma: "We Spaniards have a disease which only gold can cure." Cortés and his men began the long march into the Central Valley of Mexico. Along the way, they learned something of the Aztecs and the nature of their empire from subject villages and probably from Malinche as well. They reached the city of Cempoala on June 3, 1519. There, the Totonac lord allied with Cortés against the Aztecs in hopes of freeing his city-state from Aztec tribute. Cortés had now hit upon one of the keys to his success in conquering the Aztec: exploiting the divisions within the Aztec empire, soliciting the support of its tribute states and enemies, and raising a large army of indigenous warriors.

In the meantime, the Aztec ambassadors had returned to the Aztec capitol of Tenochtitlán and reported all that they had learned of the Spaniards to their emperor Moctezuma. Throughout Cortés's long march to Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma had watchers following them and advising him of their movements. He attempted to bribe the Spanish, sending gifts of gold. Instead of dissuading the Spanish, it increased their desire. The Aztec reaction to the greed of the Spanish was recorded in the Florentine Codex: "They seized upon the gold as if they were monkeys. For clearly their thirst for it was unquenchable, they starved, lusted for it and they stuffed themselves with it." As a last ditch effort to prevent the Spanish from reaching Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma had the road blocked, planting a forest to hide the route to the city. His plan failed.

Cortés reached the city of Tlaxcala, enemy of the Aztec and their chief rivals to power in the region. After an initial conflict with the Spaniards, the Tlaxcalans allied with the Spanish, promising supplies and a large army. The Spanish met little resistance the rest of the way to the Aztec capitol and on November 8, 1519 reached Tenochtitlán. Moctezuma came personally to meet Cortés and his men. Sources from both sides indicate that the first meeting was a peaceful encounter of conversation and diplomacy. Each presented gifts to the other and affirmed his good intentions. Doña Marina interpreted what Moctezuma said to Cortés: "Lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on earth. You have come to your city of México." Moctezuma acted as a gracious host and housed the Spaniards in one of the central palaces. Within a week Cortés seized the emperor and held him hostage. For months, the Spaniards roamed the city freely, gathering gold and riches and forcing Moctezuma to address his people from time to time to assure the peace and reaffirm the power and position of the Spanish. The Spaniards grew overconfident; the Aztec grew restless. Things came to a head on April 20, 1520, when Pánfilo de Narváez landed at Veracruz with orders to arrest Cortés for treason. Cortés left to deal with the new threat, leaving the Tenochtitlán garrison under Pedro de Alvarado. Cortés took Narváez by surprise and captured him, then

## La Malinche

Contemporary Spanish documents mention Malinche rarely. Cortés mentions her only twice in all of the letters he wrote to the king detailing the conquest. His primary interest in these letters was to paint himself and his actions in the best light possible; being completely reliant on a native and a woman to boot would have made him seem weak. The Spanish chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes a little more of her in his account, stating that she was important to the conquest, and judging from her beauty and poise, certainly a noblewoman. Indigenous documents consistently depict her as a central figure of the expedition; she stands close beside Cortés nearly every time he is shown. Some of the indigenous sources depict her in noble dress; others depict her barefoot and with loose, flowing hair, which is more indicative of a commoner. Overall, very little is known about this woman who played such an important role in the conquest; the ambiguity about her in these records says a great deal about class and gender in the 1500s among both the Spanish and the Aztec. Malinche has been cast in innumerable lights as history's view of the conquest, the role of women in society, and the worth of indigenous peoples has changed: she has alternately been depicted as traitor to her people, victim of exploitation, heroine of the conquest, the first Latin American, and as a Mexican Eve, mother of the **mestizos**.



**Malinche interprets for Cortes and Moctezuma. From the Lienzo de Tlaxcala.**

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Malinche](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Malinche)

recruited the newly arrived troops with promises of gold. He returned triumphant to Tenochtitlán.

Meanwhile, the Spaniards in Tenochtitlán found themselves in a very dangerous position. During Cortés's absence, the citizens of Tenochtitlán celebrated a religious festival dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, their principal god. Alvarado, fearful of treachery, ordered an attack on the festival, killing many. The Aztec responded by driving the Spaniards back into the palace, laying siege to it. During the siege, two key things happened. First, the Aztec grew weary of inaction and elected a new emperor, Cuitlahuac, to lead them in resisting the Spaniards. Secondly, Moctezuma died. Spanish sources claim that he was killed by his own people while addressing them; Aztec sources claim that the Spaniards killed him. In any case, the Spanish had lost their only point of leverage and were now held hostage in the very palace that they once commanded from.

When Cortés returned, the Aztecs permitted him to enter the city and trapped him in the palace as well. The standoff continued for many days. The Spanish realized that they had to escape. At midnight on June 30, 1520, they attempted to make their escape. This flight became known as the **Noche Triste**, or Night of Sorrows. Their escape was foiled when a woman drawing water saw them and raised the alarm. The fighting was fierce. Many Spaniards and many more of their Tlaxcalan allies died. Some of the Spaniards were severely hindered by the gold they tried to carry out of the city. The Aztec followed them out of the city, very nearly killing them all; the Spanish were saved only when Cortés killed the Aztec commander, throwing the army into disarray. Eventually, the retreating forces made it to the safety of Tlaxcala.

Although the Spanish had been forced out of the city, they had left an unintentional and dangerous parting gift: smallpox. The disease raged through the city, killing thousands and weakening all. The Florentine Codex captures the Aztec view: "When the Spaniards fled we thought we had seen the last of them but this was not to be . . . a great pestilence came, the smallpox. It caused great misery. It covered the body with pustules, those who suffered could only lie in their beds. Many died of hunger for there was no one left alive in their homes to look after them." Even the new emperor died of the disease.

In December of 1520, Cortés marched on Tenochtitlán once more. Many more Aztec tributary states, seeking to break away from the empire, allied with the Spaniards. Cortés now commanded an army of approximately 75,000; some historians argue that Cortés's army numbered as much as 200,000. The Spaniards constructed twelve boats, and launched them into the lake. Each day the Spaniards would fight their way into the city, tearing it apart piece by piece as they advanced. Often, they found themselves trapped in hand to hand combat in the narrow streets of the city. Each nightfall, they withdrew and returned to the mainland. The battle raged into the summer of 1521. Many Spanish captives were taken; the Florentine Codex describes the ritual execution of the Spanish to the Aztec war god Huitzilopochtli. The Aztec

killed several of the Spanish horses, and displayed their heads as war trophies on the skull rack of the temple. Cortés himself was badly wounded and nearly captured.

The battle raged on for months. Disease was still active in the city, and the Spanish further weakened the population by cutting the huge city from its food sources and supply of fresh water. Thousands died from famine. Finally, after the emperor Cuautémoc was captured, the Aztec surrendered on August 13, 1521.

The Spanish had successfully defeated one of the most powerful empires on earth, not because the Aztecs thought they were gods, but because of several key factors. Spanish weaponry did play a role in the defeat, but examination of the sources shows that surprisingly, the horses and dogs of war were much more effective tools than the swords and cannon. More importantly, the Spanish successfully exploited the divisions within the Aztec empire, making alliances and gathering an enormous army of native forces. By kidnapping Moctezuma, Cortés also contributed to the breakdown of Aztec political unity and authority. Finally, the arrival of disease in the densely populated capitol proved to be a key factor to the Spanish victory. Cortés's defeat of the Aztec established a pattern of conquest that the Spanish returned to again and again as they expanded throughout the New World. For instance, in 1532, Francisco Pizarro conquered the Inca Empire with a force of about two hundred men by following the patterns established by Cortés. Pizarro took advantage of divisions in the empire introduced by a recent civil war, pitting one side against the other and inciting more violence and killing. Moreover, Pizarro took the Incan leader Atahualpa captive. After Atahualpa ransomed himself with a roomful of silver and gold, Pizarro had him killed. The Spaniards then fought their way to Cuzco, the Inca capital, and captured it, effectively ending the Incan Empire. The conquistadores of Peru also relied on Indian allies in warfare. Four years after the conquest, the Spanish faced a massive uprising called The Great Inca Rebellion. The Spanish were able to put down the rebellion and defend their city of Lima only with the aid of their Indian allies. Although the Spaniards faced insurrections for decades after the conquest of Cuzco, the Spaniards were able to successfully quell the rebellions and establish control by following the example of their forebears in Mexico.

## **The Myth of Quetzalcoatl**

What of the myth of Cortés as a god? For generations, historians told of an Aztec legend that cast Cortés as the fated return of the god Quetzalcoatl. The myth says that long before the establishment of the Aztec empire, a priest/god named Quetzalcoatl was forced from the Central Valley of Mexico, out to the Gulf of Mexico. Quetzalcoatl vowed to return and destroy the people who had forsaken him. His return was foretold in the year Ce Atl, One Reed: 1519. In the months leading up to Cortés's arrival in the city of Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma was said to have observed omens of the downfall of his society: a comet, the spontaneous combustion of a temple, the birth of misformed animals and people. Therefore, the myth states, when Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma willingly submitted to the Spanish and invited them into the city.

Where did the idea come from, and why did historians find it appealing for so long? Examination of sources written by eyewitnesses to the conquest reveals that there is absolutely no mention of the Spanish being seen as gods or of Cortés as the embodiment of Quetzalcoatl. Moreover, there is absolutely no mention of the myth of Quetzalcoatl's exile from Mexico in any of the documents before the conquest. The first mention of any of these ideas is found in sources dating about 30 years after the conquest. By this time, the Spanish were well established in the region, and were in the process of attempting to Christianize and Hispanicize the Nahua people (descendants of the Aztec and the peoples of their empire). They focused much of their energies on the sons of the elite, taking over their education. These young, elite descendants of Aztec produced several histories of the conquest under the tutelage of the Spaniards; post-conquest documents, influenced by the Spanish, but with a decidedly indigenous voice. The Florentine Codex is the most important of these documents. Why the god myth of conquest? Perhaps these young men looked back to the mighty empire of their fathers and grandfathers and didn't understand how such a powerful empire could fall to so few Spaniards. Such a myth would have been powerfully appealing to them. Historians fell under the spell of the myth as well, but for differing reasons. Early twentieth century historians saw the myth as irrefutable proof of the simplicity of the Aztecs, and the inevitable domination of the Europeans. Much later, historians who sympathized and sought to end a bias favoring Europeans in the historical record saw the myth as proof that the Aztec were a people with a complex culture, worldview, and religion.