

Chapter 1 Additional Material

Early Spanish Conquests

Spanish experiences in Latin and South America during the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries differed in some notable ways from colonization elsewhere in North America. To begin, military adventurers and proselytizing missionaries played key roles in the Spanish conquest of indigenous peoples. In 1492, when Columbus first discovered lands in what became known as the New World, the Spanish also completed their centuries-long conflict against the Muslim Moors, finally expelling them out of the Iberian Peninsula. As a result, a large pool of men possessing military skills or a commitment to spreading the Catholic faith were now available for other endeavors (such as creating a new overseas empire). Though Jesuit priests did promote the cause of Catholicism among natives in Canada, seventeenth-century French and English colonies stemmed more from efforts to establish commercial ventures or, in the latter case, create communities where settlers had liberty to practice particular religious faiths.

Another peculiarity is that the Spanish encountered and conquered the last great native empires in the Americas: the Aztec and the Inca. The largest native polity in North America per se—the Mississippian or mound-building culture centered around a city now called Cahokia in what is today Illinois—had declined in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although in 1540–42

the conquistador Hernando de Soto came across some last remnants of it among peoples he encountered in the continent's southeast. Whereas the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) had about 200,000 people when Hernán Cortés first arrived in 1519, in the seventeenth-century French and English colonists encountered native nations with populations of a few thousand, or an occasional confederation of peoples whose total inhabitants numbered in the low tens of thousands. And these populations were often dispersed in numerous towns and villages.

The conquest of these empires entailed some unique fighting compared to experiences elsewhere in the Americas. At Tenochtitlán, Spanish forces under Cortés engaged in street combat. In the final campaign to take the city in 1521, they constructed boats and used native allies in canoes to support soldiers assaulting causeways across Lake Texcoco. Although precise figures are elusive, the size of the forces involved were much larger than in the majority of engagements during the contact and early colonial period, with thousands on either side. But this point demonstrates the need for European colonists for native allies. Cortés' Spanish forces generally had only a few hundred soldiers at any given time, perhaps about a thousand at the most. But native allies who fought with them numbered many thousands, and provided crucial manpower in the final campaign.



From *The history of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards*, translated into English from the original Spanish of Don Antonio de Solis...by Thomas Townsend, esq.

Credit: Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Jay I. Kislak Collection (LOC Control no. 16005370).

The Aztec example also raises the issue of technology. Various treatments of initial contacts between indigenous and Western peoples in the Americas comment on native shock when first encountering firearms. While true, such awe did not last very long. Certainly the crossbows and arquebuses (precursors to muskets) used by Spanish soldiers in Mexico were superior to any missile weapons possessed by the Aztec. But given the difficulty in using them as well as their limited numbers, their contribution to the Spanish conquest is debatable. The steel swords and armor of Spanish soldiers were at least as important, as they were superior to the wood and bone variants used by Aztec warriors. (Metal versions of tools and weapons already familiar to native peoples, such as axes, became very popular among indigenous groups after contact with Europeans.) The Spanish in Mexico also had another military advantage: horses. These large animals were not native to the Americas, and when mounted by soldiers and used for quick attacks, were perhaps more impressive than firearms to the Aztecs. As with guns, their contribution to the ultimate Spanish conquest is debatable.

But the introduction of horses into the Americas speaks to a broader issue. Europeans came from a different ecological environment than Native Americans. Not only were plants and animals different, but so were diseases. The biological interaction that occurred when Europeans started crossing the Atlantic is today referred to as the “Columbian exchange.” For Native Americans, the most devastating aspect of this development was the introduction of new diseases. As children, Westerners had usually been exposed and developed antibodies to lethal diseases such as small pox (if they survived)—diseases that had not previously existed among

native American peoples. In the centuries that followed initial contacts with Europeans, deadly epidemics periodically afflicted indigenous groups throughout the Americas. By the seventeenth century, native populations had dropped precipitously, and may have influenced the development of mourning war (discussed in Chapter 1 of *Ways of War*) and other practices whereby North American peoples limited the lethality of their conflicts.

Before then, the spread of disease assisted Spanish efforts to expand their authority over larger areas of Central and South America. Having already established their domination over most of the Caribbean, Spanish conquests continued after the defeat of the Aztec in 1521, of which the most dramatic was the subjugation the Incas starting in 1532 with the expedition led by Francisco Pizarro. But numerous native groups came under Spanish influence, who often provided labor for Spanish-owned estates or to support the Catholic missions that endeavored to convert them to Christianity. By the seventeenth century, the northern extreme of the Spanish empire reached what is today New Mexico. There, in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, local peoples inflicted what Alan Taylor has described as “the greatest setback that natives ever inflicted on European expansion in North America.” Even so, by the 1690s the Spanish were reasserting their control over the region.

Another region in the northern extreme of the Spanish empire was Florida. There the main settlement was Saint Augustine, the first permanent European settlement in North America proper. The Spanish founded it in 1565 to protect shipping routes between the Caribbean and Spain, including treasure fleets carrying gold and silver. To help defend Florida from possible overland attacks from the north, the Spanish cultivated relations with indigenous peoples, such as the Apalachee, Guale, and Timucua, and established missions in the area. By the early eighteenth

century, rivalries between European powers and the advent of the Indian slave trade embroiled these peoples in a series of devastating regional wars.

Box 1.1 Samuel de Champlain Helps Defeat the Iroquois

Please click on the following link for access to the print *Defeat of the Iroquois at Lake Champlain*.

From Tarry at home travels. (New York: Macmillan, 1906) Hale, Edward Everett (1822–1909), Author. Mid-Manhattan Library / Picture Collection:

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-f379-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

In 1609, Samuel de Champlain accompanied some Huron and Montagnais allies in a battle against the Mohawks, one of the Five Nations of the Iroquois. This was the first time Indians in northeastern North America saw a firearm used. Initially behind and hidden from the view of the Mohawk, at a key moment, Champlain and other Frenchmen moved in front of their native allies and fired their matchlocks, killing some chieftains. Shortly thereafter the Mohawk fled. Some argue the battle demonstrates that prior to European colonization, native foes engaged in more battles than afterwards, which resulted from the introduction of firearms into the continent. One scholar claims the Iroquois began using “skulking” ambush and hit-and-run tactics in the 1600s because they initially lacked firearms that the French distributed to their Amerindian allies. Champlain’s account of the battle also demonstrates that to that time warriors often built barricades to defend their camps—the image above includes one the Mohawk had built the previous day.

Short Bibliography

Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York, Penguin, 2001.

Thomas, Hugh. *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.