

“Conquistador”

Hernán Cortés, King Montezuma, and the Last Stand of the Aztecs

Review by: Nicholas Pell 4 April 2011

Historian’s Objective:

The historian, Buddy Levy, wrote this narrative of Hernán Cortés’ Conquest of “New Spain” to tell the story of the hardships experienced by his men, the natives who joined him and the proud “Aztecas” who were subsequently conquered. Levy’s objective was to display the daily occurrences of the conquest and to show how truly complex it was to subdue the Aztecs, as the process did not happen overnight like other historical accounts might lead one to believe. Levy truly captured the sentiment of Cortés’ conquest by including the conquistador’s own journal accounts, as well as those of the native Aztecs’. He expressed Cortés’ determination for the conquest with the conqueror’s own words that they would “*not turn back until they had taken Mexico or died in the attempt*” (Levy 228).

Levy’s purpose for writing this historical narrative was to express the intricacies that went into the conquest of the Aztec empire. He wanted to teach the reader about the immense political and agricultural systems that the Aztecs had while allowing the reader to question how it was that such an advanced civilization would have even given heed to this foreign “*Tenle*” who had little to offer them. Levy’s rationale behind the creation of this work might very well have been to show that Gold, God, and Glory had as much to do with Cortés’ conquest of Mexico as these things had to do with the maritime travels of countless other 15th and 16th century explorers. This historical narrative truly encapsulates the dichotomy of theologies and philosophies of the Aztec and Spanish cultures. It also shows that power and privilege had a lot to do with the success and conquest of the great city of Tenochtitlán.

Synopsis:

This narrative starts out with Cortés’ departure from Cuba in 1519. He was equipped with 11 ships, 500 men, and 15 horses. His goal: to settle the newly-found lands in the name of the

Spanish crown, to convert the natives to Catholicism, and to “acquire” as many riches as he and his men could. Essentially, Cortés wanted to have the glory of founding the new land and, with the justification that he was doing so in the sacred name of God, acquire gold and have the natives become vassals of Spain. Cortés landed on the eastern shore of the Yucatán peninsula in early March of 1519. Throughout his journeys, he fought many natives, and even brought some under his rule. As this account relates, Cortés relied very heavily on the natives’ sheer numbers in his army and their knowledge of the Aztec culture and customs.

With the support of thousands of Mexican natives and that of La Malinche as a translator, Cortés was able to infiltrate the city of Tenochtitlán and eventually capture king Montezuma. Cortés and Montezuma ruled together for a few months. Montezuma’s morale declined during this time. After addressing his people (whose support for him had been descending for some time), and after having been stoned by the same, he eventually received his wish: “*I wish only to die. Fate has brought me to such a pass because of [Cortés] that I do not wish to live or hear his voice again*” (Levy 181).

Cortés eventually felt unsafe staying in the city of Tenochtitlán, so, during the night (now referred to as “La Noche Triste” [July 1st, 1520]), he and his men fled the “city on the lake” by way of the westward “Tacuba Causeway” (Levy 188). Many died in the process, and much of their stolen treasure was lost. They fled to nearby Tlaxcala (to allied native forces) for support and to heal from their wounds. After recovering from a coma which lasted several days, Cortés laid out a new plan. His first step was to scuttle his remaining ships which lay at bay on the coast of Villa Rica, so as to force his men to stay and continue the mission. He then decided to build 13 brigantines (referred to as “The Wooden Serpent”) which he would later use for a water ambush on the city of Tenochtitlán. Cortés eventually planned the re-conquest of Tenochtitlán, and, with the help of thousands of Tlaxcalans and other indigenous tribes, launched a three-sided attack on “*the City of Dreams*.” After much bloodshed, many days of fighting and subsequent Spanish retreats Conquistador Hernán Cortés eventually destroyed the city of Tenochtitlán, and captured its ruler, Cuauhtémoc. The date was August 13th, 1521. He had successfully knocked out their main source

of fresh water and had closed their market in Tlatelolco (located on the northern part of the island). Because of these measures, the Aztecs had been starving to death and had been in a draught for weeks. Cortés' plan had worked, and on that day, he acquired for the Spanish crown the city of Tenochtitlán and the vassalage of all of the inhabitants who were under the Aztec empire. Cortés acquired "*the City of Dreams*," a city which he was recorded to have referred to as "*the most beautiful thing in the world*" (Levy 102).

Critique:

I must start out by stating that this account was, by far, the most accurate and intriguing history of the Aztecs that I have ever come across. Buddy Levy wrote with amazing historical accuracy and included the much-needed accounts of the Aztec people (as some other works do not). Many forget that Cortés did not take on this conquest alone, with only Spanish help. He was aided immensely by the natives, especially "La Malinche." This historical narrative displays the intricacies of war, as well as the consequences of the same. This work shows that greed, such as that that the great Conquistador had, can lead to the destruction of a city and an entire civilization.

As Cortés traveled across the land, he learned of the ritual human sacrifices that the natives performed so as to "*[ensure] the daily rising of the sun*" (Levy 66). The practice of human sacrifice, especially during the festival of Toxcatl, was revered as a highly honored tradition for the native people, as this account explained in detail (Levy 164). This absolutely disgusted the great conqueror, and he worked diligently to stop the "*evils of false worship*" (Levy 66). Cortés witnessed that the natives had no advanced form of metallurgy as it related to swords, spears, and knives. The indigenous used obsidian, a type of volcanic glass, for spear heads and knives. Their armor was made of thick, breathable cotton, which proved nearly useless against the Spanish arquebusiers, crossbows and steel swords. From a purely military standpoint, Cortés and his men were more advanced and equipped for "quick-death" battle, whereas the Aztecs instituted their weapons to *injure* their victims that they may later have brought them back to their capital to perform sacrificial ordinances upon them (Levy 75).

When word of a new leader whose goal it was to overthrow the oppressive Aztec government spread across the land of Mexico, thousands of the native Tlaxcalans joined Cortés and his ranks. With these reinforcements, as well as the occasional addition of Spanish troops who arrived on ships from Hispaniola and Spain, Cortés eventually had the manpower necessary to entice fear in the Aztec government, control the people contained within its empire, and ultimately overthrow it. It was because of these natives that Cortés could move his 13 brigantines over fifty miles in order to have amphibious warfare possible. La Malinche (Doña Marina) was so necessary in Cortés' communication with the natives, because it was she who stood as the lingual intermediary between him and the Aztecs. Her role in the conquest was often muted, but she was instrumental in Cortés' ability to speak with both his advocates and adversaries. Without her and Jerónimo de Aguilar (who both stood as his translators), Cortés would have been reduced to communication by gestures and might not have had the success that he did.

To Cortés' advantage, an African porter named Francisco de Eguía (who was infected with smallpox), brought the first case of the pestilence to New Spain. Because of how closely the natives lived and as a result of communal bathing and improper medical care, the disease spread quickly and killed off thousands of the indigenous population. Even the newly-appointed Aztec king, Cuitláhuac, died from smallpox. No Spaniards were reported to have died from the disease (because they were immune to it). It was supposed that they *could have been* Gods because they were unaffected by the "*Great Rash*" (Levy 216). Without the plague of smallpox which wiped out over half of the inhabitants of Mexico (Levy 215), Cortés simply did not have had the population majority over the Aztecs, and might not have gained control of the city of Tenochtitlán.

Contrary to popular belief, Cortés was not welcomed into the city of Tenochtitlán as the esteemed "Quetzalcoatl" (plumed serpent; god of the wind) although king Montezuma and his Aztec people speculated that he *could have been* such. "[He] had miraculously arrived on the mainland in 1-Reed, the precise year Quetzalcoatl was predicted to return, and even more [significant], it was 1-Wind in the Aztec calendar, Quetzalcoatl's day of "the whirlwind" (Levy 111). Cortés played on

this misconception too, and considered the Aztec speculation to be more literal than figurative. He was truly not a god. Cortés had many to thank for his successes, but, prideful as he was, *he* was named the conqueror of the Aztec civilization, with his loyal Malinche forever at his side.

Application to class:

This historical narrative applies to that which we have learned in class in that explorers have three main objectives. These are: God, Gold, and Glory. Cortés was certainly an “explorer” in that respect. Much of what we learned in class about 15th and 16th century explorers and conquistadors related to their greed for gold, rape (whether literal or figurative) of the people and their land, and the justification that this was all done “in the name of God.”

Hernán Cortés was very determined to overtake the city of Tenochtitlán, and, as we learned from Columbus’ travels, he too used his authority (and pride) to disregard the military and political orders from his superiors. Truly, Cortés was like unto Hitler in that he eventually believed that *he* should be the ultimate ruler of the people whom he had conquered. He, like Napoleon Bonaparte, was very militant in his endeavors and philosophies and cruel to the “inferior” (Aztec) people, as well as to his own.

Cortés, like Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia, was a self-proclaimed “leader of his people.” Cortés prided himself in the idea that vassalage should be extended to (if not forced upon) the natives of the Aztec empire. This is like unto the concept of “Pan-Germanism” or Irredentism (although the land of “New Spain” had never belonged to Spain) because Spain wanted to extend its borders and expand its empire.

Work Cited:

Levy, Buddy. Conquistador: Hernán Cortés, King Montezuma, and the Last Stand of the Aztecs.

New York: Random House, Inc., 2008.