



Section 3. Political sciences

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-24-3-18-23



WHY THE SPANISH SUCCEEDED IN INVADING MEXICO

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Cite: Kamalova K. (2023). *Why the Spanish Succeeded in Invading Mexico*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2024, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-24-3-18-23>

Abstract

This article delves into the reasons behind the Spanish establishment in the region, with a particular focus on the alliances formed with native populations that facilitated the conquest of the Aztec Empire. Through source analysis, the article evaluates the credibility and content of primary sources, particularly The Thirteenth Communication by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, to uncover alternative perspectives on historical events. The analysis reveals the emotional narrative and strategic objectives underlying Ixtlilxochitl's account, shedding light on the motivations behind the Texcocan alliance with Spain. Additionally, the article examines the broader geopolitical landscape of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, characterized by internal conflicts, economic interactions, and religious dynamics as well as the personal factor, including the maneuverability in uncertainty and the power dynamics between individuals, having played a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of the conquest. Finally, the article highlights the multifaceted nature of historical causation in shaping colonial legacies.

Keywords: *Aztecs, Aztec History, Aztec Politics, Mesoamerica, Mesoamerican Ethnohistory, Spanish conquest of the Americas, pre-Columbian America, Fernando De Alva Ixtlilxochitl*

Introduction

Before turning to the part of the article that will look more closely at the reasons for the Spanish establishment in the region, there is a quote from the abstract of the Mexican edition of the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) work "De la venida de los españoles y principio de la ley evangélica" (The Thirteenth Communication. On the Coming of the Spaniards and the Beginning of the Evangelical Law): "in it he [Alva Ixtlilxochitl] makes

sense of the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his friends in a world dominated by the Meschic Empire and the alliances with the natives that led to the fall of the city of Tenochtitlan." (Ixtlilxochitl, 1938). Thus, it can be concluded that it was the assistance of the natives to the Spanish that made the conquest of the great Aztec Empire possible. Rephrasing the question for reflection: what made these alliances possible in the first place and productive for the Spanish in the second?

Research method

The method applied in the article is source analysis. As a research method it involves critically examining various sources to extract, evaluate, and interpret information relevant to a research question. The article is concerned with the question “Why the Spanish succeeded in invading Mexico?”. The primary source The Thirteenth Message by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (Talach, 2013) was used to analyse the matter.

In the article, source credibility is evaluated, namely authorship, publication, purpose and audience, evidence and argumentation; source content is analysed, namely context, theme, perspectives, language and style; implications and limitations of the source are also under analysis in the process of interpretation.

Analysis

The Thirteenth Communication itself is a source that provides a completely alternative viewpoint on the events that took place in the early sixteenth century. The history of pre-Columbian America is known to be very Aztecocentric, because the Aztecs themselves worked on it. When conquering the Zapotec, Toltec and Maya peoples, whose culture they assimilated, they burned their historical manuscripts, asserting their superiority over the conquered, and the Aztec Tlatoani Itzcoatl tried to burn and rewrite all the sources that existed before him, and the trend continued afterwards: history is written by those who occupy the dominant political position, and the Aztecs were undoubtedly the leading force in the region (not least because, they could afford to expand actively southwards, covered on other sides by their allies in the Triple Alliance, the Tlaxcalans and Tlacopanis), then the prevailing interpretations of historical events obviously belonged to the Spanish, who, again, relied mainly on Aztec sources.

Going into the linguistic analysis of the text, it can be noted that it is more synchronic than diachronic: Ixtlilxochitl does not give a historical analysis of why the Texcocans suddenly sided with Spain (except in those cases necessary for him to praise the crown), it can be read between the lines, but he himself rather presents a cross-section of the

events that unfolded around the assistance to Cortés. However, since Alva did not recognise “tales” (passed on by word of mouth) and used only archival sources, his text has a semblance of intertextuality, if it is at all appropriate to speak of it in relation to texts from such an early period.

Ixtlilxochitl’s version has a number of characteristic features, such as the emotionality of the narrative, the constant embellishment of events, the attention to the “twists and turns” of the family tree, and the explanation of the victory and survival of the Spaniards led by Cortés by the help of the noble Texcocan warriors led by Ixtlilxochitl II. They are explained mainly by the purpose of writing this “note”, although it is a historical reconstruction, it is linked to a very specific task: to present a list of merits and services, the citation of which in some number will help to achieve some historical justice or recognition by the royal government. Ixtlilxochitl, by emphasising the actions of his ancestors specifically, seeks to explain to the Spaniards, as it were, why he keeps the memory of these events alive, can talk about them, and is worthy of leniency from the Spanish crown (it is known that he twice had to litigate over family holdings on Mexican soil).

As a final remark, it is worth pointing out that the Thirteenth Report proposed for consideration was published in 1829 (Presentación editorial, 2022, October 13) and is part of the Historical Compendium of the Kingdom of Texcoco (La versión Texcocana. El Compendio histórico del reino de Texcoco). The date of its publication is noteworthy: the work was published during the Mexican national upsurge, since it was in this decade that Mexico gained its independence (1821). The facts that no attention has been paid to the message before this, and that very historians have little information about the figure of Alva himself, with his lineage known mainly from his own sources, suggest that the message may have been fabricated or even altered, but this branch of reflection will intentionally be left aside.

Turning to the main part, it is necessary to define the world order that had developed by the time of the Spanish arrival. This article is dedicated to a period when the regional ordering was more similar to Hobbes’s natural

state than any “order” at all. The post-classical era of the Mesoamerican history is characterised by a large number of wars, which is no surprise, since it represents a mixed world order according to A. Watson (Watson, 2009). Thus, the confederate state of Tlaxcala (which by the time of arrival of the conquistadors was on the verge of destruction by the Aztecs and which acted as their first opponent) and the Hueshotzinki — Nahuazi-speaking Indian people, proto-state chiefdom (located to the south, also on the verge of destruction) co-existed in it. Recalling another feature of such world orders — the prevalence of economic interactions — the rise of a new powerful class can be noted here — mailers, traders, who gained political power through economic one. Their activities, however, were not exclusively aimed at economic growth, but they became scouts who reported to the Tlatoani on the political, economic and military climate in other cities and subsequently used this information to invade their neighbours’ territories, without contributing to the tranquillity of the empire. By the 16th century, the Mexican empire had accumulated many contradictions caused mainly by the inadequate cruelty of the Aztec rulers. If Incas acted under the guise of equality, Aztecs frankly brutalised themselves, thousands of people had their hearts torn out. The Spaniards were not kind, but even they were amazed by these traditions. There was such a phenomenon as the Flower Wars, the name of which is connected with a custom (probably legendary but still indicative): already conquered people had to come out with a bouquet to meet the armed Aztecs, someone was killed on the spot, the rest were captured and sacrificed.

In addition to internal feuds among representatives of the highest military nobility, the Aztec Empire was no stranger to the problems of any empire: the territory was not homogeneous, it included a number of enclaves of unconquered “barbarians”. Made up of many pieces, the empire faced the disobedience of these “shreds”: subjugated Indian tribes were set against the Aztecs. Cortes was very pleased to know that this territory was inhabited by different ethnic groups (Pagen, 1986), because he realised that he could act the same way he did in Spain. At this

time on the Iberian peninsula wars of vassals against their lords caused by conflicts of interest between different groups prevailed. So when Cortes found out that there were different groups in Mexico, he began paying attention to the locals who were not Aztecs but were enslaved by them. He offered them an alliance on the basis of “if you help me, I will protect you from the Meschics.” Thus, the first factor is the accumulated contradictions and dissatisfaction with the central authority in the empire.

As for foreign policy (presuming that the Aztec core, Tenochtitlan was a sovereign political entity) and Tenochtitlan’s allies, the Triple Alliance was not a union of three equal entities (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan), nor a concert of powers, but a precarious balance, which is more appropriate, perhaps, to call a weak bipolarity (Tenochtitlan/Texcoco). The Aztec strategic culture can be characterised as limited power politics (realpolitik). But it could have been “unlimited” because there is a clear preference for coercion with a desire for expansion, but for the still an unconquered Texcoco that kept them in check. And here the incentive for Texcoco to create a new world order is the emergence of an opportunity to finally go up against a strong player, to upset the precarious balance and turn the situation in their favour with the help of a strong “other”. The Spaniards did not possess a serious advantage over Tenochtitlan, but it was enough for them to simply appear and become an additional factor of influence to which all the others reacted. Also the alliance itself was extremely unstable.

The next factor is communication. The faster it is, the easier it is to establish control over any group of people. The Spaniards had ships, caravels and galleons as means of communication, until, of course, they were burnt by Cortes. In addition, they had horses, which, were mostly unsuitable for the area, but they a) frightened the Indians, who mistook them for strange living thinking creatures that split in two (when the rider dismounted), b) caused awe (when the “army” harnessed them in large numbers), c) still occasionally served as a means of transport. And, what can be emphasised in a separate paragraph, but is logically included in this one,— they had Malinche. It also relates di-

rectly to the communication factor, because it served as a bridge between the natives and the Spaniards. Although she is not actually mentioned in the Message itself, Malinche knew Nahuatl and several Mayan dialects, which was incredibly helpful to Cortes in establishing contact with local tribes (e.g. Sem-poala).

According to Watson, the commonality of culture and religious unity is a system-forming factor that needs to be highlighted next (Watson, 2009). Having entered into an alliance with Cortes, Ixtlilxochitl renounced the religion binding the Indians and violated this very unity, and quite cruelly: “they rushed to the main chapel where Huitzilopochtli was, Cortes and Ixtlilxochitl entered at the same time and both pounced on the idol *and Ixtlilxochitl cut off the head of the one whom he had honoured as his god a few days earlier*”. This is one facet of the religious factor — the destruction of the bond that united the Indians, the second facet — the imposition of a new “religious unity”, the beginning of a new law — the “gospel law”. Religion can have the strongest influence on politics, but it can also be its instrument, it belongs to the ideological-companion instrument of politics, and the fact that the Spaniards had such an instrument also definitely contributed not only to the conquest of peoples, but also to the further ordering of the whole colonial system (to recall at least that the Church owned a significant share of all colonial lands). This can be defined as an attempt, on the whole rather successful, to change the rules of the system, and, accordingly, whoever set the new rules ruled the ball. The third facet, rather controversial, however, is the inclusion, and harmonious inclusion, of new figures into the old system of rules. Here the analysis goes about the assumption that the natives, in particular the Meshiki under Montezuma II, mistook the Spaniards for their gods who had returned, as predicted, from the east. The fact is that throughout the Americas there was a widespread myth of a tutor god who, after his benevolent rule, mysteriously disappeared, promising the people that one day he would return. In Mexico, this was Quetzalcoatl. He was supposed to return in a year se-alcatel, based on a 52-year cycle. The Spanish came to Mexico from the east, and

1519 was indeed the year of the end of se-alcatel. This version, however, has many inconsistencies (from the appearance of Cortes with his beard and attributes such as a golden helmet Huitzilopochtli to the ambiguity of the figure of Quetzalcoatl in Mexican mythology). Modern researchers believe that this myth was composed by the Spaniards themselves after the conquest of Mexico for ideological justification of their deeds. Basically the Spanish monks adhered to this concept to show that they bring God to the land where God had been lost. Moreover, the Mexicans had no reason to accept the Spanish as their “lost gods”, when the foreigners carried the Gospel law, did not present themselves as gods, but had their own even higher god.

The religious factor, if it were as weighty as it may seem at first sight, would explain much in the behaviour of the natives. Setting it aside as an explanatory concept, it is easy to see that the main burden of justifying the desire to cooperate falls upon the principle “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”. It was because of it, if not because of religion, that the native Indian tribes submitted to the casual stranger. Here it should be mentioned that the personal factor played an important role in the conquest of Mexico. The figure of Cortes himself has grown more mythical than historical and there is so much speculation and so many assessments that it is hardly possible to figure out where the truth is, and yet one thing is known for sure: Cortes’s advantage was in his flexibility, this is the strength of Proteus (Loshkarev, 2021): in conditions of maximum uncertainty, often without a clear understanding of the consequences of his actions, Cortes always managed to find a way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. As confirmation of this thesis, the story of his departure from Cuba may be recalled, the way he burned the ships, and the way he used to his advantage the defeat of Veracruz by the Indians, and got out of the besieged Tenochtitlan and the battle given by a handful of Spaniards against a thousand Aztec troops, and the fact that he could use the most skilful diplomacy, or he could show himself on the violent side (for example, the murder of several thousands of indigenous in Cholula, followed by the dismissal of guilt). No matter what one thinks of him, Cortes

made a huge contribution to the conquest of Mexico. At the same time the personal factor of weakness of Montezuma II played a role, as he was turned by the Spaniards into their hostage, There appears an opposition “weak/strong” within the framework of the personal factor, “wins”, respectively, the “strong” (Herzog, 2015).

In addition, as one of the distinct factors of the Aztec empire’s demise, smallpox must be mentioned. This disease even brings death to the King of the Meschiques, Quitlahuatzin, who had time to send “only forty days”, infected by “one Negro who arrived with the Spaniards”. It was actually enough for the Spaniards to arrive in these lands: they had already introduced a disease to which the indigenous had no immunity, which is why the factor in the disintegration of the world order is biological. Despite the fact that Ixtlilxochitl does not pay much attention to smallpox, probably, such an amazing success of the Spaniards is explained not by their qualities, fabulously described by the author, but by the fact that there was no one to conquer (an exaggeration, as there obviously was some population left in these lands even after the epidemic).

Going back to the beginning, the Texcocans won, but only by uniting with the invaders who conquered them, becoming, as it were, co-conspirators of their own (it depends, of course, on whether to regard the Triple Alliance as something holistic or, on the contrary, something absolutely unstable and full of contradictions). It raises the question whether one’s own tyrant is better than someone else’s tyrant. In fact, the choice of the Texcocans and dozens of other tribes

and chiefdoms played its role. All the factors cited above as part of the main one, which is the help of the Aztecs, made the conquest of Mexico possible.

Finally, what is worth noting is that the theories considered in the theoretical part are rather vectors than a clear framework, so it is quite difficult to determine what goes beyond them. For this reason, it was decided to limit the definition of these vectors to the Aztec polity, in particular, at the time of the arrival of the conquistadors.

Conclusion

To summarise, there are all the factors worthy of attention in the order of enumeration (without ranking): the accumulated contradictions and dissatisfaction with the central power in the empire, the instability of the Triple Alliance, the communication factor, which includes horses, ships and language, the presence of an interpreter, Malinche, the religious factor, which includes the destruction of the old alliance and the creation of a new one or the metamorphosis of the old, the personal factor, which includes manoeuvrability in uncertainty (the power of Proteus (Loshkarev, 2021)) and the opposition “weak/strong”, and, rendering it different from overall narrative, but therefore no less worthy of attention, the biological factor, namely smallpox, to which the Indians had no immunity. And finally, what brings together all the previously mentioned factors (except the biological one) is the help of the natives; it was the co-operation with the local tribes that paved the way for the conquistadors, following which the Spanish crown then fell into decline.

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submitted 12.05.2024;
accepted for publication 30.05.2024;
published 27.06.2024
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