That fateful moment when two civilizations came face to face

_Cortés and his men were out for gold and glory; Montezuma’s Aztec empire was shaky; the cruel result was a tragedy of history_

Charles L. Mee Jr.

Even before anyone came, there were amazing events: a comet appeared and split into three; the waters of the lake boiled up in a rage; a sign like a tongue of fire burned up into the sky, up to the heavens.

These and other remarkable things began to happen ten years before the Spaniards landed: omens that foretold their coming, said the old men who drew pictographs of them some 30 years afterward for the Franciscan missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún.

According to Sahagún’s aged native informants, a messenger brought word of “towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea.” The ships came in the spring of 1519, off the northern shore of the Yucatan peninsula. There were 11 all told (or, according to other sources, 10 or 12 ships), carrying 10 large bronze cannon, 4 falconets, or light cannon, stores of powder and shot, 16 horses, some large dogs, 550 soldiers (including 32 crossbowmen and 13 musketeers), 100 sailors along with 200 Cuban natives, several black people and a few Indian women.

The Spaniards, with their white skin, their suits of armor, their cannon and their horses, were an arresting sight. “They were very white,” the old men told Sahagún. Their faces were like chalk. Indian amazement, in any case, has been the theme of most historians for the past four centuries and more, who have written of the Spanish ships of supernatural size and appearance. The newcomers were observed riding on the backs of extraordinary deerlike beasts, which snorted and bellowed, and whose running made tremors “as if stones were raining on the earth.” Perhaps these creatures who rode such beasts were gods, white gods.

Yet the natives of the Yucatán and of Mexico could hardly have been quite as astonished as all that. In truth, just a year before, in 1518, the Indians had seen Spaniards cruise precisely this same coastline, in an expedition led by the adventurer Juan de Grijalva. The Indians had met the Spaniards and traded native gold ornaments and jewels for green glass beads, some scissors, pins and other trinkets. And the year before Grijalva, Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba had sailed into the Gulf of Mexico looking for gold and silver and slaves.

The new lot of Spaniards was led by Hernán Cortés, a soldier of fortune whose parents had destined him for the law until he had quit school at the age of 16. According to an account written years later by Cortés’ private secretary and chaplain, Francisco López de Gómara, this “ vexed his parents exceedingly…. He was a source of trouble to his parents as well as to himself, for he was restless, haughty, mischievous, and given to quarreling, for which reason he decided to seek his fortune.” Cortés arrived in the New World in 1504, and eventually was chosen by Diego Velázquez, governor of Cuba, to command an expedition to Mexico—for exploration and trade but, officially at least, not to conquer or colonize.

Even so, many of those who sailed with him were experienced soldiers of fortune, men who had signed up in the hope of getting fame and riches, as well as conquering lands for Spain. Tough as they were, they were also committed, in a way we can hardly understand today, to the mission of converting the Indians to Christianity. Along the route of their journey, searching for members of an earlier journey, they picked up Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked eight years before, then enslaved by the Maya, learning their language. The Spaniards also picked up a woman sold to the Maya by allies of the Aztecs. They called her Doña Marina. She spoke Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, as well as Maya. As the Spaniards moved into Aztec territory, she was helpful, translating from Nahuatl into Maya, while Aguilar translated from Maya into Spanish.

On Holy Thursday, 1519, the fleet found safe harbor on the island of San Juan de Ulúa, as the Spaniards called it, off Mexico’s eastern shore. As Bernal Díaz, one of Cortés’ foot soldiers who chronicled these events years later, tells the story, they no sooner had dropped anchor than two large canoes came out filled with Aztec ambassadors. The Indians brought with them some gifts, and they were taken aboard the flagship and given food and wine and some blue beads.
“They said that their lord,” relates Bernal Díaz, “a servant of the great Montezuma [as the Spanish spelled it], had sent them to find out what kind of men we were and what we were seeking.” According to Gómara, the Indians also asked the Spaniards, with exemplary diplomatic tact, “whether they intended to stop or continue on beyond.” Cortés replied that the Spaniards had come to speak to the lord of the Aztecs. (According to Sahagún’s native informants the Spaniards were not as polite as all that. They put the Indians in irons and fired off a cannon to scare them.)

By Easter Sunday, a local Aztec governor had arrived. His name was Tentlil, and he was accompanied, says Gómara, by more than 4,000 men, all unarmed, handsomely dressed and loaded with presents. Tentlil had brought along some artists, who made portraits in the style of Aztec picture-writing, of Cortés, his captains and soldiers, his ships and horses and guns—a detailed report to send back to Montezuma. When Cortés asked to see Montezuma himself, saying that the Spaniards came as ambassadors from the greatest king on earth, Tentlil graciously replied that word would be sent to Montezuma. Some sources say that Tentlil at first inquired testily, “How is it that you have been here only two days, and demand to see the emperor?” Cortés asked whether Montezuma had any gold, and Tentlil replied that he did. It was then, apparently, that Cortés said, in a phrase that has rung down through the ages, “Send me some of it, because I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold.”

From his capital city of Tenochtitlán, the present site of Mexico City, the emperor Montezuma II ruled over a vast imperial domain in central Mexico stretching from the Gulf Coast to the Pacific Ocean, and as far south as present-day Guatemala. He was chosen by a group of about a hundred of the richest and most powerful members of the ruling class, and he had to maintain his rule with subtle and skillful maneuvering. Central Mexico at the time probably had a population of perhaps 25 million, with 2 million or so in the region about Tenochtitlán. Of these, perhaps a total of 500,000 could be mustered as soldiers, though the offensive force here comprised, on average, probably about 50,000 men.

Montezuma’s reply to Cortés came back to the coast accompanied by more extremely lavish gifts, and word that Montezuma “rejoiced to learn about” Cortés’ great king, and that Cortés should determine what he needed for himself and “the cure of his sickness,” as well as whatever supplies he needed for his men and his ships. But, as for Montezuma and the Spanish leader meeting, that would be “impossible.”

Undismayed, Cortés gathered a sample of Spanish wealth to send to the emperor, inquiring again about a meeting and the possibility of trade. While he waited he had some surprise visitors, five Indians from the city of Zempoala—a city, they said, that had recently been brought under Montezuma’s yoke by force of arms.

This piece of news electrified Cortés. As Díaz puts it, he learned “that Montezuma had opponents and enemies, which greatly delighted him.” Very quickly, Cortés would come to learn how extraordinarily fragile this great empire of Montezuma’s was. Mexico was a loose organization of villages and city-states linked together in an uneasy alliance. Their inhabitants spoke more than 20 different languages and hundreds of different dialects. Their local loyalties made them resentful of central government. The empire, in short, was based upon the conquest and subjugation of many embittered peoples. Cortés instantly saw the possibility of revolt in Mexico, with himself as the leader.

Eager to be rid of Cortés, Montezuma apparently reiterated in his next communication that the Spaniards might have whatever they needed but then must take their fleet and leave. Now surer of his ground, Cortés refused. It was impossible, he insisted, for the Spaniards to leave without seeing the emperor. Montezuma had provided men to wait on the Spaniards, but about this time Cortés saw that these people had disappeared. He called his captains together and told them to prepare for war.

The route the Spaniards eventually took to Montezuma’s capital city was circuitous. First they headed north, to Zempoala, finding the people ready to join in an uprising against Montezuma. From there, gathering allies, they moved on to Quiahuitzlan, where they came across some of Montezuma’s tax collectors—and had them arrested. (Later Cortés quietly set them free for diplomatic purposes.) As soon as the chiefs of the neighboring towns heard that the Spaniards had arrested Montezuma’s tax collectors, they joined forces with Cortés against Montezuma, and even took an oath of allegiance. Almost overnight his tiny force was increased by thousands of fighting men.

**STONES CAME LIKE HAIL FROM INDIAN SLINGS**

After establishing a base at Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, the Spaniards and their new allies ventured into the territory of the Tlaxcalans, where their mettle was tested in battles with several thousand warriors. The Indians fought with clubs, spears, sling bullets, arrows and darts; the Spaniards with lances, artillery, muskets, crossbows and swords. Some days of nearly continu-
uous hand-to-hand fighting occurred. Stones came like hail from the Indians’ slings, Díaz says, and “their barbed and fire-hardened darts fell like corn on the threshing-floor.”

The Spaniards “wondered what would happen,” Díaz adds, “when we had to fight Montezuma if we were reduced to such straits by the Tlaxcalans, whom our Cempoalan allies described as a peaceful people.” But in the end they had the victory, the first of many.

How, in fact, was it possible for this little band of Spaniards to march into unknown territory, defeat the vast armies brought against them, and lose only two score or so Spanish lives in such encounters?

First of all, not too much faith should be placed in the numbers used to describe the size of the enemy. Though the various Spanish estimates range from 30,000 to 100,000 warriors, it is clear that if such numbers were accurate, only a miracle could explain a Spanish victory. That miracle would seem less necessary if, say a decimal point were moved, giving the Tlaxcalans 10,000 warriors at most. Even so, the Spaniards were greatly outnumbered.

Not too much credit can be given to the Spanish crossbows. Although they outclassed Indian bows, they were difficult to use. Nor can too much credit be given to the purely material effects of gunpowder. Spanish powder was often wet, and the rate of fire of cannon and muskets was appallingly slow.

The psychological effect of gunpowder and horses and glinting armor, though, must have been phenomenal. The Spaniards must have impressed the Indians in the way that street demonstrators are impressed—and suddenly made to feel vulnerable—when heavily armed, modern riot police wade into the midst of a crowd. Besides, some Indian tactics helped the Spaniards. They tended not to kill their enemies, hoping to wound and capture them mainly for use as sacrifices to the gods. They also stopped fighting periodically to remove their dead and wounded from the battlefield. At close range, the Indians used wooden clubs tipped and ridged with razor-sharp obsidian—a vicious weapon against other Indians, but one which probably shattered against Spanish helmets.

The Spaniards brought their swords into this close combat, and they were dreadfully effective. Pointed and double-bladed, they could stab, and slash left and right, quickly killing or maiming. Driving directly at warriors clustered around their leaders, the Spaniards would often capture or kill a local chief. Once their chief was taken, his men usually fell back.

After two weeks the Tlaxcalans surrendered, agreeing to join Cortés against the Aztecs. As the Spaniards penetrated farther and farther into Mexico, they recruited allies until, when they reached Tenochtitlán at last, their force included about 5,000 Indians.

As the Spaniards advanced, they laid waste to the town of Cholula. It was there that Cortés killed 3,000 Indians, because, he said, they had plotted with Montezuma to attack him. Other sources describe it as an unprovoked massacre. In any case, as they approached Tenochtitlán the Spaniards’ reputation for savagery and invincibility grew greater and greater.

By the time they had reached the city of Cuitlahuac, just southeast of Tenochtitlán, they had entered the lake country in the Valley of Mexico, where the towns were sometimes built entirely in the water, connected to the land by broad causeways. The towns and stone buildings, says Díaz, “seemed like an enchanted vision…. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream.”

As they approached the Aztec capital the Spaniards set foot on a causeway—wide enough for ten horsemen to ride abreast. And partway along it, Gómara says, they were met by 4,000 “gentlemen of the court” of Tenochtitlán “richly dressed after their fashion,” who, each in turn, bowed to the Spaniards as a sign of peace. Then, just across a little bridge, the Spaniards saw Montezuma. “He walked,” Gómara adds, “under a pallium of gold and green feathers, strung about with silver hangings, and carried by four gentlemen.” He was supported on the arms of two royal princes.

Courtiers walked ahead of Montezuma, sweeping the ground and laying down thin mantles so that his feet would never touch the earth. Then came 200 lords, all barefoot, but wearing rich cloaks. Cortés stepped forward to embrace Montezuma; but the two princes put out their hands at once to prevent it. The two leaders exchanged brief greetings. Only then was Cortés permitted to step forward and take a splendid necklace of pearls and cut glass and put it around the neck of Montezuma.

The emperor ordered that Cortés and many of his Indian allies be shown to a beautiful palace. There, Montezuma himself took Cortés by the hand, bidding him, Cortés says, to “sit on a very rich throne… and then left saying that I should wait for him.” In the heart of Montezuma’s empire, the Spaniards and their allies were surrounded. The Aztecs, in turn, were surrounded by more of Cortés’ allies outside the city. Frozen in this balance of forces, they commenced a curious diplomatic dance, one whose end was entirely unpredictable.

Montezuma, Díaz reports, was about 40 years old, “of good height, well proportioned, spare and slight.” He bathed every afternoon, according to Díaz—twice a day, according to Gómara. The Spaniards, who sometimes slept in their armor without even removing their shoes, were impressed by the frequency of Montezuma’s bathing.

For a time the Spaniards were left alone. The city in which they found themselves would have impressed anyone. Tenochtitlán lay at the center of a vast bowl dominated by high mountains. At the bottom was a large plain and many shallow lakes, including Lake Texcoco, a large body of salt water. The Aztec capital had been built up atop mudbanks and islands until, like Venice, it was a wonder of human artifice, laced with canals and bridges. Three long and wide causeways connected it to the mainland. An aqueduct brought fresh water from a hillside spring into the middle of the city.

Cortés describes a marketplace “twice as big as that of Salamanca, with arcades all around, where more than sixty thousand people come each day to buy and sell.” The array of goods on sale reflected the far-flung trade that the Aztecs had developed: all manner of birds—chickens, partridge, quail, turtledoves, falcons—used for food, for feathers, for hunting; gold or feather-work in the form of butterflies, trees, flowers; a silver monkey that moved its feet and head; carved turquoise and emeralds; stuff made of conchs and periwinkles; toys for children; oint-
ments, syrups and culinary delicacies, such as little barkless dogs that had been castrated and fattened. There were even cakes made from a sort of scum skimmed from the ooze on the lake’s surface and dried, to be eaten like cheese. “Delicious,” says Gómara.

All around the city, according to Cortés, were many temples, “beautiful buildings,” but among them all, there was one “whose great size and magnificence no human tongue could describe.” The main temple occupied a site about 70 by 80 yards at its base, with two staircases leading up nearly 200 feet to a terrace and twin shrines. There the stones were splattered black with the blood of human sacrifices.

Most often, the victim would be led or dragged to the top of the temple steps and stretched out over a block of stone by five priests. A priest would cut him open, reach in and pluck out his still-beating heart. The heart was offered up in a sacred vessel, priests. A priest would cut him open, reach in and pluck out his still-beating heart. The heart was offered up in a sacred vessel, and then became food for Cortés himself. And so, says Gómara, Cortés took some of his soldiers with him to pay a call on the emperor. Cortés greeted Montezuma “as usual, and then began to jest and banter with him, as he had done before.” But soon enough Cortés got to the point, and told the emperor that he would need to come and stay with the Spaniards. Montezuma was “profoundly shaken,” says Gómara,

In the days to come, as Cortés and Montezuma met, Cortés broached his wish to convert Montezuma to Christianity and spoke of the evils of the Aztec gods—a topic of conversation that must have struck Montezuma as outrageously rude, and irrelevant to the business of conducting trade or to negotiations between an emperor and a visiting captain general.

A COMMANDER
“BESET WITH MISGIVINGS”

For their part, the Spaniards evidently became increasingly uneasy about the absurdity and perilousness of their position. Even Cortés himself came to feel “beset with misgivings,” sharing a dreadful sense of being caught in a web from which he and his men could never escape. It had begun to dawn on them that there was no reason for Montezuma to let them leave Tenochtitlán alive. Eventually, they devised a most astounding way out of their dilemma. They decided to seize Montezuma and hold him hostage in his own city.

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According to Díaz, Cortés and Montezuma spent more than half an hour discussing the question. Cortés’ soldiers grew jittery. “What is the use of all these words?” one of them burst out. “Either we take him or we knife him. If we do not look after ourselves now we shall be dead men.” In the end Montezuma went peacefully with the Spaniards.

How was it that the Aztec emperor could have allowed himself to be placed in such a position? Sahagún’s informants gave an explanation of the mystery that has endured ever since: Montezuma and the Aztecs thought that Cortés was none other than the ancient god-king Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, who, according to religious myth, had been driven from his kingdom vowing one day to return and reassert his rule. Therefore some historians believe that Montezuma was a prisoner of his own mythology. The myth is a wonderful explanation but, as British archaeologist Nigel Davis points out, it “has been rather overplayed in popular accounts.” Besides, purely diplomatic protocol provides a reasonable explanation—Montezuma waited for Cortés to arrive at Tenochtitlán simply because it was the Aztec custom that an ambassador was immune from harm.

Or it may be that, as word came of Spanish military and diplomatic victories, Montezuma came to comprehend that these strangers needed to be handled with great care. This, in any case, appears to have been Cortés’ view. As Gómara explains, Montezuma “did not wish to stir up trouble for himself (and this was the truest reason)” by offering open resistance to Cortés and thus perhaps encouraging more of his discontented subjects to join the Spaniards in an attempt to unseat his power. He would pursue the strategy of the spider and the fly; he would bring Cortés into Tenochtitlán and informally hold him hostage, in the same way that he customarily held numerous rival chiefs as permanent hostages.

While the Spaniards kept Montezuma in captivity—sometimes, indeed, in manacles—the myth of Montezuma’s rule had to be maintained. Each day the Spaniards would ask him what his orders and his wants were, and these were carried out. Sometimes Cortés and Montezuma would sit together and play to totoloque, a game that involved tossing small pellets of gold for higher stakes, usually more gold or jewelry.

Eventually, perhaps trying to quench the Spanish thirst for gold, Montezuma agreed not only to open up his personal treasure but to call in gifts from his whole empire and give them to Cortés. The list of what he gave is breathtaking: gold and silver and pearls, golden nose crescents and necklaces, blowguns inlaid with silver, silver plates and cups, pitchers and saucers. There was so much gold treasure from Montezuma’s gifts alone, says Díaz, that it took the Spaniards three days just to examine it all.

Soon afterward it appeared that some of the Aztec leaders, tired of seeing their emperor truckling to the Spaniards, told Montezuma that either the Spaniards should leave or the Aztecs should kill them. Aware of the danger, Cortés ordered that the horses be kept saddled and bridled day and night; Spanish soldiers slept in their armor, their weapons beside them.

But just at the critical point—it was May 1520—Montezuma’s messengers brought news that another Spanish fleet, captained by Pánfilo de Narváez, had been spotted back at San Juan de Ulúa where Cortés had originally landed. A picture painted on cloth was brought to Montezuma. There were 18 ships, 80 horses and 900 soldiers.

Cortés greeted the news with an appearance of relief, even joy. However, out of Montezuma’s presence he grew “very thoughtful,” Díaz says. He guessed that Diego Velázquez had
sent the fleet to put a stop to his enterprise, and he sensed the presence of rivals for the Aztec riches as well as a possible split among the Spaniards that the Aztecs might exploit. Cortés left for the coast, taking about 120 soldiers with him and leaving fewer than 100 at Tenochtitlán, under the command of Pedro de Alvarado, a man with the reputation of being brave but cruel.

At Zempoala, Cortés took Narváez’s army by surprise at night. Narváez himself got a poke thrust that cost him an eye and was put into irons. Most of his men joined Cortés, augmenting his force with a large and fresh lot of soldiers, including, as Gómez Cúellar relates, “a Negro sick with the smallpox”—who would, as we now know, turn out to be a very significant figure in the final tragedy.

Back in Tenochtitlán, however, the whole city had exploded in violence. The Indians had been celebrating the annual festival of Toxcatl in the courtyard of the great temple square with “drums, conch trumpets, bone fifes” and other instruments. They were covered with necklaces and jewels, feathers and pearls, and danced in circles, accompanied by sacred singing. In the midst of the dancing the Spanish soldiers abruptly closed off all the exits and, with swords drawn, waded into the midst of the dancers.

“They attacked the man who was drumming,” according to Sahagún’s native informants, “and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor. They attacked all the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them…. Others they beheaded… or split their heads to pieces…. Some attempted to run away, but… they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails.”

The next day the Aztecs who had not been trapped in the courtyard counterattacked. Full-scale fighting swept through the city, bringing about all of the horrors that Montezuma apparently had feared and labored for so long to avoid. The emperor watched, powerless, as the city, which had thus far been saved from bloodshed, was threatened with disaster. The Aztecs closed off the causeways, destroyed some of the bridges over which the Spaniards might escape and threw up barricades around the palace, hoping to starve the Spaniards out.

### TRAPPED INSIDE THE AZTEC CITY

Hearing the news, Cortés at once rushed back toward Tenochtitlán. As he passed through the countryside, he discovered “all the land was in revolt and almost uninhabited.” In late June, when he reentered Montezuma’s city, he found the streets almost deserted. There was an ominous quiet, as the Aztecs let the Spaniards back into the trap. By next morning, the roads around Tenochtitlán were filled with angry warriors, all of them enemies of the Spaniards. The thousands of Cortés’ native allies now seemed to melt away, except for the few thousand Tlaxcalans trapped with the Spaniards inside the city.

“Such a multitude” of Aztecs now swarmed in to surround the Spaniards’ quarters, says Cortés, “that neither the streets nor the roofs of the houses could be seen for them.” And soon, so many stones began to be “hurled at us from their slings into the fortress that it seemed they were raining from the sky….”

Wave after wave of Aztecs repeatedly attacked, often running headlong into Spanish guns, cannon and swords. Some tried to scale the walls of the palace. Finally, they shot burning arrows into the fortress, hoping to smoke the enemy out. One whole section of the palace fell, but the attackers never got in.

At last Cortés sent for Montezuma and asked him to go up to the roof of the palace and tell his people to stop the fighting and let the Spaniards leave in peace. According to Díaz, Montezuma mounted to the roof, and a great silence fell over the thousands who swarmed over the streets and nearby rooftops. The emperor begged his people to put down their arms and let the Spaniards go. But, Díaz says, the chiefs replied to Montezuma—“in tears”—that they no longer recognized him as their leader, and they would not stop now until all the Spaniards were dead, “and they begged for his forgiveness.”

And then, a shower of darts and stones was thrown at Montezuma. The Spanish soldiers rushed the emperor back inside the palace. But soon thereafter, because he refused to eat or have his wounds tended, Montezuma died.

While most sources agree with this account, some, mostly native sources, say that Montezuma was murdered by the Spaniards back in their palace quarters.

It was now imperative for the Spaniards to get out of the city. In the middle of the night of June 30, 1520, they brought the gold and jewels and silver out into the middle of a hall in the palace. Those who wanted some, took it and stuffed it into their packs and clothes. Shortly before midnight, Cortés and his men made a run for it across one of the causeways.

The horsemen went out first, presumably to charge and scatter any Aztecs who might block the way. They were followed by soldiers carrying a makeshift wooden bridge to be used in place of the bridges the Aztecs had destroyed. The retreating Spanish managed to slam the bridge down across the first break they came to. They had caught the Aztecs by surprise, and so a good many Spaniards slipped past the main mass of Indians. But then an alarm sounded—trumpets, cries and whistles—and their retreat became a headlong dash down the causeway. Crowds of Aztec warriors threw stones and spears at them, and, as Díaz says, they had to leave the bridge behind at the first gap.

Trying to get over the next gap without the bridge was a disaster. As horses slipped and fell into the water, cannon and bundles and boxes followed. The Spaniards rushed on from gap to gap, fleeing ahead of the Aztec warriors, braving the improvised gauntlet of warrior-filled canoes on either side of the causeway. Those who had been most greedy about stuffing gold into their clothes were among the first to sink with the weight of it as they crossed. “So those who died,” Gómez Cúellar notes dryly, “died rich.”

According to Díaz, there had been 1,300 Spanish soldiers in Tenochtitlán in those last days (much of Cortés’ original army, plus Narváez’s reinforcements) as well as 2,000 native warriors, mostly Tlaxcalans. Estimates of those killed in the siege and flight from the city range from 450 to 860 Spaniards and 1,000 to 4,000 Tlaxcalans.

The survivors continued to flee, all the way to the city of Tlaxcala, where their strongest allies took them in. For Cortés
and the Tlaxcalans, there was no quitting the struggle with the Aztecs.

Realizing that to take back the Aztec capital he would have to attack and seize the city from both the causeways and the surrounding water, Cortés had boats built so they could be carried piecemeal over land and then assembled to operate in the shallow lake waters. In late December of 1520, Cortés reentered the Valley of Mexico, secured the shores of the lake, and destroyed the aqueduct that brought the main supply of fresh water into the city.

In late April 1521 the siege began, Cortés sending his boats across the water, and his foot soldiers down the causeways. The Aztecs had prepared their defenses by planting sharpened stakes just under the water at the gaps in the causeway. As fighting continued, the Spanish kept filling in the gaps with stones and rubble, but at night the Aztecs reopened them. Once, when the Aztecs took prisoners, they cut off the heads of some and bowled them at the approaching army.

Day and night, the fighting went on. The Spaniards would secure a street, only to find it taken back the next day. At last Cortés instructed his men to advance, slowly and deliberately, removing every Aztec barricade, destroying every Aztec tower and house as they went. The slow, grinding reduction of Tenochtitlán went on for three months, and toward the end the stench of unburied bodies piled high in the streets and rotting in the water was appalling. In the last offensive, so “piteous” was the wailing of women and children, says Gómara, that Cortés urged his men to spare the populace, but they kept on. As the city began at last to collapse, a gush of old men, women and children came flooding out toward the causeways with such force “that they pushed each other into the water; where many drowned.”

The end came on August 13, 1521. The few Aztec warriors still alive gathered on the rooftops of the houses that still stood, and “stared at the ruins of their city in a dazed silence.” As the Spaniards walked at last down the inner streets of the conquered city, they tied handkerchiefs over their noses to guard against the stench. They went through town, seeing the stagnant and briny water that had served as drinking water in these last days of Tenochtitlán and the remnants of what the Aztecs had had for food: lizards and salt grasses from the lake, twigs, roots and tree bark.

Among the piles of bodies were people who had died not so much of wounds as of starvation and of various diseases, especially smallpox—the virus that had been brought ashore by the man in Narváez’s crew, a virus that had made its way across Mexico with Cortés’ army. The populations of the Americas had no resistance to it.

In some regions of Mexico, the mortality rate was so great that the living could not bring themselves to bury the dead. It was said that the Indians, overwhelmed by the task, sometimes pulled down the houses on top of the dead to bury them.

Cortés’ story did not end here. Like many other New World adventurers, he went on to great wealth and power. But in the end, accused of murder and mismanagement, he died brokenhearted in Spain. The pestilence that his invasion brought did not end with the death of Tenochtitlán, either. Smallpox and other epidemics spread throughout the countryside, subsided and recurred, subsided and recurred, until, eventually, of a total population of perhaps 25 million, as many as 22 million died.

And with the death of so many, a civilization died—not simply a city or a government or an empire, but most of the accumulated knowledge of life and art and skill, so that, in time, practically all that remained of it were its artifacts and its story of the inevitability, in life and in history, of tragedy, and surprise.

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