

Conquistadors of Spain

- means 'conquerors'
- desire by Spain to seek new lands & wealth, esp. gold
- $\frac{1}{5}$ of wealth went directly back to king
- trips also sponsored by RCC which was

looking for converts
after Reformation

- 2 most famous

Hernan
Cortes

Francisco
Pizarro

- Conquered
Aztecs

- Conquered
Incas

1521

1532

- Aztecs in
Mexico,

- Incas in
Peru,

flat terrain

mountains

- Aztecs known
- HC sent by Spanish reps on Cuba
- 5 million Aztecs
- Aztec leader Montezuma
- Incas a rumor
- FP had to ask Spanish king for permission
- 6 million Incas
- Inca leader Atahualpa

- Aztecs hated
by other
N. American
tribes

- Incas
allowed
other NA's
to blend w/
them

• HC used
other NA
tribes as
allies

- 663 men
16 horses

- FP
attacked
w/ only
Spanish

- 177 men
62 horses

- Aztecs fought bravely but poorly

- Montezuma captured, held for ransom, murdered

- Smallpox released accidentally

- Incas never attacked because...

- Atahualpa captured, held for ransom, murdered

- Smallpox beats Span. to Peru

-neither N. Amer.
tribe used their
superior #'s

-Inca's did not use
advantage of
mountainous terrain
importance

-begins Spanish
influence in W. Hemis.
that continues to
today

- RCC established in Central & South America
- Spain becomes wealthiest nation in Europe
- forces other Euro. countries to try and grab land in W. Hemis.
- 2 large American civilizations destroyed

On the trail of Hernán Cortés

A journey into a past most Mexicans would rather forget

MEXICO CITY, TLAXCALA, VERACRUZ



THE state of Veracruz, on the Gulf coast, is Mexico at its most fertile. Along the tropical coastline, vast sugar-cane plantations shimmer in the heat. Climb the mountains towards the balmy state capital of Jalapa and the landscape changes into a canopy of coffee plants and orange trees, with cattle and horses grazing. Mexicans will tell you that this natural bounty is the essence of their country. What many fail to realise, though, is that until 500 years ago none of these crops or animals existed in Mexico. Veracruz was the gateway through which they entered, and it was Spaniards who brought them.

This is where one of the great military expeditions of history began: Hernán Cortés's march in 1519-20 from the Gulf of Mexico to Tenochtitlán, seat of the Aztec empire. Historians liken it to Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul. Its protagonist, a cunning 34-year-old with almost no experience of war, led about 500 men and just

over a dozen horses into territories whose bloodthirsty warriors hugely outnumbered his own. He exploited seething tribal rivalries to conquer a civilisation—albeit with the help of gunpowder, smallpox and his wily Indian lover. At times he used mischief; at times cruelty. He had an eye for his place in history—as well as for the ladies. His soldiers did not just subjugate the people they conquered. From the very start they bred with the Indians too, creating a mixed race through *mestizaje*, with a common language and religion that defines Mexico today.

Today the journey—bits of which your correspondent did by car, bits on horseback—is rather easier than it was five centuries ago. Even so, it can be tricky. To follow Cortés's first march from beginning to end requires trampling through jungle, skirting snow-capped volcanoes, traipsing through fields of fighting bulls and battling Mexico City's traffic. Only a few historians, such as Juan Miralles, a Mexican diplomat, have deciphered the conquistadors' lousy spelling of Indian names to identify the route. Sometimes history seems to have swallowed Cortés's footsteps up.

On the march

When Cortés disembarked on the sandbanks of Veracruz on April 22nd (Good Friday) in 1519, after a long journey from Cuba via the Yucatán and Tabasco, he set in train three manoeuvres that would help determine the outcome of the conquest. He met ambassadors of Moctezuma, lord of the Aztecs, and the more gold they gave him as a bribe to stop him travelling to Tenochtitlán, the more they whetted his appetite to go. He double-crossed men loyal to the Cuban governor, Diego Velázquez, to give himself free rein to pursue his path to glory in service of the King of Spain. And he realised the usefulness of Indian allies, above all the alluring Malintzin, or La Malinche, who had been given to him as a slave a few weeks before and

whose linguistic skills and womanly wiles helped him penetrate the great Aztec empire by brokering pacts with its enemies.

Today there is no trace of the mosquito-infested dunes where he established the first Villa Rica de la Veracruz, a make-believe town created solely to hold a rigged election that would give him powers to conquer. San Juan de Ulúa is a historic fort near an esplanade where marimba music flutters and elderly men play chess and drink coffee. In a possible echo of the control the Aztecs once exerted, parts of Veracruz look like a police state: heavily armed marines in balaclavas patrol the area to stop drug violence.

Back in 1519 the Aztecs' rivals, the local Totonac Indians, may have looked as threatening as today's drug lords. They had, according to one account, drooping holes in their lower lips and ears, studded with stones and gold. But they were friendlier than they looked. Once their overlords, the Aztec ambassadors, had given

► says another horseman.

From Xico, the conquistadors flogged through freezing mountain passes and waterless terrain to arrive in Tlaxcala, Mexico's smallest state. Although it is a quiet haven of colonial architecture, haciendas and bull studs only two hours from the capital, few people visit it. That is partly because its unique role in the conquest tarnished its reputation, partly because it is known now for trafficking girls. Half a millennium on, the curse persists.

Led by a local prince, Xicoténcatl the Younger, the Tlaxcalans almost beat Cortés and his men in battle. They quickly killed two of his horses, destroying the myth of the conquistadors' invincibility. The wounded Spaniards were forced to treat their injuries with the body fat of a dead Indian, the only ointment they could find. But eventually the Tlaxcalans capitulated—hampered perhaps by their tradition of trying to capture their enemies for sacrifice, rather than slaughtering them.

Cortés was astonished by their city. He thought it “greater and stronger than Granada”; it teemed with fresh game to eat, in the market there were barbers' shops, and it even had a functioning justice system (modern Mexico, take note). It also provided allies; its people were sworn enemies of the Aztecs and were delighted to join up with the Spaniards. The idea that the conquest is all Cortés's dirty work is incorrect. “The conquest was a war of Indians against Indians. The Spaniards were far too small a force to do it by themselves,” says Andrea Martínez, a historian and expert on Tlaxcala.

For a few centuries Tlaxcala did well out of its co-conquest. It earned a royal seal from Spain as a “very noble and very loyal” city. According to Ms Martínez, its Indian *caciques* were allowed to retain control of their people and fought tenacious legal battles to stop the imperial authorities from stripping them of their rights. On behalf of the crown, loyal Tlaxcalans helped conquer territory and build settlements from Central America as far north as Albuquerque, New Mexico.

That all changed with independence. Enrique Krauze, a historian, notes that the country's break from Spain in 1821 was portrayed by liberals as the reversal of the conquest. And the anti-conquest fervour drew further strength from the revolution of 1910-17 that eventually gave rise to PRI rule. As a result, Tlaxcala became a dirty word and schoolchildren were taught that it was a “traitor state”. Now there are few traces of Cortés, and the only Tlaxcalan celebrated nationwide is Xicoténcatl the Younger, who was hanged for failing to support the final siege against the Aztecs. Armando Díaz de la Mora, a state historian, finds it exasperating. “Cortés was a great friend to Tlaxcala,” he says, “[but] there are no squares, streets or statues named after him.”

Your correspondent, conquistador-style, took a day trip on horseback to find traces of the legendary wall on the border of Tlaxcala that kept the Aztec marauders at bay. There is no sign of it. The battlegrounds on which Cortés and his men fought tens of thousands of club-wielding Tlaxcalans are now overrun by fighting bulls. But the landscape still has the beauty that must have captivated Cortés 500 years ago. Above it looms a striking volcano, called La Malinche. Legend has it that when the locals saw Malintzin bathing in a pool, she looked so voluptuous that they named it after her.

Blood, sweat and tears

History takes a different turn with the final leg of Cortés's first journey: the approach to Tenochtitlán. In the city of Cholula, which was loyal to Moctezuma, Cortés's Spanish and Tlaxcalan forces massacred thousands in the main square, though accounts differ

as to whether it was a pre-emptive strike to fend off an attack or a simple case of bloodlust. The slaughter is one of the biggest blights on Cortés's memory. Visit Cholula today and it is the ancient pre-hispanic pyramid, buried beneath a church, that draws history buffs, not the conquistador.

The path between the two volcanoes that tower above Cholula is called the Paso de Cortés. It is spectacular. From there he had his first awe-inspiring sight of what is now Mexico City. The lakes that shimmered below him are mostly now drained and cluttered with some of Latin America's biggest slums, with barely a lick of paint on the houses to brighten them. The causeways—still known as *calzadas*—that took him across the lakes to greet, kidnap and ultimately destroy Moctezuma are the distant forebears of multi-lane highways now snarled with some of the world's worst traffic.

Along one of them, the Calzada Mexico-Tacuba, Cortés fled on a rainy night in 1520, pursued by enraged Aztecs avenging the death of their emperor. Many of his panicked followers fell into the surrounding lake, drowning under the weight of their armour and turning the water red with blood. Today, next to the burnt husk of a giant *ahuehuete* tree, with buses spewing their fumes alongside, is a sign saying that Cortés wept there for the fate of his men. The event has passed down in history as *la noche triste* (the sad night), because it is the moment when the Spaniards came closest to defeat. The sign, however, erected in 2013, takes the Aztec view and calls it *la noche victoriosa*.

That is a reflection of Mexico's struggle with its past. Should it accept the historical record, with all its brutality, come to terms with the inevitability of Tenochtitlán's fall and celebrate the boldness and enterprise of Cortés and his men? Or should it continue to glorify the Aztecs and anguish over the genocide that Cortés perpetrated in God's name? Should it continue to demonise Cortés, in the words of Octavio Paz, a Nobel prize-winning poet, as a symbol of violent penetration, or learn to appreciate him as the unifier of two cultures? The dilemma is more than historical. “Hatred of Cortés is not even hatred of Spain. It's hatred of ourselves,” wrote Paz on the 500th anniversary of the conquistador's birth in 1985.

Some Mexicans are making efforts to reconcile the country to its history. A television

magnate, Ricardo Salinas Pliego, is using the rights to Miralles's history books, which he owns, to produce a TV drama that he hopes will re-shape the story of the country's birth on its half-millennium. “We're definitely going to rewrite history,” he says. Cortés, he believes, “was really in love with Mexico”. La Malinche, too, has “been very poorly served by history. She shows what a strong woman can do with history. And she gave birth to the first *mestizo*.”

For now, though, the national dilemma lingers. At the journey's end, the centre of Mexico City, a mural in a stairwell in the baroque sanctuary of San Ildefonso, beside the remains of Tenochtitlán's dazzling Great Temple, depicts a uniquely Mexican version of Adam and Eve. Painted by José Clemente Orozco, a stern Cortés is clasping the hand of the dark-skinned La Malinche. Both are naked. Beneath their feet is a dead, faceless Indian.

A few streets away, at the site where the conquistador first met Moctezuma, another mural offers a gentler version of the story. Behind the plain façade of the Hospital de Jesús, which Cortés built in 1524 to train Indian doctors, are two porticoed courtyards, with perhaps the only bust of Cortés to be found in a public building in Mexico. Upstairs, a mural depicts Spanish, Indian and *mestizo* doctors and nurses working side by side. In the next-door church, which is closed for refurbishment, lie Cortés's bones. ■



In Tenochtitlán, the capital, he crossed the causeways to greet, kidnap and ultimately destroy Moctezuma