

Conquest of new spain – a different side of cortes



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When I first learned about Hernando Cortes and the Conquistadors, Cortes was always portrayed as a barbarian and savage who killed, raped, and plundered his way into the heart of the Aztec empire. He was merciless and ruthless, showing no compassion on his path to total annihilation of an ancient Mexican empire. After reading Bernal Diaz's firsthand account of his conquest in *The Conquest of New Spain*, this could not have been further from the truth.

In this memoir of an old soldier of Cortes, written in his dying years, Cortes is compassionate and moral, showing the qualities of a great leader while displaying a unique show of kindness toward his traitorous enemies.

Throughout the story, the Aztecs attack Cortes' armies, set traps, and spread lies and deceit. Cortes would much rather trade with the Aztecs than fight them, even with his fellow Spaniards' lust for gold and riches. In *The Conquest of New Spain*, Bernal Diaz shows an atypical side of Cortes, one of compassion, piety, and cleverness while revealing the barbaric nature of the Aztecs who they conquered. Cortes is seen as the voice of reason against the irrational actions of the natives, even in their first encounters, " we sent them offers of peace...but they had refused to trust us and tried to kill our ambassadors. Not content with that, they had attacked us three times...and had lain ambushes against us...We might have killed many of their vassals but had not wished to do so and grieved for those who had died though they alone were to blame" (165).

Diaz states that " He [Cortes] ordered him [Alguilar] to beg them [the natives] not to start a war...and to speak to them about the advantages of remaining at peace...they said they would kill us all if we entered their town"

(69). This unprovoked aggressiveness on the side of the natives is seen in the first two encounters Diaz has with them, under Fransisco Hernandez and Juan de Grijalva. In these two encounters, the natives hardly give the Spaniards a chance to plead their case before attacking them with no mercy or provocation. The fact that the natives met the Spaniards with unmatched aggression on every occasion and hardly gave a chance for diplomacy shows how crude and uncivilized these people really were. Despite popular opinion, Cortes and the Conquistadors did not pillage the land or attack the natives, they tried to peacefully trade with them. When men stole items from an Indian town, Cortes ordered them to bring it back and to compensate the town for everything they ate.

He tried to treat the Aztecs with kindness, even when he received none of it back. Cortes even risked his own life on occasion to save lives of the natives, saying nothing for the number of times he did so to save his own people. Cortes is also seen as a deeply religious man. Even in a strange land, he has the priest say mass “ Very early next morning, after hearing Fray Bartolome de Olmedo say mass...” (74).

He tried to teach the natives the ideals of the Christian faith, “ He expounded to them the principles of our holy faith...he ordered two of our carpenters to make a very tall cross” (81). He even tries to spread his religion to the Aztecs, in order to better their lives “ He begged them to erect in their cities...a cross like the one they saw...they would then see how well things would go with them, and what our God would do for them” (97). One might argue that Cortes showed both arrogance and ignorance in his disdainful approach towards the Aztecs’ religion and idols, but benevolence was his

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only motive. He gained nothing from seeing the Aztecs convert to Christianity; Cortes just wanted the natives to have, in his opinion, a better life.

He saw the way they lived in comparison to the great European civilizations and he tried to bring Christianity to them, because he believed that all men were able to receive God's blessings, not just the Spaniards. In this vein, he did not let his army take any slaves on their march to Tenochtitlan and he did not take advantage of any of the women offered to him, because he had a wife waiting for him at home. In contrast to the highly civilized Spaniards, the Aztecs are savages, and not just on a technological level. They sacrifice men and children for nearly any occasion; the Spaniards have often walked into a town to see children's blood on temple walls or Aztecs in cages awaiting sacrifice. At one temple, there were literally one hundred thousand skulls placed in a pile near the temple, skulls of people that were sacrificed.

The Aztecs do not even respect their own leader, not hesitating to throw rocks at him when they realize he has cooperated with the Spaniards, "Montezuma was hit by three stones, one on the head, one on the arm and one on the leg" (294). Cortes, in comparison, is a great man and a great leader. His bravery, heralded by Diaz "What men in all the world who have shown such daring?" (216) is perfectly exemplified when he decides to march into Mexico, knowing full-well the Aztecs plan to kill them. In addition to being cunning and sidestepping the Aztecs' traps, Cortes is valiant and brave, fighting in the trenches alongside his men, unlike Montezuma who sits in a palace: "Cortes himself and all the rest went up the river in the boats... while Cortes was fighting, he lost a sandal in the mud...and landed with one

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bare foot" (70). In fact, Cortes' treatment of Montezuma itself is an example of Cortes' benevolence.

After Montezuma repeatedly sent armies to kill Cortes, tried to ambush Cortes, or set traps to thwart Cortes' advance, Cortes only held him prisoner as a last resort. Even holding him prisoner, Cortes lowered his hat in his presence and gave Montezuma the full illusion of power, even though he did not have to, especially after Montezuma's hostility towards him. Even after this kind act, Montezuma still plotted behind Cortes' back. In the telling of history, Cortes is shown as a wicked man who destroyed a great empire, but he was in fact the most compassionate man of them all.

He tried to reason with the Indians and to set up treaties and alliances. After being betrayed countless times and averting multiple traps, he was still willing to forgive the Indians for all they had done. Only after la Noche de Triste was Cortes unable to pardon the Indians any longer, as they had killed hundreds of his fellow Spaniards. He proceeded to decimate Tenochtitlan and eradicate the memory of the Aztecs from the face of Mexico only after he had exhausted every possibility for diplomacy.

The Indians had no one but themselves to blame for this tragedy, as their deceit and treachery in the face of a benevolent man brought it upon themselves.