

Europeans confront the aztec and turkish empires in the 16th century essay exampl...

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There is a great contrast in these 16th Century documents between the way a European observer described the wealth, power and confidence of the Ottoman Empire at its height, and how the Aztec records in *The Broken Spears* were filled with a sense of doom and despair as the relatively small Spanish force under Hernan Cortez approached their capital of Tenochtitlan. In the former case, the Turks already had conquered the Near East and the Balkans, and the Europeans were not at all certain they could ever defeat them or even fight a successful defensive action against their large and powerful forces, while in the Aztec records, even though they had an army of hundreds of thousands and could have easily defeated the tiny Spanish force as soon as it landed, they delayed and hesitated until it was far too late. Cortez conquered and destroyed the Aztec empire, with the help of disease epidemics and local allies, while the Europeans finally held off the Turkish advance and then began to force them to retreat. By the 19th Century, the Ottoman Empire was known as the Sick Man of Europe, which was a far cry from how the Europeans had viewed it in the 16th and 17th Centuries. As for the Aztecs, they were conquered and enslaved like all other Native Americans, their culture and religion destroyed and their numbers decimated by disease epidemics.

In *The Broken Spears*, the Aztec documents reveal that the emperor Motecuhzoma and his people were terrified of the Spanish invaders, as if they were alien beings from another planet. They had never seen horses and firearms before, which seemed magical to them, and they truly believed these strange visitors were gods. Another they had a large army with courageous and resolute warriors they took no action against the invaders as

they continued to march inland toward Tenochtitlan. Motecuhzoma is portrayed as repeatedly attempting to appease the Spanish and give them whatever they might desire, right up until the moment they marched into his capital and demanded all the gold and silver they had. As they were moving in from the coast, he sent a large delegation to greet them, and this group “took whatever the strangers might request or whatever might please them” (Leon-Portilla Chapter 4). This included prisoners to be sacrificed, since the emperor truly believed the visitors were gods from heaven and that they fed on human blood. When the Spanish witnessed the human sacrifice, though, it appalled and revolted them, and they refused to touch the food that was sprinkled with blood. Motecuhzoma also sent out sorcerers and magicians to determine if “they could work some charm against them or do them some mischief”, but their magic failed completely (Leon-Portilla Chapter 4). Repeatedly the Aztec accounts describe the emperor and confused, frightened and irresolute, but so were his advisers and many of the common people. They had no idea what their fate would be at the hands of these strange ‘gods’, and Motecuhzoma even considered fleeing Tenochtitlan, but then finally just decided to stay and await his fate.

Some cities did attack the Spanish, such as the Otomis of Tecuac, and were totally defeated, which caused others to take no action against the invaders or ally with them. In this case, the Spanish use of artillery and firearms had a devastating effect on their opponents, who had never seen such weapons before—or even imagined them. At Tlaxcala and other cities, they were welcomed as ‘gods’ and given whatever they desired, and in many areas they were told that the Aztecs were “great warriors and conquerors and

have defeated their neighbors on every side” (Lopez-Portilla Chapter 5). Those who had been subjugated by the Aztecs even began to imagine the Spanish as allies and liberators, which of course turned out to be a tragic error. They even took advantage of their power to settle scores with rival peoples, such as at Chulula, a city allied with the Aztecs, where the Spanish massacred a peaceful assembly of nobles and warriors. They would later commit the same type of horrendous act against thousands of unarmed boys and young men in Tenochtitlan, who were performing a ceremonial dance for them. This brutality caused the Aztecs to rise up against the Spanish and drive them out of the city on “ Noche Triste” (the Sad Night), but by then it was too late. They had already let them in to the heart of their empire and given them presents of gold and silver that merely whetted their appetites for more. Motecuhzoma was in despair when he heard of the Chulula massacre while “ the common people were terrified by the news; they could do nothing but tremble with fright” (Lopez-Portilla Chapter 5). So the emperor allowed them to march into his capital and take him prisoner, learning only too late that these visitors were no ‘ gods’ at all.

This supreme exercise in self-confidence and even blind arrogance and ambition on the part of Cortez and his tiny force was an extreme contrast from the way Europeans viewed the Ottoman Empire in the East. In a series of letters in 1555-62, the French observer Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq described the army and court of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent at the apex of the Ottoman Empire’s power. He found a great deal to admire about the Turks, as have many foreign observers over the centuries, and noted that among all the soldiers and officials and the imperial court, there was “ not in

all that great assemblage a single man who owed his position to aught save his valor and his merit" (Busbecq 658). Among the Turks, there were no distinctions by birth or wealth, but only based on merit and personal qualities, which he contrasted very unfavorably with Europeans of the time. Even their dress showed no great trappings of wealth and luxury, and he believed this was why the Ottomans were so successful in their wars against the Christians. He described an Ottoman army with 40, 000 camels to carry supplies, and also the famous "patience, self-denial, and thrift of the Turkish soldier, that enable him to face the most trying circumstances" (Busbecq 659). Here again, he contrasted the Turks favorably with European soldiers who demanded all sorts of delicacies and luxuries in the field.

WORKS CITED

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