



62

FRANCISCO PIZARRO

c. 1475 - 1541

Francisco Pizarro, the illiterate Spanish adventurer who conquered the Inca Empire in Peru, was born about 1475, in the city of Trujillo, Spain. Like Hernando Cortés, whose career parallels his in many ways, Pizarro came to the New World to seek fame and fortune. From 1502 to 1509, Pizarro lived on Hispaniola, the Caribbean island on which Haiti and the Dominican Republic are now situated. In 1513, he was a member of the expedition, led by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, which discovered the Pacific Ocean. In 1519, he settled in Panama. In 1522, when Pizarro was about forty-seven years old, he learned of the existence of the Inca Empire from Pascual de Andagoya, a Spanish explorer who had visited it. Pizarro, doubtless inspired by the recent conquest of Mexico by Hernando Cortés, decided to conquer the Inca Em-

pire. His first attempt, in 1524-25, was unsuccessful, and his two ships had to turn back before reaching Peru. On his second attempt, 1526-28, he managed to reach the coast of Peru and return with gold, llamas, and Indians.

In 1528, he returned to Spain. There, the following year, the emperor Charles V authorized him to conquer Peru for Spain, and supplied him with funds for an expedition. Pizarro returned to Panama, where he assembled the expedition. It sailed from Panama in 1531, at which time Pizarro was already fifty-six years old. The force which he had assembled included fewer than 200 men, while the empire that he had set out to conquer had a population of over six million!

Pizarro reached the coast of Peru the following year. In September 1532, taking with him only 177 men and 62 horses, he marched inland. Pizarro led his small force high into the Andes mountains to reach the town of Cajamarca, where the Incan ruler, Atahualpa, was staying with an army of forty thousand warriors. Pizarro's troops arrived at Cajamarca on November 15, 1532. The following day, at Pizarro's request, Atahualpa left the bulk of his troops behind, and accompanied only by about five thousand unarmed retainers, came to parley with Pizarro.

In the light of what Atahualpa must have known, his behavior is baffling. From the time that they had first landed on the coast, the Spaniards had plainly demonstrated both their hostile intent and their utter ruthlessness. It is therefore hard to understand why Atahualpa permitted Pizarro's forces to approach Cajamarca unhindered. Had the Indians attacked him on the narrow mountain roads, where Pizarro's horses were almost useless, they could easily have annihilated the Spanish forces. Atahualpa's behavior after Pizarro reached Cajamarca was still more amazing. To approach a hostile army while himself unarmed was incredibly stupid. The mystery is only heightened by the fact that ambush was a common tactic of the Incas.

Pizarro did not let his golden opportunity pass. He ordered his troops to attack Atahualpa and his unarmed escort. The battle—or rather massacre—lasted only about half an hour. Not

a single Spanish soldier was killed; the only one wounded was Pizarro himself, who suffered a minor wound while protecting Atahualpa, whom he succeeded in capturing alive.

Pizarro's strategy worked perfectly. The Inca Empire was a highly centralized structure, with all authority flowing from the Inca, or emperor, who was believed to be semi-divine. With the Inca held prisoner, the Indians were unable to react to the Spanish invasion. In the hope of regaining his freedom, Atahualpa paid Pizarro an enormous ransom in gold and silver, probably worth more than 28 million dollars. Nevertheless, within a few months Pizarro had him executed. In November 1533, a year after the capture of Atahualpa, Pizarro's troops entered the Inca capital, Cuzco, without a fight. There, Pizarro installed a new Inca as his puppet. In 1535, he founded the city of Lima, which became the new capital of Peru.

In 1536, however, the puppet Inca escaped and led an Indian revolt against the Spanish. For a while the Spanish forces were besieged in Lima and Cuzco. The Spanish managed to regain control of most of the country the following year, but it was not until 1572 that the revolt was finally crushed. By then, however, Pizarro himself was dead.

Pizarro's downfall came about because the Spanish started fighting among themselves. One of Pizarro's closest associates, Diego de Almagro, revolted in 1537, claiming that Pizarro was not giving him his rightful share of the booty. Almagro was captured and executed; but the issue was not really settled, and in 1541, a group of Almagro's followers broke into Pizarro's palace in Lima and assassinated the sixty-six-year-old leader, only eight years after he had entered Cuzco victoriously.

Francisco Pizarro was brave, determined, and shrewd. By his own lights, he was a religious man, and it is reported that the dying Pizarro drew a cross on the ground with his own blood, and that his last word was "Jesus." However, he was also an incredibly avaricious man, cruel, ambitious, and treacherous: perhaps the most brutal of the conquistadors.

But Pizarro's harsh character should not blind us to the



Pizarro's audience with Charles V before embarking for Peru.

magnitude of his military achievement. When, in 1967, the Israelis won a dramatic victory over Arab nations which greatly outnumbered them, and which possessed far more military equipment, many persons were surprised. It was an impressive triumph; but history is studded with examples of military victories won against sizable numerical odds. Napoleon and Alexander the Great repeatedly won victories against larger armies. The Mongols, under the successors of Genghis Khan, managed to conquer China, a country which had at least thirty times their population.

However, Pizarro's conquest of an empire of over six million with a force of only 180 men is the most astonishing military feat in history. The numerical odds he overcame were considerably higher than those which faced Cortés, who invaded an empire of roughly five million with a force of 600 men. Could even Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan have matched Pizarro's accomplishment? I doubt it, since neither of them would ever have been so reckless as to attempt a conquest when faced with such overwhelming odds.

But, one might ask, did not Spanish firearms give them an overwhelming tactical advantage? Not at all. Arquebuses, the primitive firearms of the time, had a small range and took a long time to reload. Although they made a frightening noise, they were actually less effective than good bows and arrows. In any event, when Pizarro entered Cajamarca, only three of his men had arquebuses, and no more than twenty had crossbows. Most of the Indians were killed by conventional weapons such as swords and spears. Despite their possession of a few horses and firearms, it is plain that the Spanish entered the conflict at an overwhelming military disadvantage. Leadership and determination, rather than weaponry, were the chief factors in the Spanish victory. Of course, Pizarro had good luck as well; but it is an old saying that fortune favors the brave.

Francisco Pizarro has been condemned by some writers as little more than a courageous thug. But few if any thugs have had his impact on history. The empire which he overthrew ruled most of present-day Peru and Ecuador, as well as the northern half of Chile, and part of Bolivia. Its population was considerably larger than all the rest of South America combined. As a result of Pizarro's conquests, the religion and culture of Spain were imposed on the entire region. Furthermore, after the fall of the Inca Empire, no other part of South America had any chance of successfully resisting European conquest. Millions of Indians still inhabit South America. But in most parts of the continent the Indians have never regained political power, and European language, religion, and culture remain dominant.

Cortés and Pizarro, each leading only small forces, succeeded in rather quickly overthrowing the empires of the Aztecs and the Incas. This has led many people to suspect that the conquest of Mexico and Peru by Europeans was inevitable. Indeed, it does seem that the Aztec Empire had no real chance of maintaining its independence. Its location (near the Gulf of Mexico, and a comparatively short sail from Cuba) left it vulnerable to Spanish attack. Even if the Aztecs had succeeded in defeating Cortés's small forces, larger Spanish armies were sure to follow fairly soon.

The Inca Empire, on the other hand, was far better situated for defense. The only ocean bordering it was the Pacific, which was less accessible to Spanish ships than the Atlantic. The Incas maintained large armies, and their empire was populous and well organized. Furthermore, the terrain of Peru is rugged and mountainous, and in many sections of the world, the European colonial powers found it very difficult to conquer mountainous regions. Even in the late nineteenth century, when European arms were far more advanced than they had been in the early sixteenth century, an Italian attempt to conquer Ethiopia was unsuccessful. Similarly, the British had almost endless difficulties with the tribes on the mountainous northwest frontier of India. And the Europeans were never able to colonize such mountainous countries as Nepal, Afghanistan, and Iran. Had Pizarro's invasion failed, and had the Incas thereby had the opportunity to gain some knowledge of European weapons and tactics, they might well have been able to fight off substantially larger European forces afterwards. As it was, it took the Spanish thirty-six years to suppress the Indian revolt of 1536, even though the Indians had very few guns and were never able to muster more than a small fraction of the troops which they could have assembled before Pizarro's conquest. The Spanish might have conquered the Inca Empire even without Pizarro, but that conclusion seems far from certain.

Thus, Pizarro has been ranked slightly higher than Cortés on this list. Cortés speeded up history; Pizarro may possibly have altered its course.