63 HERNANDO CORTÉS

1485-1547

Hernando Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, was born in 1485, in Medellín, Spain. His father was a minor noble. In his youth, Cortés attended the University of Salamanca, where he studied law. At the age of nineteen, he left Spain to seek his fortune in the newly-discovered Western Hemisphere. He arrived in Hispaniola in 1504, and spent several years there as a gentleman farmer and local Don Juan. In 1511, he took part in the Spanish conquest of Cuba. Following this adventure, he married the sister-in-law of the Imperial Governor of Cuba, Diego Velásquez, and was appointed mayor of Santiago.

In 1518, Velásquez chose Cortés to be the captain of an expedition to Mexico. The governor, fearing Cortés's ambition,

soon reversed his order, but it was too late to stop Cortés. He sailed in February 1519, with 11 ships, 110 sailors, 553 soldiers (including only 13 with hand guns and 32 with crossbows), 10 heavy cannons, 4 light cannons, and 16 horses. The expedition disembarked on Good Friday at the site of the present city of Veracruz. Cortés remained near the coast for a while, gathering information about the situation in Mexico. He learned that the Aztecs, who ruled Mexico, had a great capital which lay inland; that they had great stores of precious metals; and that they were hated by many of the other Indian tribes whom they had subdued.

Cortés, who was bent on conquest, decided to march inland and invade the Aztec territory. Some of his men were frightened by the enormous numerical odds which they would have to overcome; so before marching inland, Cortés destroyed the expedition's boats, thus leaving his men no choice but to either follow him to victory or be killed by the Indians.

Proceeding inland, the Spaniards encountered fierce resistance from the Tlaxcalans, an independent tribe of Indians. But after their large army had been defeated by the Spanish in some hard-fought battles, the Tlaxcalans decided to join forces with Cortés against the Aztecs, whom they hated. Cortés then advanced to Cholula, where the Aztec ruler, Montezuma II, had planned a surprise attack on the Spanish. However, Cortés, who had obtained advance information of the Indians' intentions, struck first, and massacred thousands of them at Cholula. He then advanced toward the capital, Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City), and on November 8, 1519, entered the city without opposition. He soon imprisoned Montezuma, whom he made a puppet, and it looked as though the conquest was almost complete.

But then another Spanish force, under Pánfilo de Narváez, arrived on the coast with orders to arrest Cortés. Cortés left some of his forces in Tenochtitlán, and hastily led the rest of his troops back to the coast. There, he defeated the troops of Narváez and persuaded the survivors to join him. However, by the time he

was able to return to Tenochtitlán, the subordinate whom he had left there had antagonized the Aztecs beyond endurance. On June 30, 1520, there was an uprising in Tenochtitlán, and the Spanish forces, suffering severe casualties, retreated to Tlaxcala. However, Cortés obtained additional troops, and the following May he returned and laid siege to Tenochtitlán. The city fell on August 13. After that, Spanish control of Mexico was reasonably secure, although Cortés had to spend some time consolidating the conquest of the outlying regions. Tenochtitlán was rebuilt and renamed Mexico City, and it became the capital of the Spanish colony of New Spain.

Considering the small number of troops with which Cortés started, his conquest of an empire of five million was a truly remarkable military feat. The only example in history of a conquest against greater numerical odds is that of Francisco Pizarro over the Incas in Peru. It is natural to be curious about how and why Cortés succeeded. Certainly, his possession of horses and firearms was a factor; however, the very small numbers of those which he possessed were not in themselves nearly sufficient compensation for his enormous numerical disadvantage. (It is worth noting that neither of the two previous Spanish expeditions to the Mexican coast had succeeded in establishing a settlement or in making any permanent conquests.) Certainly, the leadership which Cortés provided, and his courage and determination were major factors in his success. An equally important factor was his skillful diplomacy. Cortés not only avoided inspiring an Indian coalition against him, but he successfully persuaded substantial numbers of Indians to join with him against the Aztecs.

Cortés was also aided by Aztec legends concerning the god Quetzalcoatl. According to Indian legend, this god had instructed the Indians in agriculture, metallurgy, and government; he had been tall, with white skin, and a flowing beard. After promising to revisit the Indians, he had departed over the "Eastern Ocean," that is, the Gulf of Mexico. To Montezuma, it seemed very possible that Cortés was the returning god, and this fear seems to have markedly influenced his behavior. Certainly,

Montezuma's reaction to the Spanish invasion was weak and indecisive.

One last factor in the Spaniards' success was their religious fervor. To us, of course, Cortés's invasion seems an inexcusable act of aggression. Cortés, however, was convinced that his invasion was morally justified. He could, and did, quite sincerely tell his men that they would win because their cause was just, and because they were fighting under the banner of the Cross. Cortés's religious motivation was quite sincere: more than once, he risked the success of his expedition by heavy-handed attempts to convert his Indian allies to Christianity.

Although Cortés was an excellent diplomat when dealing with the Indians, he was not equally successful in the political infighting with his Spanish rivals. The Spanish king rewarded him richly with lands and made Cortés a marquis, but removed him from his post as Governor of Mexico. Cortés returned to Spain in 1540, and spent the last seven years of his life vainly petitioning the king to restore his authority in New Spain. When Cortés died, in 1547, near Seville, Spain, he was an embittered though wealthy man. His large estates in Mexico were inherited by his son.

That Cortés was greedy and ambitious is obvious. An admirer who knew Cortés personally described him as ruthless, haughty, mischievous, and quarrelsome. But Cortés had many admirable qualities as well. He was courageous, determined, and intelligent. He had a generally cheerful disposition. Though a firm military leader, he was not wantonly cruel. Unlike Pizarro, who was universally hated, Cortés got along well with many of the Indians and tried not to govern them harshly. Incidentally, Cortés was apparently handsome and charming; he was always a great ladies' man.

In his will, Cortés stated that he was uncertain whether it was morally right to own Indian slaves. The question had troubled him, and he requested his son to consider the matter carefully. For his times, this was a rare attitude; one can hardly conceive of Francisco Pizarro (or Christopher Columbus), being

Cortés and Montezuma meet.

troubled by such a question. All in all, one gets the impression that of all the Spanish conquistadors, Cortés was the most decent human being.

Cortés and Pizarro were born within fifty miles of each other, and only about ten years apart. The achievements of the two men (who appear to have been relatives) are strikingly similar. Between them, they conquered a region of virtually continental size, and imposed on that region the language, religion, and culture of the conquerors. Throughout most of that region, political power has ever since remained with persons of European ancestry.

The combined influence of Cortés and Pizarro was considerably greater than that of Simón Bolívar. Their conquests

transferred political power in South America from the Indians to the Europeans. Bolivar's victories merely succeeded in transferring power from the Spanish government to persons of European ancestry born in South America.

It might seem, at first, that Cortés should be ranked higher than Pizarro because his conquests took place earlier and inspired those of Pizarro. Furthermore, Indian resistance in Peru had not ended when Pizarro died, whereas Cortés essentially completed the conquest of Mexico. But in my opinion, those points are slightly overbalanced by another consideration. The conquering zeal of the Spanish, and the superiority of their weapons, obviously posed a serious threat to both the Aztecs and the Incas. Peru, protected by its mountainous terrain, had some chance of retaining its independence. Pizarro's bold and successful attack may, therefore, actually have changed the course of history.

But the Aztec dominions were less mountainous than Peru; furthermore, Mexico (unlike Peru) borders on a portion of the Atlantic Ocean and was therefore relatively accessible to Spanish forces. It therefore appears that the conquest of Mexico by Spain was virtually inevitable: the principal result of Cortés's daring and able leadership was to hasten the process.