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Hernan Cortez: Of Contracts and Conquest*

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At this moment in history, February 1519, the Spanish enterprise in the Americas was floundering as the king's appointed governors were placing their personal interests above those of the crown. Governor Pedrarias in Panama had just executed the great explorer Balboa, throwing Castilla del Oro into turmoil (and setting back the discovery of Peru by a decade). Balboa was preparing to set off for the South American continent when Pedrarias arrested him. So, too, with Hernan Cortez: Governor Diego Velasquez of Cuba was doing everything in his power to prevent Cortez from launching his expedition to Mexico. In both cases personal greed overrode the crown's interest in exploration and discovery of the riches of the Americas. It did not help that King Charles was more interested in the affairs of Europe than America, delegating responsibility for American affairs to his Council of the Indies.

Cortez and Governor Velasquez

In truth, Cortez and Velasquez had a mercurial relationship. When, at nineteen years of age, in 1504, Cortez arrived on Española, Governor Nicolás de Ovando, a distant relative, arranged for him to receive a *repartimiento* (distribution) of land and slaves. Cortez worked the land and acted as a notary for the small town of Azua, but after seven years grew restive, saying "I came to get rich not to till the soil, like a peasant." In 1511, when Ovando's successor Diego

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Columbus made the decision to conquer Cuba, assigning Diego Valesquez to command, Cortez signed on. After brutally pacifying the island, Valesquez became governor and rewarded Cortez for his courageous service, naming him as one of his secretaries and allotting him land and slaves.[1]

Hernán Cortés
Book of America, R. Cronau

Then things soon turned sour. Cortez was a handsome, charismatic man of fine bearing; literate, but not learned; and he was also gregarious and a rake with promiscuous habits. He became romantically involved with Catalina Suarez, one of the daughters of a wealthy Spanish landowner on the island. But his reluctance to marry her caused a rift with Velasquez, who was courting one of Catalina's sisters. Thereafter, Cortez became a magnet for those with a grievance against the governor. They decided to present their complaints to Diego Columbus in Santo Domingo, electing Cortez for the mission. Velasquez discovered their plan and imprisoned Cortez. Although he escaped and found temporary sanctuary in a church, he was caught and imprisoned a second time, and slated for trial. Escaping yet a second time, Cortez saw that his best course would be to marry Catalina and reconcile with the governor. [2]

[1] William H. Prescott, *Mexico and the Life of the Conquerer, Hernando Cortes, Vol. I* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier and Son, 1900), 173-174.

[2] Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume IX, History of Mexico, Vol. I. 1516-1521* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Company, 1883), 48-52.

Over the next several years Cortez made a reputation for himself, suppressing his ambition for adventure, growing wealthy from working the land and gold mines, and being elected mayor of Santiago, the new capital of Cuba. He was happy and seemingly content—until opportunity beckoned. Governor Velasquez had sent two expeditions to the mainland in search of gold and slaves. The first under Francisco Hernandez de Cordova in February 1517 had shown promise in regard to both categories. The second, under the command of his nephew Juan de Grijalva a year later, apparently had been lost. The governor decided to send a mission to rescue Grijalva, which prompted Cortez to grasp the opportunity to lead the mission.

Cortez sent word of his interest through mutual friends who were close advisors to the governor. One of these was Velasquez' secretary, Andrés de Duero, who would play a most vital role later in this story. As recompense for interceding with Velasquez, Cortez promised to give Duero a third of whatever he found. When the governor's first choices turned down his call to lead the expedition, Cortez was there, ready and willing to risk his fortune for the chance to discover new land and riches. Accordingly, the governor obtained a license from the king's authorities in Santo Domingo and the two men entered into a contract on October 23, 1518.[3]

Cortez, thirty-three years old and in the prime of his life, was elated at the prospect of leading an expedition to the mainland. It would be his first adventure since his participation in the pacification of Cuba six years before. It would be his first opportunity to lead a large group of men into battle in a new and unknown land. He reached out to his many friends and any who were thirsting for adventure to contribute to the provision of ships, guns, men, and supplies. They flocked to his banner. Risking much of his fortune, he was well on the way to outfitting his armada, having acquired six ships and recruited

[3] "Instructions Given By Velasquez, Governor of Cuba, to Cortes, on His Taking Command of the Expedition; Dated at Fernandina, October 23, 1518," in William H. Prescott, *Mexico and the Life of the Conqueror, Fernando Cortes, Vol. II* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier and Son, 1900), 423-426.

three hundred men. Suddenly, Cortez's hopes were placed in doubt with news of Grijalva's safe return.

The Grijalva expedition returned to port in Cuba some time in November 1518; by at least one account, arriving in Santiago as late as November 15, three weeks after Velasquez and Cortez had signed their contract.[4] At every stop they were feted royally, as Grijalva regaled all with stories of vast riches in New Spain. Governor Velasquez was "well contented" with the gold brought back, in all the substantial sum of about 20,000 dollars, but angry with Grijalva (in part for not establishing a settlement in so rich a land, even though that was not his primary mission). The venal Velasquez feared that someone else would claim the land and "rob him of his reward."[5]

Indeed, he perceived and was increasingly led to believe by those around him that the usurper would be none other than the man with whom he had so recently signed a contract, Hernan Cortez. The lure of gold had prompted Velasquez to change his mind and he sought to wriggle out of his contract. At first, he sought to dissuade Cortez from proceeding on the grounds that Grijalva had returned, so there was no longer a reason for the expedition. Cortez refused, insisting that a contract was a contract. Then, Velasquez ordered his officials to confiscate Cortez' ships. Upon learning of this decision, Cortez hastily gathered his ships and men and cast off three days later, on November 18, 1518.

For three months, between November 18, 1518 and February 18, 1519, Cortez played the game of catch-me-if-you-can with the

[4] Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest of America and Its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of Colonies, Vol. II* (London: John Parker and Son West Strand, 1855), 228. There are various other accounts about the timing of Grijalva's return. See, e.g., Bancroft, *History of Mexico, Vol. I,* 30-31, esp. note 8; and Charles St. John Fancourt, *The History of Yucatan* (London: John Murray, 1854), 21-23.

[5] Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, trans. Alfred Percival Maudslay, M.A. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1908), 63-65; Bancroft, *History of Mexico, Vol. I*, 31-33.

governor. Cortez had been in the midst of outfitting his expedition when he cast off on November 18 to elude Velasquez' officials. Attempting to build up sufficient stores for his expedition, he moved from port to port from east to west—Macaca, Trinidad, Havana—even sending an aide to Jamaica for supplies. Cortez eluded, bluffed, or recruited to his cause the governor's men who came with orders to seize him and his ships. By the middle of February 1519, he was ready. He now had eleven ships, over five hundred soldiers, one hundred sailors, two hundred native bearers, about two dozen women, fourteen cannon, and all the provisions and equipment needed for an extended campaign, including sixteen horses and numerous war dogs.

Cortez' expedition to Mexico, 1519-1521
map source: https://hernandocortes-laurel.weebly.com

Departing February 18, 1519 from San Antonio, on the far western tip of Cuba, Cortez sailed first to Cozumel off the northeast coast of Yucatan where, after a stormy voyage, fate smiled. A Spanish ecclesiastic who had been shipwrecked eight years earlier and held captive made his way to Cortez and rescue. Jeronimo de Aguilar would become a valued adviser and interpreter with the Maya whose

language he had learned. In discussions with several of the captains who had sailed with Grijalva and had joined his expedition, Cortez planned his initial strategy. Departing Cozumel in early March, Cortez passed by the places where Cordova and Grijalva had encountered hostile receptions and stopped at the Tabasco River on March 25, where Grijalva had first encountered and had a profitable exchange with Indian chiefs. The Tabascan people were tributaries to the Aztecs, who determined their policies.

Cortez' reception, however, was "unlike what he had reason to expect," from members of the Grijalva expedition. The Indians attacked his forces as he attempted to land, despite protestations that he had come in peace. The attack was unsuccessful. In retrospect, however, it is clear that Montezuma, ruler of the Aztecs, had decided upon a test of strength. He evidently assumed that he could overwhelm Cortez's relatively small force with numbers. As noted in the previous chapter, Montezuma had a network of intelligence and communication that spanned the empire, so he was able to assess Cortez's strength and movements from the beginning, just as he had earlier followed Cordova and Grijalva.[6]

After an uneasy night and more skirmishes the next day, Cortez learned that further inland at Centla, a very large force (later reported to be forty thousand natives) was preparing to attack. Cortez responded, as was his wont, by taking the offensive rather than conceding the initiative to the Indians. He decided upon a pincer attack. He sent his foot soldiers, supported by cannon brought from the ships, on a frontal assault against massed Indian forces, while he circled around behind with his armored horses. The result was a major defeat for the Indians, who fled in fright from the booming cannon

[6] William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: The Modern Library, 1843), 125, note 14; Bancroft, *History of Mexico,* 100.

and the powerful horses, which they had never before seen.[7] While not mentioned by historians cited here, Cortez likely also used his terrifying war dogs as weapons in the battle against the Tabascan warriors. Natives throughout the Americas bred small dogs for food but had never come upon the large, ferocious carnivorous beasts that the Spaniards brought with them.[8]

"Spanish War Dogs," *World History Amino*

The Tabascans had endured enough. Next day, their chiefs approached the Cortez headquarters with a peace offering that included many gold ornaments, food, cotton cloth, and twenty slave girls. Cortez, too, offered peace, glass beads, and trinkets, but demanded to know the source of the gold. Their reply was that the

[7] Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 116-120; Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* 152-157; Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, 87-90.

[8] "The Dogs of the Conquistadors," *doglawreporter-Bay-Net*, http://doglawreporter-bay-net.blogspot.com/2011/11/the-dogs-of-conquistadors.html; "Spanish War Dogs, Edible Dogs of the Conquistadors and Aztecs," *El Valle de Anton, Panama...The Volcanic Village…History, Attractions and Information*, https://elvalleinformation.wordpress.com; Graham Hancock, "The Spanish use of Animals as Weapons of War," *Ancient Origins*, October 6, 2013, https://www.ancient-origins.net/opinion-guest-authors/spanish-use-animals-weapons-war-00898,.

source of the gold lay further to the west, in Mexico. Cortez' course was now set; he would head for the capital of the Aztecs. Before departing, he made a display of religious power. He organized a procession to the principal temple of Tabasco, where an altar had been installed and Indian idols had been taken down and replaced with the cross and statues of the Virgin Mary. He insisted that the Tabascans tender their allegiance to the Spanish king and God (whose warriors, the natives had witnessed, possessed the power of thunder and lightning).[9] It was but the first of many instances in which Cortez would systematically tear down the belief system of his adversaries by toppling their idols and replacing them with Catholic symbols. Later, this practice would nearly bring about his own destruction.

La Malinche –Xavier L. Medellin and Felix HInz, "Doña Marina," *Medellinhistoria.com*

It is said that success brings its own luck and the victory over the Tabascans seemed to prove it. As his ships sailed west along the coast to Mexico, Cortez discovered that one of the slave girls on board was educated in both the language of the Maya and Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Thus, within a few days of his arrival on the American mainland, Cortez had acquired two people who would be invaluable, enabling him to communicate with his adversaries. The slave girl, whom the Spaniards christened "Marina," but who was called "Malintzen" or "Malinche" by the Aztecs, reportedly was beautiful and intelligent. She became a close adviser,

[9] William H. Prescott, *Mexico and the Life of the Conqueror, Fernando Cortes, Vol. I* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier and Son, 1900), 205-206.

interlocutor, and, eventually, mistress to Cortez, bearing him a son. She would be Cortez' voice when he interacted with Montezuma. Indeed, the Aztec emperor would frequently address Cortez as "Malinche."

Anchoring April 20 off the coast of San Juan de Ulúa, Cortez' first task was to establish a defensible coastal base of operations, as the place where they had landed was a combination of sand dunes and marshes infested with swarms of mosquitoes. Accordingly, he sent out armed reconnaissance teams by land and by sea to find a more accommodating location. The site selected was a bay near Quiahuiztlan, located further up the coast, about 20 miles north of Cempoala, the capital city of the Totonac tribe (the Totonacs were an unhappy people who were tributaries of the Aztecs and were more than amenable to cooperating with the Spaniards). There, Cortez established the settlement of *Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz.*

The establishment of Vera Cruz served a political as well as military purpose. Pursuant to the establishment of the settlement a dispute broke out between Cortez' supporters and a handful of Velasquez's. The latter claimed that Cortez had no mandate to establish a settlement and insisted that they therefore return to Cuba. Refusing to cut short his expedition, the captain put the leaders in irons aboard one of his ships and dispersed the others among his men, winning them over one by one. Nevertheless, Cortez knew that Velasquez remained a formidable threat to his expedition. His lack of a mandate meant that Velasquez could take away everything he might gain in Mexico through legal action in Spanish courts, or by appealing directly to the king.

Therefore, Cortez decided to follow the precedent established by Velasquez himself and set up a legitimate political base, which would enable him to act independently of the governor. A few years earlier, when Velazquez conquered Cuba, he did so under a contract with the governor of Santo Domingo, Diego Columbus. Establishing the city of Santiago, Velasquez abrogated this contract

and designated himself as governor of Cuba under the Spanish crown. The king accepted his fait accompli and legalized his position as governor.[10]

Thus, Cortez sought to do the same. He established the city of Vera Cruz, naming town officials and magistrates, who, in turn, elected him as both captain general and chief magistrate. Being head of a settlement, Cortez argued, superseded his contract with Velasquez and signified that his expedition was no longer under the authority of the governor, but under that of the king. Both Velasquez and Cortez would appeal directly to King Charles for validation of their charges against each other. This, in fact, would be the purpose of the first of five extensive letters Cortez would send to the king, which would accompany the shipment of the king's portion of whatever treasure Cortez would find.[11]

Cortez had been warmly welcomed by the local Totonac tribal leaders but was surprised by an equally warm, but unexpected visit by Aztec representatives of emperor Montezuma. Discussions with the Totonac leaders revealed that they were but one of many disaffected tributaries of the Aztecs. Although Montezuma ruled over a vast and populous empire of vassal states, it was rent with dissension and ruthlessly held together by force used to put down frequent outbreaks of revolt. There were some thirty-eight provinces, each paying tribute of various kinds to the capital of Tenochtitlan (the present site of Mexico City).

To enforce the peace and Aztec rule, Montezuma deployed military garrisons in every province to keep order and to protect the tax collectors, who exacted tribute of all kinds, including sons and daughters of vassal states who were sacrificed to the gods. Cortez

[10] **"**Hernán Cortés," *New World Encyclopedia,* http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hernán_Cortés

[11] David Marley, *Wars of the Americas: A Chronology of Armed Conflict in the New World, 1492 to the Present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 17.

quickly realized that he could pursue a divide-and-conquer strategy in which he would ally with tributary states against the powerful Aztec center. His first alliance would be with the Totonacs, whom Cortez promised to protect against the Aztecs, starting with defending their decision to refuse payment of tribute to Montezuma's tax collectors. This audacious defiance of Montezuma served to create the first cracks undermining his rule, as word spread throughout the empire.

At the same time that he was allying with the Totonacs, Cortez adopted a diplomatic approach to Montezuma's emissaries who had come bearing gifts of gold and other Aztec riches soon after he had landed. By the time of Cortez' arrival, Montezuma had accumulated a significant amount of intelligence about the invading Spaniards from both direct and indirect contacts with earlier expeditions. He knew they were more powerful than he in every respect but numbers. Each time they had come they came stronger than before, the recent battle at Tabasco revealing new weapons the Aztecs had never before beheld.

Principal sites of Mesoamerican civilization –*Britannica.com*

Montezuma: Uneasy Lies the Crown

It was uncanny that Cortez had arrived at just the time foretold by Aztec prophecy and that he and his men bore a strong resemblance to their chief god, Quetzalcoatl, a bearded white man, who had left in ages past, but who had promised to return to resume his rule over the empire. Indeed, the Aztecs justified their rule in the name of this deity. But it was doubtful that Montezuma believed that Cortez was this god; he had seen enough of the Spanish to know that they were men; powerful men with a technology he could not match, but men, nonetheless. But could he employ Cortez to shore up his own shaky rule? The record is ambiguous, but during the period between late June 1519 through early November when Cortez entered Tenochtitlan, Montezuma appears to have followed a twofold strategy of peaceful talk while setting traps for Cortez, rather than a strategy of direct confrontation proposed by some of his advisers.

At first Montezuma sought to dissuade Cortez from visiting his capital. Yet, the tactic he employed to turn Cortez away had the very opposite effect of enticing him in. Montezuma knew the Spanish were after gold, above all. Cortez had told his emissaries that the Spanish were afflicted by a disease that only gold could cure. Thus, it made no sense for Montezuma to send gifts in enormous quantities of the very items that Cortez sought and expect him to turn away. No, the answer must be that Montezuma sought to draw Cortez to him with promises of more gold, attempting to learn about his weaknesses, while setting traps along the way. In short, Montezuma employed a strategy of attrition.

Montezuma II
—*Britannica.com*

Montezuma's objective was to deplete Cortez's forces by leading him into conflicts with his recalcitrant allies. If that failed (as we know it did), then he would seek to exploit the notion that Cortez was the returning god Quetzalcoatl and claim that the god's purpose was to rule through reinforcing Aztec authority over a fractious realm. It was a risky strategy; it would preclude Montezuma's deployment of his own forces against the presumed deity in whose name he would claim to rule, for such a course could trigger uncontainable revolts throughout the empire. Attrition could work both ways.

At the end of June Montezuma sent another large delegation to Cortez, again laden with gold and treasure. This time, however, it was to inform him that he could travel to Tenochtitlan after all, but with no guarantee that he could actually meet Montezuma. Cortez was excited at this news, but before he could marshal his forces and set off, there occurred an event that forced a delay. On July 1 a single ship arrived from Cuba with a dozen crew professing their interest in joining Cortez' forces. The men were welcomed, but it was the news they brought with them about governor Velasquez that galvanized Cortez into action.

Their news was that the king had issued a decree appointing Velasquez as *Adelantado* of Cuba "giving him authority to trade and found settlements." It was Cortez' worst fear because now the governor had the legal right to deprive him of everything he had claimed in Mexico. Cortez decided to inform the king of what he had done and beg his confirmation. Accordingly, he loaded one of his best ships with as much of the treasure he had so far accumulated, including all he had parceled out to his men, as his gift to the king. Along with the treasure, he sent his first letter (which has recently been discovered), as well as a petition signed by all of his men supporting Cortez in all of his actions.[12]

[12] Diaz del Castillo, *The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain*, 192-198; and John Schwaller with Helen Nader, *The First Letter From New Spain: The Lost Petition of Cortez and his Company, June 20, 1519* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

Departing for Spain on July 26, the ship stopped first in Cuba to take on food and water, but, despite admonitions to take precautions against leaking news of their trip to Velasquez, the governor discovered it. Although he tried and failed to intercept the ship, which sailed on to Spain unhindered, the governor now decided to use his new authority to mount an expedition to Mexico to seize and imprison Cortez and claim the land for himself. It would be almost a year before the governor's expeditionary force would arrive in Mexico (June 1520) and when it did it would trigger a sequence of events that would lead to the near defeat of Cortez' entire effort in Mexico. But that is a part of the narrative to be taken up later.

In the meantime, word of the king's decree sparked renewed unrest in the camp. A handful of men secretly planned to steal a ship and return to Cuba. Upon learning of the plot, Cortez dealt harshly with the dissidents, executing the two leaders and severely punishing the others. It now transpired that Cortez also discovered that his remaining nine ships were no longer seaworthy, having been weakened by shipworm. One vessel he was able to salvage, but the others had to be taken apart, sails and hardware stored, and the rotting planks burned. Cortez offered free passage aboard the remaining ship to anyone who wished to leave, but there were no takers. Dismantling his fleet had several positive consequences. Not only did it strengthen the resolve of his men once they realized that they had no choice but to march with Cortez, but also, it strengthened his force by adding roughly a hundred sailors who were now free to accompany him.

On August 16, Cortez set off for Montezuma's inland capital of Tenochtitlan with four hundred Spaniards, strengthened by the addition of over a thousand Totonac warriors and porters, plus fifteen horses, a like number of cannon and numerous war dogs. On the advice of his Totonac allies, Cortez headed directly for Tlaxcalan territory in the expectation that he could enlist them as allies, for the Tlaxcalans were determined adversaries whom the Aztecs had never

been able to subdue. For the first two weeks, tribes encountered along the march were uniformly friendly and hospitable, welcoming Cortez as a liberator from the Aztec yoke. But, reaching the border of Tlaxcala on August 31, Cortez once again was confounded by what he encountered.

Contrary to what he had been led to expect, the Tlaxcalans immediately began a series of large-scale attacks on Cortez's forces lasting nearly three weeks, including a night attack, which war dog sentries foiled. Although Cortez's forces fought the Tlaxcalans to a standoff, the battles weakened both sides. In the end the Tlaxcala leadership decided to reverse policy; they sued for peace and indicated a willingness to join an alliance with Cortez. It would become one of the most enduring and crucial alliances the Spanish would ever make in Mexico. Having a secure base of operations in the very heart of the Aztec empire would be a critical component of his eventual victory. The question was: what explained the Tlaxcalan decision to attack the enemy of their mortal foe in the first place? The answer lay in the internal politics of the Tlaxcala realm, which was composed of four provinces whose leaders both cooperated and contended with each other for supremacy, even colluding with the Aztecs on occasion.[13]

In the debate over how to deal with the Spaniards, there was considerable disagreement among the leaders. Xicotencatl the Younger, the warrior son of one of the four leaders of the Tlaxcalan confederacy, saw advantage in attacking Cortez, as part of his bid for leadership. Others were opposed, seeing advantage in an alliance for their long struggle against the Aztecs. The decision to attack was therefore not unanimous and dissension spread to the forces in the field. In the end, Xicotencatl the Younger lost not only the battle and his bid for leadership, but later on he would be executed for what was

[13] Ross Hassig, "Xicotencatl: Rethinking An Indigenous Mexican Hero," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, No. 32, 2001.

determined to be a traitorous policy of opposing the decision to ally with Cortez.

Whatever the domestic explanation for the Tlaxcala attack on Cortez's forces, the objective reality was that their battles served the attrition strategy of Montezuma. Montezuma could hardly have been more pleased than to see his two main adversaries facing off against each other in mutually draining engagements. But Montezuma's pleasure soon faded at the grim prospect of having to face both adversaries once they reconciled and entered into alliance against him. Worse, news of Cortez' successes on the battlefield had spread throughout the country, drawing many disgruntled tributaries to his side.

While recuperating in Tlaxcala, where they would spend the better part of a month, Cortez received yet another emissary from Montezuma. The emperor's message was to congratulate Cortez on his military prowess and to offer him tribute in any amount he wished, for as long as he wished, if only he would not come to Tenochtitlan.[14] Accepting the offer of tribute, Cortez courteously insisted that he must meet Montezuma in person to convey the message of his sovereign. A personal meeting would also enable them to "iron out" any misunderstandings. That being the case, the Aztec emissaries were authorized to invite Cortez to proceed by the direct route that passed through the religious center of the empire, Cholula.

Cholula would be the next trap in Montezuma's larger attrition strategy against Cortez. Cholula was the holy city of the Aztecs, the equivalent of Jerusalem for the Christians, or Mecca for the Muslims. Its great pyramid was nearly as large as the grand pyramid of Giza in Egypt. By the middle of October, his troops refreshed and ready, Cortez set out for Cholula accompanied by six thousand Tlaxcalan warriors (most of his Totonac allies had decided to return to their coastal homeland). Upon arrival, the Cholula chiefs warmly welcomed

[14] Diaz del Castillo, *The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain*, 264.

Cortez into the city, but required the Tlaxcalans, who were their enemies, to camp outside the city walls.

After a few days of cordial interaction, the mood changed. Sending several of his Indian aides out on a carefully disguised reconnaissance of the city, what they saw alarmed him. Cortez knew from the outset that Cholula was a strong ally of Montezuma and so he approached the city with caution. His scouts now confirmed his worst fears. Streets were being barricaded, stones (ammunition) placed on rooftops, stake pits to trap horses were being dug and camouflaged, children were being sacrificed to appease their gods, women and elderly were leaving the city en masse, and a large Aztec force was being deployed nearby. Malinche, befriending one of the chieftains' wives, confirmed that their plan was to massacre the Spaniards in the city streets in a close quarter engagement that would neutralize the Spanish advantages of mobility and firepower.[15]

It was a difficult situation, but Cortez reacted in characteristic fashion by taking the initiative rather than waiting passively for his enemies to strike. He set his own trap, informing Cholula's leaders that he would be leaving the next morning and requesting their presence to send him off. When the chiefs and ranking members of the city arrived in the central courtyard the next morning, Cortez confronted them, exposing their plot. His men slammed the gates shut and massacred the people trapped in the courtyard. Cortez signaled his Tlaxcalan allies, who also stormed the city, preventing any assistance from reaching the courtyard.

Cortez had ordered a preemptive attack that thwarted the planned Cholula attack on him. He deliberately eradicated the entire leadership along with several thousand men, removing it as an ally of Montezuma and sending a clear message to the Aztec emperor and his allies that the same fate would attend to them if they resisted. Several neighboring cities quickly sent envoys to Cortez' camp tendering their allegiance. Cortez brought the city back to order, treating its

[15] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 267-268.

inhabitants with compassion and encouraging a return to normal activity. He also installed pro-Tlaxcala leaders into power, insuring that his supply line from Vera Cruz to Tlaxcala to Cholula was securely in the hands of allies.

Montezuma hastily sent envoys to Cortez laden with rich presents, disclaiming any connection to the events at Cholula. He explained away the presence of the Aztec force in the vicinity as being there to put down disorders. Renewing his invitation to Cortez to come to Tenochtitlan, Montezuma laid yet another trap. As Cortez' forces advanced, they came upon a fork in the road with one route recently blocked. The other route led through narrow passages and ravines, perfect territory for an ambush. So, taking a page from Hannibal's book, Cortez set off over the mountains to arrive at Tenochtitlan by a more circuitous route that was geographically challenging, but militarily safer.[16]

Cortez in Tenochtitlan

On November 8, appearing on the doorstep of Montezuma's island capital, Cortez presented him with what was in effect a fait accompli. The Aztec emperor was forced to implement Plan B, the Machiavellian tactic of keeping one's friends close, but his enemies closer. He did this by literally embracing Cortez as the embodiment of the long-prophesied return of Quetzalcoatl. Welcoming Cortez at the entrance of Tenochtitlan, Montezuma said:

> Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy. The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming…. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields. Do the kings know the destiny of

[16] Marley, *Wars of the Americas*, 18.

> those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see! No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams…. I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again. This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us, you have come down from the sky. Rest now and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords![17]

Showered with gifts of gold and feted lavishly, Cortez, his men, and Tlaxcalan allies were housed by Montezuma in the palace of Axayacatl in the center of the island capital. There can be little doubt that neither Montezuma nor his chiefs believed Cortez was the god Quetzalcoatl; but saying that he was reinforced his people's awestruck, almost reverential reaction to him. It also offered the opportunity to show that they were allied, thus shoring up his fractious regime against further defections. Montezuma would rule, but at the behest of the long absent deity. In co-opting Cortez, Montezuma also bought time to work out a plan to defeat him.

After a week of festivities, Cortez began to feel less like a god than a lamb being fattened for sacrifice. Though its buildings were magnificent, the layout of the capital lent itself to the feeling of entrapment. The city was an island fortress that could only be entered or exited by three causeways across water that could quickly be shut by raising drawbridges. When the bridges were raised the city was nearly impregnable to attack from without, but that same feature

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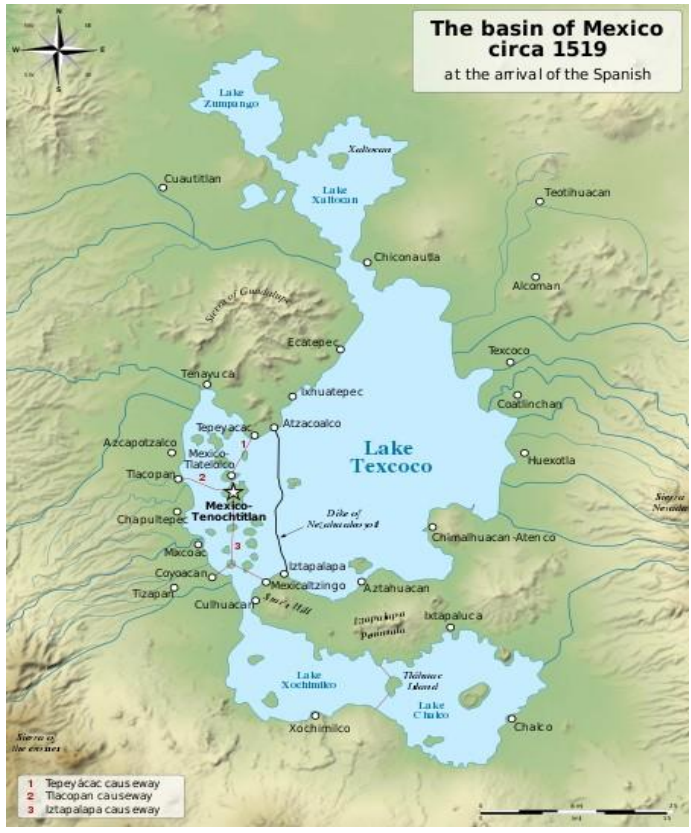
[17] Jill Lepore, *Encounters in the New World: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 62-65. Compare to the version offered by the Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, Chapter 16, who rewrites this speech to omit all reference to Cortez' passage from heaven to earth, coming out of the clouds, and coming down from the sky.

could isolate those within the city's walls. Cortez had bearded the lion in his den, but now looked for a way to escape.



Tenochtitlan, its causeways and surrounding islets on the western edge of Lake Texcoco –Image: Wikimedia Commons

Pondering their predicament, Cortez and his officers rejected withdrawal from the city either secretly or openly as leaving themselves vulnerable to attack, especially if caught on the narrow causeways. Even if they should successfully retreat to their coastal

base 240 miles away, they would be judged as having failed to achieve their objective. Instead, based upon Montezuma's treatment of him, Cortez hit upon the idea of seizing the emperor and holding him hostage. They would be safe as long as they kept him under control and could rule in his name until they could accumulate sufficient treasure as ransom and arrange for a safe exit. Cortez, too, would keep his friends close and his enemies closer.

Then, an event occurred that offered Cortez the opportunity to put his plan into action. He received news of an attack on their base at Vera Cruz. The Aztec governor of the adjoining province, on the pretext of offering allegiance to Cortez, had drawn the garrison's fifty-man guard into an ambush, with the evident purpose of seizing control of Cortez's coastal base. Although commander Juan de Escalante and his men had beaten off the attack, they had suffered the loss of eight men, including Escalante himself, who died afterward from his wounds. One of their Indian prisoners confessed that the attack was undertaken "at the instigation of Montezuma." Worse, the natives had cut off the head of one of Escalante's men, which they "sent to the Aztec emperor."[18]

Cortez was both outraged and alarmed, for there could be no mistaking the significance of the attack. Capture of their coastal base would have cut them off from any source of reinforcements, communication, or escape. It would be the penultimate turn of the screw isolating them in the Aztec capital from which they would never hope to depart alive. Indeed, there would be no base to which to flee. Requesting an audience with Montezuma, Cortez arrived with an armed guard. Laying out the charge against the attacker and against the emperor as instigator, he demanded an investigation. Montezuma professed his innocence, blaming the incident on one of his enemies, but agreed with Cortez' demand that he summon the accused to stand trial.

[18] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 342-343.

Cortez additionally insisted that to insure against any mutinous action, Montezuma should move his residence to Cortez' palace until the investigation had ended. Although vigorously refusing to consent to such a "degradation" of his authority, when confronted with the angry retinue surrounding him, Montezuma complied. Although his nobles were aghast, Montezuma himself made plain that he was "visiting his friends of his own accord," bringing his entire household with him. Ensconced comfortably in the palace of Axayacatl and treated with the utmost deference and homage by the Spaniards attending him, Montezuma nevertheless was now effectively under house arrest and Cortez' hostage.[19]

Upon the accused governor's arrival for trial, Montezuma disavowed him, but the defendant maintained that he served no other sovereign but his emperor. Moreover, he admitted his role in the attack and the killings. Investigation concluded, he and his chief officers were condemned to be burned at the stake in front of Montezuma's palace. Cortez ordered that the funeral pyre be composed of the "arrows, javelins, and other weapons," drawn from the capital's arsenal. To insure against any last-minute eruption, just prior to the execution, Cortez confronted Montezuma, charging him with being the instigator of the entire affair, and fettered his ankles.

When it was over, Cortez released him from his bonds, but declined to permit him to return to his palace, a decision in which Montezuma gloomily acquiesced. As the emperor whiled away his time in captivity over the winter months, Cortez busied himself with devising means of avoiding entrapment in the capital. In a stroke of tactical genius, he decided to begin building two sailing vessels armed with cannon, which could transport fifty or sixty troops. These would enable him to relieve his dependence on the causeways and offer a way to barge out of the city if trapped there. Materials—sails, iron, cordage, nails, even cannon—were sent from the Vera Cruz base in coming days.

[19] Ibid, 344-346.

Challenges to Empire

Meanwhile, a noble of the empire, Cacama, who had once been a rival of Montezuma, concocted a plan to mount an insurrection against the Spaniards ostensibly in order to restore the emperor to power. The scheme contained within it, however, a deeper plan to succeed Montezuma as the vanquisher of the intruders. Cortez discovered the plot, proposing an open confrontation, but Montezuma offered a subtler approach, recognizing the threat to himself in any successful rebellion carried out by a rival. Calling for a meeting of the plotters in a town near Tenochtitlan, the emperor had the plotters arrested and imprisoned. He also sent his men to each of their provinces to root out potential rebels.[20]

Having snuffed out an internal threat, Cortez now required that Montezuma formally declare his fealty to King Charles. Montezuma agreed, informing his astonished people that the ancient prophecy of the return of Quetzalcoatl to resume his rule over the kingdom had come true. Cortez also suggested that as a sign of fealty, Montezuma should send a gratuity to the king to cement his good will. Thereupon the emperor sent his tax collectors to the far ends of the empire to bring back as much gold tribute as they could carry. The emperor himself added to the hoard, turning over several rooms of his palace that were filled to the ceiling with the yellow metal.[21]

When asked about the source of the gold, Montezuma revealed that they obtained most of it from distant rivers and from earlier conquests. Cortez sent men to locate the sources, confirming that the Aztecs had obtained gold mainly by panning for it or picking up small nuggets washed down the rivers. Yet this source of gold was insufficient to account for the enormous horde possessed by the natives. Some mines were discovered that showed signs of not having been worked for hundreds of years. It was a puzzle.

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[20] Ibid, 357-359.

[21] Ibid, 361-363.

The Aztec was a stone-age culture. They had no iron or steel like the Spaniards. Their weapons were of wood and flint. They had no written language, the simple wheel was unknown to them, and they used no currency. Yet, the mines that Cortez' men discovered had been worked with hard metallic tools in the distant past. The same was true of the magnificent temple/pyramids whose stones had been cut by hard-edged instruments. Like the hermit crab or the cuckoo bird, the Aztecs occupied and built upon a habitat that they had not created. Cortez and his men were too busy collecting loot to ponder this conundrum and simply accepted as fact that the Aztecs were the architects of their domain.[22]

Cortez seemed to have accomplished all he had set out to do. In the name of the king he ruled an empire through Montezuma as large as any in Europe, and perhaps wealthier. But now he took a step too far. He demanded that he and his men be allowed to practice their religion openly in one of the many temples in the city. Although Montezuma was startled by the request, he agreed to turn over a temple. The temple was scrubbed down of sacrificial blood and adorned with the crucifix and a mass was held, which Cortez' entire army attended. It was an extraordinary sight, but a final indignity to the Aztecs who witnessed the celebration of a Catholic mass as the profanation of their own religious beliefs. It also directly contradicted Cortez's personification of Quetzalcoatl reborn.

The public desecration of the temple roused the Aztec lords, priests, and people and the emperor was not slow to take advantage of the opportunity. Calling Cortez to his apartments, he insisted that the Spaniards must all leave the country immediately, or "every Aztec in the land will rise in arms against you." Cortez responded that while he would regret leaving the country, he could not yet do so because he had no ships. Were it not for this he would leave at once. Not to be outdone, Montezuma offered to help build new ships. Cortez retorted

[22] For an incisive exploration of this conundrum, see Zecharia Sitchin, *The Lost Realms* (New York: Harper, 1990), 14-16.

that if he had to leave under these threatening circumstances, he would have to take the emperor with him.[23]

Over the following weeks, now under an increasingly inhospitable atmosphere in Tenochtitlan, Cortez' and Montezuma's men worked together in Vera Cruz constructing a new fleet. (Cortez, however, passed the word to his men to slow-walk the entire construction process.) The correlation of forces was still adverse. Cortez was surrounded, safe only as long as he held Montezuma hostage, but even that security measure was compromised by the unsubtle inflammatory attempt to flaunt Catholicism in the face of the Aztecs, which only built resentment among the populace, lord and lowly alike.

The Spaniards were stuck. Any withdrawal/escape plan required traversing the two-hundred-and-forty-mile distance from Tenochtitlan to Vera Cruz—although there were presumably safe havens along the way at Cholula and Tlaxcala. But would there be ships to sail away on? Moreover, there were possible ambushes along the way, beginning with the problems of departing from the Aztec capital itself. Tenochtitlan, a capital city of 300,000, was the center of a populated area of lakeside towns and villages of close to 400,000 people. Now in early May of 1520, nearly six months after entering Tenochtitlan, "tidings came from the coast, which gave greater alarm to Cortez than even the menaced insurrection of the Aztecs."[24]

Plot and Counterplot—Spanish and Aztec

Earlier, Governor Velasquez, upon learning of the fabulous riches Cortez had discovered in Mexico, had begun to build an expedition to seize them for himself (in the name of the king). Scouring Cuba for ships, men, and weapons, by the spring of 1520 he had assembled the largest expedition that had ever been sent to Mexico. There were eighteen ships, over a thousand men, eighty

[23] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 369-370.
[24] Ibid, 371.

horses, one hundred and fifty crossbows, eighty riflemen, forty cannon, and one thousand island natives along with ample provisions of food and weapons. The main weakness of the force was not immediately apparent, but it was that many of the men he recruited for the expedition were neither well trained, nor fully dedicated to the governor. They were drawn primarily by the news of Cortez's discovery of Mexico's riches, rather than any allegiance to Velasquez.

Departing Cuba in early March under the command of Panfilo de Narvaez, the armada dropped anchor off San Juan de Ulúa on April 23. Finding this anchorage as unacceptable as Cortez had, he moved his encampment further to the north, near Cempoalla and Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. Montezuma's coastal watchers quickly informed him of the fleet's arrival and the Aztec chieftain sent envoys with gifts and a message of friendship. Narvaez reciprocated, condemning Cortez as a rogue profiteer whom he had come to imprison and send back to Spain for trial for insubordination to the king. It quickly became apparent that the two leaders had a common enemy, as their course of action would reflect. Whether fully articulated or not, their strategy was to coordinate their maneuvers. When Narvaez began his assault on Cortez, Montezuma was to trigger an uprising from within Tenochtitlan. It was an obvious strategy, but one that would never get beyond its first step.[25]

Whether Cortez learned of their connivance sooner or later was immaterial. He said later that he thought they had secretly "connived" against him.[26] Narvaez' very presence on the coast

[25] "Cortés Struggles with Narváez," in Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain,* ed. David Carrasco (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2008), 209: In his introduction to this section, Carrasco says Montezuma and Narvaez formed an "alliance." Marley, *Wars of the Americas*, 20, says "Cortés …is also angry with Montezuma, having learned the emperor secretly contacted his antagonist Narváez during the recent coastal campaign, promising friendship."

[26] Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Memoirs of the Conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Vol. I,* trans. John Ingram Lockhart (Project Gutenberg eBook # 32474, May 21, 2010), 338.

presented the conquistador with the crisis of his life. But Cortez would react the way he had to every other crisis he had faced to date. He would seize the initiative and not passively await the attack being prepared. To throw Narvaez off guard and lead him to believe that there was no urgency, Cortez sent several messengers with letters proposing cooperation with him, including an offer to divide Mexico and all of its treasure between them. He also sent agents to sow division among his troops with gifts of gold and promises of much more.

The problem Cortez faced was how to defeat a two-front attack against numerically superior forces? His answer was to hold at Tenochtitlan while striking preemptively at Cempoalla before Narvaez was ready. Thus, Cortez put one of his top officers, Pedro de Alvarado, in charge of the Tenochtitlan defense. For this purpose, Alvarado would have the majority of their total force—140 men, all of the cannon and most of the muskets. Then, Cortez took his best 70 men and in the second week of May, travelling light, set off for Narvaez's encampment outside Cempoalla, planning to carry out a surprise attack. Along the way, by prearrangement he stopped at Cholula where he was joined by Velasquez de Leon with 120 men and, further along, met with Gonzalo de Sandoval and 66 more from Vera Cruz. Sandoval had also brought along dozens of long lances tipped with copper blades for use against Narvaez's horsemen. In all, after a series of forced marches over two weeks, he arrived with 266 lightly armed men a few miles from Narvaez's encampment on the night of May 28.[27]

There he received another group of envoys from Narvaez, one of whom fortuitously was an old friend, Andrés de Duero. Duero was a double agent and secret ally of Cortez who, recall, had been instrumental as secretary to Velasquez in persuading the governor to

[27] Troop numbers throughout this history are in dispute. These come from Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 383. See also, Sigurdsson, "Battle of Cempoala: Cortez & His Men Defeat Force Sent to Arrest Him," *Burn Pit*, May 24, 2013, who claims that the force was "nearly 400." www.burnpit.us

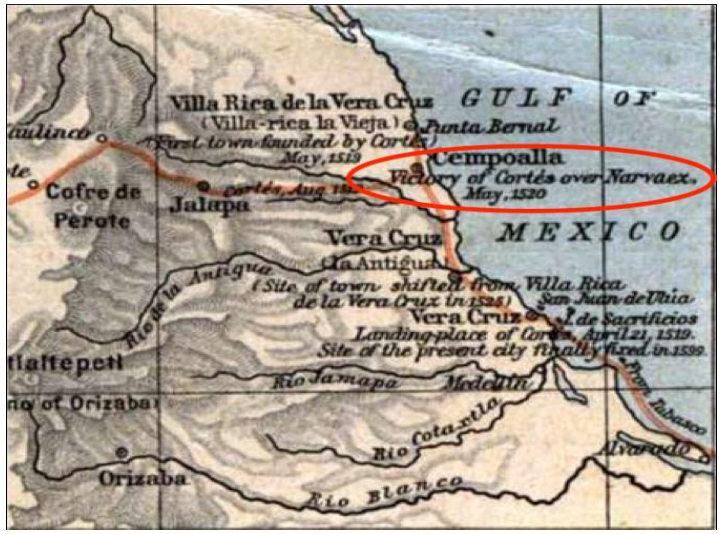
enter into the original contract with Cortez. He now brought an offer from Narvaez. If Cortez would surrender, he and his entire force would be transported safely back to Cuba with no charges to be brought against them. Cortez declined this offer, instead reaffirming the original deal he had made with Duero for one third of all the wealth he obtained in Mexico. Realizing how much more valuable that deal was now, Duero was convinced and promptly disclosed to Cortez invaluable information about Narvaez' overconfidence, his lax security measures, and dispositions of troops, cannon, and cavalry.[28]

Cortez decided to strike hard and immediately that very night. The circumstances were perfect. It had begun to rain, a torrential downpour, which would conceal their movements. He assigned the main task of capturing or killing Narvaez to Sandoval, giving him sixty men for the job. He gave Francisco Pizarro the task to silence the cannon by pouring wax into the firing holes, also with sixty men. To Leon he gave sixty men to neutralize Narvaez's main force under Diego Velasquez. Cortez took twenty men and five horses to use as a mobile reserve and left the remainder of some forty men as a secondary reserve. He also sent a handful of men secretly into Narvaez' camp to cut the girths of the horses' saddles.[29]

After midnight, still in a downpour, at the agreed signal Cortez' men mounted the assault. Surprise was nearly complete despite one of the sentries having sounded the alarm. Sandoval's forces climbed up to the temple-top headquarters where Narvaez lay asleep and in a brief but fierce battle subdued the commander, literally smoking him out of his quarters by setting fire to the thatched roof of his compartment and by knocking out one of his eyes with a blow from a lance. Claiming that Narvaez was killed, Cortez' men quickly persuaded his troops to give in. Cortez had lost but two men in

[28] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 387-388
[29] Diaz del Castillo, *The Memoirs of the Conquistador,* 322-323; and "Conquest of the Aztec Empire, Part II," *Spanish War History*, spanishwars.net.

the attack to about a dozen for Narvaez, with several more wounded on each side.



Victory at Cempoalla –Adapted from map entitled "Cortes' landing and inland march," MexicanHistory.org

It was a complete victory accomplished in a matter of hours. Engaging with Narvaez' troops, Cortez won them to his side, again with gold handouts and promises of more to come. He had quintupled his forces to thirteen hundred men augmented by two thousand Tlaxcalan warriors. He also now had ninety-six horses, forty cannon, eighty crossbows, and eighty muskets, all with a full complement of ammunition and stores. Cortez, as he had done before, dismantled most of the ships, reserving their armament, sails, rigging, rudders, compasses, and hardware. Cortez appeared to be in a stronger position with a more powerful force than he had when he originally entered Mexico, but his euphoria was short-lived as news came from Alvarado that Tenochtitlan was in revolt and his forces were under siege.

The uprising at Tenochtitlan was a second major crisis for Cortez, threatening to take away everything he had gained in Mexico. What exactly happened is still shrouded in controversy regarding the origin of the turmoil. Most scholars blame Alvarado for provoking the insurrection by deliberately massacring several hundred Aztec leaders who were peacefully celebrating a feast day in the courtyard adjacent to Alvarado's temple headquarters. The argument professing the peaceful intent of the Aztecs is unconvincing. Evidence suggests that the resulting uprising was consistent with the joint plan Narvaez and Montezuma had put together.

The trouble began on May 16 as soon as Cortez had left Tenochtitlan. According to an early Spanish source, "the Mexica intended to have murdered all the Spaniards on this occasion, for which purpose they had concealed their arms in the buildings adjoining the temple. This was told the Spaniards by the women, from whom they always learnt the truth."[30] Another source says that Alvarado tortured several priests who divulged the plan for the insurrection.[31] Still another notes that the uprising was not a spontaneous reaction to the massacre but showed "signs of organization."[32]

It is difficult to believe that Montezuma, who only weeks before had threatened Cortez with a revolution of the entire Aztec nation against him if he did not leave Mexico forthwith, would now meekly request permission from Alvarado to hold a peaceful celebration in the courtyard of the conquistadors' headquarters. More likely, Montezuma saw his opportunity to eliminate the Spaniards' weakened presence in Tenochtitlan as Narvaez presumably was

[30] Antonio de Herrera, *Historia General de las Indies Occidentales,* 366*,* as quoted in Diaz del Castillo*, The Memoirs of the Conquistador,* 397, note 86.

[31] Buddy Levy, *Conquistador: Hernan Cortez, King Montezuma and the Last Stand of the Aztecs* (New York Bantam, 2008), 166.

[32] Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 77.

destroying Cortez' small force on the coast. Alvarado partially upset this plan by striking preemptively, perhaps triggering prematurely the uprising planned against him anyway.

To Montezuma's surprise, it was Cortez who defeated Narvaez. And as soon as Montezuma was informed of this fact he called off the uprising in Tenochtitlan, although he maintained the cutoff of water and food to Alvarado's embattled troops. The tables had turned once again. Instead of the destruction of Cortez' forces in both places, Montezuma was now confronted with the largest Spanish force he had ever faced, and it was coming to Tenochtitlan. The Aztec leader hastily put another plan into action. He would put the blame on Alvarado for the uprising, denying any responsibility, while laying a trap for Cortez in the capital when he arrived. He would lure Cortez into the capital and then seal it shut, trapping them all inside. The embattled Alvarado would be bait for this trap.

Montezuma's first act was to send a high level four-man delegation to Cortez while he was still on the coast. They tearfully complained that

> Pedro de Alvarado sallied out from his quarters with all the soldiers that Cortés had left with him and for no reason at all, fell on their chieftains and Caciques who were dancing and celebrating a feast in honour of their Idols…[33]

In other words, the story of Alvarado's brutal massacre of innocent Indians came from Montezuma, and its purpose was to blame the Spaniards for precipitating the uprising and to exonerate himself. Montezuma also expected that the news would bring Cortez quickly back to Tenochtitlan. He was right.

Cortez decided to return to Tenochtitlan immediately, not only to rescue Alvarado, but also to regain control of the empire. His first destination was Tlaxcala where he put his forces in order,

[33] Carrasco, ed., *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 210.

augmenting them with two thousand fresh men from his ally. Beyond Tlaxcala the reception his men received from villages along the way was increasingly cool, and when he arrived at Texcoco on the east side of the lake, downright frigid. At Texcoco Cortez received two messages. From Alvarado came word that hostilities had ceased, but the blockade continued. From Montezuma came a missive promising to lift the blockade as soon as Cortez arrived at Tenochtitlan and once again disclaiming any responsibility for the uprising which he said had occurred against his orders.[34]

Arriving at the southern causeway entrance to Tenochtitlan on June 24, the scene was decidedly different from his first entrance the previous November. Thousands welcomed him along the route the first time, but now the city seemed deserted, though the gates were open. Against the advice of his Tlaxcalan allies who smelled a trap, Cortez took his entire force over the causeway and into the city, receiving a joyful reception by Alvarado's men, but there was only eerie silence in the rest of the city. After a testy exchange with Montezuma during which Cortez demanded that the local markets be reopened, and food and water supplied, the Aztec emperor suggested that releasing his presumptive heir, Cuitláhuac, would lead to that result. Instead, when released, Cuitláhuac became the leader of the revolt.

Within hours, it became clear that the city was up in arms. Hordes of warriors began to descend upon Tenochtitlan from the surrounding countryside and men previously hidden on rooftops in the city emerged armed with stones to sling at the Spaniards. All the entrances to the city were shut and the causeway drawbridges were raised. Cortez realized they had fallen into a trap but believed that his superior firepower would prevail as it had in the past. The entire contingent was lodged in their palace at Axayacatl, a walled enclosure with the usual temple in the center. The walls, however, were not high enough to be a significant barrier to a determined aggressor and

[34] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 402-403.

higher surrounding temples offered vantage points from which to rain down stones and arrows on Cortez' men.

Thus began the siege of Cortez at Tenochtitlan. Over the next week hordes of Aztec warriors attempted to storm the palace, while the Spaniards responded with their thirteen cannons strategically placed for defense and muskets trained at those who breached the walls. Nevertheless, breaches occurred, resulting in close order hand-to-hand combat. Today, the Aztec strategy would be recognized as a human wave attack designed to reduce the strength of the adversary by repeated advances until eventually overwhelming him. Cortez sought to break through the Aztec lines by repeatedly charging out of the fortress with his cavalry, but the Indians simply withdrew behind hastily constructed barricades only to reemerge when the horsemen retreated. Cortez was winning battles but losing the war to a determined foe possessing seemingly unlimited numbers.

To provide some protection from the slings and arrows, Cortez devised a wheeled wooden canopy called a *manta*, under which two-dozen men could safely advance and fire their muskets. Several were constructed but they were too heavy and visibility was poor. The Aztecs were able to thwart this stratagem by rushing the mantas and pushing them over. Cortez was growing desperate. There was no letup of the siege and food and water were dwindling fast. The only answer was to break out from the blockade and retreat to friendly territory in Tlaxcala where he could regroup and rebuild his forces. However, the causeways leading from the city to the mainland were constructed of stone buttresses spanned by wooden drawbridges. There was constant conflict over the bridges. Cortez' men sought to establish control of the main causeway and its seven bridges, but the Aztecs tore down each connecting wooden bridge as it was rebuilt.

At last, Cortez turned to Montezuma, who initially refused to meet with him, declaring that it was no use: "you will never leave these walls alive." When Cortez promised to leave Mexico and return

to Spain if given the opportunity to depart in peace, Montezuma relented and agreed to address his people. Calling to his people from the top of the Axayacatl palace, he declared that any further conflict was unnecessary, as the Spaniards had agreed to depart and leave their land. But the sentiment among the Aztecs was adverse, spurred on by Cuitláhuac, leader of the rebellion and Montezuma's presumptive heir. The throng denounced the emperor, their words followed by a rain of stones and arrows, several of which struck and badly injured Montezuma.[35] He would expire a few days later, at forty-one years of age. Indeed, a council of chiefs had elected Cuitláhuac to be acting sovereign even before Montezuma had addressed the crowd.[36] Cuitláhuac always had been an outspoken advocate for fighting the Spaniards. There would be no armistice. It would be a war of annihilation.

Cortez was truly desperate. They had expended all the ammunition for the muskets and the powder for the cannon was gone. They were down to swords and lances and twenty-three horses. There was no alternative but to attempt a breakout. He had earlier instructed his men to construct a portable wooden span to place over the broken bridges connecting the stone causeway segments. Unfortunately, they had managed to build only one. They would depart well after midnight on June 30/July 1. Although advising his men to travel as light as possible, many were loath to leave behind the treasure in the palace and would attempt to take as much of it with them as they could carry, slowing them down.

They had chosen the shortest of the three causeways for their escape route that led to the lakeside city of Tlacopan two miles

[35] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 420-422. Prescott records that Guatemozin (Cuauhtémoc, who acceded to the throne after Cuitláhuac), was reported to have fired the first arrow: 422, note 15.

[36] Maurice Collis, *Cortés and Montezuma* (New Directions Publishing, September 15, 1999), 184.

distant to the west. To divert attention from their plan, Cortez delivered the dead body of Montezuma to the Aztecs, who took him off for ritual burial. In a constant drizzle they set off, with horses' hooves padded to muffle their sound. Using the portable bridge, the advance guard passed over the first segment safely, but, before they could move it to the second they were discovered. The Indians, evidently prepared for the breakout, were arrayed in strength along the banks of the causeway and in hundreds of canoes along its length. It was a massacre, perhaps the worst defeat in Spanish military history. Cortez' men, confined along the narrow causeway and struggling to make it to the mainland, divested themselves of the treasure they carried to lighten their load and speed their pace. The defeat became known as *La Noche Triste*, the night of sorrows.

Escape from Tenochtitlan –Image: Lago de Texcoco posclasico.png: Yavidaxiu, via Wikimedia Commons

Although their losses were serious, there is no agreement as to the number of deaths sustained in the breakout. Estimates range from 150 to 1,000 Spaniards, and from 2,000-4,000 Tlaxcalan warriors.

Most historians credit Cortez with retreating from Tenochtitlan with the same number of troops he had when he first set foot on Mexican soil, about 440, which would set Spanish losses at around 800. But that was small comfort. The survivors were badly battered, almost all were wounded, and had only the weapons they carried with them. Traveling northward around the lake, they headed for Tlaxcala. Each village they passed sent out locals to harass the travelers, refusing them either food or water. Oddly, however, the main Aztec army that had driven them from Tenochtitlan had not followed in pursuit.

If Cortez thought fortune had smiled at this welcome breathing space, he was shortly disabused of the notion. For, on the seventh day of the march, at the village of Otumba on the high plain leading to Tlaxcala there appeared thousands of Aztec warriors, many drawn from surrounding principalities, blocking their route and clearly intent on finishing them off. But sometimes fortune smiles in unexpected ways. Unknown to Cortez until later, the reason the Aztecs' main force had not pursued him out of Tenochtitlan was because of a completely fortuitous event.

One of Narvaez's black slaves who had traveled with Cortez back to Tenochtitlan had smallpox, which he spread into the Aztec community completely by chance. The Aztecs had no immunity to the disease, which quickly began to ravage the inhabitants, including Montezuma's successor Cuitláhuac, who became incapacitated and would perish in November.[37] The outbreak of the disease disrupted their leadership and debilitated their ranks, causing the Aztecs to delay in the pursuit of Cortez, giving him the needed breathing space. They nevertheless rallied their tributary allies, directing them to intercept Cortez before he reached Tlaxcala. Then, for whatever reason, the Aztecs had decided to wage the final battle against Cortez on open flat ground that was more favorable to him than to the

[37] Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650* (Cambridge University Press, February 13, 1998) 68-69.

Aztecs. In fact, even with only twenty horses Cortez directed cavalry charges to disrupt and disorganize the attacking natives.

Still, it appeared that Aztec numbers would be decisive, and as they were about to overwhelm Cortez' forces, the conquistador espied the Aztec commander surveying the course of battle from a small rise. Calling for support from his men, Cortez and a handful of horsemen charged the hill and killed the commander in a brief skirmish. He raised his banner and exclaimed triumph, whereupon Aztec forces became disorganized and demoralized, and began to retreat. It was either a brilliant stroke of battlefield ingenuity or luck, but against great odds, Cortez' forces broke through the encirclement to struggle onward to Tlaxcala and safety.

Destruction of the Aztec Empire

While Cortez and his men were tending their wounds and rebuilding their forces at Tlaxcala, the Aztecs were being ravaged by an epidemic of smallpox at Tenochtitlan. By some estimates the population of the capital was decimated from over 300,000 to 200,000 by the fall, including the death of Montezuma's successor Cuitláhuac in late November. By then, the Aztecs too were in recovery mode, rallied by a new emperor, Cuauhtémoc. Smallpox would eventually spread throughout Mexico, devastating the population of five million by ninety percent.

Meanwhile, good fortune continued to smile on Cortez. Governor Velasquez, assuming Narvaez had been successful, sent two ships to Vera Cruz loaded with supplies and ammunition, which Cortez' men seized. Around the same time the governor of Jamaica had sent two ships to support an expedition sent to Pánuco, a settlement some 230 miles north of Vera Cruz. In both cases Cortez persuaded the crews to join him. A merchant from the Canary Islands, perceiving a commercial opportunity, sent a galleon loaded with military stores. He was right. Cortez purchased it all with gold, including the ship. These serendipitous arrivals cheered and

augmented Cortez's forces by a hundred and fifty men, twenty horses, and copious stores of weapons and ammunition.

Cortez had also sent out his own call for help. During these months, some members of Narvaez's expedition had become disenchanted with the life of the conquistadors and wanted to return. Cortez sent them home with messages to his friends in Santo Domingo, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico (but not Cuba), asking for help. His calls were answered during the fall as reinforcements began to trickle in from the islands. By December, Cortez had rebuilt his army to over 1,000 men, including 84 cavalry, 194 musketeers, 680-foot soldiers, several hundred sailors, a handful of cannon, and over 20,000 Tlaxcalan warriors.

Cortez was ready to begin his return to Tenochtitlan. His plan was to turn the tables on the Aztecs. He would lay siege to their capital, destroy the heart of their empire, and restore Spanish rule. He knew the strengths and weaknesses of the island fortress, having occupied it for nearly seven months and having been on the wrong end of a siege there. He would isolate the Aztecs by cutting all sources of food and water. He would persuade or coerce the people of the villages along the lake to turn away from the Aztecs and support him. He would enforce the city's isolation by gaining control of the causeways to it and establish naval supremacy on the lake with his own ships. He commissioned thirteen brigantines, averaging forty feet in length, equipped with sails, and armed with cannon for this purpose.

The Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc understood Cortez' objectives and sought to counter with a spoiling strategy. Thus, when Cortez sent armed reconnaissance probes to lakeside villages and towns, Aztec forces were there to contest him in the struggle over hearts and minds. When he tried to cut off the water viaduct, they battled to keep it open. When Cortez sought to seize the causeways, Cuauhtémoc's forces contested every foot. When Cortez pushed to

gain control of the lake, hundreds of canoe-born Aztecs were there to battle him, including an attempt to drown the Spanish leader at Iztapalapa by opening the canals and raising the water level.[38] However, in each case superior Spanish firepower and determined persistence prevailed.

By the middle of June 1521, with more and more of the Aztec former tributaries flocking to Cortez's side—by some estimates amounting to 75,000 men—his forces reached the gates of Tenochtitlan. The last stand for the Aztecs had commenced. It was savage, long, and decisive. In a two month-long campaign in which no quarter was given by either side, Cortez gradually tightened the blockade while his forces and his Indian allies forced their way across the causeways and advanced through the city in what can fairly be described as house to house and hand to hand combat. To counter the remaining Aztec advantage of attacking Cortez' forces from the temple heights and rooftops of houses, Cortez decided to raze the entire city, tearing it down brick by brick and using the breakage to fill in the gaps in the causeways. The capital of the Aztec empire was no more.

Conquest of Tenochtitlan –Jay I. Kislak Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

[38] Carrasco, ed., *The History of the Conquest of New Spain,* 244.

With Aztec forces weakened to exhaustion by disease and combat, deprived of food and water, and with the end in sight, emperor Cuauhtémoc attempted to flee Tenochtitlan by canoe across the lake with his retinue and wealth but was chased down by one of the brigantines. Brought before Cortez on August 13, 1521, he surrendered. That would not be the end of the killing, however, as the former subjects of Aztec tyrannical rule now exacted their revenge, scouring towns and villages, raping and pillaging everything they considered representative of Aztec rule, despite Cortez's attempts to rein them in. When it was over Cortez brought the leaders of all the former clansmen of the empire to Tenochtitlan to witness firsthand its utter devastation and the superiority of Spanish rule.

Cortez laid the foundation of the Spanish empire in Mexico. He rebuilt Tenochtitlan, which would become the eventual site for Mexico City. He settled new towns across the country, improved the Aztec transportation network and developed gold mining operations, importing thousands of black African slaves for the purpose. As the economy developed, maritime commerce between Spain and New Spain, as it was called, ballooned. The church followed in a plan to convert the natives to Catholicism. Thousands of people poured into Mexico to settle, explore, and marvel at the wonders of the New World.

Years later, Spanish historians would glorify Cortez' exploits, but at the time he was treated shabbily by the Spanish crown and the Council of the Indies where Governor Velasquez had friends. In the familiar bureaucratic struggle among the crown, the governors abroad, and the conquistadors, the bureaucrats triumphed. Claiming to fear that he would break with Spain and establish himself as head of an independent country, the crown moved to insure control of its great colony by sending administrators to replace Cortez. The king lauded his work, accorded him land and titles, but denied him the authority he wanted in Mexico. Cortez left Mexico for Spain in 1528, returned in 1530 for a decade in which he explored into present-day

California searching for the fabled land of El Dorado—the rumored repository of gold—before returning to Spain in 1541. He would die six years later attempting to return to Mexico.

Although Cortez had seized a great deal of gold and treasure from the Aztecs, (wealth that they themselves had looted from their enemies), he never discovered the sources he so assiduously sought. The mines he restarted never lived up to their promise, although the slaves he imported proved to be a permanent addition to the land. Gold shipped to Spain in Cortez' time averaged about a ton a year, significant but not the riches that had been expected. Yet Cortez played an important role. He destroyed the Aztec empire and opened the door to the sources of gold and especially of silver that would finance the Spanish empire for the next two hundred years, but he would not live to see it. That glory would accrue to unknown later governors of the colony, and especially in Peru, ironically within but a few years of the return of Cortez to Spain.

Mexico City, 1524 –Roger Atwood, "Under Mexico City," *Archeology*, July/August 2014