



Hernán Cortés and thousands of indigenous allies look out over Tenochtitlan from the mountain pass between Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl in November 1519. The magnificent Aztec capital, built on islands in Lake Texcoco, was among the largest cities in the world.

Hernán Cortés: Conqueror of the Mexica

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Conqueror, Not Explorer

Although Hernán Cortés traveled through regions that were largely unknown to Europeans, his expedition was never primarily one of exploration. His journey from Cuba to the Yucatán Peninsula and eventually into the Valley of Mexico had a far more ambitious objective: conquest, wealth, and political power.

An argument can even be made that Cortés and his band of Spanish adventurers were, in many respects, given a guided tour into the Aztec heartland by thousands of indigenous allies who had grown weary of Aztec domination. Burdened by heavy tribute, military conscription, and demands for human sacrifice, many native peoples saw the Spaniards not as liberators but as useful allies against a common enemy.

A Royal Mission—and Personal Ambition

Like most Spanish expeditions of the early sixteenth century, Cortés' venture combined religious, political, and economic objectives. The Spanish Crown expected newly encountered peoples to be converted to Christianity and brought under royal authority. Cortés, however, also hoped to enrich himself and win lasting fame.

When the Governor of Cuba authorized an expedition across the Gulf of Mexico in 1519, Cortés sailed with approximately eleven ships, some 500 soldiers, a handful of cannon, and sixteen horses. Although his commission was limited, Cortés quickly demonstrated that he intended to pursue far grander ambitions.

First Encounters on the Yucatán Coast

Cortés' first stop was the island of Cozumel, where relations with the Maya proved generally friendly. There he rescued Gerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish castaway who had spent years living among the Maya and had become fluent in their language. Aguilar would soon become an indispensable interpreter.

Continuing westward along the Yucatán coast toward the Grijalva River, the Spaniards encountered much stiffer resistance. Local warriors hoped to overwhelm the invaders through superior numbers, but cotton armor and wooden weapons proved no match for Spanish steel swords, firearms, cannon, and cavalry. The sight of mounted horsemen alone terrified many who had never before seen horses.

The Arrival of La Malinche

Following this early victory, defeated native leaders presented Cortés with twenty women as part of a peace offering. Among them was a young woman later known as **La Malinche**, **Malintzin**, or **Doña Marina**. She spoke both Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, and Chontal Maya.

Together with Gerónimo de Aguilar, she completed the final piece of Cortés' communications puzzle. Messages could now be translated from Nahuatl into Maya by La Malinche, then from Maya into Spanish by Aguilar. Before long, La Malinche herself learned Spanish and became Cortés' principal interpreter, advisor, and diplomat. Her role in the conquest remains one of the most debated subjects in Mexican history.

Founding Veracruz

Before marching inland, Cortés established a permanent settlement on the Gulf Coast: **Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz**. By creating this new municipality, he cleverly placed himself under the direct authority of the Spanish Crown rather than the Governor of Cuba, who had begun to distrust his growing ambitions.

From Veracruz, Cortés advanced to **Cempoala**, home of the Totonac people. Long oppressed by the Aztecs, the Totonacs eagerly allied themselves with the Spaniards. Their warriors would become the first of many thousands of indigenous allies who helped make the conquest possible.

Allies Against the Aztecs

Late in the summer of 1519, Cortés left the coast with roughly 500 Spaniards and an ever-growing army of native allies.

Marching inland through rugged mountains, the expedition reached **Tlaxcala**, whose fiercely independent people had resisted Aztec domination for generations. After brief but bitter fighting, the Tlaxcalans chose alliance over continued conflict. Their decision would prove decisive, for they ultimately supplied tens of thousands of warriors to Cortés' cause.

The combined force next entered **Cholula**, where the Spaniards encountered the largest pyramid in the Americas—the Great Pyramid of Cholula, dedicated primarily to the god Quetzalcoatl. The structure dwarfed Egypt's Great Pyramid in overall volume.

Human sacrifice played an important role in Aztec religion, although historians continue to debate the number of victims offered annually. To the deeply Catholic Spaniards, these ceremonies appeared horrifying and reinforced their belief that they were carrying out a religious as well as military mission.

First View of the Valley of Mexico

Continuing westward, the expedition crossed the mountain pass between Mexico's magnificent volcanoes, **Popocatepetl** and **Iztaccíhuatl**. From the crest they looked down upon one of the world's great urban landscapes.

The Valley of Mexico stretched before them, dominated by a vast lake system surrounding the island city of **Tenochtitlan**, capital of the Aztec Empire.

Connected to the mainland by three broad causeways, Tenochtitlan boasted an estimated population approaching 200,000—larger than many European capitals of the day. Its orderly streets, canals, markets, gardens, and temples left even hardened Spanish soldiers astonished.

Moctezuma's Fatal Welcome

Once again, fortune favored Cortés.

According to later Spanish accounts, Emperor **Moctezuma II** may have believed Cortés was connected with the long-absent deity Quetzalcoatl, whose return had been foretold. Modern historians debate whether this belief actually influenced Moctezuma or whether the story developed after the conquest. Whatever his reasoning, the Aztec ruler chose diplomacy over immediate resistance.

Moctezuma welcomed the Spaniards into Tenochtitlan and treated them with great courtesy, perhaps hoping that lavish gifts of gold would satisfy their ambitions and persuade them to depart.

Instead, Cortés soon placed the emperor under house arrest and effectively governed the empire through him.

Defeat, Disease, and Final Victory

The uneasy relationship quickly collapsed. After Moctezuma died during the ensuing uprising under circumstances that remain disputed, the people of Tenochtitlan rose against the Spaniards.

Forced to flee the city during the desperate retreat later remembered as *La Noche Triste* ("The Night of Sorrows"), many Spaniards perished while attempting to carry away stolen treasure.

Cortés refused to concede defeat. During the following year, he rebuilt his forces with the help of thousands of indigenous allies, constructed a fleet of brigantines to control the waters of Lake Texcoco, and returned to besiege Tenochtitlan.

At the same time, a devastating smallpox epidemic swept through central Mexico, killing countless Aztecs—including many experienced warriors and leaders—and severely weakening the empire's ability to resist.

In August 1521, after months of brutal fighting, Tenochtitlan fell. The Aztec Empire had come to an end.

Legacy of the Conquest

In the final analysis, Hernán Cortés was far more conqueror than explorer. He began as an ambitious, slave-owning rancher from Cuba and led a determined band of soldiers seeking wealth, glory, and advancement.

Yet Spanish steel alone did not conquer the Aztec Empire. Victory depended equally upon native allies who opposed Aztec rule, Cortés' remarkable political skill, and epidemic disease that devastated the indigenous population.

The conquest transformed the history of the Americas. The Aztec Empire disappeared, but the peoples of Mexico endured. Over the centuries, Spanish and indigenous cultures blended—often under harsh and unequal conditions—to create the rich and complex society that is modern Mexico.

For readers interested in tracing Cortés' route across Mexico, an excellent companion resource is "Geography and Travels in History: Cortés and Mexico" at Trivia-Library.com.