


11-2020

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Recommended Citation

Arbeláez, Maria S. (2020) "When Montezuma Met Cortes: The True History of the Meetings that Changed History," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 10, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.10.1.1185>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol10/iss1/11>

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Review

When Montezuma Met Cortes: The True History of the Meetings that Changed History

Matthew Restall. New York: Harper Collins Books, 2018. 560pp.

Maria Arbelaez *

November 8 of 1519, Moctezuma II, Mexica *Tlatoani*, the “one who speaks,” leader and emperor, and Hernan Cortes, head of the invading Spanish military force, met on what currently is downtown Mexico City. A memorial plaque marks the site of the meeting alongside a colonial church and the remnants of a hospital. There is a tile picture with a representation of the event. The Spanish conquest of Mexico and the fall of Tenochtitlan is one of the most studied and controversial episodes in the history of Mexico and the Americas. It is a story never settled. Matthew Restall's book is a reexamination of the encounter of leaders of different worlds. It is a story retold many times over. Based on an exhaustive review of the existing evidence, Restall corrects prevailing interpretations, demystifies romanticized narratives, and provides a nuanced reading of the sources. The book appeared just before the five-hundred years commemoration of the event. *When Montezuma met Cortes* is divided into two parts and eight chapters. The text contains illustrations from codexes, paintings, photos and portraits, cartoons, and pictures from engravings. In all, they exemplify the description and analysis by the author. Restall includes in his commentary, the study of Vivaldi's operatic masterpiece, *Montezuma*, first

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performed in Venice in 1733. There is an explanatory appendix clarifying term use and short biographies of the main actors of the Spanish-Aztec War. Copious notes annotate the text.

Cortes, who arrived in coastal Mexico late 1518, quickly confirmed knowledge about the existence of the prosperous metropolis of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan. There, the *Tenochca* or *Mexica* peoples were at the helm of the Triple Alliance, commandeering the populous central Mexican valley. Ambition, yearning for glory, and adventure motivated the Spanish conquistadors. Months after landing in the Yucatan peninsula and the founding of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, April 22, 1519, Cortes decided to march toward the central Mexican plateau and Tenochtitlan. The decision carried the scuttling and burning ten of his ships, except one who was to take the disaffected back to Cuba and Spain. On his coastal foray, Cortes received a “gift” of twenty girls from a chieftain in Tabasco. The donation was a traditional means of forging tribal alliances. Among the girls was Malitzin, who, because of her polyglot talents, became the translator, intermediary, protector, lover, and scout of Cortes.

The expedition faced several drawbacks and bloody confrontations. Most of the encounters with the local populations were not amicable meetings. Instead, Cortes and his men faced formidable challenges, astute maneuvering, and deadly fighting. Still, he managed to create multiple alliances with the historical enemies and disgruntled subjects of the Aztec empire. Deadly skirmishes convinced the resentful Totonaco, Tlaxcalteca, and Cempoala warriors to join the Spaniards. For these indigenous groups, the primary driving force was the expectations of leveling the scores of grievances harbored against the Mexica. For decades, the *tenochcas* coerced them to pay hefty tributes of foodstuffs, goods, and slaves.

Spaniards swiftly placated revolts with the power of muskets, steel swords, gunpowder, horses, and war dogs. The Spaniards showed these groups that resistance to the European might was futile and instead requested their allegiance. After these demonstrations of supremacy, thousands acknowledged the leadership of Cortes and his soldiers. Most significant for the indigenous alliance was the promise of relief from the tributary burden. A reprieve was too valuable to discard. Tlaxcaltecas were the majority contingent behind the Spanish forces. Cortes's critical decision had the trappings of an epic development. Emboldened by the relatively easy successes over resistance in Cholula, he advanced forth already knowing that Moctezuma II did not want him in Tenochtitlan. The

emperor sent envoys and gifts, trying to dissuade the Spaniards, who had calculated that the reward of the conquest would be much more substantial. Despite the imperial rejection, Cortes entered the city on November 8, and Montezuma II reluctantly greeted the Spaniard. From this date to the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spanish might on August 13, 1521, the two years were replete with massacres, epidemics, sacking, destruction, and hundreds of thousands of Indigenous peoples dead. They succumbed to war, diseases, and despair.

The above is a concise account of the events as we know them and repeated innumerable times. For centuries, these histories had winners and losers with villains and heroes. Restall's interest is not so much to retell the story but to assess the how, when, why, and who of the narratives. Five centuries later, historians and writers alike apparently can distinguish myth from facts. They can also recognize the political implications of texts as the written word is but one of the arenas of cultural wars. The encounter between the two worlds attracted the imagination of many. It probably appealed more to outsiders than nationals. Mexican students learn the stories, and the capital city dwellers occasionally visit the site. Mostly go by it without blinking an eye. Mexicans interest is not in the gargantuan epic and marvelous fictions written by the Europeans. Those accounts were the official narratives for over three-hundred years of colonial rule and more than a century of independence and national existence.

Books, essays, and articles plus paintings conveyed the story of the victors in Spanish, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Italian. All the while in Europe, writers and publishing houses made names and fortunes selling the purportedly civilizing ideas and salvation dogmas imposed by the Spaniards. Contesting and disparate narratives were part of the printing frenzy. The famous sixteenth-century claims of the brutality and sinister conduct of the Spaniards were part of the attempt to curtail Spanish overseas monopolies and imperial power. The ideological assault, later named the Black Legend, was a discursive way to restrict Spanish political authority in Europe. The wars of religion of the same century demonstrated the divergent perceptions of the Spaniard's history. In Mexico, from the colony through independence, those accounts were the ecumenical texts used by conservative writers of the political elites. Narratives of the winners survived into the early twentieth century when the Mexican Revolution muralists visually destroyed the mythohistories of the conquest. For once, Mexicans could see on the walls an exalted mirror of themselves even though the pictorial story was as mythical as its written opposite. Scholars in Mexico called the enduring polemic as a confrontation between Hispanophiles

and *Indianistas* (indigenous advocates). In Mexico, these conflicts are an essential part of the dispute of who has the authority and license to write history. It reflects who writes it and what the story is. The conquest and the obliteration of Tenochtitlan is a constant subject in Mexican historiography. The answers are never reasonable. The uses and abuses of history persist because its significance is an ever-present reality. For centuries, political opportunism has dominated the historical narratives. Consideration of history as a chaotic set of events, often incoherent, and in constant flux are not factors of deliberation. As in melodrama, there are good and bad actors, depending on who is doing the writing and the interpretation. Or preferably who has the authority and means to write it.

In the U.S., the Spanish exploits caught the fancy of North American scholar William Prescott, who exalted the Spanish conquest in the Americas (*History of the Conquest of Mexico* [1843] and *History of the Conquest of Peru* [1847]). For the Bostonian, both episodes indicated the downfall of savagery and the triumph of civilization. It is no wonder that while Prescott was writing his stories, with the aid of Spanish researchers, while the U.S. military was advancing over Mexico in the infamous land grabbing venture of the nineteenth century.

Restall studies the assortment of old and new versions of the encounter, conquest, and the fall of Tenochtitlan. The examination of centuries of the voluminous Mexican, European, and North American conquest historiography unveils authorial motivations and ambitions, fabrications, and distortions. Because the Spaniards wrote the Spanish accounts of the encounter, salient are the narratives of Hernan Cortes, *Second Letter to Spanish Emperor Charles V* [dated October 30, 1520], Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (1632), and Bartolome de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias* (1561, 1597) in different English and Spanish versions and years of publication. Restall includes citations of hundreds of other books and articles written and published for five centuries. Essential sources are the surviving library of codexes in European and Mexican repositories. The work of Miguel Leon Portilla, *La visión de los vencidos* (1959) published for the Anglophone world as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (1962) nor does the most recent scholarship on codexes of Maria Castañeda de la Paz, *Conflictos y alianzas en tiempos de cambios: Atzacotalco, Tlacopan, Tenochtitlan y Tlateloco* (2014) have a meaningful role in Restall's historiographical review.

Restall's title of *The True History of the Meeting that Changed History* is an iteration of Bernal Diaz del Castillo's account. Diaz's narrative, presented as a supposed

testimonial report, was written fifty years later and published by someone else after more than a century. On the other hand, despite the retelling of the encounter under contemporary insights and viewpoints, Restall's claim that the event "changed history" is puzzling. Among many other definitions, history is a series of interpretations and hypotheses of events stitched together into a narrative. The who, when, what, and how of history is of utmost significance. Whatever the character history narratives acquire, they live in the contested territory and place of present cultural and political conflicts. History, as a discipline, and its philosophies, in the past and now, is the theater of endless disputes, and there is no "one true history." Historians of the late twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first doubt with unmitigated skepticism texts that include words as "truth" and unequivocal "change" without been previously qualified and thoroughly contextualized.