

Module 01: Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?

Evidence 6: Fray Diego Durán, *Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain*

A

Introduction

Below is an excerpt from a history of New Spain written by Father Diego Durán, a Dominican missionary sent to Mexico to convert the Indians after the fall of Tenochtitlán. He was one of the colonial scholars who, in the sixteenth century, learned the language and investigated and recorded the history and culture of the native peoples. Durán's work was based on Aztec picture writings and a chronicle by an Indian noble (written in Nahuatl, the native language). These scholars — Motolinía was another, as was Friar Bernardino de Sahagún — made impressive contributions that are still used by historians to understand Aztec life before and after the conquest. In this excerpt, Durán describes the fall of Tenochtitlán, how the Spaniards rebuilt the city, and the treatment of the native people at the hands of the Spanish conquerors.

Questions to Consider

- What does Durán's account tell you about the various causes of death during and after the battle for Tenochtitlán? How does Durán's story compare to that of Motolinía?
- According to Durán, how did the Aztecs explain the smallpox epidemic of 1520? [Note that Durán's chronology is inaccurate; in this excerpt, the epidemic takes place after Cortés defeated the Aztecs in 1521, instead of the fall of 1520, before the Spaniards took the city. Nonetheless, Durán's account contains an important bit of information about the smallpox epidemic.]

Document

When Cortés saw the great number of people covering the flat roofs and filling the streets of the city, he was amazed and became afraid that he would not be able to conquer without bringing much harm to his Spaniards and friends. But he urged the Chalaca, Texcocans, Tlaxcalans and

Tecpanecs of Tacuba to take courage and finish with the enterprise. All the men returned to the combat and at this time they realized that the warriors who stood on the roofs were women. They sent word to Cortés about this, and the men began to ridicule and insult the enemy. However, the men of Tlatelolco did everything in their power to defend themselves and killed many enemy Indians and some Spaniards, among them a lieutenant from whom they snatched the banner, tearing it to pieces in front of the entire army. In another document I read that they destroyed four Spanish flags and killed a captain by the last name of Guzmán and that the Tlatelolca won glory in this battle.

In the end, though, the Spaniards, greatly aided by their allies, vanquished the Aztecs. King Cuauhtemoc [the young king who assumed the throne after the death from smallpox of the previous monarch] boarded a small canoe, covered himself with a mat and was rowed out of the city by a single man. However, he was taken prisoner by some Spaniards who saw him from their brig, and he was brought before Cortés.

When Cortés faced this youth, a man of refinement and of handsome appearance, he said to Marina, the interpreter, "Ask Cuauhtemoc why he permitted the destruction of the city with such loss of lives of his own people and of ours. Many were the times I begged him for peace!"

The young king answered:

"Tell the captain
That I have done my duty;
I have defended my city, my kingdom,
Just as he would have defended his
Had I attempted to take it from him.
But I have failed! Now that I am his captive,
Let him take this dagger
And kill me with it!"

Putting forth his hand Cuauhtemoc took a dagger that Cortés carried in his belt and placed it in the latter's hands, begging to be slain. Cortés was greatly troubled by these words and though he did not rise from his seat, he spoke soft and consoling words in Cuauhtemoc and made him sit next to him.

The entire city then surrendered to Cortés, and when he took possession of it, he went to live in the principal palace of Montezuma which now belongs to the heir of the Spanish captain. He put guards about the city and gave liberty to Cuauhtemoc to go where he wished, telling him to ask for whatever he might desire. Cuauhtemoc asked him to free the men, women and children whom the Spaniards had captured, many of whom had fled from the famine. Cortés then gave orders that, under pain of death, all the Spaniards liberate those who were being held captive. So it was done and all the refugees, men and women, returned to the city and resettled in it. But the dead on that day were over forty thousand men and women who, rather than fall into the hands of the Spaniards, threw themselves and their children into the canals. The stench of the corpses was so great that even though bodies were carried out of the city continually, many were left and the evil spell was unbearable for a long time. . . .

The valorous Cortés conquered Mexico on the feast of Saint Hippolytus, three days before the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin, Our Lady. It is said that the latter appeared during the conquest in order to aid the Spaniards. It is also told that the glorious Patron of Spain, Saint James, appeared just as his image appeared in the church of Tlatelolco. The Indians claim that they saw him in the greatest of the battles when the Spaniards were losing and their banners had been taken from them and torn, to their great shame. At that moment the glorious Saint James appeared, frightening away the Indians and favoring the Spaniards through divine permission. Once Mexico had been taken in the name of His Majesty, Cortés ordered that the pyramid be demolished, the idols broken, the city razed and the canals filled in. He divided the land into lots, having ordered the people of Chalco, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Tacuba to bring stakes, stone, earth and other materials to fill in the lagoons and pools that existed. He also built houses and laid out the streets to the best of his knowledge. He considered it safer to found a city where Mexico had been — within the lake instead of outside of it — as the strength of the country was concentrated in the capital and all the inhabitants were ruled from there. He was afraid that if the site of the city were to be changed there might be a rebellion. . . .

After the city had been leveled, after the Spaniards had begun to build their homes in it, the most Christian Don Hernando, Marqués del Valle, saw to it that the natives were instructed in the things of the Faith. He pointed out

the site where the church was to be built, he set up crosses and images and ordered that the Indians be taught the doctrines of our Holy Catholic Faith. All of this had been started by a cleric whom Cortés brought with him, though it is my opinion that this man should have been suspended or excommunicated since I have heard that he was more eager to wash his hands in the blood of innocents than Pilate to wash his hands on the death of Christ.

But let us forget my moralizing. In order to convert the natives, a ship was sent to Spain to inform his Catholic Majesty, the Emperor Charles V, then king of Spain, that this land had been conquered in his most serene name. I have heard a trustworthy person say, however, that some advised Cortés not to send any messages to Spain, but to crown himself king of the New World. These persons promised to pay allegiance to him and obey him, but like a true vassal of His Majesty he refused to commit such an act against his oath of obedience.

Cortés also asked that the friars be sent to administer the sacraments, and the latter were chosen carefully and dispatched to Mexico. So it was that the twelve friars of the order of the glorious Saint Francis arrived in this land three years after the conquest. The twelve gained many converts because of their religious and holy lives, like the original apostles who they imitated in everything. They preached and baptized in all the provinces with apostolic zeal, filled with spirit and divine fervor. Each barefooted friar went off on foot to a different region and each was such a perfect example of virtue that in this way they attracted the natives. The latter were much moved by the words, labors, and abnegation which the friars chose.

Two years after these holy monks had come, men from the order of Our Glorious Father Saint Dominic also arrived, and they were no less holy or zealous in promoting the honor of God and gaining souls. These friars came from the Island of Santo Domingo, which is also called Hispaniola. They took charge of the work of conversion and obtained privileges and exemptions in order to protect the natives. They fought the great cruelty and inhumanity of the Spaniards, by whom a great many evil deeds had been done.

Before the Dominicans arrived, Cortés had already gone forth to conquer other provinces, especially those which we now call Marquesado, the hot

country. This land defended itself for many days, its ruler being the lord of Yacapichtlan, who was a son or grandson of the great Tlacaelel, of whom I have spoken many times and whose great deeds I have described. The lords of Yacapichtlan are of his lineage. The inhabitants of this land fled to the rocky cliffs of Tlayacapan, Totolapan, and Tepoztlan but when the artillery began to be active and the natives fell from the cliffs, the Indians disbanded, then fled into the hills. As Cortés conquered these towns he divided them and their people among the conquerors in the name of His Majesty. . . .

In this way the Spaniards went from conquest to conquest, subjecting the land. After each city was taken a Spaniard asked Cortés to grant it to him, and he received it as an *encomienda*. So it was that *iusetete vel iniuste*, just or unjustly, men, women, and children were taken, branded on their faces and sold as slaves for the mines or as servants. In those times they even loaded ships with slaves to be carried away from New Spain. I myself met some of them in the home of my relatives, and they were marked in the face with the name of the man who had sold them. These slaves had not come from nearby towns but were brought from more than ten leagues away from Mexico. Most of them were brought to the city from the province of Guatemala and from the coasts distant to Mexico. And even though I did not actually see slaves branded with hot irons on the face, just like horses in a corral, I did see these men and women liberated through the intercession of the monks in the time of the most Christian Viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza.

At this time Cortés journeyed to the land that is called Las Hibueras taking with him many chieftains from Mexico, Texcoco, Tacuba, Xochimilco and Chalco, and among the chiefs went the valorous king of Mexico, Cuauhtemoc. He was taken along as it was feared that he might cause trouble if he remained in Mexico, [since] the city had been left unprotected by the Spaniards. It seems that after a few days' journey he was accused of rebelling against the Spaniards and of trying to assassinate them. Several witnesses appeared to denounce him and Cortés had the Aztec ruler hanged. In this way perished the great Cuauhtemoc, who had ruled over Mexico three or four years. That he might not depart this world alone, the other chieftains whom Cortés had brought along were executed also. Some died a natural death, others were hanged or run down by hounds and still others died in different ways. Some Spaniards who attempted to kill Cortés

and steal his ship were also hanged.

When Cortés returned from this campaign the Christian religion began to grow and the Indians took to it with love and willingness. After the monks had preached to them they began to abandon their idols. They broke them, mocked them, stepped on them and demolished pyramids upon which they had worshipped. Turning to God, they accepted the true faith in One Deity. With great fervor they begged to be baptized, and it was an amazing thing to see millions who came to be baptized and to give up the blindness in which they had lived. . . .

But let us return to our purpose, and speak again of the Indians, who have been the subject of my book. After the country had been conquered a plague of smallpox broke out. This had been brought by a Negro who had come with the Spaniards. A multitude of Indians died from this disease since there were no doctors and the illness was new to them. So it was that thousands died, attributing the pestilence to the Spaniards who had brought it.

From the period of the plague to the unhappy present, this most fertile and rich land together with its capital, Mexico, has suffered many calamities and has declined with the loss of its grandeur and excellence and the great men who once inhabited it.

I will conclude this work by honoring and glorifying Our God and Lord and His Blessed Mother, the Sovereign Virgin Mary, subjecting the book to the correction of the Holy Catholic Church, Our Mother, whose son I am, and under whose protection I promise to live and die like a true and faithful Christian.

[This work was finished in the year 1581.]

Source:

Fray Diego Durán, *Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain*, Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas, trans. and ed. (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 316-324.