

indigenous nobles within an enclosed space. At Pizarro's invitation, Atahualpa's multitude of followers entered a square where the Spaniards had hidden cannons. Without warning, the cannons fired into the crowd at close range, creating gruesome carnage. Then Spaniards on horses charged into the mass of bodies, swinging their long steel blades in bloody arcs, sending heads and arms flying, as no indigenous American weapon could do. Meanwhile, surprise and armor protected Pizarro's men. Not one of them died that day, yet they succeeded in taking Atahualpa prisoner, killing and maiming thousands of his men in the process. Atahualpa's people brought mountains of gold to ransom him, but Pizarro had him executed anyway. Depriving the indigenous defenders of leadership was part of the "divide-and-conquer" strategy.

Neither the Incas nor the Aztecs could have been defeated without the aid of the Spaniards' indigenous allies. In Mexico, Aztec taxes and tributes had weighed heavily on the shoulders of other Nahuatl-speaking city-states. Tributary city-states had furnished sacrificial victims for the Aztec state religion, the ideology that glorified Aztec imperial expansion and bathed the pyramids of Tenochtitlan in the blood of hundreds of thousands. As a result, Cortés found ready alliances, most notably with the nearby indigenous city of Tlaxcala, an old rival of Tenochtitlan. Eager to end Aztec rule, rival cities sent thousands of warriors to help Cortés.

Pizarro, too, used indigenous allies to topple the Inca Empire. Unlike the Aztecs, the Incas had imposed a centralized power that broke up rival city-states and resettled their populations. While the Aztecs had merely imposed tributes, the Incas administered, building roads and storage facilities and garrisons. Like the Aztecs, and like the Spanish and Portuguese, too, the Incas had a state religion that provided an ideological justification for empire. Unfortunately for the Incas, however, both the reigning emperor and his successor had died suddenly in the epidemic

that advancing along trade routes ahead of Pizarro, ravaged the Inca ruling family, creating a succession crisis just before the Spanish arrival. Disastrously, an Inca civil war had begun. Atahualpa led one side and his brother Huascar the other. The wily Pizarro was able to play the two sides against each other, achieving the ultimate victory for himself. Each side in the Inca civil war saw the other as the greatest threat. How could they know that Pizarro's tiny expedition was only the entering wedge of vast colonizing forces beyond the Atlantic?

Aztec and Inca treasures soon attracted Spaniards by the thousands. The defeat of Aztec and Inca power was only the first step in establishing Spanish dominion over the mainland. Now the Spanish had to colonize, to assert effective control over large populations and sprawling territories, over the civilizations that underlay the Aztec and Inca empires and that remained in place after their destruction. This was a gradual process, requiring several generations and contrasting markedly with the pattern of colonization on the Brazilian coast.

THE BIRTH OF SPANISH AMERICA

Even before the dust of imperial collapse had settled in Mexico and Peru, the Spanish began to parcel out the plunder of conquest. Some was treasure captured from indigenous royalty, but most took a form called *encomienda*, whereby the conquerors were rewarded with people. In this system, indigenous people were "entrusted" (the meaning of the word *encomienda*) to each conqueror, who had the responsibility of Christianizing them and the privilege of making them work for him. *Encomiendas* of conquered Moors had been awarded aplenty during the Christian reconquest of Iberia, so it was a familiar system to the Spaniards. Conquerors who received *encomiendas* became much like European nobles, able to live from the labor of serf-like farmers who delivered part of their crops as regular tribute.

For indigenous farmers accustomed to paying tribute to imperial masters, the situation was familiar, too. Most often, the same city-states, villages, and clans that had once paid tribute to the Aztecs or Incas now paid tribute to the new Spanish overlords instead. Calamitous, repeated epidemics during the 1500s, comparable in severity to the Black Death of medieval Europe, reduced native populations to a fraction of their former size. But, unlike what occurred in the Caribbean or along the Brazilian coast, indigenous villages did not disappear from Mexico and Peru.

Whereas Tupi society was swept away by disease and replaced by Brazilian sugar plantations, the sedentary farming societies of central Mexico and the Andes survived, shaken but intact, for the Spanish to take over. The Spanish normally created *encomiendas* out of already existing communities with their own indigenous nobles, whom the Spanish called *caciques*.^{*} The Spanish conquerors cultivated relations with these nobles, sometimes marrying into their families. Gradually, however, Spanish conquest undercut the defeated warrior nobility of Aztec and Inca days, and indigenous people adopted Spanish-style village governments. In Mexico, village officials with Spanish titles conducted their business and kept written records in Nahuatl. Hundreds of Spanish words came into Nahuatl, of course, indicating the powerful impact of conquest, but the basic structure of the language survived, preserving a distinctly indigenous worldview.

Mexico officially became "New Spain," but it was really two societies being grafted together, mostly by Spanish men and indigenous women. Spanish women, like Portuguese women in Brazil, were few. In the early years of the Encounter, Spanish

^{*}*Cacique* is actually an Arawak word that the Spanish adopted in the Caribbean and later applied elsewhere.

men in America outnumbered Spanish women roughly nine to one. So, within a few years, indigenous women and Spanish men became the parents of a legion of mestizo children, exactly as anticipated by Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter from Brazil. Malinche had Cortés's baby soon after the fall of Tenochtitlan.

What an intriguing figure is Malinche, a Spanish deformation of her indigenous name, Malintzin. She was one of twenty female slaves given to Cortés as he sailed up the Mexican coast seeking the Aztec Empire in 1519. She already spoke Maya and Nahuatl, and she learned Spanish in months. This astoundingly quick-witted and self-possessed sixteen-year-old girl became inseparable from Cortés and was instrumental in the capture of Moctezuma. Understandably, her life has been read as a romantic novel, but also as a betrayal of Mexico. It was neither. As for romance, Cortés summoned his Spanish wife, who was waiting in Cuba, then gave Malinche a bit of property and turned her away. As for betraying Mexico, that country did not yet exist, unless one refers to the Aztec Empire, and Malinche had good reason to hate the Aztecs. Although Nahuatl was her first language, her own family had sold her into slavery to Mayas, which is how she learned that language. Malinche was more betrayed than betrayer. Cortés married her to one of his men, with whom she had a second child. She died, not yet twenty-five, only a few years later.

The Aztec princess Techichpotzín, baptized Isabel, was the daughter of Moctezuma. She became "Isabel Moctezuma," exemplifying the woman of indigenous nobility who could attract a Spanish husband because of her wealth. As the legitimate heiress of Moctezuma's personal fortune and the recipient of a desirable *encomienda*, Isabel attracted more than her share of husbands. Before her three Spanish husbands, she was married to two different leaders of the Aztec resistance in the last days of Tenochtitlan. She outlived four of her spouses,

bore seven mestizo children, adapted to her new life, and became a model of Catholic devotion and a benefactor of religious charities. She lived to the respectable age of forty.

As the Aztec and Inca nobility declined and the number of Spanish women increased, fewer and fewer Spanish men married indigenous women. Although Spanish men continued fathering unnumbered mestizo children, most were illegitimate and inherited little or nothing from their Spanish fathers. These children were "people-in-between": not Europeans or Africans or indigenous Americans. Mestizo children were second-class people in the Spanish world, poor relations, if recognized at all. Malinche's son by Cortés, Martín, became virtually a servant of his half-brother, also named Martín, Cortés's son by his second Spanish wife.

Spanish women usually arrived after the fighting was over, but that was not always the case. A woman named Isabel de Guevara helped conquer Argentina and Paraguay in the 1530s and 1540s. Years later, in an attempt to gain an *encomienda* for her part in the conquest, she wrote a letter to the Spanish Crown, describing how the women of the expedition took over when famine killed two-thirds of their party. As the men fainted from hunger, wrote Guevara, the women began "standing guard, patrolling the fires, loading the crossbows . . . arousing the soldiers who were capable of fighting, shouting the alarm through the camp, acting as sergeants, and putting the soldiers in order."

The most famous "conquistadora" of all was Inés Suárez, a woman of thirty when she came to America in 1537, alone, looking for her husband. She searched first in Venezuela, then in Peru, where she found her husband already dead. Suárez then became the mistress of the conqueror of Chile, legendary for her actions during an indigenous attack there. Her plan was to terrorize the attackers by throwing them the heads of seven captured chiefs, and her most famous deed was to cut off the first captive's head herself. Despite (what was regarded as) her hero-

ism, the conqueror of Chile, who had a wife in Spain, put Inés Suárez aside when he became governor of the new territory.

Favorable marriages outweighed even extraordinary ability in the lives of women. The marriage contract was a pillar of the Spanish social structure, crucial to the distribution of property. Marriage was a religious sacrament, and religious conformity was serious business in the Spanish Empire.

Spanish conquest had meant an earthly and a spiritual conquest, the defeat of the old gods. Spanish churchmen arrived to teach Catholic doctrine. They searched insistently for sacred objects that the indigenous people still preserved, hidden away, from their old religions—"idols," in Catholic eyes. The priest and the holder of the *encomienda* stood side by side in many areas, as the only two representatives of Spanish authority. As had occurred during the Christianization of Europe centuries earlier, the conversion of kings (or, in America, caciques) brought whole communities into the church at once. In their haste to baptize, missionaries perfunctorily sprinkled holy water on indigenous people in mass ceremonies that did little to teach them Christianity. Still, the baptized could remember the imposition of other imperial state religions, for that was a pattern familiar from before the Encounter. Among sedentary peoples, the Spanish made a habit of erecting churches on sites already sacred to indigenous deities. The people of Tenochtitlan cannot have been surprised to see Spanish conquerors level the Aztec Great Temple and construct their cathedral on practically the same spot.

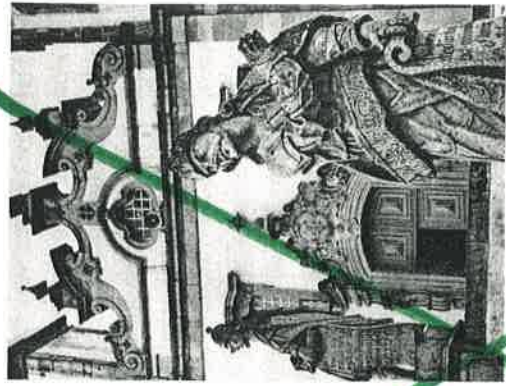
The fully sedentary people of central Mexico and Peru survived the Encounter infinitely better than did semisedentary people such as the Tupi. Still, the Encounter had a dire impact on settled agricultural societies, too. The Spanish often demanded more tribute than had indigenous overlords. For example, Andean villages had provided a labor draft called the *mita* to their Inca rulers, but after the conquest *mita* laborers

were forced to do something new—toil in the shafts of deep silver mines, sometimes locked down for days. In addition, epidemic European diseases continued to decimate the indigenous population.

By the end of the 1500s, the basic contours of Latin American ethnicities were established. American, European, and African genes and cultures had begun to mix, creating rich potential for human diversity, but the violent and exploitative nature of the Encounter would sour the mix for centuries to come. In Brazil and the Caribbean region, Europeans and Africans took the place of the indigenous populations that were virtually wiped out. In Mexico and Peru, by contrast, Nahuatl- and Quechua-speaking societies survived to be gradually transformed. One way or the other, the original sin of Latin American history—the festering social injustice at the core—had done its durable damage. How would more equitable, more inclusive communities ever emerge from the smoking ruins of conquest? The next step, systematic colonization, the creation of entire social systems geared to serve the interests of distant masters in Europe, only made matters worse.

COUNTERCURRENTS:

Virar Bartolomé de las Casas



Colonial Brazilian Church.
Statue by Aleijadinho. Photograph by Michael Teague.
Brazil, Time World Library, 1967.

As our story makes abundantly clear, the European drive to extract labor and tribute explains much about the colonization of Latin America. How could it be different? At the most basic level, conquest is always about exploitation. On the other hand, conquerors and colonizers rarely admitted this, even to themselves. That is how the other, more idealistic, motives enter the picture. Most Spanish and Portuguese people who came to the Americas in the 1500s believed that spreading the “true religion,” even by force, was a good thing. Like all people, they tended to give their own actions the best possible interpretation. On the other hand, religious idealism truly was the driving force for some; logically enough, these were most often church people. The Catholic Church—Inquisition and all—generated the most important humanitarian countercurrents in this age of raw exploitation.