

INTRO

What's up guys, always remember that SEX WORK is REAL WORK, and I'm not a human trafficker, I'm a job creator.

But, well, this isn't the story of how getting railed up the ass by total strangers for rent money is empowering actually if you think about it...this is the story...of Bernardino de Sahagun.

Diaz wrote for glory, Cortes for gold, Las Casas for God.

But Bernardino de Sahagun? Why did he write?

He certainly needed a good answer...because in 16th Century New Spain...what he was writing was very suspicious indeed.

But in order to understand the significance of what he was writing, you first much understand the slapstick misadventures that were Spanish attempts to convert the natives, and what a codex was.

A codex was a book of pictures, not exactly written language, but interestingly could be considered a step on the way to having one. A sort of proto-hieroglyphic, which abides by certain rules.¹

These pictures were core to how the aztec settled legal disputes...²

Montezuma

So, why do you believe your altepetl should extend to the river, and not stop at the big rock?

Native

Holding a soyjack

Well...if you will refer to this chart here...

But these images were more than just for legal arguments, they were how the people of Mesoamerica recorded their histories as well! And, boy, let me tell ya, those histories made great firewood! The codices written before the arrival of the Spanish were burned. First, by the Tlaxcalteca, when they burned the library of Texcoco despite them being "allies" by that point,³ then later by Christian missionaries of the Fransiscan order in mass book-burnings.⁴

The Fransiscan friars who were responsible for the conversion of natives after conquest, would destroy temples, codices, and idols, as well as do mass-baptisms in their initial attempts at native conversion. These methods were...not super effective.⁵

Indian

Thanks for the bath! That was really refreshing.

Friar

What? That wasn't a bath! You love Jesus now!

Indian

Who?

The city of Texcoco had its temple raided by Fransiscan friars 4 years after the conquest, and the friars found to their shock that the statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary which had been given to the city, had been placed alongside the old gods and worshiped as another part of their Pantheon.⁶

It had become clear that the natives did not understand what Christianity was, and mass-baptisms were mere political theater, so how do you break through the cultural barrier and ensure the natives are *properly* Christian? That's right!

No one expects the Spanish Inquisition clip

Mass-baptisms were followed by a few Inquisitions mostly aimed at native leaders,⁷ but these were severely lacking in political support.⁸

But even if they were popular, these trials reinforced the simple fact that the Spanish and natives lacked the shared-theological ground necessary to properly communicate on theological matters, such as whether or not christ felt sexual desire, and whether or not sexually desiring a femboy was gay or not.. During the inquisition of one native...shaman...sorta a traveling priest/healer/magician, yknow, Rasputin-type guy, the shaman seems super confused through the whole thing.⁹

Bernardino de Sahagun, a friar of the Fransiscan order, arrived in New Spain in 1529 at the age of 30, 8 years after the fall of the Aztec empire. While in New Spain, he quickly developed a fondness for the Nahuatl language of the now-conquered peoples.¹⁰ As a man with a big boner

for Jesus and language, Sahagun would be tasked with learning about and documenting Aztec religion, so as to finally figure out how to root it out completely.

But while compiling and translating the writings and illustrations of Nahuatl people, Sahagun would end up assembling more of an encyclopedia of the Nahuatl peoples, in a decidedly unconventional manner.

I do believe Sahagun's work may qualify as one of the most unique books ever written. It was written in Nahuatl with the Roman alphabet, but was also a story told in images like a pre-contact codex, and it was also assembled in the traditional order of a European-style encyclopedia, an order set by the Greek writer Pliny in classical antiquity. It is the last history of the Nahuatl told in a way they never could have told it otherwise, a history written by a man in an order which had previously devoted itself to burning similar histories...and it was under constant scrutiny.

As the decades passed, Sahagun's colleagues would call his work a waste of money, they would call it idolatrous, and they would have his manuscripts confiscated and sent around and inspected by his peers, bringing his work to a standstill for years.¹¹ He was even ordered to dismiss his scribes and work alone despite his now old age and trembling hand. But thankfully for Sahagun, as his work began receiving more scrutiny and doubt from the Franciscan order, the commissary general friar Rodrigo de Sequerra was always on Sahagun's side and fighting to let him continue his work.

But in 1577, something happened that even Sequerra couldn't prevent. Sahagun's greatest fear had come true, the crown demanded his manuscript for inspection and no copies were allowed to remain. His life's work had to be sent across the world's second largest ocean in the hands of a stranger, so that another stranger could take one look at it, and burn it as heresy.

Oh yeah, at this point King Phillip II was actually the King of Spain, but I'm gonna keep using Charles the Fifth's head because I like looking at his face.

Regardless, we can see here that policy seems to have changed, as the crown's decree extended to **all** accounts of the native way of life before Spanish arrival. Where the policy was once erasure, then became understanding, it appears that it had circled back around to erasure once-more.¹²

Bernardino would claim that he did send a manuscript, but it was lost on the way. Regardless of whether or not Bernardino was lying, we do know one thing, he **did** make copies, as his work continued against the Crown's law.

1580

Mexico City

Sequerra

You know I'm on your side, Bernardino. But this...codex, it's-

Bernardino

How does a doctor cure a disease?

Sequerra

Ugh, this again.

Bernardino

He must *understand* the disease, before he can do anything else! How can we root out the religion of these people if we do not understand it!¹³

Sequerra

You're not studying their religion, you're recording their entire history! Their conflicts, their origins, their medicine, the conquest itself, it's not about rooting out their religion, anyone can see that!

Bernardino

Well, I wished to preserve their language as well! How could we speak latin without the many latin grammar books we have preserved from antiquity!¹⁴

Sequerra

Why, Bernardino? You were directed nearly thirty years ago by our order to learn their religion, not document their entire history!

Bernardino

Because...no one else will tell it.

Sequerra

Bernardino...please be careful...

Bernardino

You asked why. The writings of the greeks and Romans connect us to our past, pagan and idolatrous it may be, these people deserve the same! They deserve better than-

Sequerra

Stop! For your sake and for mine, Bernardino, speak no more.

Bernardino

Can we not extend the same understanding to these people that we have extended to ourselves? Why must we uproot them from their past so totally? These are the stories of their fathers and their fathers, if we can show them they worship men, then they can continue to love the achievements of their forefathers.¹⁵

Sequerra

They're barbarians, Bernardino. They achieved nothing.

Bernardino

Hmph, it takes quite a bit of gall to destroy someone's home, then point at the rubble and say it's pathetic.¹⁶

Sequerra

Be very careful. I'm on your side, but for the love of God, can't you make it easier on me? King Phillip's decree was clear. You were to send your manuscript to the Crown, so they can ensure it's free of idolatry.

Bernardino

It...was lost in transit, I'm sure I sent it, I'll send another copy.

Sequerra

No copies were to remain, Bernardino...why are you being combative? You have faithfully served this order for half a century now, why in your old age are you being so difficult?

Bernardino

...there are things in the book that trouble me. Things about Cortes, things about Montezuma, things about us, what we said, how we acted, even how we remained. They will burn it, Sequerra, they'll burn my life's work not because it's sinful, but because it casts light upon our own sins.¹⁷

Sequerra

...I am sure...that Sodom and Gomorrah would have loved to tell their side of the story...

Bernardino

You can twist scripture however you wish, I know what is wrong.

Sequerra

And what happened when Lot's wife looked back at those cities? You shoulder too much, this isn't the time, let someone else tell their story Bernardino, that is not the task you were given, it's not what we're doing here...

Bernardino

Who? Who else can tell their story? These people will be extinct before long, I buried ten thousand bodies myself, the plague tears through them.¹⁸

Sequerra

This isn't a negotiation. I'm taking your book to Spain, and...maybe...they'll let me return with it.

Bernardino

Don't return with it.

Sequerra

What?

Bernardino

If you must take it, then take it somewhere else, somewhere it will be safe Sequerra, I beg of you. Don't let them burn it.¹⁹

Sequerra

I don't have a choice.

Bernardino

Then bury it. Bury it somewhere it won't be found. Someone, someday...should know these people as I have known them. You've always fought for me, for this work I believe in, and it's more than I deserved...but that fight won't mean anything if this book ends up in Spain. I don't need you to help me tell this story...I need you to help me bury it, so someone someday can...

Bernardino's work would end up in the library of the ruling family of Florence Italy, where it would remain unnoticed by the world for centuries. It would be called The Florentine Codex, and it shouldn't exist.

There's lots of fun little things in the Florentine codex that the Spanish empire would not have wanted to be known, and much of it is, frankly, just embarrassing for them. For example, at one point during the siege of Tenochtitlan, Cortes started to construct a huge catapult, but it malfunctioned, and Cortes managed to play it off as an act of mercy to the clueless natives.²¹

At least, that's what *he* said happened in his letters to the king. But in the Florentine Codex?

The natives watched the Spanish construct this weird device they most certainly didn't understand at first, but saw them pointing and gesturing towards a location filled with commoners, and could probably assume that the big rock in the device wasn't for decoration. However, when the device was activated, the rock dropped straight-down and just rocked back-and-forth harmlessly. Then, all the Spanish started yelling at and pointing fingers at one another.²²

Sorry, that's just the funniest shit on earth to me.

But the most important parts of The Florentine Codex lie between the lines.

The Codex contains three distinct parts. A Nahuatl portion written by Christianized Nahuas who Sahagun worked with, the images themselves which were penned by Nahuas, and a Spanish

translation of the Nahuatl text, which was written by Sahagun himself. As you could imagine...there are many things that Sahagun did not include in his translation.²³ Lots of little things that the Spanish empire just wouldn't like. Things like, where the nahuatl portion calls the conquistadors greedy monkeys with a piggish hunger, Sahagun just translates that to basically, "they were happy when they got gold".¹⁷

The Florentine codex whispers more than it says. The images contained within for example, lose their pigment as the book progresses, showing the pressure and time-constraints Bernardino was under.

But there is one thing of particular note to us. Between the funny stories and translation fuckery and running out of crayons.

Montezuma doesn't die in the Florentine Codex. I mean he's alive in one part and dead in another, but he doesn't *die*...he just...stops living.

Computer: Yes, that's what dying means.

NO, I MEAN, without cause, without injury, the Great Speaker of the Aztec people ceases to exist.²⁰

The Florentine Codex contains an entire page on the funny catapult fuck-up...and not a single *word*...on how Montezuma died.

The Florentine Codex tells a story in the places it says nothing at all. A product of an incompetent empire and a dying people. A smoking mirror that twists in places and reflects faithfully in the next. In the spaces between the lines, whispers half a millennium old build and build to the roaring crescendo.

Diaz wrote for glory, Cortes for gold, Las Casas for God.

...and Bernardino wrote with a trembling hand.

November 8th, 1519:

What Remains of Montezuma

In my last video, before I took a break to huff glue and get my pilot's license, the meeting between Montezuma and Cortes occurred. This event, one of the most important meetings in

human history, is steeped in levels of propaganda, misinformation, and absurdity that I didn't think possible. The equivalent of Truman saying Stalin promised to give the Soviet Union to America because the Russians had a prophecy that the rightful ruler of the Slavic peoples would arrive under a pair of golden arches.

In this video we're going to FINALLY cover the fall of Tenochtitlan itself, so that in my next video I can cover something nice and easy, like how to resolve Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Growing up in American public school during the 2000s, between our cheeseburger breaks and 9/11 orgies, I was told that the Spanish beat the Aztecs with superior technology and some bacterial allies. I know you're shocked, but it turns out that's bullshit.

On a long enough time-scale, was the defeat of the Aztec by the Spanish a sure thing? Absolutely, but we're not on a long time-scale, and this is *not* a war between the Aztecs and Spain. This is a war between the Aztec and several hundred Spanish investors. **Chapter 2**
Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest

As I have worked on this project, I have learned that schools in other nations tell another totally distinct but much more compelling lie. That the Aztecs were despots, who were overthrown largely by their angry subjects, and the Spanish helped, because they were good guys. As far as lies go, this one is at least on the same hemisphere as the truth, but just because the constellations look correct and the toilet flushes the right way, doesn't mean you're in australia. Look up and see the penguins.

This video is about the tensions of empire, and how they unwind. Tensions between empires and their allies, tensions between empires and their actions, tensions between subject and ruler and ruler and history.

Speaking of tension, Cortes after several days in Tenochtitlan sent his translators to Montezuma so as to ask to visit the Aztec's main temple, a massive pyramid in the center of the city. Montezuma would not only let them do so, he'd even greet them at the top. **Page 234, diaz**

Montezuma

I hope the climb didn't exhaust you, Spaniard! It is a great temple, is it not?

Cortes

Oh, our people don't get tired, actually. **Page 234, diaz**

Montezuma

Under his breath

You're so full of shit I should sell you to the leatherworkers, I'd make a fortune.

Cortes

What?

Montezuma

I said, gaze upon my city.

Show accurate images

Its grand plazas and markets, its verdant gardens, its proud people and their great works.

Cortes

...It is beautiful...particularly from up here.

Montezuma

There is a reason we build our temples high, Spaniard. So our Gods can look out and see how we appreciate their gifts. Come inside with me, and I shall show you how we thank them.

Alright...let's address the human sacrifice in the room. He's...starting to smell.

there's a dead guy in the middle of the scene

If you will look up Bernal Diaz's historical account which first got me into this hellfuck nightmare story, and Ctrl+f the word "sacrifice" you will get 116 results. It is a point driven home by the Spanish like they're a good friend and the point had far too much to drink that night. Don't drink and drive kids, unless you're really good at it.

Can we trust Spanish accounts on human sacrifice? No.

The justification for the war was *specifically* to accomplish the goal of stopping human sacrifice. **Page 137 Diaz AND page 86 Five Letters of Cortes** It was central to the moral and political justification for their war with the Aztec, and seeing as the expedition *desperately* needed one as they were acting without legal authority, they naturally play it up as much as possible.

One point Diaz in particular discusses, was a supposedly massive human skull rack right in the center of Tenochtitlan! According to Diaz, there was an *incalculable* number of skulls upon the rack, and when Mathew Restall wrote When Montezuma Met Cortes, archeological findings showed there were only a few dozen, I guess Diaz was bad at counting. Furthermore, these skulls were of men, most likely prisoners of war! **Page 93-93, When Montezuma Met Cortes**

Unfortunately for Restall, the archeologists kept digging. They have now unearthed hundreds of skulls in the skull rack, including those of several children and many women.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-find-brings-skulls-discovered-aztec-tower-over-600-180976543/>

Mathew Restall's argument largely rested upon archeological findings, or rather, the lack of them, but the gap between Spanish accounts and Archeological digs is getting more narrow over time. A hundred thousand skulls, such as Diaz once reported? No, but these sacrifices occurred on a much larger scale than Restall argued, the evidence is right there.

Oh, I know! Let's use the Florentine Codex! That'll be a good source, in book 2 of the codex, here are the things listed:

*Computer: children being sacrificed to the god of rain. The more they cried, the more rain would come. **Page 1-2 florentine codex book 2***

*Skinning men alive and wearing their skin **Page 47 florentine codex book 2***

*Giving a young man a decadent life of luxury for a year, then killing him at the end of this year **page 9 florentine codex book 2***

Alright, that's enough. There's a lot more, but damn that's pretty fucked up huh?

Computer: Did you notice something about that portion of the Florentine Codex?

What? Of course not, I hate noticing things.

Computer: While the Florentine Codex was written in Nahuatl, then translated to Spanish by Sahagun. There is no Nahuatl text for a significant amount of these descriptions of sacrifices, including what you just uncritically read, therefore it is totally possible that it's complete invention. Penned by and for Spaniards.

I understand you wish for a "perfect" source that objectively communicates the religious practices of the Aztec, but such a source not only doesn't exist, it, quite simply, CANNOT exist. Perhaps...this alone is worth thinking about. How the actual religious practices of the Aztec were and are still to this day, subservient to the political motivations of the person describing them.

You know what? You're right computer! Let's cut through the worthless flesh of this whole thing, and get to the beating heart at the center of this child, I mean, matter. Cortes and Diaz would both claim that they entered tenochtitlan to stop aztec cruelty, **Page 137, diaz** as the peoples they encountered were forced into this tribute system and hated the aztecs for their cruelty and greed! This, in combination with the monstrous human sacrifice which occurred, is a common talking-point among people claiming the Spanish were *liberators*, rather than *oppressors*.

I was unaware it was so profitable to be a liberator, but regardless, in the Cortes and Diaz accounts? I have no doubt that there is a great deal of truth to that. I, in fact, *would be absolutely shocked* if the Spanish were *not* greeted enthusiastically by many mesoamericans who detested Aztec dominance. Many of these city-states, were forced to supply tribute to the aztec after losing wars to them, I'd hate them too.

Listen, I visit a lot of playgrounds, and let me tell ya from experience:

If you're looking for kids on the playground who are sick of giving the biggest kid on the playground money, lord knows you'll find plenty of them, and they will be staunch allies of your

when you beat up the bully and take his place so that YOU can get all the lunch money from now on.

But of course, that bully does have friends. Friends that benefit from the lunch money kickbacks and protection the bully provides and maybe there's some marriage alliances too I don't know the metaphor is breaking down.

Regardless, you'd find a lot of allies. First from outright victims of the bully, then later when you starting singling-out and beating up that bully's friends when he's not around.

So, if you wanna take out that bully, first you'd make friends with those who already hate the bully...then you'd beat up the bullies friend's a bit, which demonstrates not ONLY that the bully can no longer protect them, but that YOU probably could.

"The Mexica let it be known that they were offering a year's tribute relief to all who refrained from going over to the [Spanish and Tlaxcalteca]- implicitly reminding everyone that they were the leaders who were there to stay and that they wouldn't forget who their friends and enemies were after these interlopers were forced to withdraw. But that was a distant reward compared to the immediate threat of having mounted lancers ride through town, burning and killing with impunity. Meanwhile, the Spaniards also offered to reward those who came over to them. "They see," wrote Cortés in the midst of these events, "how those who do so are well received and favored by me, whereas those who do not are destroyed daily." - PAGE 120, fifth sun

Oh wow, what a liberator.

The spanish would call the propaganda surrounding their colonies, "The Black Legend". The lies of mostly protestants intended to attack the catholic church and Spain's great empire. While I understand you're expecting me to call this bullshit, the fact is, there is a great deal of merit to the idea that Spanish conduct in the New World was used as propaganda by their european adversaries, and exaggerations seemed common. Other European nations desiring a slice of the American pie *would* absolutely use Spanish atrocities to justify their *own* atrocities and lies. While I do believe Las Casas was a good man and a much much more reliable source than the non-stop lie factory that was Hernan Cortes, it's no coincidence his work was first translated into English and spread during the Spanish-American War.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Legend>

If the Aztec were monstrous, Spain was always justified, and if Spain was monstrous, then competing powers telling them to eat a dick with all of their territorial claims was justified.

My big problem with "Black Legend" proponents, and make no mistake many still exist, is that they fail to understand that Spain had its own "Black Legend" about the Aztec, the "black legend" is standard-procedure for political entities with imperial ambitions, Spain is not exceptional in this regard, every empire that has ever existed gets this treatment, INCLUDING the Aztec.

The Aztec Black Legend, like all black legends, aims to morally discredit them and therefore their achievements. One must not only conquer a people, they must make it clear that the conquest was morally necessitated.

The Aztec black legend rests upon two pillars, one of which is human sacrifice, and the other is how quickly the Spanish found allies upon their arrival. As far as the sacrifice is concerned, many Spanish accounts can be dismissed out-of-hand, but it did occur and it occurred a lot. The second pillar, however, is the most dangerous sort of lie. The sort that is correct, until you consider how they got those allies in the first place.

Aztec human sacrifice was many things. But it was, as far as we're concerned today, a political tool. A tool used to frighten Aztec enemies, sure, but the sacrifices absolutely did not stop when the Spanish showed up, nor did the Aztecs *invent* the practice, it was the standard Mesoamerican civilization MO, it's what all the cool kids did. **page 84 Five Letters of Cortes to the Emperor** Not only did the Spanish also constantly engage in state-sanctioned and religiously-motivated killings which were, themselves, human sacrifice, *mesoamericans* would continue to practice human sacrifice in the early years after conquest. **Page 33, Bonfires of Culture** While this was most certainly not something the Spanish wanted, stopping that sacrifice was secondary to consolidating their power. The sacrifices stop when they *can* be stopped without risking the loss of the rich lands of Mesoamerica.

Human sacrifice was also, as it pertains to Cortes and colonization apologists, a political tool. But instead of the political statement being, "look what we do to our enemies, don't fuck with us" it rather became, "look at what *they did* to their political enemies, they deserved it. Anyway, get on the stick and let us burn you."

The Aztec did practice human sacrifice, absolutely. But the fact is, when the Cortes expedition saw this barbaric behavior, what they really saw were dollar-signs, much as other European powers did when they saw Spanish cruelty. Sacrifice would become the ultimate rhetorical and political tool to the Spanish, and much as other empires would use Spanish cruelty to justify their own actions, the Spanish would use Aztec cruelty to justify their actions.

The Black Legend is not only real, it's universal. From Carthaginian baby-sacrifice to Saddam Husein gassing Kurdish people, every nation has a black legend rooted in truth which justified their conquest.

"There were some smoking braziers of their incense...in which they were burning the hearts of three Indians whom they had sacrificed that day; and all the walls of that shrine were so splashed and caked with blood that they and the floor too were black. Indeed, the whole place stank abominably."

Montezuma

So what do you think?

Cortes

Um...so I have a few notes

Montezuma

Sure.

Cortes

I think...if you put a, uh, maybe a tv...with veggietales on it...by the burning flesh braziers...and...dark cloaked priests...it may liven the place up

Montezuma

That may end up messing with the flow of chi from the blood fountain...but ok, go on

Cortes

Maybe...a potted planet, a...a succelent or something low maintenance like that...over by the...what's that statue with the toothy grin?

Montezuma

That's the Flayed Lord.

Cortes

You worship a guy without skin?

Montezuma

Well, he skins his enemies and wears it.

Cortes

Oh cool cool cool, so...would it be alright if I put a...yknow, a little chapel in here or something? So me and the boys can-

Montezuma

Excuse me?

Cortes

I mean...it'd be cool of you to

Montezuma

Do you see ME going into YOUR place if worship and skinning people? Hm? What gives you the right to ask for this?

For Montezuma's part, he *would* allow the Spanish to build a small place of worship in their own quarters while refusing the construction of one in the temple, Ol' Monty would even go so far as to supply materials and craftsmen. Polytheistic religions have this sort of built-in tolerance...which is why they're not around anymore. **Page 218 sapiens** Montezuma didn't give a shit who the Spanish worshiped, Montezuma's Gods were treating him well and that's all he wanted, and this was probably a significant reason for Montezuma's anger, no one from a polytheistic religion would be acting like Cortes and human sacrifice was a totally normal part of broader mesoamerican worship, so Cortes' constant Jesus shit probably made him seem both alien and *needlessly* antagonistic.

During the construction of the Spanish place of worship...we must come to our ...fourth knot. The capture knot. Its threads are long, because, well...

"...the Meeting had planted a seed. Or rather, the lie of the Meeting had planted a seed that, just as one lie begets another, germinated into a sprawling tree of inventions and embellishments. The captains had reached Tenochtitlan hoping to do what conquistadors had done before and would continue to do in the Americas: seize the ruler; and by threats, selective acts of violence, and the performance of possession, make a conquest claim." - When Montezuma met Cortes by Mathew Restall

According to Diaz, while they were constructing their place of worship, the Spaniards noticed something strange in their quarters. The room had a door which had been plastered over and painted, seemingly recently. The Spaniards, who as I'm sure you've noticed by this point were the *worst* fucking house guests, naturally opened it in secret, and- **page 241-242 Díaz**

"When they saw the quantity of golden objects - jewels and plates and ingots - which lay in that chamber they were quite transported. They did not know what to think of such riches. The news soon spread to the other captains and soldiers, and very secretly we all went in to see. The sight of all that wealth dumbfounded me. Being only a youth at the time and never having seen such riches before, I felt certain that there could not be a store like it in the world."

The Spanish closed the door, presumably when they were finished orgasming, and covered it up again, making it appear the same way as when they found it.

...

WEIRDLY ENOUGH, RIGHT AFTER THIS HAPPENED, the conquistadors came to Cortes and told him just how dangerous their situation was. Montezuma, they said, was unreliable and could have them all killed at any moment, and their only hope considering how insanely outnumbered they were, was to capture him and hold him hostage. They were, of course, correct that they were in a bad situation, but, yknow, funny timing, and, also...they could...like...leave.

So, Cortes along with 5 or so of his men and his translators, visited Montezuma, and took him captive...which is pretty weird! **Page 245 Diaz** Y'know, because this loony tunes situation lasted for like 6 months, and the Spanish were wildly outnumbered yet no one did shit.

"This is because the very notion, like the Surrender at the Meeting, is pure nonsense – implausible in the extreme, unsupported by any of the evidence of life in Tenochtitlan during these months. If Montezuma was ever physically detained, whether in irons or under guard, it was after war broke out in the city center in May; in other words, it happened within weeks, if not days, of his death. But Cortés and others later moved the "arrest" forward in time; they admitted that Montezuma still ran his empire, but by inventing his capture, they could claim that Cortés controlled Montezuma and thus controlled the empire. The story only hangs together if one accepts cartoonish stereotypes of Montezuma as naïve and acquiescent, and Cortés as brilliantly and boldly Machiavellian..."

To me, this is the strongest part of Mathew Restall's entire argument. *Maybe* Montezuma surrendered, *maybe* he was captive for a very long time and no one did shit because the Spanish were just big-dicked badasses like that, *maybe* Cortes was always in control of the situation despite having zero experience leading men, but while implausible and shocking things *do* happen...it's when they begin happening one after the other over and over that it becomes difficult to believe...and *all* these things need to be true, or none of it makes sense whatsoever...and, frankly...it doesn't much make sense in the first place.

Montezuma has to be a pussy, Cortes has to be a genius the likes of which the world's never seen for like 2 years and an absolute idiot forever before and after, the Tlaxcalteca have to be totally docile and obedient to some fucking weirdos they just met and also fought in battle. It would be one thing if every account was consistently improbably in the exact same way, but they're not. The time at which certain events happened, and what happened at all varies *wildly*! They vary wildly because the people writing these accounts had *agendas* that varied wildly.

During the 235 days of supposed captivity, despite having access to writing tools and Cortes' frankly insane claim that a **notary** was present for the surrender, not a *single letter* from the Spaniards would leave the city until after it fell.

In Bernal Diaz's account...Montezuma's captivity was business-as-usual to a suspect degree. Aztec nobility would still visit him so he could settle disputes, they all went hunting together, Montezuma still did his sacrifices, they even played a game called *Totoloque* and Montezuma accused Pedro de Alvarado, a man who would later go down in history as the butcher of the mayan people...of cheating. **page 252 diaz**

Montezuma

Hey, cmon Pedro, you know you're not keeping score correctly!

Alvarado

I will wear your fucking skin before this is over.

Cortes, defying the orders of Diego Velasquez, the Cuban governor who authorized his expedition, waged a war of conquest. In order to morally justify this illegal war, Cortes would use the brutal ritual of human sacrifice and the accounts of Aztec enemies. Then, in order to *legally* justify his war, he invented a surrender and a captivity. The fact is, Cortes can't be trusted, and it seems far more likely that Cortes and the other conquistadors were in Montezuma's entourage. They gamed with him, hunted with him, and dined with him, and it was only later that the captivity was claimed to have occurred.

According to the traditional narrative, at this point, a Velasquez loyalist by the name of Narvaez arrives in Mexico with a force three times the size of Cortes' expedition, but at the battle of Cholula, he would be crushed by Cortes in a stunning sneak attack!

...oh yeah, and Cortes had a metric shitload of Tlaxcalteca with him. It should be noted here that despite Cortes claiming to be in control of the Aztec empire, even settling the succession of the city of Tetzcoco...*no* Aztec warriors would fight on his side, but some *would* be on Narvaez's side. Regardless, Narvaez was wildly outnumbered, and some bad luck would result in his taking an arrow to the eye in the beginning of the battle. **Page 255 when Montezuma met Cortes**

Cortes

So, would you like to continue to try and arrest me for no material gain, or do you wanna go with me to the seat of the Aztec empire and steal all their shit?

Narvaez, with arrow in face

I will...consider the offer.

Cortes getting Narvaez's men to switch sides is often presented as great leadership on his part, but it should be noted that conquistadors were investors and it was more profitable to rob Aztecs than hang Cortes...at least...these men thought...

But while Cortes and Narvaez were having their little cat-fight, aforementioned butcher of men and cheater of monopoly, Pedro de Alvarado, had attacked the Aztec during a festival, causing the simmering tensions in the city to boil over. **Page 283 Diaz** Upon the return of the expedition, Cortes and his men were besieged in the palace with Montezuma.

And so, Montezuma was sent out onto the roof, to attempt to get his subjects under control.

...and that brings us to the death knot.

There, on the roof, Montezuma implored his people to lay down their arms, but-

"Barely was the speech finished when a sudden shower of stones and darts descended...

...

It was stated that he had reigned for seventeen years, and was the best king they ever had in Mexico..." - Diaz

So...did angry aztec soldiers slay montezuma?

...After Julius Caesar defeated Pompey the Great and the Roman senate in the Battle of Pharsalus, Pompey would escape to Egypt, as it was ruled by the Ptolemaic family, his old allies. But the Egyptian royal family would treacherously slay pompey, and gift his severed head to Caesar so as to curry favor with him.

...but Caesar was not pleased by this gruesome display. Pompey had been married to Caesar's daughter, he had been a war hero when Caesar was a young man, and the two had worked together as adults for years. Did Julius Caesar, in this moment, tangle with the cost of his ambition? Could it be that the man always portrayed as in control, the man who cast the die and crossed the Rubicon, who had played the game better than anyone had ever played it before...had not truly understood what happens when someone loses? A usually generous man to former enemies, it's fair to assume Caesar planned to spare Pompey. Had Julius Caesar never considered the possibility that Pompey the Great, his friend, his ally, his inspiration, could lose?

We will never know what Caesar thought at this moment where his ambition killed his friend, but according to Plutarch...he wept.

While Caesar was never much of a drinker, his time trapped in the palace of Alexandria, would be time spent drinking himself to sleep. His ambition for a time, seemingly spent. He had killed his friend, and now he was trapped in the clutches of a foreign boy king and a restless angry city sick of Roman influence.

We try to paint Caesar, Napoleon, Alexander, and yes, even Cortes, as mythical figures. Always in control, always strong and decisive, but it is these moments that pull me in. The moments where they stop being myths, and start being human.

...Cortes wept upon seeing Montezuma's remains...as did many conquistadors. They'd spent the better part of a year with the man, hunting, playing, talking. Could it be that Cortes-

COMPUTER: No.

Cortes was not Caesar.

Cortes' right-hand man was Sandoval, and he was always trusted with the most sensitive assignments by Cortes. Sandoval would spend much of the war in charge of the colony of Villa Rica, and years later, would travel with Cortes to Spain. But upon the road, fell deathly ill.

Sandoval

After all we've been through...it seems a cruel joke for a little fever to kill me.

Cortes

Don't talk like that...we survived a war against two empires at once...this fever will pass in no time.

Sandoval

No...we were young men, then. Filled with the fire of ambition...but now...I'm...I'm so tired...have we been Godly men, Cortes? The swords of Christ? ...as the darkness calls me...it whispers a terrible truth...that our swords swung for gold and glory...and never for God.

Zoom out, cortes gone**Sandoval**

...Cortes? Hello?

Sandoval would be robbed by an innkeeper and die penniless and alone after Cortes abandoned him on the road. **Page 176, when montezuma met cortes**

...Cortes didn't cry, and Montezuma almost certainly didn't get killed by his subjects. But...why lie about this? The Spanish had previously burned native rulers alive, the fucking Incan emperor would end up being choked to death, they probably high-fived each other after, why *lie* about Montezuma?

...he surrendered, didn't he? He surrendered without resistance, he allowed himself to be captive for 6 months, and he was a steadfast ally of the Spanish. I can say without a shadow of a doubt that Montezuma did not die from his wounds on that roof...he died on November 8th, 1519, as that was the day that Montezuma... The cannibal king. The Great Speaker. The heir to an empire and the coward who gave it up, died, and was replaced by a murky cloud of politics.

...did Montezuma die of his wounds from the Aztec after being held hostage by the Spaniards for nearly a year, or...after the Spanish were honored guests for a year, did Cortes, now strengthened with a much larger force by Narvaez's surrender and eager to maintain their loyalty with gold, take Montezuma captive, causing the city to rise against him? And upon being besieged in the palace, did the Spaniards cut down Montezuma in cold blood? What use was he...after all...if he could not control his people?

...lies beget lies. And we may never know. In place of a story, we have knot after knot, one after the other, tied by greedy and generous men alike, all pushing a different narrative to different ends.

The Spanish would escape the city in the night, a night now known as the Noche Triste, the night of tears. The cost of this retreat would be devastating, the thirteen hundred soldiers Cortés got from Narváez had almost all drowned in the lake, their pockets weighed down with gold. One of these bars has even been recovered in a recent archeological dig. Thirteen hundred men entered Tenochtitlan after Narváez' defeat, and 400 left. The Spanish would go to Tlaxcallan, gather fresh troops, and return to lay siege to the great city, a city now suffering from a debilitating smallpox plague, as well as a power struggle.

The Aztec ruled their empire in just about the most hands-off way an empire could be ruled. As long as tribute was delivered as agreed-upon, the many city-states in their "territory" *and we should use that term lightly* would govern themselves as they had prior to their defeat. With the death of Montezuma, a succession crisis occurred. The previous regional power of Mesoamerica, those that had preceded the Aztec, the city of Azcapotzalco, had lost their power during a succession crisis of their own.

And as with Azcapotzalco's fall from power...the writing was on the wall.

Steel and germs absolutely played a significant part in the fall of the Aztec, but they were the obsidian daggers that opened the chest, that which pulled the heart out was their system of government.

The Aztec brought city's under their influence in many ways, war of course, but also diplomacy, favors and intimidation. But what fear could a dying city project? What favors were there to earn with a dead man? What benefits were there to siding with a lost cause, when you could instead join the Spanish, and curry favor with what looked to be the new regional power?

Even their once-firm allies of Texcoco who had benefited greatly from this system, those that had helped defeat Azcapotzalco, turned to the Spanish side, hoping for favorable relations after the city of Tenochtitlan's now inevitable defeat.

The Aztec empire was already dead. An empire that ruled through a complex web of fear and favors could not maintain that appearance of power and control, as their city was dying, and the vast network of city-states rebelled during this period of weakness and uncertainty. The Aztec had dominated the region for 100 years, but that domination was built on reputation, and that reputation died with Montezuma.

Among the conquistador deaths during the Noche Triste, was a man named Botello the Astrologer.

When the conquistadors went through his belongings, I know, you're shocked, the conquistadors didn't respect other's personal property, it's crazy, Díaz notes that Botello had a journal filled with the names of conquistadors, and their fates according to the stars...

“Also in the box was an object four inches long and made of leather, in the shape of a man’s genitals. The resemblance was remarkable...” - Diaz

I love this guy so fuckin much.

It was the work of Bernal Diaz that dragged me into this story, his work is enrapturing, hilarious, heartfelt, and thrilling...but beyond that it is simple. Offering quick answers to the many questions raised by one of the most complicated and politically-divisive events in human history. This simplicity lies at the heart of its success, and failure.

EPILOGUE

Bernal Diaz...didn’t know what was happening. It’s hard to blame him, as neither did the mesoamerican people...until it was too late.

On the last page of the last book of the Florentine Codex, the now-defeated leaders of Tenochtitlan brought gold to Cortes. The entire interaction went as you could imagine.

Cortes

I know you’ve got more ya fuckin liar.

Ciuacoatl

Maybe some of the commoners took it in the chaos of war? Perhaps some poor woman hid the gold beneath her skirt, but in such case, you will find it.

In this exchange, besides that sick burn...we see how the Aztec saw their own defeat...because let me tell ya! They were fuckin confused.

They tried to explain to Cortes that now that he’d won he was to return home, and the Aztec would pay tribute to the Spanish as tribute had once been paid to them.

This was the way of mesoamerican war, you defeat your enemy, burn their temple to establish dominance, then you go home and wait to receive your tribute, which will most likely come on a yearly basis. The loser essentially maintained their independence, the winner gets luxury goods and resources until they lose the power required to enforce their demands.

As the Spanish burned Tenochtitlan to the ground, and established Mexico City, which would become their base of operations for future expeditions, it became clear that this was not what war was to the Spanish. The Spanish did not want tribute, they wanted everything, and they would not return home, they had conquered a new one and would shape it in their image.

The Aztec, from their diplomatic meeting in November 1519, to the fall of Tenochtitlan, were fighting the sort of war they'd fought countless times before. A mesoamerican power-struggle, and the stakes of such a war was losing your position in the tribute system. Not your independence, nor your culture. The Spanish were fighting a different war, a war of conquest, a total war aimed at subjugating the region.

Within the context of a "war of conquest", Aztec actions looked weak, indecisive, and generally embarrassing, and it is only when you take their perspective that their actions appear reasonable and measured. The Aztec brought a macuahuitl to a sword fight.

They did not understand that their way of life was morally abhorrent to the Spanish, they did not know they were dealing with investors and not diplomats, they did not know that this was an existential threat to their way of life, they thought it was a threat to Tenochtitlan's regional power, and they acted accordingly.

The nature of mesoamerican warfare would largely be buried, and it is only in recent years that serious attempts to understand their perspective has shed light on what occurred.

While the Dutch and English would spread propaganda about the Spanish and establish a "black legend" around their empire, this does not compare to the black legend the Spanish formulated around the Aztec. They had total control over the narrative for nearly a hundred years until such famed Nahuatl historians as Ixtilxochitl and Chimalpahin would arise near the end of the 16th century, but by that point the eyewitnesses of the conquest were dead, and those two men were as Spanish as they were Nahuatl.

The black legend around the Aztec is...madness.

They were savage inhuman barbarians...who built a glorious storybook city and surrendered on sight. Montezuma was an inconsistent two-faced bastard who was totally docile and easy to control. It doesn't make sense. It's a nonsensical narrative that, despite Diaz, despite Las Casas, despite Sahagun...was communicated almost totally by Hernan Cortes. Everything that has ever been written about the fall of the Aztec *has to* depend on his letters, despite the absolutely nonsensical narrative contained within them...

Did you know...Hernan Cortes studied for several years to be a lawyer?

...

That was...the last thing I learned about this whole event, and it made it all click. It was this understanding of the Spanish legal system that helped Cortes get away with what he did, in combination with the fact that when a guy hands you an empire for free, you probably don't ask too many questions.

Hernan Cortez studied to be a lawyer, and he lived like a lawyer. He did not write a history, he wrote a legal argument. He wrote a legal argument that holds zero water and has for five centuries made this event, one of the most important events in human history, almost impossible to parse. And as he lived like a lawyer, so too did he die like a lawyer, on a pile of gold and lies.

And, unfortunately, in these final moments of this 3 hour tangle of lawyer doublespeak, old man rambling, and censorship...

I have to quote 1984.

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