500 Years Later, The Spanish Conquest Of Mexico Is Still Being Debated

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Five-hundred years ago, two men met and changed much of the world forever. About 500 Spanish conquistadors — ragged from skirmishes, a massacre of an Indigenous village and a hike between massive volcanoes — couldn't believe what they saw: an elegant island city in a land that Europeans didn't know existed until a few years before. "It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before," wrote conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo.

The date was November 8, 1519. Hernán Cortés walked them down a causeway leading into the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, and was greeted by this land's most powerful man: Emperor Montezuma II. (Montezuma was Mexica, but the term Aztec is often used to denote the triple alliance of civilizations that made up his empire.)

According to Cortés, Montezuma immediately recognized the divine right of the Spanish and the Catholic Church to rule these lands and he surrendered his empire. But according to historian Matthew Restall, author of the book *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, this is simply wrong. "The more that I thought about [the surrender], the more I decided it just didn't quite make sense," he tells NPR. "But then what really got me interested was this question, if it's a lie, how has it lasted for 500 years?"

The meeting of Montezuma and Cortés — in what today is Mexico City — and the true story of the conquest that followed it still weigh heavily in Mexico half a millennium later.

Twice this year, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has publicly asked the Spanish crown to apologize for atrocities against native people. So far, Spain has rejected that request.

The story of the Spanish conquest, as it has been commonly understood for 500 years, goes like this: Montezuma surrendered his empire to Cortés. Cortés and his men entered Tenochtitlán and lived there peacefully for months until rebellious Aztecs attacked them. Montezuma was killed by friendly fire. The surviving conquistadors escaped the city and later returned with Spanish reinforcements. They bravely laid siege to Tenochtitlán for months and finally captured it on August 13, 1521, with the Spanish taking their rightful place as leaders of the land we now know as Mexico. Conquest accomplished.

"History is messy, and this story tidies up all of that mess and turns the messy, unpleasant war that took place 500 years ago into a nice, tidy dramatic narrative that has a hero [Cortés] and antihero [Montezuma] and has some kind of climactic, glorious ending," says Restall.

In *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Restall revises this story. He ditches the word "conquest" and instead refers to the time as the Spanish-Aztec war. He says Cortés was a "mediocrity" with little personal impact on the unfolding of events and refocuses on complex territorial battles between the Aztecs and their rivals. The Tlaxcallan Empire, which allied with the Spanish, was the driving force, outnumbering conquistadors 50-to-1 during the war with the Aztecs. Smallpox and a betrayal from an Aztec ally dealt the final blow. The wondrous island city fell, but it would take years for the Spanish to establish control in New Spain.

The Aztecs had deep, complex rituals around death. Aztecs believed their gods needed nourishment to survive and made them offerings of people and animals. For example, offering warriors — primarily prisoners of war — ensured the sun would continue to shine and the Aztecs would be successful in war. The Spanish didn't see it that way.

"The image we have of the Aztecs was overwhelmingly invented by Spaniards at the time," says Restall. "They used it to not only justify the conquest and colonization but any and all acts of violence that subsequently emerged."

"Misunderstanding and misrepresentation of something like Aztec civilization today can make it easier for us to misunderstand and misrepresent Indigenous peoples of the Americas," Restall says.

With Mexico's president still insisting on Spain's apology and calling for "reconciliation" with the Spanish over the conquest, it will continue to be present in modern-day Mexico.