Early modern history | *Book Review*

Germ warfare

How European viruses toppled the Aztec and Inca empires

By Ronald Wright

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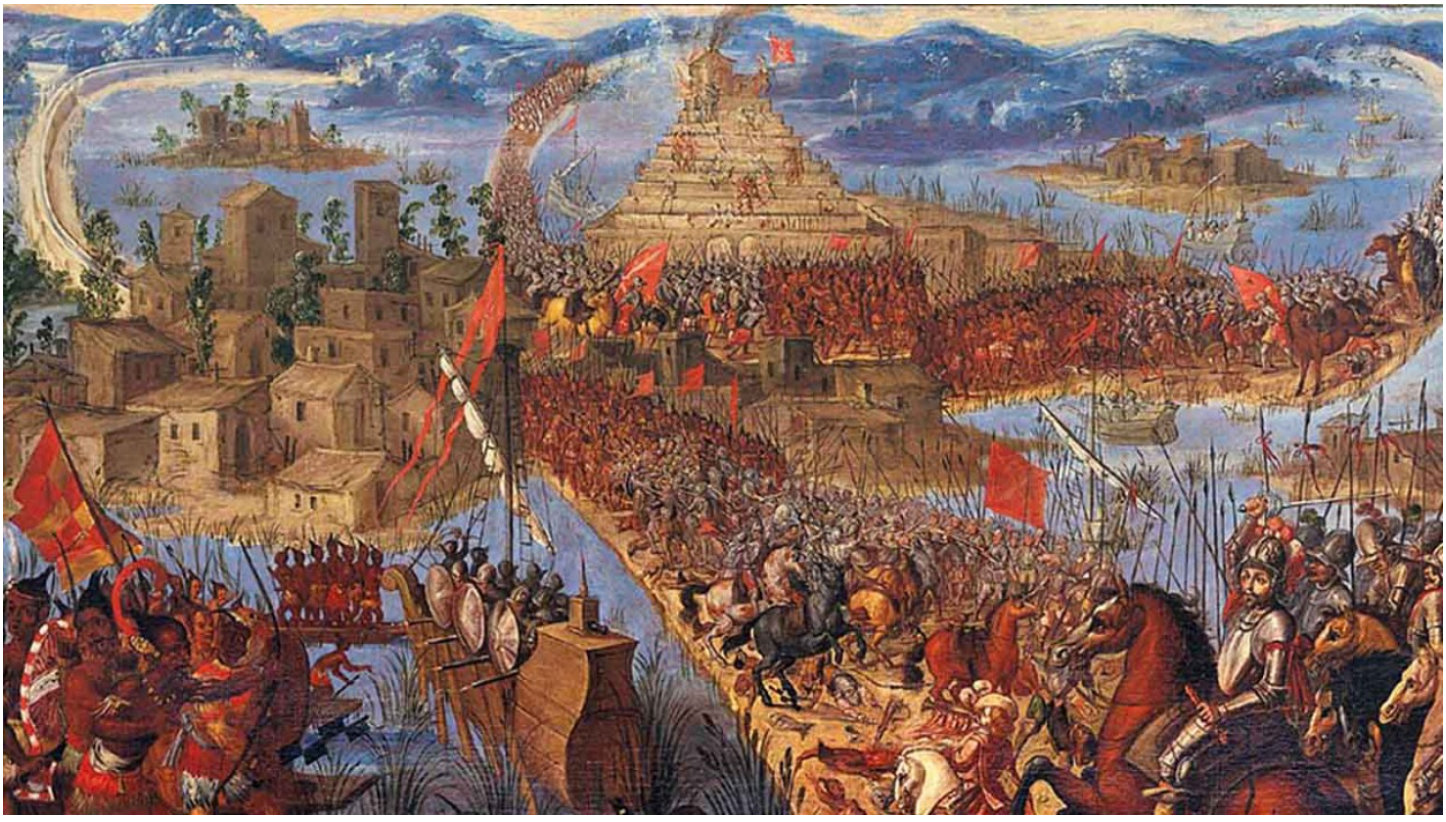

"The Conquest of Tenochtitlan" by an unknown artist, seventeenth century

IN THIS REVIEW

COLLISION OF WORLDS
A deep history of the fall of Aztec Mexico and the forging of New Spain
358pp. Oxford University Press. £26.99 (US $34.95).
David M. Carballo

INCA APOCALYPSE
The Spanish Conquest and the transformation of the Andean world
464pp. Oxford University Press. £26.99 (US $34.95).
R. Alan Covey

CONQUISTADORES
A new history
491pp. Allen Lane. £30.
Fernando Cervantes

Like conspiracy theories and fake news, the winners' history dies hard. People still wonder why Europeans found America first, or how small bands of Spaniards toppled mighty empires at a stroke. The conquistadors' letters and reports, shaped for their king's ear, framed history for centuries.

America's discoverers were, of course, the Ice Age hunter-gatherers who peopled the New World at least 18,000 years before Europeans reached its shores. Once the ice sheets thawed, separate yet parallel cultural experiments began in both New World and Old, as the discovery of farming led to civilization. Despite differing geography, ecologies and domesticable species, the results turned out remarkably alike. When Spaniards and Mexicans came face-to-face 500 years ago, each side could recognize the other's institutions. Governments, priesthoods, armies, markets, cities, roads, mines, law courts, schools, mathematics, astronomy, sports, theatre, books and fine art had evolved independently on both sides of the Atlantic.

As Adam Smith and Karl Marx both saw, the stolen wealth of the New World fed Europe's sudden rise to world dominance and the industrial revolution. Had the Americas not been there – as Columbus himself believed, insisting till his death that he had been to Asia – the West would have had to take longer, slower paths towards modernity.

Although the Spanish invasions have been portrayed as swift and decisive, that is not how they unfolded. For more than a generation after 1492, Spain achieved little beyond planting a few outposts on Caribbean islands. It would take Europeans three decades to win a foothold on the mainland, defended by the Maya and other advanced societies. The last Maya city-state held out for 200 years.

In his seminal work *The Columbian Exchange (1972)*, Alfred Crosby established that Old World plagues were the main conquerors of the New. Centuries of exposure had given Europeans significant immunity, but American peoples had never met such sicknesses (and had none comparable of their own). Smallpox was the deadliest, capable of killing about half a population in a first attack. The Spaniards did not overcome any major state or empire until a great wave of smallpox washed through the hemisphere in the 1520s, cutting down the Aztecs, Maya and Incas as severely as Europe's Black Death. Invasions before this first wave all failed: in 1517, the Maya drove Francisco Hernández from the shores of Yucatan; in 1520, the Aztecs routed Hernán Cortés at Mexico City; in 1521, Florida bowmen put an end to Ponce de León's quest for the Fountain of Youth; and in 1524, the Incas crushed Aleijo García's raid on the Paraguayan border of their empire.

David Carballo, author of *Collision of Worlds*, teaches archaeology at Boston University and is a specialist in Mesoamerica – the parts of Mexico and Central America in which high civilizations arose and interacted over thousands of

years. Most experts put Mesoamerica's population at some 20 million in 1500, roughly twice that of Spain and Portugal together. Mesoamerican polities took a city-state form, as in Classical Greece and Renaissance Italy, dominating lesser states through military hegemony and lopsided trading. Structures of this kind are precarious; when shaken by catastrophe such as pestilence or invasion – or, in the Aztec case, both at once – they are apt to come undone.

Carballo begins long before the collision itself, outlining the "deep history" of Mesoamerica and Spain. Both had semi-mythic traditions of a classical age from which they drew ideals and dreams of greatness. Both were shaped by centuries of medieval warfare among small states. In Mexico this led to a highly militarized culture with a sacred mission: to feed the universe with the blood of captured warriors sacrificed at the top of a city's temple to its war god. In a world of earthquakes and volcanoes, Carballo writes, "the Aztecs and other groups clearly believed in the efficacy of [sacrifice] as a debt payment to divine forces". Spain's holiest task was a 700-year *reconquista* against Islamic rule, in which the apostle James also became a war god: Santiago Matamoros, "the Moor Slayer". The reconquest ended in 1492 with the fall of Granada; some of the loot was used for outfitting Columbus.

The heart of Carballo's book is the Spanish–Mexican war of 1519–21. Cortés and his Spaniards slowly advanced from the Gulf Coast to the highlands of central Mexico, fighting but also making alliances with small states eager to break free from the Aztec grasp. Chief among these was Tlaxcala, which played a key role throughout the war, contributing intelligence, troops and a refuge. Late in 1519, the invaders crossed over the volcanoes and beheld a bowl of great lakes shimmering in the distance. Around the shore stood many towns marked by steep temples. And on an island in the middle of the water reached by long causeways stood the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco (Mexico City), bigger than any metropolis in the Americas or Europe at that time.

Its ruler, Moctezuma II, assigned the strangers a palace on the central square, perhaps as a trap. An uneasy peace held for months. But while Cortés went down to the coast to win over a rival Spanish force, his deputy massacred hundreds of unarmed Aztecs at a spring festival. Mexico's council of nobles then deposed Moctezuma and elected his brother Cuitláhuac, whom Carballo describes as "a consistent critic of appeasing the Spaniards". Open warfare broke out in the streets and Moctezuma died at Spanish hands, likely murdered by Cortés. As the invaders tried to flee in mid-1520, the Aztecs routed them, slaughtering two-thirds of the 1,200 Europeans and thousands of their allies. Many thought the Spaniards were done for, having lost most of their men and the advantage of surprise. Furthermore, the Aztecs were closing the technology gap, arming themselves with steel weapons from enemy dead.

But then, "when the Christians were exhausted from war", a friar wrote, "God saw fit to send the Indians smallpox". Among its victims was Cuitlahuac. Meanwhile Cortés managed to rebuild his army, as further Spanish forces landed, drawn by tales of gold. Even so, it took a three-month siege for the island city to fall from starvation, sickness and a block-by-block assault in the summer of 1521. The local allies' hope of winning freedom by backing the invaders was short-lived. The Spaniards did not so much destroy the Aztec empire as take it over, making its capital their own and dragooning local troops to quell the rest of Mexico and highland Guatemala. Pestilence continued to be the Spaniards' greatest ally; wave after wave scoured the land, worsened by economic and ecological chaos. Between 1520 and 1576, Mesoamerica's population fell from 20 million to 2 million, bottoming at 1 million in the 1620s. Without this demographic collapse, Carballo writes, the "transition from Mesoamerica to New Spain would have looked more like European colonial endeavours in Asia".

Well researched, up-to-date, and even-handed, *Collision of Worlds* is a much-

needed retelling of the Aztec overthrow, giving due weight to archaeological findings and indigenous sources, especially those written in Nahuatl by eyewitnesses who let us see into the Mexican side of a complex tragedy long told from mostly European viewpoints.

Inca Apocalypse brings a similar approach to the Andean part of South America, outlining the mindsets behind two growing empires, Spain and Peru, before analysing their clash. After some amusing anecdotes about ancient bones, including the two corpses ascribed to Francisco Pizarro, R. Alan Covey briefly surveys earlier books in English, noting how William Prescott's classic *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847) found a worthy successor in John Hemming's definitive *Conquest of the Incas* (1970). Hemming walked the land and sifted archives, drawing on Inca sources such as the resistance leader Titu Cusi Yupanqui. Giving much of his book to the forty-year war between Spanish Peru and the free state of Vilcabamba, he thoroughly debunked the notion that the Inca empire fell on one afternoon at Cajamarca. Yet, as Covey adds, Jared Diamond revived the myth of the "battle" of Cajamarca – a massacre of unarmed courtiers where no Spaniard died – in his tendentious *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), promoting the misconception "that a single confrontation brought the entire Andean world under Spanish rule".

Though hardly the triumph Diamond wished us to believe, the capture of Atahuallpa at Cajamarca in 1532 *was* a consequence of germs. When Pizarro first touched at Tumbes and other Peruvian seaports in 1526, he saw a thriving land with small camels, golden temples, good government, and no poverty or hunger. Known as Tawantinsuyu ("United Quarters"), this was a formal empire, running along the Pacific coast and Andean highlands from southern Colombia to central Chile and western Argentina, second only to Ming China in extent though with a smaller population (about the same as Mesoamerica's). When

Pizarro returned with an army five years later, Tumbes was an empty ruin. Smallpox had killed the great emperor Huayna Capac in his prime, along with his chosen heir, countless nobles and officials, and maybe half Tawantinsuyu's people. This had led to a bitter civil war between minor sons backed by royal and ethnic factions. Just emerging as the winner, Atahuallpa took little notice of the strange invaders, except to have them spied on. Informed they were lazy brigands, yet intrigued by their "big llamas", he lured the Spaniards to Cajamarca, intending to crush them and keep their horses before resuming his triumphal march to Cuzco, the Inca capital. Overproud, overconfident and deaf to advisers, Atahuallpa fell into his own trap. While the captive Inca raised the richest ransom in world history, Pizarro awaited reinforcements; then killed him anyway.

Covey's main interests are archaeological and ethnohistorical, giving a fresh analysis of the royal clans descended from each king and queen (who, as in Egypt, were ideally brother and sister). Women were mightier in Inca politics and culture than the Spaniards imagined; Covey tries to reconstruct their roles, including the priestesses and chosen maidens who lived in great communal buildings. The splendid walls of the one in central Cuzco not only survive but house a convent to this day. Women were the keepers of royal mummies, who had a busy afterlife at festivals and banquets, and of each clan's history. Covey casts a critical eye on conflicting traditions. At times he makes up his mind rather hastily, for example when dismissing accounts of an attack on early Cuzco by warlike neighbours because archaeology has found no trace of it. Absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence, especially in a land as far-flung and rugged as the Andes. Even in England, it was a long time before Richard III was found under a carpark.

For the Inca civil war, he draws freely on the chronicle by Juan de Betanzos, who married Atahuallpa's cousin Cusirimay and became fluent in Quechua.

This work, much of it lost until the 1980s, is of great importance, though partisan. Covey is on firmer ground with the wars between Incas and Spaniards and among the invaders themselves. Nearly all the leading conquistadors at Cajamarca were dead within ten years – mostly from infighting and treachery, though one of Pizarro's brothers was killed by Manco Inca. A teenager crowned in 1533, and the highest-ranking prince to escape Atahuallpa's purges, Manco began as a Spanish ally, thinking he could stop the invasion by becoming a vassal of King Charles. But after further conquistador mayhem, he launched the resistance, killing more than a thousand Spaniards and nearly retaking Cuzco.

The latter part of Covey's fascinating book deals with the four decades it took Spain to subdue rogue invaders and independent Incas. Especially good is his discussion of crown policy towards the free state of Vilcabamba, ruled by Manco and his sons until 1572. Influenced by enlightened Spanish churchmen who upheld indigenous rights on moral grounds, King Charles seems to have accepted that the resistance was sparked by conquistador brutality, and sought peace with the "rebel" Incas. Such policies were betrayed in the 1570s by Viceroy Toledo, sent out by Philip II with a conflicting mandate to treat Peruvians justly yet ramp up mining to pay for Spain's escalating European wars. As Toledo reached Cuzco, where he "stopped for almost two years to attack and destroy lingering claims of Inca sovereignty", he "began to refer to the Incas as the real 'tyrants' in the Andes". After commissioning works of historical propaganda to blacken the whole dynasty, Toledo managed to crush Vilcabamba and behead its last king, Tupac Amaru. He then devised a ruthless forced labour system that would feed Andean lives into the toxic mercury and silver mines for more than 200 years.

In *Conquistadores*, Fernando Cervantes seeks to persuade us that posterity has judged the conquerors too harshly. Their world, he asserts, "was not the cruel,

backward, obscurantist and bigoted myth of legend, but the late-medieval crusading world which saw the stamping out of the last vestiges of Muslim rule [and] the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492". This contorted argument doesn't do his case much good. Later, he adds the staggering claim that Spain's three-century empire had "no major rebellions". William the Silent? Tupac Amaru II?

Born in Mexico, Cervantes teaches history at Bristol University. He is both a Lay Dominican and a member of the Bartolomé de Las Casas Institute, named after the great moral critic of Spain's conquests. It is indeed to Spain's credit that she not only produced men such as Las Casas – a former conquistador himself – but listened to them; if to little effect on the ground. Herein lies the moral dilemma of most empires, and the challenge for this book. How can one claim the conquistadors have been unfairly damned by modern standards when the same standards were being upheld in their own day?

Though subtitled *A new history*, there is little in this book untold in Prescott's classics and many popular works. Cervantes has so little interest in indigenous culture that one seldom gets a sense of who or what the conquerors were conquering. In the few pages he does grant to the American civilizations, he can't resist highlighting their most shocking practices. At times he mentions Spanish atrocities as well, but skips many of the worst. There's no doubt the Mexicans sacrificed people, as did Europeans with their heretic bonfires. The history Cervantes tells best is the final siege of the Aztec capital in 1521. Its lakes are mostly drained, and Mexico City now sprawls over the whole basin. Yet the names of the old towns survive as neighbourhoods, among which he grew up. This gives him a clear sense of geography as the Spaniards and their allies relentlessly close in.

The same cannot be said of his Peruvian chapters, weakened by unfamiliarity

and blunders (for example, giving Hernando de Soto "a crucial role" during Manco's resistance, which did not begin until Soto was back in Spain). Cervantes breaks off with Pizarro's murder in 1541, adding nothing further on Peru except to praise the "success" thirty years later of Viceroy Toledo – without a word on his infamous mining laws. Lima's Archbishop of the day was not so blithe, writing to the king (in words quoted by Hemming, not Cervantes): "For the love of God, let Your Highness order their revocation!"

***Ronald Wright**'s books include* A Short History of Progress*, 2004, and* Stolen Continents*, 1992. His* Time Among the Maya *was reissued in a new edition in the UK in 2020*

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