Spanish Conquests Of The Aztecs

The Spanish Conquistadors won against the Aztecs due to a combination of experience, motivation and dumb luck. The Spanish past of war and violence prepared them for any opponent, and their dirty, smelly country drove them to sacrifice anything for money and status. But the Conquistadors' main reason for winning was the strong and powerful leadership of Hernan Cortes, the extreme intelligence and skill of Malinalli, and the outbreak of foreign disease in the Aztec empire, all which were instances of luck. Cortes won partly through skill, but the rest of the Conquistadors may not have been so successful had they had a less ruthless leader. Malinalli was also a stroke of luck for the Spanish, and her ability to quickly learn Spanish, and her knowledge of the Aztec culture, was crucial for the Spanish's triumph. Diseases such as smallpox, chickenpox and syphilis were the final blow for the Aztecs, and their lack of immunity was the last misfortune that caused the empire to crumble.

The Spanish and the Aztecs came from vastly different military histories, with the Spanish at an advantage. The Spanish Conquistadors were experienced enough to be ready for anything a new civilisation could throw at them. Having just been through the Spanish Inquisition, and being very used to fighting with not only their neighbours but also with civilisations very different to their own, they were well equipped for a battle with anyone. The Aztecs, meanwhile, were only experienced fighting neighbouring tribes with the same technological advancements and tools. Their major weapons were sharp sticks, sometimes with obsidian blades. They fought on foot, and although they did have more specialised weapons like poison darts, their strategy was largely to outnumber and win by killing randomly. The Spanish had access to swords, bows and most importantly, armour. Aztec warriors found it very difficult to fight against people who didn't die when they stabbed them with their spears. The Spanish also had access to a few horses, giving them the benefits of shock and fear, as well as the higher ground and faster speeds. Their technology and military experience gave them a significant advantage in the battles they fought.

The Spanish also had a driving motivation propelling them forward, where the Aztecs were conflicted and confused. The Aztec religion prophesised the end of the world in the same year the Spanish came to their land, and their leader, Moctezuma, was paralysed with indecision. He was not sure whether attacking the invaders would stop the world's end or anger the gods. Their home was being invaded, so they had no time to prepare, and they had no clear goal. The Spanish meanwhile, came from a dirty, unhygienic, crowded country in Europe, filled with poor, starving or sickly people. Cortes himself grew up as an unhealthy child, and he needed status if he and his family stood a chance in the world. The Conquistadors all held similar mindsets; glory and fame or death. The Aztecs were afraid they would all meet their death if they made a decision. The Spanish were willing to sacrifice much more than the Aztecs in a decision, because they believed it would bring them the desired end goal.

Hernan Cortes was a motivated, charismatic and ruthless leader. Abandoning his higher ups with a crew of like-minded men in the search for land, he made many enemies along the way. By the time he had reached the shores of Central America, there were already whispers that they would not succeed, and turning back would be a better option. Cortes immediately identified the ringleader, executed him and burned all their ships, leaving them with no choice

but to follow his rule. With fear, power and determination, he kept his troops alive, mostly by showing them the consequences for betraying him. Moctezuma was indecisive and made many mistakes, leading to his arrest and eventual murder. Cortes was cunning and used every asset to his advantage, knowing he didn't have many. His charisma also bought them many allies throughout their journey. His resourcefulness kept his troops alive, even when facing enemies much larger than his own.

The Aztecs had many enemies and they joined together when they saw a chance to defeat them. Many smaller tribes joined forces with the Aztecs, but the most prominent is Malinalli, the slave girl traded to Cortes and his men near the beginning of their journey, who played a vital role in the Conquistadors' understanding of the Aztec empire. Learning Spanish within a few months, Malinalli was extremely intelligent, knowledgeable in many languages and cultural customs. Cortes quickly realised this, and he elevated her position, both to translator and to his personal mistress. She used this newfound power to her advantage, and her hatred of the Aztecs motivated her to work with the Spanish, to earn a more profitable life should they succeed. She knew her only other option was life as a slave, so she put all her efforts into Cortes and his men. She translated all his interactions with Moctezuma, and bore a child for Cortes, a boy. She also advised him on political moves; what would unsettle the Aztecs, what would surprise them and what would outrage them. Her influence was felt throughout the entire mission, and her help was invaluable to the Conquistadors' win.

Disease was the last straw for the Aztec Empire. They had been raging war with the Spanish, drifted in and out of their control, and their leader was dead. Their civilisation was falling apart. Then European diseases began spreading like wildfire. Thousands died, and hundreds more fell sick. Their power weakening and their immune systems unfamiliar to the new diseases, the Aztec Empire collapsed. The diseases alone would have severely impacted the empire and possibly killed them all off, but without other factors in play, the Spanish would also have been vanquished. When Cortes heard the news, he reclaimed the Empire, and sailed back to Spain, rich, famous and in favour of the king. Few Aztecs survived the devastating blow to the society, and the Spanish overran it and began building a new civilisation. Pure misfortune for the Aztecs caused them, at last, to crumble.

The Spanish were able to colonize the Aztecs despite a major disadvantage in numbers due to their advantages in past experience, motivations, leaders, allies and luck. The Spanish were well experienced in a variety of enemies, their goal was clear and easy to work toward, they had a strong and unscrupulous leader, they gained many allies in the form of other tribes and Malinalli, and their immunity to European diseases helped immensely. The Aztecs lack variety in their military tactics, they were conflicted about their decisions, their leader was indecisive and allowed himself to be kidnapped, manipulated and killed, they had many enemies, and they were unlucky. The Spanish were successful mostly due to luck, both the luck of having people on their side, and having an unknown weapon.