In an astonishing work of scholarship that reads like an adventure thriller, historian Buddy Levy records the last days of the Aztec empire and the two men at the center of an epic clash of cultures.

“I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold.” —Hernán Cortés

It was a moment unique in human history, the face-to-face meeting between two men from civilizations a world apart. Only one would survive the encounter. In 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived on the shores of Mexico with a roughshod crew of adventurers and the intent to expand the Spanish empire. Along the way, this brash and roguish conquistador schemed to convert the native inhabitants to Catholicism and carry off a fortune in gold. That he saw nothing paradoxical in his intentions is one of the most remarkable—and tragic—aspects of this unforgettable story of conquest.

In Tenochtitlán, the famed City of Dreams, Cortés met his Aztec counterpart, Montezuma: king, divinity, ruler of fifteen million people, and commander of the most powerful military machine in the Americas. Yet in less than two years, Cortés defeated the entire Aztec nation in one of the most astonishing military campaigns ever waged. Sometimes outnumbered in battle thousands-to-one, Cortés repeatedly beat seemingly impossible odds. Buddy Levy meticulously researches the mix of cunning,
courage, brutality, superstition, and finally disease that enabled Cortés and his men to survive.

Conquistador is the story of a lost kingdom—a complex and sophisticated civilization where floating gardens, immense wealth, and reverence for art stood side by side with bloodstained temples and gruesome rites of human sacrifice. It’s the story of Montezuma—proud, spiritual, enigmatic, and doomed to misunderstand the stranger he thought a god. Epic in scope, as entertaining as it is enlightening, Conquistador is history at its most riveting.


The Conquest of Mexico was not a single event, it was not the result of disease, treachery, technology, or evil it was a long two year slog of battles won and battles lost. Too often the events surrounding the Conquest are simplified to issues of technology or disease and to a demonizing of the Spaniards. The reality is of course more nuanced and the simplification denigrates all sides.

This book does an admirable job of introducing the History and some of the issues related to the Conquest in an honest way. It draws on sources from all sides, including modern research and legacy studies. It presents the events in a complete enough narrative to tell the story with out getting bogged down in the details, some of which can be quite gory.

There are many other books available on this same topic but they tend to be one-sided or focused on a single topic. When for instance a writer tries to make the case that Spanish victory was predicated on superior technology the writer would denigrate Spanish tactics, Aztec adaptations to technology and tactics. The focal point of this book is on the two leaders, Cortes and Montezuma.

The image of Cortes presented is a fairly complete image. This image may very well surprise many casual readers. Cortes was a real person and defies simple demonizing. He was physically very brave almost to the point of abject recklessness. The travail he endured is astounding. Cortes did not win every battle he presided over the long retreat from Mexico City and he proved capable of learning and adapting to the methods and abilities of his opponents. This natural military ability is something that is often overlooked in rash judgments which focus on technology or disease. The simple truth is that the majority of Cortés’s forces were not Spanish they were locals. The gaining of local support speaks to another side of Cortes which gets overlooked and that is his diplomatic skills. His ability to discern fissures in the Aztec world and exploit them, creating a unified force of opposition, a coalition of the willing. We also see the darker side of Cortes,
the side we are more apt to be familiar with the earnest religious zealot and the gold hungry adventurer.

The Aztec ruler is also fleshed out and we meet a troubled man at the height of his powers who has been a priest and a successful warrior. He is in church of a society built up on the shoulders of a triple federation, tribute, fear, and faith. Too often we get a glamorized image of the Aztecs, the kind that is popular in Mexico today ... which is often far from the truth.

This book ends really with the birth of a son to Cortes and to his native interpreter mistress. In a way this is fitting as there in lays the creation of modern Mexico a blend of two civilizations moving forward together.

All told this book is an excellent introduction the casual reader and beginning scholar of a story which seems at times more fiction then truth, but which really happened.

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