

**To what extent did the outbreak of small pox undermine the military ability of the Aztec soldiers during the fall of Tenochtitlan (1519-1521)?**



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## Section One – Identification and Evaluation of Source

This investigation will explore the question of to what extent did the outbreak of small pox undermine the military ability of the Aztec soldiers during the fall of Tenochtitlan (1519-1521).

The first source that will be evaluated is the letters written by Hernan Cortes to King Charles V during the conquest of the Aztecs, translated from Spanish by Anthony Pagden. Being a key eye-witness account of the conquest, the origin of the source is especially valuable to my investigation because Cortes was the military commander of the Spanish force, and his descriptions on smallpox would reveal its importance to the final victory. As a result, when the expected smallpox epidemic is not given much attention, it strongly points to the insignificance of the epidemic, which helps to construct a powerful counterargument to the investigation as pointed out by many historians such as McCaa.

The purpose of Cortes writing these letters was to justify his unlawful actions and prove to the king how he might be worthy of rewards. This is a major limitation of the source, because in this case it is highly possible that he chose to downplay the role of smallpox in order to show off his merit. This is evidenced by his attempt to emphasize his role as a successful leader when he describes “they wished by my hand others would be put in place” while glossing over the details of how local chieftains died from the epidemic. This source also faces another limitation as it only provides what Cortes personally witnessed and unable to provide a comprehensive view of the impact of smallpox on the entire native population. Cortes retreated from Tenochtitlan

in June 1520, but smallpox arrived Tenochtitlan in October 1520. This means that the letters fail to provide any account of what exactly happened in Tenochtitlan while smallpox raged, which is key to my investigation.

The second source that will be evaluated is the book *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes, and the Fall of Old Mexico (1993)* written by the English historian Hugh Thomas. The content of his research is especially valuable because he introduces new perspectives on this topic, such as the impact of smallpox on harvest and political situation. This is useful to the investigation as it analyses the links between the epidemic and the performance of the Aztecs during the battle, which is a view that other historians like McCaa and Brooks are lacking.

However, his research still faces certain limitations since some of the arguments are not strongly supported by evidences and remains speculative, partly due to limited information that most primary sources are able to provide. For instance, his view on how smallpox lead to lack of tribute and food in Tenochtitlan is only supported by evidences before the siege, and no evidence was drawn from native accounts during the final siege. Moreover, since the purpose of his research is to provide a comprehensive account of the entire conquest, his research is limited as it tends to provide a generalized account of the epidemic. Most details of the epidemic were very narrative, and he made no attempt to assess the situation based on quantitative analysis, which undermined the plausibility of his arguments to some extent.

Word Count: 534

## Section Two – Investigation

When the Spanish Conquistadors defeated the Aztecs in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was also the first time that smallpox was brought to the New World. In the following centuries, there has been much controversies over the role of smallpox in the defeat of the Aztecs. While historians like William McNeil and Crosby assert that the Spanish victory was only made possible by the outbreak of smallpox, other historians like Brooks argue that the epidemic was only a “mild attack” and had negligible impact (Brooks 29). After close examination of the scale of the epidemic, military performance of the Aztecs, and political climate of the natives, it becomes reasonable to conclude that the outbreak did weaken the military ability of the Aztecs. However, it did so mainly by bringing more instability to the native political situation and weakening the Aztec rule and solidifying Cortes’ political presence, whereas its other influences on military tactics and combat ability of the Aztecs remain minimal.

One of the major reason why historians like Brooks contend that the epidemic was negligible is due to the lack of reference to smallpox made by Spanish conquistadors (Brooks 29). This is notable in the account provided by Hernan Cortes, commander of the Spanish force, whose letters to the king are crucial to our understanding of the conquest. In Cortes’ account of the conquest, he mentioned smallpox only once while explaining the death of one of his ally, with nothing more than a brief remark of “[he] had died of the smallpox” (Cortes 165). Such lack of attention seemingly suggests that the epidemic was of no great significance. However, it seems more probable that Cortes might have created this impression on purpose. At

the time, Cortes' actions were technically unlawful, so he wrote to Charles V mainly to validate his position. Therefore, he might have downplayed the role of smallpox in order to demonstrate his prowess and impress Charles V so he could get rewarded, and one must treat his letters with suspicion.

Combining other key sources, it seems that the epidemic was of a larger scale than what Cortes described and wiped out many local population. Motolinía, a Franciscan missionary in Mexico, wrote in his *Memoriales* that “in some provinces”, “half” the people died (McCaa 416). This is further supported by the account of the diseases in *The Florentine Codex*, a contemporary Nahuatl and Spanish manuscript based on native accounts: “very many Indians died of this pestilence ...the Mexica warriors were greatly weakened by it” (Sahagun 182). From one perspective, it could be argued that this depopulation directly favored the Spanish, as the Aztecs obviously suffered from loss of soldiers. However, as Hassig points out, it is likely that the epidemic has brought the same devastation to the local allies of the Spanish as well since they weren't immune; and because the Spanish only make up a tiny portion of the force, the net effect would be to reduce numbers on both sides, meaning that no profound military advantage is gained or lost by either side (Hassig 125). Moreover, since an accurate figure of the death rate could not be obtained from existing data, and Cortes was able to gain so much local allies during the final siege to cancel out the numerical advantage of the Aztecs, raw number seems inconsequential to the conclusion that this investigation tried to form. Therefore, it becomes reasonable to argue that the impact of smallpox remains minimal on giving the Spanish a numerical

advantage and military superiority over the Aztecs.

Rather, the most profound impact of the epidemic perhaps lies in its ability to disintegrate the rule of Tenochtitlan over its tributaries and exterminate the benefits that Tenochtitlan enjoyed from them. In June 1520, Montezuma, ruler of Tenochtitlan, was killed. For his successor Cuitlahuac to establish authority, showing military prowess to the tribute states was necessary in order to secure their loyalty, as the nature of Aztec leadership was constructed upon military success. However, smallpox killed Cuitlahuac in December before he had any chance to consolidate his rule.

Owing to the unexpected death caused by smallpox, the city was left leaderless for two months before the next inauguration, which further hampered the next leader to consolidate his rule over the tribute states (Hassig 129). This paved the way for many tribute states such as Tezcoco and Chalco to dissolve their bonds with the Aztecs.

Losing these allies means that Tenochtitlan receives less tributes during the siege, especially food, which it heavily relied on as the production capacity of Tenochtitlan was low (Thomas 485). The situation was made even worse as peasants infected with smallpox were immobilized and can not tend to their crops and starvation took place sometimes (Thomas 485). Consequently, the Aztecs suffered from bad health condition and lack of food during the battle. In short, the outbreak of smallpox made the Aztecs more susceptible to a siege warfare as external sources of food and water was cut off, and a Spanish victory was made much easier.

On the other hand, the Spanish leadership remained intact, and the smallpox epidemic provided them an opportunity to increase their power by building up more

alliances. When local rulers died of smallpox, Cortes was in the position to appoint new chieftains “as though he were absolute lord of all the land” (Castillo 340). In this way, Cortes secured two of his most powerful allies, Tetzcoco and Chalco, which granted him geographical advantage to easily reenter the Mexico Valley with adequate local supply (Hassig 136). His local allies proved to be crucial to his victory as they helped to construct brigantines, provide manpower, and supply food to the army during the final assault, while Tenochtitlan was unable to obtain enough food and succumbed to the brigantines. Although it could be argued that Cortes’ control over appointing local chieftains is exaggerated, but it was undeniable that the epidemic provided Cortes an opportunity to penetrate into the local politics. If smallpox hadn’t helped to upset the political climate, the other states would not lose faith in Cuauhtemoc and Cortes would not have secured these alliances.

However, even though the epidemic unsettled the political situation, it didn’t have a profound impact on the military strategy that the Aztecs adopted. After Cortes retreated from Tenochtitlan in June 1520, the Aztecs did not further pursue him and turned to a defensive position, which potentially led to their defeat as they suffered from food shortages. One could argue that smallpox led to this decision because the attention and manpower was being diverted to restore the destruction caused by the epidemic (Hassig 131). However, this argument stands on feeble ground as smallpox reached Tenochtitlan four months after the escape of Cortes. From one perspective, this decision made strategic sense: defending requires less logistical support and shifts the burden of maneuvering an entire army to the Spanish; horses would be of no use



in Tenochtitlan if the Spanish attacks (Hassig 133). Moreover, killing all the enemies and fighting without announcement are all unconventional to the Aztec's warfare style (Thomas 485). Considering these factors, it seems that smallpox had minimal influence over the Aztec decision to remain in defensive position.

In conclusion, the smallpox epidemic that broke out in the Mexico Valley definitely impacted the performance of both sides during the Battle of Tenochtitlan. In one way, its impact on the tactics adopted by the locals was minimal and the fatality rate is inconsequential to the final outcome. However, its greatest significance is that it weakened the political control of Tenochtitlan over its tributary states and led to food shortages during the siege, and it also allowed the Spanish to build more alliances which were crucial to their victory.

Word Count: 1284

### Section Three – Reflection

This investigation has allowed me to develop a more critical understanding of the different methods historians chose to use as well as the challenges they faced.

At the start of my research, I noticed that one common challenge faced by historians when trying to reach an accurate depiction of the scale of the epidemic is the ambiguous nature of many primary sources. As a result, it becomes a major limitation to those historians who based their research predominantly upon primary sources. For example, Brooks built his argument based upon the fact that many translation errors were present as “half of the population died” was often mistranslated and exaggerated, and other works were under the influence of a Franciscan myth and overstated the number of deaths. This led me into thinking the role of historians in determining a particular narrative as these interpretations of primary sources remain largely speculative and are based upon personal understanding. I began to wonder whether a definitive account of the scale of epidemic was possible. Meanwhile, over-relying on primary sources also obscures the focuses of these historians from analyzing the indirect impact of smallpox as they put too much attention on figuring out the exact scale of the outbreak. Nevertheless, this view is compensated by historians like Thomas and Hassig, who focused their research on ideas like food shortage and political turmoil, and I have adopted them in my investigation to balance my arguments.

At the same time, I think all the historians faced the challenge of having limited scientific knowledge about smallpox and how it would influence a “virgin soil”

population, which might have hindered them to develop a more specific case or lead to poorly supported arguments. Most of the historians like Thomas or McCaa try to analyze the seriousness of the epidemic by considering the descriptions of smallpox in firsthand accounts. However, the ambiguous wordings such as “many died” would hardly be helpful in estimating the number of deaths on both sides, whereas a scientific estimation would be much more accurate in this case. Nevertheless, I did not include any scientific concepts in my investigation since I am not knowledgeable in this area, but this makes me better understand a major limitation historians face when trying to uncover history of diseases.

Word Count: 378

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