

This is the pre-printed version of a chapter that will appear in:

The Cambridge World History of Genocide, Volume 1, ed. Ben Kiernan, Tracy Lemos, and Tristan Taylor (series editor: Ben Kiernan), (Cambridge: CUP, 2022).

Please, reference the published version.

Genocidal Massacre in the Spanish Conquest of the Americas: Xaragua, Cholula, and Toxcatl (1503-1519)

This chapter will examine and compare three genocidal events in the early modern Caribbean and Mesoamerica: the massacres of Xaragua (Hispaniola, 1503), Cholula (Mexico, 1519), and Toxcatl (Mexico, 1520; also known as the Massacre of Templo Mayor). These mass killings represent turning points in the history of the Spanish Atlantic conquest and share important characteristics. Each targeted Amerindian communities. Each was entirely or partially planned and executed by European actors, namely Spanish military entrepreneurs (*conquistadores*) under the leadership of fray Nicolás de Ovando, Hernán Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado respectively. Each event can be described as a ‘genocidal massacre’ targeting a specific community because of its membership of a larger group.¹ The European perpetrators intended to provide an object lesson for the surviving members of that group. These object lessons took the form of unexpected mass killing of civilians and combatants, and were executed — often combined with other forms of excessive violence — for the purpose of intimidating indigenous populations in order to facilitate their subjection to Spanish rule. Each of these acts of violence also met the cognate objective of destroying or significantly diminishing the political, religious and military leadership of the targeted community.

¹ I follow Leo Kuper’s definition of the term. See Id., *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982), especially chapter four. For the state of research on violence in colonial Mesoamerica and Latin America more widely, see the chapters by J. G. McCurdy, W. Gabbert, H. Langfur, and M. Restall in the *Cambridge World History of Violence*, Vol. 3: AD 1500 – AD 1800, ed. R. Antony, S. Carroll, C. Dodds Pennock (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020); an introductory, comparative overview of incidents of mass killings in colonial Latin America is E. A. Johnson, R. D. Salvatore, P. Spierenburg, ‘Murder and Mass-Murder in Pre-Modern Latin America: From Pre-Colonial Sacrifices to the End of Colonial Rule, and Introductory Comparison with European Societies’, *Historical Social Research* 37 (2012), 233-53.

Altogether, these three mass killings emerged from a “dynamic of submission”: they were carried out in order to impose political, economic, and cultural domination.²

There are differences, too. A complicating factor — in the cases of Xaragua and Cholula — is the role of indigenous actors as initiators, facilitators and perpetrators of massacre, a factor evident yet frequently distorted or ignored in European records.³ In the case of the Toxcatl Massacre, it is possible that the intention to serve an object lesson and destroy the leadership of the targeted community mingled with or was even outweighed by a combination of greed and the “weight of fear and of the imaginary” on the minds of the perpetrators.⁴

The Spanish adventurers perpetrating those massacres hailed from a violent place. The mass killing of civilians and prisoners-of-war was a depressing feature of European siege warfare, for instance during the Italian Wars of the late Renaissance.⁵ The Atlantic arena of early modern European colonial expansion, however, witnessed the escalation of specific forms of violence and shock tactics, such as the regular use of dogs in combat and regular, organised mass killings.⁶ Massacre in the Canary Islands, the Caribbean and the early Spanish main did

² As opposed to a “dynamic of eradication”, indicative of genocide and elimination of a group. See the brief discussion in J. Sémelin, ‘In Consideration of Massacres’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 3 (2001), 377-89, 381.

³ Historical scholarship now acknowledges that even the description of indigenous actors as “allies” providing logistical and military support to European invaders during the conquest of the Americas is prone to obscure or distort their agency and self-perception. Florine Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors. The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan: A Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala* (Boulder, Colorado, University Press of Colorado, 2004); and the contributions in L. E. Matthew and M. R. Oudijk (eds.), *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2007) are examples of works bringing indigenous perspectives back to life and into the study of early modern Mesoamerican and colonial history.

⁴ Sémelin, ‘Consideration’, 384.

⁵ On practices, perceptions and normative frameworks of violence in European theatres of war, see G. Parker, ‘The Etiquette of Atrocity: The Laws of War in Early Modern Europe’, in Id., *Success is Never Final. Empire, War and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (New York, Basic Books, 2002), pp. 143-68; and H. E. Braun, ‘Killing Innocents? Massacre, War, and Boundaries of Violence in Early Modern Europe’, in: I. Pérez-Tostado (ed.), *A Cultural History of Genocide, Volume 3: Early Modern World (1400-1789)* (London, New York, Dheli, Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 41-61. S. D. Dowd, *Renaissance Mass Murder. Civilians and Soldiers during the Italian Wars* (Oxford, OUP, 2018) discusses a period of escalating violence in war in contemporary Europe.

⁶ J-F. Schaub observes that “the threshold of tolerance for violence seems to have been lowered in Western Societies due to [the] Atlantic experience”, id., ‘Violence in the Atlantic: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, in N. Canny and P. D. Morgan (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850* (Oxford, OUP, 2011), pp. 113-29, p. 114; see also B. Sandberg, ‘Beyond Encounters: Religion, Ethnicity, and Violence in the Early Modern Atlantic World, 1492–1700’, *Journal of World History* 17 (2006), 1–25. The chapters by W. Gabbert, H. Langfur, and M. Restall in the *Cambridge World History of Violence, Vol. 3: AD 1500 – AD 1800*, ed. R. Antony, S. Carroll, C. Dodds Pennock (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020) offer up-to-date surveys of research on the violence of conquest and colonial violence in Latin America.

not simply follow the — rather malleable — rules of conduct observed in European theatres of war and conquest. Massacres in the form of cunningly conceived and carefully planned mass killings of large, unprepared communities became integral to the Spanish strategy of conquest and colonization. Arguably, the experience of conquest in the Atlantic tested and stretched existing boundaries of violence and established a distinct yet increasingly controversial “etiquette of atrocity”.⁷

Genocidal massacres as a distinct form of excessive violence, then, marked the shift from initial exploration, slave-raiding and trading to territorial conquest and subjection of populations to colonial rule and systemic exploitation of indigenous labour. Early massacres on the American main followed the loose pattern of treacherous hostage taking combined with genocidal atrocity established during the Spanish conquests of the Atlantic archipelagos and the Caribbean. The situation in the Canaries as well as the Caribbean differed from that on the American main in that the original number of *indigenes* was small and their technological capability limited. Strategies deployed during a protracted and costly war of attrition waged by technologically far superior European invaders against Neolithic populations in difficult territory and along fragile lines of supply, however, were successfully transmitted and adjusted to the technologically more advanced and more complex polities and vastly larger populations of the *tierra firme*.

This escalation of violence in the Atlantic was driven by a number of factors. One was the *mentalité* of the so-called *conquistadores*, mostly younger men from the middle ranks of society and with the means to buy their own weapons and food to secure a place on exploratory expeditions and slave raids.⁸ They saw themselves as entrepreneurs whose legitimate business it was to subjugate and exploit Amerindian resources and the labour of Amerindian populations at breakneck speed. They justified their actions on the grounds that their ventures were self-funded and high-risk, often marked by extremely high casualty rates

⁷ The term is borrowed from G. Parker (see footnote 5 above).

⁸ For the social and economic profile of the *conquistadors*, see H. Thomas, *Who's Who of the Conquistadors* (London, Cassell & Co, 2000); and R. Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521–1555* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1991); also J. Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquistadors of Peru* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1972); and J. I. Avellaneda, *The Conquerors of the New Kingdom of Granada* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

among European participants.⁹ They also strongly identified with the ideals and the rhetoric of the *Reconquista*. The subjugation and exploitation of non-Christian peoples was understood as the reward for individual valour as well as the expression of divine providence.

Victory against the odds was common in the Americas, Hernán Cortés proclaimed at the eve of the siege of Tenochtitlán in May 1521, because the Spanish “dare face the greatest peril, consider fighting their glory, and have the habit of winning”.¹⁰ He also reminded his “brothers” (and a few sisters) that the “principal reason for our coming to these parts is to glorify and preach the faith of Jesus Christ, even though at the same time it brings us honour and profit”. The Spanish, Cortés concluded, were instruments of divine justice, because the Mexica were cannibals and deserving of a “great punishment”. Papal bulls authorizing conquest and colonization as well as the legal instruments by which the Castilian crown aimed to regulate its progress, like the *Requerimiento*, sanctioned and nourished this belief in superiority over the indigenous peoples of the Americas.¹¹

The relative absence of royal and ecclesiastical authority during the first few decades following Columbus’ landfall further emboldened this sense of entitlement. On the one hand, Atlantic conquest operated within a framework of legitimacy and probity unilaterally defined by the crown. Conquistadors depended upon royal licensing, recognition and endorsement of their actions and achievements while at the same time entertaining a profound disdain for secular and ecclesiastical authority as parasitical beneficiaries of individual valour and sacrifice. Royal officials and missionary friars at the coalface of conquest and colonisation, on

⁹ Fatality rates were significantly higher among African and indigenous slaves, carriers and fellow combatants, though conquistador narratives do not tend to acknowledge this fact.

¹⁰ Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés. The Life of the Conqueror by his Secretary*, transl. L. B. Simpson (from *the Istoría del Conquista de Mexico*) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1964), p. 240 [English translation of Gómara’s *Historia de la conquista de México* (Zaragoza, Agustín Millán, 1552), effectively a biography and defence of Cortés]. Gómara claims to render a speech delivered before the Spanish left Tlaxcala to commence the siege of Tenochtitlán. Historians now trace and dissect the glorifying “mythstory” of conquest and conquistador constructed within the frame of European culture, consciousness, and desires. See M. Restall, *Seven Myths of the Conquest* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003); Id., *When Moctezuma met Cortés. The True Story of the Meeting That Changed History* (New York, Ecco, 2018).

¹¹ English translations of the papal bulls and treaties providing much of the legal framework for Iberian expansion in the Americas — especially *Inter caetera*, issued by pope Alexander VI to the Catholic Monarchs on 4 May 1493, and the Treaty of Tordesillas concluded between Castile and Portugal in 1494 — in F. G. Davenport, *European Treaties Bearing on the United States to 1648* (Washington, D.C., The Carnegie Institution Washington of Washington, 1917); *Inter caetera*, *ibid.*, pp. 71-8; Tordesillas, *ibid.*, p. 95. For the English text of the *Requerimiento* — drafted by the Castilian lawyer Juan López de Palacios Rubios on behalf of the Castilian crown in 1513 in order to channel papal doctrine — see, for instance, J. Cowans, *Early Modern Spain. A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2003), pp. 34-6. A recent discussion of papal doctrine framing European conquest is D. M. Lantigua, *Infidels and Empires in a New World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020).

the other hand, often lacked the will and support or the resources to restrain conquistador violence. Some shared in the disregard for the lives (and souls) of indigenous peoples, as appears to have been the case with the Hierosolymite friars on Hispaniola. Their attitude reflected the fact that the theological-legal vernacular of violence available during the first decades of conquest tended to blur the boundaries between Amerindian pagans, Muslim enemies of the Christian faith, and heretics.¹²

The conquistadors' ruthless pursuit of personal gain, though, increased tensions with secular and ecclesiastical authorities' intent on preserving, converting and establishing political and economic dominion over Amerindian peoples. Crown and church of Castile had felt the need to protect indigenous populations early on.¹³ With the dramatic demographic decline of indigenous Caribbean populations — partly the work of European diseases¹⁴ — the violence of conquest became problematic. The impassioned sermon fray Antonio de Montesinos delivered to Spanish settlers on Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) on 21 December 1511 marked the first known public denouncement of settler violence. The question of whether violent conquest and excessive violence facilitated or obstructed the legitimizing objective of Catholic mission became a pressing issue during the decades leading up to the mid-sixteenth century.

Xaragua (1503)

The Massacre of Xaragua took place on Hispaniola in 1503. It represents the paradigm for shock mass killing and the extermination of indigenous leaders as integral to the subjugation of Caribbean and subsequently Amerindian peoples to Spanish colonial rule. It was ordered by fray Nicolás de Ovando (1460-1511), a knight and commander of the military order of Alcántara and royal *Gobernador general de las Indias* (1502-9). Ovando established royal

¹² For juridical-theological negotiations of the violence of conquest and empire, see, for instance, Lantigua, *Infidels*; and the relevant contributions in J. Tellkamp (ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Spanish Imperial and Political and Social Thought* (Leiden, Brill, 2020).

¹³ A good example are the attempts to regulate the slave trade in the Caribbean during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century; see Erin Woodruff Stone, *Captives of Conquest. Slavery in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

¹⁴ For the complex, at times heated debate on the relative impact of European pathogens on Amerindian populations, see N. D. Cook, *Born To Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998); M. L. Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indians*, transl. C. Ipsen (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008); and Id., 'The Depopulation of Hispanic America after the Conquest', *Population and Development Review* 32 (2006), 199-232.

control over Spanish settlers by settling them in townships, adapting and imposing the *encomienda* system successfully practised on Muslim populations in Castile as a means to organise, instruct and exploit Amerindian populations.¹⁵ He pursued and completed the conquest of Hispaniola with a ruthlessness and a degree of treacherous brutality already noted by contemporaries, including the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), the most prominent critic of the conquest.¹⁶

At some point in 1503, Ovando called a meeting with Anacaona, the chief cacique or “Queen” of Xaragua, one of the main chiefdoms of the Taino people of Hispaniola. Xaragua paid tribute to the Spanish at the time, but was able to resist more pervasive forms of Spanish rule. The fact that Xaragua hosted a sizeable number of Spanish deserters and rebels married to Taino women caused further concern and suspicion. From Ovando’s point of view, Xaragua represented a latent threat to Spanish rule on Hispaniola. The meeting, allegedly arranged to consult and celebrate peace and friendship with Xaragua was a pretext for extinguishing this real, imagined or purported menace.

More than 300 Spanish soldiers accompanied by an indeterminate number of Taino warriors from the neighbouring chiefdom of Marién, rivals of the Xaragua at the time, arrived at the agreed place. Once the festivities had begun, on a signal from Ovando, the Spanish and their allies apprehended the caciques and slaughtered their entourage, with many women and children among the victims. It is likely that Spanish *rebeldes* with their Taino wives and *mestizo* children were among the victims.¹⁷ Anacaona was captured and soon afterwards executed by hanging. Many Xaragua caciques taken prisoner were burned alive.¹⁸ Some of

¹⁵ The *encomienda* system granted indigenous labour and tribute to a settler (*encomendero*), in return, theoretically, for spiritual instruction and legal protection within nascent colonial society.

¹⁶ Our main sources are Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (manuscript completed in 1542 and circulated widely thereafter; first printed Sevilla, 1552); I reference id., *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. and transl. by N. Griffin, with an intro. by A. Pagden (London, Penguin, 1992); Events at Cholula, *ibid.*, pp. 21-22. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo de Valdés, *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (first version published Toledo, 1526). I reference Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo de Valdés, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, ed. J. Pérez de Tudela Bueso, vol. 2 (Biblioteca de Autores Españoles; 118) (Madrid, Ediciones Atlas, 1959); Events at Cholula, *ibid.*, 103. Pietro Martyr d’Anghiera, *De orbe novo* (Álcala de Henares, 1516), first Decada. We have no testimony from either indigenous or Spanish survivors.

¹⁷ Las Casas reports that some Spanish horsemen attempted to save the lives of some of the indigenous children, while others cut them down methodically. It is possible that members of Ovando’s company took pity or wanted to take slaves or sought to preserve the lives of *mestizo* children.

¹⁸ Las Casas claims that more than three hundred caciques were burnt alive and “countless” other natives slaughtered; Oviedo speaks of sixty executed caciques. Some years after the massacre, Dominican and Franciscan friars reported the burning of forty caciques, *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de América y Oceanía*, vol. 7 (Madrid, M. Bernaldo de Quirós, 1867), p. 410.

the surviving caciques fled to Cuba, where they would soon confront one of Ovando's captain's in charge of the killing on the day, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar (1465-1524). The massacre eliminated the Xaragua as a political and military force and as a rival for both the Spanish and other Taino chiefdoms, and marked the beginning of the end of the process of Spanish subjugation of Hispaniola.

Ovando appears to have found it necessary to take statements from those involved in the massacre in order to prove that the betrayal and slaughter of an ally had been justified — an indication that he expected criticism — though these have not been found.¹⁹ He was recalled in 1509 and replaced by Diego Colón, who would seek to rule more benignly over Spanish settlers and indigenous alike. At the time of Ovando's recall, it was evident to the Castilian crown that European diseases, settler violence, and existing strategies of economic exploitation wreaked havoc among the indigenous peoples. The justification of genocidal massacres became more tenuous if the perpetrator did not deliver on the moral, political and economic objectives of crown and church: conversion of a demographically stable indigenous population and delivery of stable revenue. Hernán Cortés learned the ropes of conquest under the patronage of Ovando and rose under Velázquez, but would prove remarkably adept at presenting his actions in ways aligned with changing expectations on the part of secular and ecclesiastical authorities.

The Massacre of Xaragua displays core characteristics of early sixteenth century Spanish massacres of conquest in the Atlantic. Invariably, these massacres happened within the context of indigenous political structures, conflict and competition. They show the Spanish as generally competent in reading, manipulating and exploiting indigenous political dynamics to their advantage. They usually involve indigenous individuals and groups not only as victims or bystanders, but as pursuing their own agenda while providing intelligence as well as logistical and active military support for the European invaders. The aim and outcome of the massacres was the extermination of indigenous leaders and the imparting of terror. The use of terror — including other stock measures such as public executions by hanging or burning and the feeding of dismembered bodies to dogs — was a workable strategy of conquest, and even a psychological necessity for tiny, beleaguered bands of violent

¹⁹ T. S. Floyd, *The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean, 1492-1526* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1973), p. 63.

entrepreneurs operating in difficult, unfamiliar territory, surrounded by enemies and unreliable allies, and depending on extremely stretched lines of supply.

Cholula (1519) and Toxcatl (1520)

Frustrated Spanish settlers and adventurers eventually extended their search for precious minerals, cheap labour and social status from the exhausted Caribbean archipelago to the American main. Many of them veterans of the Caribbean campaigns, they imported their ambitions, rivalries and tactics of conquest including torture, hostage taking of indigenous leaders under diplomatic pretext and genocidal massacre.

Two exploratory expeditions (1517, 1518) — supported and partly funded by Diego Velázquez, now *adelantado* of Cuba — established contact with highly developed coastal Mayan communities.²⁰ The second expedition under Juan de Grijalva was met by envoys of Moctezuma II, the leader (*tlatoani*) of the Mexica, the dominating member of the Triple Alliance of Nahuatl-speaking communities ruling over much of what is today central Mexico. Communication was limited. The envoys deployed the customary tactics of Mesoamerican diplomacy, seeking to impress and possibly intimidate the strange foreigners with gifts and references to Moctezuma's power. Contrary to likely intention, the splendid attire and especially the rich gold ornaments worn by the envoys made the Mexica the target of Spanish conquest.

Velázquez ordered and part-financed a further expedition under his client and kinsman Hernán Cortés. Undoubtedly intent to be in charge of future conquest, he would find himself outmanoeuvred by the latter. On reaching the point of contact between Grijalva and the ambassadors of Moctezuma II, the expedition founded the town of Veracruz and elected Cortés *alcalde*. This symbolic act aimed to establish a direct relationship and right to communication between the group and the emperor over the head of Velázquez. As a result, subsequent events were characterized not only by inter-cultural conflict, but also by

²⁰ For a detailed account of events, though beholden to the European hero-leader figure, see H. Thomas, *Conquest. Moctezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (London, Hutchinson, 1993); revising Eurocentric perspectives and acknowledging the complexity of the sources, for instance: Restall, *When Moctezuma met Cortés*; D. M. Carballo, *Collision of Worlds: A Deep History of the Fall of Aztec Mexico and the Forging of New Spain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021). For the politics of conquest on the Spanish side, see the excellent essay by J. H. Elliott, 'Cortés, Velázquez, and Charles V', in Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, transl., edited and with a new introduction by A. Pagden (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986), pp. xi – xxxvii.

substantial acts of violence among the conquistadors as a result of the enmity between Cortés, Velázquez and their followers and supporters. The situation also fostered tensions and a widespread attitude of ‘all-or-nothing’ among members of the expedition. They had taken unfathomable risks by placing themselves between indigenous communities of unknown strength and the most powerful Spanish leader in the Caribbean. They were condemned to succeed in their objective to subject a sizeable part of the native population and territory on the American main on terms that would impress the crown and secure its protection.

In his letters (*cartas de relación*) to the emperor, Cortés maintains that the expedition consistently followed Spanish protocol of conquest, for instance by referencing the *Requerimiento*.²¹ Read out to uncomprehending indigenous populations, the document demanded voluntary subjection to the rule of the Catholic rulers of Spain. If they chose to resist, they would suffer punishment, even enslavement. By the time Cortés dropped anchor at Veracruz, however, the *Requerimiento* had been subject to criticism especially from ecclesiastical quarters, and the threat of slavery had been partially disowned by the crown. This and probably even more so the need to receive recognition for their actions from the crown and over the head of Velázquez convinced Cortés and his followers that their conquest had to be presented as a series of acts of “voluntary” submission to royal authority. Correspondingly, acts of genocidal violence, whether prompted by indigenous resistance or not, were described as pre-emptive strikes provoked by indigenous “treason” and “rebellion” mingled with insufferable violations of European norms (such as human sacrifice). Cortés’ correspondence with Charles V is carefully curated to profile himself and his expedition — in deliberate contrast to Caribbean conquest and conquistadors like Velázquez — as the beginning of a process of sustainable long-term European settlement and rule over indigenous peoples.

The victims of the Massacres of Cholula and Toxcatl were the Mexica (aka Aztecs) and other ethnically, culturally and politically aligned Nahuatl-speaking communities.²² The Mexica had

²¹ Cortés, *Letters*, ‘First Letter’, p. 10, p. 21; ‘Second Letter’, p. 59. The fact that the *requerimiento* was not read out at Cholula led to a charge against Cortés in his *residencia*.

²² The term ‘Aztec’ is a nineteenth-century invention used to describe Nahuatl-speaking, ethnically and culturally related communities in the basin of central Mexico still popular with historians for reasons of convenience. The ‘Aztecs’ referred to themselves as Mexica-Colhua. Still one of the most comprehensive and sensitive approaches

been late arrivals to the fertile landscape of the Valley of Mexico, but rapidly expanded from their centre, the twin-city of Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco situated in the marshlands of Lake Texcoco. In 1440, they formed a Triple Alliance with the *altepetls* (communities with urban centres and surrounding areas headed by a *tlatoani*) of Texcoco and Tlacopan, and set out on annual campaigns of aggressive expansion, establishing tributary overlordship over most of central Mexico. Despite its aggressive stance, military prowess and wealth, this was a comparatively fragile political structure characterised by rivalry among the members of the Triple Alliance and under persistent pressure to suppress resistance and continue expansion.

The tensions between the Mexica, their allies and subject peoples might have been exacerbated by excessive practice of ritual violence. Like most Mesoamerican peoples, the Mexica practised human sacrifice, sacrificing enemy warriors taken prisoner on the battlefield as well as victims delivered as tribute.²³ Under *tlatoani* Ahuitzotl (ruled 1486-1502) the taking of sacrificial victims — by means of so-called ritual “Flower Wars” traditionally arranged between communities for that purpose — proliferated and escalated. Cortés and other Spanish sources claim that the coastal communities allying themselves to the Spanish had pointed to excessive demand for sacrificial victims as a particular pressure point. In short, there were significant holes in the tapestry of Mexica dominance. Most importantly, some key regional powers had maintained their independence or were in a position to reclaim their independence from the Triple Alliance, notably the *altepetls* of Cempoala and Tlaxcala.

Cholula

The Massacre of Cholula took place in mid to late October 1519, when the Spanish and a large number of warriors from Cempoala and Tlaxcala advanced from the coast onto the rich and expansive agricultural community of Cholula. Cholula was situated in the Puebla-Tlaxcala

to pre-colonial Mexica or Aztec society is I. Clendinnen, *The Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014). F. F. Berdan and M. E. Smith, *Everyday Life in the Aztec World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020) give a panoramic view of the Mexica life experience informed by recent research.

²³ On human sacrifice, warfare and empire in pre-colonial Mesoamerica, see, for instance, R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); D. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice. The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1999); and C. Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood. Gender, Life-Cycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008).

valley in Central Mexico, half-way between Tenochtitlán and the Spanish anchor point at the coast. The city was an important trade hub and religious centre hosting a major temple of the god Quetzalcoatl, one of the most important deities in the shared Mesoamerican pantheon.

Its relation to the Triple Alliance is no longer altogether clear. Historiography tended to describe Central American indigenous communities as politically unified city states, ethnically and politically more homogenous even than the likes of Renaissance Florence. This certainly was the understanding of the Spanish. Cholula, though, might rather have been a cluster of communities with differing histories and fluid, sometimes conflicting political allegiances. Though difficult to verify in the sources, this structure might have played into the massacre. The complex make-up of indigenous urban and political conglomerates certainly added a layer of complication and potential peril in situations of political crisis. This played out powerfully during the final months of Tenóchtitlan-Tlatelolco, when many previous allies of the Triple Alliance and even political groupings within Tlatelolco, resentful of Tenóchtitlan's hegemony, decided to side with the Spanish. In the case of the Massacre of Cholula, extreme hostility between the *altepetls* of Cholula, Tlaxcala and Cempoala appears to have been a major, albeit not fully determinable factor.

Our information about the massacre comes almost exclusively from Spanish sources.²⁴ The main sources are Cortés's second letter to emperor Charles V, testimony from Spanish eyewitnesses and other contemporary accounts, Tlaxcalan accounts, and narratives provided by the Mexica allies of the Cholulans. We have no Cholulan testimonies. The sources betray politically motivated and ultimately irreconcilable disagreement over what happened: whether a pitched battle involving armed combatants or an unprovoked attack on an unprepared community took place, whether or not women and children were among the victims, and who ultimately instigated the violence. Estimates concerning the number of victims vary considerably, ranging from c. 2,000 to c. 27,000 (out of an estimated urban population of c. 30 – 50,000).²⁵ Population estimates, analysis of historical accounts and archaeological evidence suggest a number between 2,000 and 6,000, with many women and

²⁴ A survey of the main textual sources, including telling archaeological evidence, is G. G. McCafferty, 'The Cholula Massacre: Factional Histories and Archaeology of the Spanish Conquest', in M. Boyd, J. C. Erwin, and M. Hendrickson (eds), *The Entangled Past: Integrating History and Archaeology* (Calgary, University of Calgary, 2000), pp. 347-59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

children among the victims. Spanish sources stress that the community subsequently received settlers from other *altepetls* and continued to exist.

Cortés embedded Cholula in a carefully construed sequence of events leading up to the alleged submission of Moctezuma II to Charles V on 8 November 1519, less than a month after the massacre.²⁶ He presents Spanish actions as a pre-emptive strike punishing a treacherous Cholulan-Mexica plot to overwhelm his forces. Cortés's main objective is to portray himself as a capable commander and selfless servant of Charles V. He is at pains to stress that he and his men observed Spanish law, custom and honour in dealing with indigenous peoples. The Spanish, he posits, exerted legitimate pressure on Moctezuma and received an invitation to proceed to Tenochtitlán passing through Cholula en route. Integral to his justification of subsequent actions is the claim that Mexica and Cholulan promises of safe passage were part of a treacherous design to lure his company into a death trap, just as his Tlaxcalan and Cempoalan allies had warned would be the case.

The Spanish and their allies, Cortés claims, discovered and avoided a first ambush laid by a large Mexica army along the main road to Cholula by taking a different route. After their arrival in Cholula and a seemingly friendly welcome, though, clear signs of hostile intent piled up. The Spanish were not offered sufficient provisions. Women and children were nowhere to be seen and appeared to have abandoned the city. Cortés reports this as evidence that the city was preparing for battle. Intelligence from different sources — locals tortured and interrogated, corroborating information gathered by Cortés's native interpreter Malinche (whom he does not name) — provided further evidence that the Cholulans intended to strike against the Spanish. With all escape routes blocked and under threat of imminent attack, the Spanish decided that a pre-emptive strike was the only solution. Consequently, the Cholulan chieftains were invited to the Spanish compound under a pretext and taken prisoner, though not harmed, according to Cortés. The Spanish then fell upon the surprised Cholulan warriors and, with the help of allies rallied to their plight, defeated them after several hours of intense combat.

Other Spanish eyewitness accounts, recorded well after the event, offer partially overlapping, yet in some important aspects strikingly different accounts. The narratives of Andrés de Tapia, Francisco de Aguilar, Bernadino Vázquez de Tapia, Bernal Díaz de Castilla,

²⁶ Events at Cholula: Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, pp. 69-75, especially pp. 72-73.

Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco López de Gómara discussed below as well as other testimonies and accounts have to be read in the light of personal rivalries among conquistadors and rising tensions between conquistadors and authorities framed by the evolving early sixteenth-century debate concerning the legitimacy of Spanish conquest and conduct in the Americas. Indigenous sources composed after the conquest, too, are prone to political bias, and reflect entrenched ethnic rivalries as well as the fact that many communities were keen to negotiate their position within the emerging Spanish hegemony. They tend to negotiate the choppy waters of memory during the years immediately after the conquest by foregrounding superstition and treachery on the part of their indigenous rivals and carefully avoid apportioning blame or primary agency to the Spanish.

Andrés de Tapia (1498? - 1561) was one of Cortés's captains and a lifelong friend and supporter. His gave testimony during the *residencia* into Cortés's actions and penned his own narrative during the late 1540s.²⁷ Tapia claims that Cholulan and Mexica dignitaries intended to send the Spanish on their way to Tenochtitlán accompanied by a large escort of Cholulan warriors with orders to ambush them once they reached a particularly difficult section of the road. He also stresses the crucial role of Malinche in discovering the plot and informing the Spanish (though like Cortés, he does not give her name). On receiving evidence of the plot, Cortés decided to strike first, and on the day of departure apprehended most of the local leaders, extracted confessions without torture, and killed most of them for their treachery. The Spanish and the Amerindians in their company then fell upon the warriors disguised as carriers who had gathered in front of the Spanish quarters. After killing the warriors assembled in the courtyard, the Spanish and their allies went out to burn and ravage the city and temples for two more days, soon supported by numerous Tlaxcalan reinforcements. Tapia claims that the Spanish, at the express order of Cortés, did not kill any women or children, but that many were killed by indigenous allies who did not feel bound by his order. Though he does not give numbers, his narrative implies a very high casualty count.

²⁷ A *residencia* was the routine examination of the conduct of an official after the end of their term of office, an integral part of the Spanish administrative system. Cortés's *residencia* was conducted from 1526 to 1545, but never concluded; see the documentation in L. Martínez (ed.), *Documentos cortesianos II 1526-1545. Sección IV: Juicio de Residencia* (Mexico City, Universidad Autónoma de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991 [ebook, 2014]). Tapia's testimony concerning Cholula, *ibid.*, pp. 599-602; Andrés de Tapia, *Relación de algunas cosas de las que acaecieron al muy ilustre señor don Hernando Cortés, marqués del Valle (...)* in J. G. Icasbalceta (ed.), *Collección de documentos para la historia de México*, vol. 2 (Mexico City, J.M. Andiaide, 1866), pp. 554-94. English translation of relevant passages in S. B. Schwartz, *Victors and Vanquished. Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), pp. 115-19.

His account only partly overlaps with that of Francisco (formerly Alonso) de Aguilar (1479-1571), a conquistador and eyewitness who wrote his *Relación breve de la conquista de la Nueva España* in the 1560s, after he had joined the Dominican order.²⁸ Aguilar confirms a growing sense of hostility after the Spanish had arrived in the city, though no plot or provocation. After several days during which the natives did not bring food and water, “the captains” acted against the advice of Cortés and decided to kill the Amerindians who had eventually arrived to deliver foodstuffs and water. He gives the number of victims as c. 2,000. The captains took this decision, according to Aguilar, in order to intimidate the Mexica and secure a safe passage to Tenóchtitlán and quick submission.

Bernadino Vázquez de Tapia (no relation to Andrés), who developed a notoriously inimical relationship with Cortés and well as his second-in-command Pedro de Alvarado in the years after the conquest, is the eyewitness deviating most blatantly from Cortés’s account.²⁹ He claims that there was no plot to ambush the Spaniards, that the Cholulans provided everything the Spaniards requested, and that he, though a captain, had received no notice or orders when Cortés suddenly ordered the killing of c. 4,000 Amerindian porters assembled in the courtyard before their quarters. The reason for Cortés’s decision to order the massacre, Vázquez de Tapia states — here in line with Aguilar’s account — was the hope that native peoples would be deterred from further resistance and the Mexica and Moctezuma subdued more easily.

Another co-perpetrator, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, offers a more comprehensive and rhetorically enhanced account of the massacre in his *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de Nueva España*.³⁰ Bernal describes the negotiations between Cortés, Moctezuma’s ambassadors and the Cholulans as well as the failed ambush on the road to Cholula. He provides detail on Cholulan preparations for a surprise attack on the Spanish while still housed

²⁸ Several editions, including Francisco de Aguilar, *Relación breve de la conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. J. Gurría Lacroix (México, Universidad Autónoma de México, 1980). English translation of relevant passages in P. de Fuentes (ed.), *The Conquistadors: First Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), pp. 143-44.

²⁹ His testimony for the *residencia* concerning events at Cholula in *Documentos Cortesianos II*, pp. 56-7. Bernadino Vázquez de Tapia, *Relación de méritos y servicios del conquistador Bernadino Vázquez de Tapia, vecino y regidor de esta gran ciudad de Tenustitlan*, ed. J. Gurría Lacroix (Mexico City, Universidad Autónoma de México, 1972); translation of extracts in D. A. Peterson, Z. D. Green (eds), ‘The Spanish Arrival and the Massacre at Cholula’, *Notas Mesoamericanas* 10 (1987), pp. 203-22, especially pp. 209-10.

³⁰ Bernal Díaz’s text is available in a number of English editions and translations. I reference Bernal Díaz de Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de Nueva España*, ed. David Carrasco (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2008), pp. 106-15 (‘The Massacre at Cholula’).

in the city: holes had been dug in the streets and furnished with stakes to kill the horses; side streets had been blocked with barricades; missiles had been collected and placed on the roofs of houses. He also names and gives much credit for Spanish survival to Malinche.

Díaz deviates from other defensive accounts in crucial points. He agrees with Cortés and Andrés de Tapia that women and children had not been evacuated, but claims they actively participated in the preparations for war, gathering stones and other projectiles, and preparing pots with tomato and chilli to cook human flesh. According to Bernal Díaz, the entire community — warriors and civilians, including women and even children — was actively involved in the treacherous plot, and therefore deserved punishment. The actual fighting and killing, though, he says, only involved the warriors.

Like many of the most outspoken critics of Spanish conduct of war in the Americas, Bartolomé de Las Casas was a member of a religious order. He joined the Dominican order after witnessing the brutal conquest of Hispaniola and Cuba. Las Casas did not query the legitimacy of Spanish rule in the Americas, sanctioned by papal bulls, but focused firmly on the violence of conquest as a human tragedy, contrary to Christian ethics and dogma, and a fateful obstruction to peaceful mission and conversion of the Amerindians. Up to the later 1550s, such criticism circulated freely in the Americas and in Spain, not least at the royal court.

The description of events at Cholula in his *Brevísima relación* is representative of his critique of Spanish strategy and use of violence.³¹ The friar denies the existence of a plot. The Cholulan dignitaries were deceived, tortured and later burned at the stake for no fault of their own. The victims of the subsequent mass slaughter were helpless slaves willingly sent as carriers. The massacre was staged simply in order to conquer by means of intimidation. In fact, Las Casas defines Cholula and similar events during the conquest in Leo Kuper's terms as an object lesson for other members of a group. Once they had arrived at Cholula, he says, the Spanish:

“... decided that the moment had come to organize a massacre (or ‘punishment’ as they call it) in order to inspire fear and terror in all the people of the territory. This was, indeed, the pattern they followed in all the lands they [the conquistadors

³¹ Las Casas, *Destruction*, pp. 45-8.

generally] invaded: to stage a bloody massacre of the most public possible kind in order to terrorize those meek and gentle peoples.”³²

Las Casas’ fervent, at times polemical and altogether efficient critique made him the *bête noire* of *conquistadores* like Bernal Díaz and apologists like Ginés de Sepúlveda or the Sevillian humanist Francisco López de Gómara (1511-66). The latter, in his *Historia general de las Indias*, set out to provide a narrative legitimizing Spanish conquest in the Americas.³³ His version of events at Cholula reflects that intention. Faced with the need to reconcile divine providence with the startling violence, greed, and destruction wreaked by the conquistadors, Gómara resolved to heroize Cortés.³⁴ Concerning Cholula, he alleges that Mexican-Cholulan treachery was the sole cause of violence.³⁵

According to Gómara, a plot to slaughter the Spanish on arrival in Cholula contrived by Moctezuma, the Cholulans, and a high-ranking Tlaxcalan noble was uncovered and reported by an unnamed woman given to Pedro de Alvarado while the Spanish still rested in Tlaxcala. The commander was strangled on Cortés’s orders, apparently without a Tlaxcalan backlash. Like Cortés, he mentions a Mexica force — he speaks of more than thirty thousand men — waiting to ambush the Spaniards. Cortés, though, does not again mention it as in any way involved in the actual confrontation. Gómara explains that the Cholulans did not trust Moctezuma enough to admit his troops into their town. He then follows Cortés’s second letter, but offers more detail. He mentions the entrenched enmity between Tlaxcalans and Cholulans, initially generous provision of food soon replaced by hostile behaviour, the removal of women and children from the city, and a Cholulan plot to overwhelm the Spanish on their way to Tenochtitlán uncovered by Malinche (he mentions her by name). He also records that Cortés extracted confessions from Cholulan leaders through intimidation rather than torture, and ordered several of them to be killed as punishment. The Spanish, supported by native reinforcements that had been secretly summoned, then attacked and defeated the Cholulan warriors in fierce battle, burned the temple and sacked the city. Gómara emphasizes

³² Las Casas, *Destruction*, 45.

³³ See footnote 10 above.

³⁴ On’s efforts to reconcile violent imperialism and divine providence, see C. A. Roa-de-la-Carrera, *Histories of Infamy. Francisco López de Gómara and the Ethics of Spanish Imperialism*, translated by S. Sessions (Boulder, University of Colorado Press, 2005); G. E. Carman, *Rhetorical Conquests: Cortés, Gómara, and Renaissance Imperialism* (West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2006).

³⁵ Gómara, *Life*, especially pp. 123-30.

Cholulan fear of Moctezuma, treachery and unnatural desire to gorge on human flesh. His account of events ends with a lasting reconciliation between Tlaxcala and Cholula negotiated by Cortés.

Accounts from Tlaxcala tend to stress their early alliance with the Spanish and conversion to Christianity. The Tlaxcalan chronicler Diego Muñoz Camargo (1529-1599) in his *History of Tlaxcala* (*Historia de Tlaxcala*; completed before 1585) claims that the Cholulan leaders dismissed the Tlaxcalan offer of peace and alliance with the Spanish.³⁶ Convinced that Quetzalcoatl would assist their warriors and consume the Spanish invaders with fire and water, they even broke Mesoamerican diplomatic protocol by mutilating the Tlaxcalan envoy. When defeat became obvious, many Cholulans became victims of their heathen superstition and committed suicide by throwing themselves from the walls of their burning temples (the same claim is made by Andrés de Tapia). Muñoz Camargo's account is not corroborated by other than Tlaxcalan sources and can be read as an attempt to put the blame for the destruction of Cholula squarely on the Cholulans and erase memory of the massacre from the historical record. The perceived need to do so points at Tlaxcalan agency at Cholula as well as awareness of Tlaxcalan responsibility for what happened at Cholula among other Nahuatl-speaking communities.

The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* — a series of cloth paintings mixing indigenous and European visual traditions created during the mid-1500s, and one Muñoz Camargo's sources — adds another facet to a complex sequence of events.³⁷ Though a rather condensed visual representation of events, the *Lienzo* points to Malinche as an important indigenous actor, *conquistadora*, and a crucial conduit for Tlaxcalan-Spanish collaboration especially in the run-up to the Massacre of Cholula.³⁸

Insert image *Matanza de Cholula* from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala

³⁶ Modern editions include Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala*, ed. G. Vázquez (Crónicas de América; 26) (Madrid, Librería Rodríguez, 1986); relevant extracts in English in M. León-Portilla (ed.), *Broken Spears. The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, expanded and updated edition (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 41-49.

³⁷ The original is lost, but digital reconstructions are available. See the well-advanced project (based on the Glasgow manuscript) at the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico: <https://lienzodetlaxcala.com>.

³⁸ On representations of Malintzin/Malinche/Doña Marina in indigenous painted sources, see C. Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM, 2006), pp. 67-79; also C. J. Rogers, 'Malintzin as a Conquistadora and Warrior Woman in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (c.1552)', *Historical Journal* (2021) [first view]; briefly McCafferty, 'Cholula Massacre', pp. 356-58.

Indigenous agency is also confirmed and highlighted by sources closer to the victims. This is what Mexica sources (mainly from Tlatelolco) relay through the mediation of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590):

The Spaniards] asked: “Where is [Tenochtitlan]? Is it far from here?” The Tlaxcaltecas said: “No, it is not far, it is only a three-day march. And it is a great city. The Aztecs are very brave. (...) At this time the Tlaxcaltecas were enemies of Cholula. They feared the Cholultecas; they envied and cursed them; their souls burned with hatred for the people of Cholula. This is why they brought certain rumours to Cortés, so that he would destroy them. They said to him “Cholula is our enemy. It is an evil city. The people are as brave as the Aztecs and they are the Aztecs’ friends. When the Spaniards heard this, they marched against Cholula. They were guided by the Tlaxcaltecas and the chiefs from Cempoala, and they all marched in battle array. (...) When they arrived, the Tlaxcaltecas and the men of Cholula called to each other and shouted greetings. An assembly was held in the courtyard of the God (probably in the temple of Quetzalcoatl), but when they all gathered together, the entrances were closed, so that there was no way of escaping. Then the sudden slaughter began: knife strokes, and sword strokes, and death. The people of Cholula had not foreseen it, had not suspected it. They faced the Spaniards without weapons, without their swords or their shields. The cause of the slaughter was treachery. They died blindly, without knowing why, because of the lies of the Tlaxcaltecas.”³⁹

The sources collected and curated by Sahagún stress the psychological impact of the massacre — shock and terror among the communities associated with the victims, and despair on the part of Moctezuma — along lines similar to what we read in Las Casas. These are colonial

³⁹ Book twelve of the Florentine Codex offers a detailed narrative of the conquest, including the massacres of Cholula and Toxcatl. The quotation is from the English translation of extracts in M. León-Portilla (ed.), *Broken Spears. The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, expanded and updated edition (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 39-41. This is not the place to discuss the complex gestation of Sahagún’s bilingual (Spanish and Nahuatl) compendium of Mexica culture and history, and its many layers of meaning and interpretation. A starting point is C. E. Dibble, ‘Sahagún’s Historia’, in Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. A. J. O. Anderson / C. E. Dibble, 13 parts (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press and School of American Research, Santa Fe, 1950-82), part 1, pp. 9-23.

sources, though, and it is likely that retrospect presentation of events and identification of agency was shaped by the intention to shift some of the agency and moral responsibility from the new Spanish overlords to indigenous rivals (Tlaxcala) and scapegoats (the role allocated to a 'weak' Moctezuma).

Spanish accounts of events at Cholula focus on the legitimacy of violence and hinge on two main points: the existence of an indigenous plot that provoked and justified a pre-emptive strike and due punishment of treachery, and the status of the victims (warriors, unarmed *temames* (porters), women, and children). While an indigenous plot remains a possibility, existing archaeological and textual evidence strongly points to a surprise attack on an unprepared community and the large-scale killing of civilians at the hands of the Spanish, Tlaxcalans and Cempoalans. On the part of the Spanish, we are likely to encounter what Cortés and his men knew as a tested and proven tactic: diplomatic subterfuge combined with excessive violence and the intimidation or extermination of indigenous leadership. Tlaxcalan and Cempoalan motivation cannot be reconstructed with a satisfying degree of certainty, though it is highly probable that vengeance, the taking of prisoners, and the weakening of Mexica hegemony and destruction of a powerful Mexica ally were driving factors.

Toxcatl

Turning to the Toxcatl Massacre (aka Massacre of Templo Mayor), historians are again forced to acknowledge that we will probably never be able to establish the facts of the matter with anything approaching certainty. What is clear is that in May 1520, the Spanish garrison in Tenochtitlán under the command of Pedro de Alvarado killed a great number of Mexica nobles and warriors — leading members of the Mexica elite, in fact — who had gathered at the Templo Mayor to honour their god Huitzilpochtli at the Feast of Toxcatl. Cortés and a sizeable number of his company were absent at the time, confronting and defeating a Spanish force under the command of Pánfilo Narváez sent by Diego Velázquez to apprehend and return Cortés to Cuba for trial.

Again, the sources reflect the contentious politics of the conquest and the ways in which its history was written and rewritten over time.⁴⁰ Indigenous accounts relay a sense of shock and outrage. The Florentine Codex is both representative and the most exhaustive in its treatment of the massacre. After describing joyful preparations and the beginning of the most important religious feast in the Mexica calendar, the Codex continues:

“At this moment, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways, all the gates of the patio (...). They posted guards so that no one could escape, and then rushed into the Sacred Patio to slaughter the celebrants (...) They ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor. They attacked all the celebrants, spearing them, striking them with their swords. They attacked some of them from behind (...). Others they beheaded (...). They slashed others in the abdomen and their entrails all spilled to the ground. Some attempted to run away, but their intestines dragged as they ran; they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails. No matter how they tried to save themselves, they could find no escape.”⁴¹

Insert image *La Matanza de Templo Mayor* from the Codex Durán

Cortés, on the other hand, omitted any reference to the event in his second letter, presumably because he wanted to keep the focus on him as a heroic leader taking swift and decisive action and uphold his carefully curated claim that he was successful in avoiding the “scandal” of excessive violence even when confronted with treacherous behaviour and unpalatable violence on the part of the natives. Soon, though, Cortés would be compelled to offer his

⁴⁰ A source-based narrative of the massacre in Thomas, *Conquest*, pp. 382-7, 389-93; a brief discussion of the relationship between eyewitness testimonies and other accounts in P. García Loaeza, ‘Telling Violence: the Toxcatl massacre at the Templo Mayor in sixteenth-century sources’, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 22 (2016), 109-23.

⁴¹ León-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, pp. 74-6. The shock about the violence and treachery is palpable in other indigenous accounts, such as the Codex Aubin, which stresses that permission to celebrate was given by both Cortés and Alvarado; *ibid.*, pp. 80-2, p. 80, p. 81.

version of events. The abortive *información* that Velázquez initiated in 1521 in order to put Cortés on trial pressed witnesses on a great number of issues, question 47 asking:⁴²

“whether they knew that Pedro de Alvarado and his men had slain more than six hundred Mexica nobles and five or six thousand commoners who peacefully celebrated their idol, thus causing the uprising that put the conquest into jeopardy”.

One exemplary witness, Juan Álvarez, reported a Mexica plot foiled by pre-emptive action on the part of Alvarado and his men.⁴³ He claimed that the Spanish had noticed preparations for war, seized and interrogated Mexica under torture, and had thus been able to confirm their suspicion. As in the case of Cholula, the defence was that the Spanish had to kill unarmed warriors and non-combatants to prevent an attack.

With conflicts and lawsuits among the conquistadors snowballing, it is no surprise that Pedro de Alvarado, too, became subject to a *residencia* a few years later, in 1529.⁴⁴ Toxcatl loomed large among the charges brought against him, not least because of the loss of pillaged gold and the fact that it put the whole conquest in grave peril. Bernadino Vázquez de Tapia makes another appearance as a key witness.⁴⁵ He states that interrogation and torture of arbitrarily apprehended *indios* did not yield any evidence of a plot, both because testimony from torture was notoriously unreliable and because the indigenous translator did not convey what the prisoners were saying but merely confirmed what Alvarado claimed they were saying.⁴⁶ Vázquez also states that the victims — he speaks of two to three hundred Mexica lords and two to three thousand spectators, though witnesses gave different numbers in the course of the inquiry — peacefully gathered in the temple and simply ignored the armed Spanish taking position at the exits. The brutality of the Spanish assault was execrable. The greed and folly of Alvarado and his men, so Vázquez de Tapia, resulted in the loss of treasure,

⁴² An *información* represented the first step in a legal process of indictment before a court of laws, namely the gathering of witness statements justifying the need for a charge. The text in L. Martínez (ed.), *Documentos cortesianos I: 1518-1528. Secciones I a III* (Mexico City, Universidad Autónoma de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990 [ebook, 2014]), pp. 280-349; question 47, *ibid.*, pp. 308-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 346-9.

⁴⁴ *Procesos de residencia instruidos contra Pedro de Alvarado y Nuño de Guzmán*, ed. J. F. Ramírez (Mexico City, Valdés y Redondas, 1847). Toxcatl is raised in question 7, *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ His testimony *ibid.*, pp. 34-42. Testimony during Cortés's *residencia*, *Documentos cortesianos I*, pp. 47-8.

⁴⁶ *Procesos (...) contra Pedro de Alvarado*, *ibid.*, p. 37.

the death of many Spaniards and indigenous allies, and the near collapse of the Spanish enterprise.⁴⁷

Alvarado and his men in turn denied that the Spanish struck out and struck first at unarmed, unsuspecting people.⁴⁸ The interrogation of commoners, so Alvarado, confirmed suspicions that Mexica nobles were planning to replace the statue of the Virgin Mary in the Templo Mayor with that of Huitzilopochtli, their god of war, and then go on to destroy the Spanish.⁴⁹ Allegedly, the intention was to impale captured Spaniards as a punishment. Crucially, Alvarado and his witnesses contend that they went to the temple in order to prevent sacrilege even though their quarters were already besieged.⁵⁰ In a nutshell: the Mexica attacked first; the Spanish did not act pre-emptively. Once the Spanish arrived at the main temple courtyard, they were confronted by increasing numbers of Mexica warriors. Forced to retreat and defend their quarters, they held the city for forty days until the return of Cortés and the main force.

The party of Alvarado offers a familiar tale of conquistador heroism laced with points that were politically and legally relevant: they stress that a native uprising had been only a matter of time; they are at pains to assert that nothing was done to provoke violence, that everything had been done to corroborate their suspicion of imminent attack, and that the Mexica had begun their assault by the time the Spanish decided to retrieve the statue of the Virgin Mary from the Templo Mayor.

Later accounts rearranged the core elements of these confused narratives, selecting, emphasising, sometimes adding details.⁵¹ Indigenous sources are unequivocal in their condemnation. Most Spanish sources are either ambivalent or follow Vázquez de Tapia in being downright dismissive of the explanation given by Alvarado and some of his men. Francisco López de Gómara, for instance, indirectly corroborates Vázquez de Tapia's version of events. After describing the dance, he states that:

“some say that he [Alvarado] was warned that those Indians, as city leaders, had gathered there to coordinate their subsequent mutiny and rebellion; [whereas] others

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 65-8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 66-7.

⁵⁰ This is the slant of the question Alvarado put to his chosen witnesses (question 19), *ibid.*, p. 93-4.

⁵¹ See García Loaeza, 'Telling violence', 113-19.

say he went there in the first instance to see their much praised and famous dancing, but seeing them so richly adorned, that they bent under the gold on their heads and shoulders (...) without sorrow nor Christian piety knifed and killed them, and took what was on their heads.”⁵²

Gómara makes clear that Cortés, though horrified by events and anything but persuaded by Alvarado’s jumbled explanations, could not pursue the issue any further given the desperate situation Alvarado had brought about.

Bernal Díaz, not present at the massacre, bluntly rejects Alvarado’s claims.⁵³ He does not describe the assault as such, but recounts that four of Moctezuma’s envoys intercepted the Spanish on their way back to Tenóchtitlán, and bitterly and credibly complained that Alvarado had killed many of their “principales y caciques” even though they had received permission from both Cortés and Alvarado himself to celebrate the feast of Toxcatl. He also goes into detail about Cortés’ interrogation of Alvarado. According to Díaz, Alvarado gave confused and conflicting accounts of an alleged Mexica conspiracy which left Cortés and everyone else in little doubt that Moctezuma’s envoys had told the truth. Alvarado escaped punishment only, Díaz suggests, echoing Gómara, because the Spanish needed to maintain unity in the face of Mexica retaliation.

Las Casas — again prefiguring Leo Kuper — decries Toxcatl as yet another example of a massacre conceived as a means to instil fear and forestall indigenous resistance. His brief words echo the sense of loss felt by the Mexica:

“The garrison decided to stage a show of strength and thereby boost the fear they inspired in the people of this kingdom, a classic Spanish tactic in these campaigns, as we have had occasion to remark before. (...) the sad story of a massacre which wiped out their entire nobility, beloved and respected by them for generations and generations.”⁵⁴

⁵² Gómara, *Life*, pp. 197-8.

⁵³ Díaz, *Historia*, pp. 155-62 (‘Spanish Massacre of the Dancers’).

⁵⁴ Las Casas, *Destruction*, pp. 50-51.

Though the relations between the Spanish and the Mexica were deteriorating rapidly and a rebellion would probably have broken out at some point, the evidence, on balance, does not stack up to proof of an indigenous plot or in fact a Mexica surprise attack. It is possible that Alvarado and his men, weakened in numbers and holed up in the midst of an increasingly hostile population succumbed to fear and paranoia. It is equally possible, though, that the opportunity to strike a decisive blow against increasingly un-cooperative Mexica leaders and to enrich themselves were weightier factors and reason enough for killing “without sorrow or Christian piety”.

Conclusion

The communities involved in the massacres of Xaragua, Cholula, and Toxcatl represented vastly different cultures, including distinct cultures of violence, but shared a sense of the fragility of political alliances and body politics nonetheless. The Spanish, through a mixture of luck, bold ignorance, and intuitive albeit limited understanding of indigenous political structures, were able to exploit the tensions and rivalries that characterised the relationships among Caribbean and Mesoamerican peoples. They were dependent on indigenous collaboration more than they were prepared to concede and possibly realised, and narrowly survived their own divisions.

The use of genocidal massacre against indigenous communities was a factor in their success. In the case of Xaragua and Cholula, indigenous actors co-operated with European strategy and practice of excessive violence. In the case of Cholula, in fact, it is more than likely that indigenous actors (the *altepetls* of Tlaxcala and Cempoala, Malinche) directed strategy and outcomes. Though it is unlikely that we will ever be able to establish whether the Toxcatl massacre was conceived as least in parts an object lesson, it does follow the pattern and illustrates the impact of genocidal massacre and excessive violence on indigenous communities.

Most Spanish and indigenous perpetrators either denied that a massacre took place in the first instance or defended their actions as the necessary and justified response to indigenous transgression of European norms they assumed to be universally binding. The indigenous victim of genocidal massacre was denounced as a rebel, a traitor, and a cruel cannibal intent on slaughtering the Spanish under the pretext of friendship and hospitality.

The excessive violence of massacre was obscured or altogether omitted from testimonies. We have indigenous accounts, however, which challenge the perpetrator narratives. We also have contemporary Spanish testimonies and Spanish accounts which demonstrate that many Spanish felt that the excessive violence of genocidal massacre violated the very norms the conquistadors claimed to represent and uphold.

Bibliographical Essay

Text and footnotes in the above essay already reference contemporary sources concerning the massacres of Xaragua, Cholula, and Toxcatl available in partial or full English translation. These include the collections of extracts translated from Spanish and Nahuatl into English edited by P. de Fuentes, M. León-Portilla, and S. B. Schwartz. León-Portilla and Schwartz include helpful introductions and illustrations. Another very useful collection is J. Lockhart (ed. and transl.), *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf & Stock, 2004). Lockhart presents bilingual translations (Nahuatl into English and Spanish into English) from a number of contemporary indigenous sources — some of them directly relevant to this chapter (Florentine Codex, Annals of Tlatelolco, and Codex Aubin) — as well as contextualisation, commentary, and ample illustrations.

Readers interested in full translations of Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex are served by A. J. O. Anderson / C. E. Dibble (eds. and transl.), *The War of Conquest: How It Was Waged Here in Mexico* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1978); and *ids.*, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 13 parts (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press and School of American Research, Santa Fe, 1950-82). The volume by H. F. Cline (transl.) and S. L. Cline (ed.), *Conquest of New Spain, 1585 Revision* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1989) offers a translation of a late redaction of Book Twelve that indicates the shift in Franciscan missionary ideology from the mid- to the late sixteenth century. The idea that Moctezuma mistook Cortés for the returning god Quetzalcoatl propagated in Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex and by Francisco López de Gómara can be regarded as a construct illustrating the complexity of politics of memory in colonial Mexico. See, for instance, J. H. Elliott, 'The Mental World of Hernán Cortés', in *id.*, *Spain and Its World, 1500-1700* (New Haven / London, Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 27-41; and C. Townsend, 'Burying the White

Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico', *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003), 659-87.

L. B. Simpson's translation of Gómara's *Historia de la conquista de Mexico* is only available in the hardback originally published in 1964, whereas Pagden's English translation of Cortés' *cartas de relación* is now available as ebook. So are D. Carrasco's English edition of Bernal Díaz de Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* referenced above and Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, transl. with an intro. by J. M. Cohen (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1963). A fresh, more rugged translation is *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, transl. with an intro. and notes by J. Burke and T. Humphrey (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2012). The most reliable translation of Bartolomé de Las Casas', *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* remains the one by N. Griffin with an introduction by A. Pagden.