

# Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain?

A Lesson in Historical Thinking



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Lesson framework adapted from the Stanford History Education Group: <http://sheg.stanford.edu/>

### Materials:

- 1) World History: The Modern Era: p. 110-112
- 2) Student Background/Timeline
- 3) Documents A-C
- 4) Document Chart
- 5) History Assessment of Thinking (HAT)

**Time Period:** Maximum of two 50-minute periods

### Document Explanation:

- 1) Document A is an excerpt from “The Broken Spears,” which is one of the only compilations of Aztec accounts of their conquest by the Spanish we have today. This document aims to portray Hernán Cortés and the Spaniards as greedy, selfish villains, who are robbing the Aztecs and destroying not only their material wealth, but also the cultural value attached to the Aztec ornaments.
- 2) Document B consists of several excerpts from letters written during the time of Spanish conquest by Hernán Cortés to the Spanish King, Charles V. Cortés knew that the relatively new Spanish empire would embrace him and revere him as a hero if he could ensure the empire wealth and prestige through his conquest. In the first excerpt, Cortés seeks to justify his conquest of the Aztecs by portraying Moctezuma as a brutal, oppressive tyrant. Cortés declares he is merely defending the weaker natives against the powerful Aztecs. In the second excerpt, he portrays the Aztecs as evil barbarians and claims his men only attack after they have been attacked. His letter also has a religious appeal as he declares that the Spanish were successful with the help of God. The third excerpt describes that same meeting with Moctezuma in “The Broken Spears,” but this time the Aztec leader willingly gives up his material wealth and power for Cortés. The last excerpt ensures King Charles V that much wealth and prestige will be bestowed on the Spanish empire as a result of Cortés’ efforts.
- 3) Document C is an Aztec perspective that portrays the Spanish as men with superior and unfamiliar weaponry and animals. This resulted in a great amount of fear. This document may be interpreted as evidence that Cortés and his men were villains – after all, they won with unfair advantages and through intimidation. On the other hand, the Spaniards may be viewed as heroes, who achieved their goals through their superior military strength.

### Teacher Notes:

Through the eyes of Moctezuma and the Aztecs, Cortés and the Spaniards were traitors and marauders, responsible for the deaths of millions of Aztecs, who also destroyed most Aztec cultural traditions. Through the eyes of Cortés, and the Spanish Empire, the success of the Spaniards was the result of courageous behavior in battle, which helped to expand and bring

wealth and prestige to the Spanish Empire, while spreading Christianity as they brought an end to the pagan religion of the Aztecs.

**Procedure:**

1. Students should have sufficient background information on exploration and conquistadors. See the page numbers in the book, as well as the teacher notes and student background information/timeline to help prepare students. It is suggested that students have a copy of the background information/timeline to aid in understanding and contextualization of the documents.

2. Provide students with Document A. You may want to model the reading of a historical document with students using Document A. For example, go through the steps of sourcing the document before you read it, and discuss with students that when approaching a historical document you should not simply read through it from first word to last.

3. Hand out the Document Chart to students and go through the sourcing, contextualization and corroboration questions as a class.

4. Repeat steps 2-3 with Documents B and C. Provide as little or as much guidance as you feel is necessary to meet the needs of your students.

**\*Formative Assessment Possibility:** At any point in time, have students write a brief response to the historical question: Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain? using evidence from the documents they have read. The teacher can then provide feedback and redirection, if necessary, based on student responses.

5. After students have read through all three documents and completed the document chart, have students respond to the corroboration questions.

**\*Formative Assessment Possibility:** Have students write missing viewpoints on a sticky note (for an electronic option, check out <http://wallwisher.com/>) and view them as a class.

6. Now it is time for students to complete one, or more, of the summative assessments to measure student learning.

**\*Summative Assessment Possibilities:**

- Document Chart – This will allow teachers to evaluate any number of historical thinking skills.
- Answering the Historical Question - Students write a 2-3 paragraph essay answering the historical thinking question: Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain? Students should use historical background information and at least four specific pieces of evidence from the documents when developing their answer.
- History Assessment of Thinking (HAT) – To evaluate students on their ability to contextualize and corroborate, this assessment is helpful. **Note for Teacher:** The painting describes the scene in which, upon receiving word of Cortés’s arrival on the coast, Moctezuma sends his ambassadors to meet the Spanish explorers. Cortés orders a show of military strength to impress the ambassadors. Students should note that the time period (end of the Seventeenth Century) may impact the reliability of the painting.

## Student Background Information/Timeline

### Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain?

By the 1400s, the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán was one of the largest, wealthiest, and most beautiful cities in the entire world. No one outside of the Americas had ever seen it until 1519 when the Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés arrived with 600 men, 16 horses, and a few cannons. He met a young native woman named Malinche who would serve as his translator and advisor. Malinche knew the Aztec language and quickly learned to speak Spanish. The leader of the Aztecs, Moctezuma, was not sure what to think when his messengers brought word that the Spanish were on their way. Was their leader, Hernán Cortés, a friend? Was he an invading enemy? Or was he the legendary god-king Quetzalcoatl returning to earth to rule the world once again? As you read the following documents that describe the meeting of the Aztec and Spanish, keep in mind this question: Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain?

- 1345: foundation of Tenochtitlán by the Aztecs
- 1376: Aztecs choose their first King and begin to expand through alliances
- 1428: Aztecs begin conquering other indigenous groups in Central Mexico
- 1440: Aztecs begin to turn on their allies
- 1469: the marriage of King Ferdinand V of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile results in the formation of the modern country of Spain
- 1492: Christopher Columbus lands in the Americas
- 1502-1519: Moctezuma rules the Aztec empire
- April 22, 1519: Hernán Cortés sails from Cuba and arrives in Mexico
- August 15, 1521: city of Tenochtitlán falls to the Spanish
- August 21, 1521: Aztecs surrender to the Spanish

## Document A (excerpted)

*There are only a few Aztec accounts of the arrival of the Spanish in Tenochtitlán in 1519. The following account describes the first meeting between the Aztec leader Moctezuma and the Spanish leader Hernán Cortés.*

When the Spaniards were installed in the palace, they asked Moctezuma about the city's resources and reserves and about the warriors' **ensigns** and shields. They questioned him closely and then demanded gold. Moctezuma guided them to it....

When they arrived at the treasure house called Teucalco, the riches of gold and feathers were brought out to them: ornaments made of **quetzal** feathers, richly worked shields, disks of gold, the necklaces of the idol, gold nose plugs, gold **greaves**, and bracelets and crowns.

The Spaniards immediately stripped the feathers from the gold shields and ensigns. They gathered all the gold into a great mound and set fire to everything else, regardless of its value. Then they melted down the gold into **ingots**....

Next they went to Moctezuma's storehouse. When they entered the hall of treasures, it was as if they had arrived in Paradise. They searched everywhere and coveted everything; they were slaves to their own greed. All of Moctezuma's possessions were brought out.... everything that belonged to the king and was reserved for him only. They seized these treasures as if they were their own as if this **plunder** were merely a stroke of good luck. And when they had taken all the gold, they heaped up everything else in the middle of the patio.

**Source:** *Published in 1992 in "The Broken Spears," written by an unknown Aztec chronicler and translated by Malinche in 1519*

### Word Bank:

ensigns – a military flag or banner  
quetzal – golden-green and scarlet feathers  
greaves – piece of plate armor  
ingots – a mass of metal for shaping, remelting, or refining  
plunder – to rob of goods or valuables by force

**Full Text Available:** Leon-Portilla, Miguel, ed. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

## Document B (modified, excerpted):

*Hernán Cortés writes to King Charles V of Spain about his march to Tenochtitlán and subsequent takeover of the city.*

1. “(The area around Vera Cruz) includes as many as fifty thousand warriors and fifty villages and strongholds, all...loyal subjects of your Majesty...for they became subjects of (Moctezuma) by force; but on hearing from me of your Majesty and of his great and royal state they declared themselves willing to be the subjects of your Majesty and my friends, begging me to defend them from that lord (Moctezuma) who ruled them by force and **tyranny**, taking their children to kill and sacrifice them to his **idols** and giving them other **grievous** causes for complaint of which they informed me.”

2. “On arriving at a small village after sunrise...a large number of Indians in full war-dress appeared with a tremendous shout and began to attack us...The more I (tried to reason with them), the more fiercely they attacked us. Seeing (that peaceful demands were useless) we began to defend ourselves...we did (the Indians) great damage, without suffering anything worse than the toil and weariness of long hours of fighting without food...It was plainly **manifest** that God was fighting on our side.”

3. “...Moctezuma returned with many various ornaments of gold, silver and featherwork, and some five or six thousand cotton clothes, richly dyed and embroidered in various ways, and having made me a present of them he seating himself on another low bench which was placed next to mind, and addressed me in this manner: ...We will obey you and hold you as lord...all that I rule, you may command anything you desire, and it shall be obeyed and done, and all that we have is at your will and pleasure. And since you are in your own land and house, rejoice and (rest after) your journey, and the battles you have fought.”

4. “Among the other (treasure) taken from the city were many gold shields, crests (coats of arms) and plumes (feathers), and other such marvellous things that they could not be described in writing nor comprehended unless they were actually seen; so that it seemed fitting to me that they should not be divided but rather that they should be presented as whole to your majesty.”

**Source:** *Letters from Hernán Cortés to King Charles V of Spain, 1519-1526.*

### Word Bank:

tyranny: unrestrained exercise of power

idols: an image or other material object to which religious worship is addressed

grievous: burdensome or sorrowful

manifest: clear

**Full Text Available:** Morris, J. Bayard (trans.). *Hernando Cortes: Five Letters 1519-1526*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1928.

## Document C (modified, excerpted):

*The “Florentine Codex” is a bi-lingual encyclopedia of central Mexican life and history, created by the Franciscan friar (a member of a religious order) Bernardino de Sahagún and indigenous (native) advisors, painters and scribes. In the following texts, Bernardino describes how both Moctezuma and the Aztecs viewed the Spaniards.*

1. “And when (Moctezuma) had heard what the messengers reported, he was terrified, he was astounded...Especially did it cause him to faint away when he heard how the gun, at (the Spaniards’) command, discharged (the shots); how it resounded as if it thundered when it went off. It indeed **bereft** one of strength...And when (the shot) struck a mountain, it was as if it were destroyed, dissolved...All iron was their war **array**...And those which bore them upon their backs, their **deer**, were as tall as roof terraces...And their dogs were very large. They had ears folded over; great dragging jowls. They had fiery eyes...And when Moctezuma heard all this, he was much terrified. It was as if he fainted away. His heart saddened; his heart failed him.”

2. “But the Aztec no longer at all dared to go there (to the Spaniards). They were greatly afraid; they were limp with fear; they were taken aback. Fear greatly **prevailed**; it spread about. No one dared come out. It was as though a wild beast were loose, as though it were the deep of night. Yet there was not for that reason a halt or hesitation in delivering everything (the Spaniards) needed, but they delivered it fearfully, they went in fear, they ran in fear as they went to deliver it. And when they had spilled it on the ground, everyone came running back in a flash, panting and trembling.”

***Source:** Bernardino de Sahagún, Franciscan friar, and indigenous advisors, painters and scribes, published in the Florentine Codex, 1570-1585*

### **Word Bank:**

bereft – to deprive ruthlessly or by force

array – to clothe with garments

deer – in this case, horses

prevailed – to be or prove superior in strength, power or influence

**Full Text Available:** Bernardino de Sahagún. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 13 vols. Trans. By Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950-82.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Document Chart: Was Hernán Cortés a hero or a villain?**

Document	<b>Sourcing:</b> What type of document is this? Who wrote it and when was it written? What do you believe was its purpose? Who might be reading this document?	<b>Contextualization:</b> What was going on at the time in which this document was written that might influence its content? Explain.	<b>Close Reading:</b> What evidence does each document provide to support the claim that Cortés is either a hero or a villain?
A: The Broken Spears			
B: Hernán Cortés' Letters to King Charles V			1.
			2.
			3.
			4.
C: Florentine Codex			1.
			2.

**Corroboration:**

- 1) Which document do you feel is the most trustworthy? Why?
- 2) After reading these documents, whose perspectives are missing? In other words, whose voice is left out of this debate? Your answer should include those perspectives you feel could help you answer the historical question better.



# History Assessment of Thinking (HAT)

Directions: Use the painting to answer the questions below.



**Title:** "Arrival of Cortés in Vera Cruz"

**By:** Jay I. Kislak

**Date:** Last half of the Seventeenth Century

**Question 1:** The painting, "Arrival of Cortés in Vera Cruz," helps historians understand the relationship between the Aztecs and the Spanish.

Do you agree or disagree? (Circle One). Briefly support your answer:

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**Question 2:** With which documents (A-C) does this painting seem to corroborate? With which documents (A-C) does this painting seem to disagree? Explain your answer:

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