H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Laura Matthew, Michel R. Oudijk, eds.** *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xiv + 349 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3854-1.

**Reviewed by** Raphael Folsom
**Published on** H-AmIndian (November, 2008)
**Commissioned by** Patrick G. Bottiger

**Violent Lessons**

"War is a savage schoolmaster" (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War,* 3.82.2)

Consider the predicament of the Tlaxcalan conquistador Don Francisco de Oñate. Oñate was heir to a central Mexican lordship, and, in 1527, led a regiment of Tlaxcalans in the conquest of Guatemala. He was proud of his service under the Spanish captain Jorge de Alvarado, and he expected rewards of land, money, and legal privilege. Yet, he was disillusioned at how little he received. He and his men worried that more disappointment was to come. The campaign dragged on, and Oñate learned that his siblings had usurped his inheritance in Tlaxcala. He wrote to King Charles V in 1547 demanding restitution for what he had lost in the service of the crown. His petition accompanied a letter from his fellow Indian conquistadors, who complained that the Spaniards failed to treat them with the respect they deserved. Although they were indispensable allies to the Spanish, they were treated as mere "Indios" (pp. 102-126). The king often supported such petitions, but his favor could never dispel the unease of the Indian conquistadors. They were often powerful men, even holders of *encomiendas*(a tract of land or a village together with its Indian inhabitants). Yet, they had to endure the insolence of Spanish settlers and the slow disintegration of their privileges. Some came to believe that they were the victims of a vast and terrible lie.

Where would the story of Oñate fit into textbook histories of the conquest of the Americas? Neither the "Black Legend" of Spanish perfidy nor the "White Legend" of Spanish altruism can account for the swirling ironies and reversals of Oñate's life. There is still no new concept to replace the old legends and make sense of the careers of the Indian conquistadors. Though much outstanding history has been written about the period, no metaphor crystallizes Mexico's conquest era for the scholarly public as "the Middle Ground" does with the borderlands of North America (Richard White, *The Middle Ground, Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* [1991]), as "the Market Revolution" describes the Jacksonian Era (Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution, Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* [1994]), or as "the Negotiated State" does postrevolutionary Mexico (*Everyday Forms of State Formation, Revolution, and the Negotiations of Rule in Modern Mexico* [1994], edited by Gilbert Joseph). In each of these cases, a bold thesis has stimulated research and provoked debate in ways that have brought about major advances in their respective fields.

*Indian Conquistadors* represents an important step in the reconceptualization of the conquest of Mesoamerica. This fascinating and distinguished volume brings together essays on the experiences of native peoples in Spanish-led expeditions throughout Mexico and Central America. The contributors depict Spaniards as the catalysts rather than the authors of change. They write of native peoples as the protagonists of their own history. Many readers will be surprised to find the conquest of Mesoamerica depicted more as the outgrowth of earlier patterns of native imperial expansion than as the triumph of Europe over America.

Susan Schroeder introduces the volume with an overview of conquest studies, divided into four sections. She begins with the "epic tradition" as espoused by sixteenth-century chroniclers and their heir, William Prescott. Schroeder sketches two more scholarly traditions in sections on "The Spiritual Conquest" from Robert Ricard to Louise Burkhart, and what she calls "Loser History," which explores the disillusionment that set in after the conquest. The final trend she describes is that of Indians as conquistadors. This is the longest and strongest section of her essay, thanks largely to Schroeder's unparalleled knowledge of early Mexican intellectuals, such

as Don Domingo de San Antón Muňón Chimalpahin and Muñoz Camargo. Her startling conclusion is that many native people regarded themselves as leaders of the conquest, rather than its victims.

Michel R. Oudijk and Matthew Restall explore this theme in fascinating detail. In a survey of indigenous allies, they show that Hernando Cortés's alliance with the Tlaxcalans was the most famous native alliance with Spanish invaders, but was not the only one. Mesoamerican allies accompanied the Spanish as far as Panama, Florida, Peru, and the Philippines. Some Indians served as soldiers, but many more acted as porters, interpreters, spies, cooks, messengers, concubines, and manual laborers. This is a rich and understudied historical vein that several other contributors mine.

This essay's most intriguing contribution lies in its exploration of preconquest patterns of war and alliance. The authors show that the Spaniards stumbled into a Mesoamerican world of constantly shifting alliances and coalitions. The greatest achievement of the Spanish can thus be regarded as the speed and skill with which they turned preexistent traditions of indigenous alliance to their own advantage. This insight also recasts our understanding of the way native people saw the conquest. They surely saw the Spanish as the bringers of change, but it was a kind of change with which Indians were familiar. They saw alliance with Spaniards as a logical outgrowth of their own diplomatic traditions.

Restall and Oudijk make the further point that *mestizaje* (race mixture), that most distinctive feature of Spanish colonialism, also had roots in the preconquest period: "One important dimension to alliance building in Mesoamerica both before and during the Spanish invasion was the exchange of women for marriage.... It is exactly this pattern that we frequently see mentioned in the sources with respect to the Spaniards. Both in Cempoala and in Tlaxcala the Spaniards received daughters of the rulers to *hacer generación* 'to make generations' or 'to engender"' (pp. 44-45).

In this and many other respects, native sources indicate that Indians saw the Spanish conquest as the continuation of old indigenous traditions. Florine Asselbergs provides rich evidence to buttress these claims in her essay, "The Conquest in Images." Native pictorial accounts of the conquest highlighted native participation, and natives took possession of the conquest as a native achievement.

Laura Matthew's essay, "Whose Conquest? Nahua, Zapoteca, and Mixteca Allies in the Conquest of Central America," fleshes out the collection's more general claims with strikingly detailed research. She skillfully places microhistorical detail in broad perspective as she examines the Indian conquistadors of Guatemala. They fought for and received privileges from the Spanish crown for their service in Central America. But these were slowly pruned back and ultimately disrespected by Spanish settlers. In response, Indian conquistadors produced voluminous petitions to the crown, one of which forms the documentary core of Matthew's essay. The petition met with delayed and partial victory in the late sixteenth century: exemption from personal service and reduced tribute payments. Yet, the petition had an importance to Indian conquistadors beyond its immediate legal implications. Matthew's careful digging and sifting has uncovered a vivid illustration of this fact: the letter of a bishop who saw a copy of the petition in the mid-nineteenth century. The documents securing the town's privileges, the bishop wrote, consisted of "parchment papers finely bound..., and covered in crimson velvet with silver guards on the outside, the coat of arms in the middle, and corresponding latches ... with loose overleafs of doubled mother-of-pearl taffeta, which are still carefully preserved.... A dignified monument to their antiquity" (p. 121)! From the historian's standpoint, this bound petition is richly suggestive, at once of community pride, of qualified respect for empire, and of the tremendous capacity of native peoples to make the colonial culture their own. Matthew concludes that in the sixteenth century natives experienced "bitter education in what they could expect from their Spanish allies in the new colonial order and the ways they would be required to act in order to preserve their distinction" (p. 121). War, the "savage schoolmaster," taught all that the conquest would fulfill no one's utopian dreams, but would lead, instead, to complex and painful new realities.

Robinson Herrera explores the most intimate of these new realities in his discussion of cross-cultural marriage. The Spanish quickly adopted the practice of marrying into native noble families to bind alliances. Gleaning fragmentary evidence from thousands of pages of notarial records, Herrera shows that this practice was common in the early conquest years but diminished over time, as the Spanish established their dominance and peninsular women immigrated and became available as marriage partners. There were always informal unions between lower status people across the cultural divide. But this practice also faded gradually. To his credit, Herrera refuses to tell a simple story of Spanish male trickery and Indian female victimhood. Spanish men often left large bequests to their mestizo children, while native women

played an active role in shaping the nascent colonial society. In Herrera's treatment, the conquest was dark and brutal, yet illuminated by flashes of human kindness and creativity.

Few such flashes are to be found in the first part of Ida Altman's "Conquest, Coercion, and Collaboration: Indian Allies and the Campaigns of Nueva Galicia." Where Herrera analyzes subtle cultural diplomacy, Altman narrates a tale of astonishing savagery. Using mostly published primary sources, Altman explores the notorious campaigns of Nuño de Guzmán to show how and why they failed. Guzmán's story is a harrowing chronicle of tenuous alliances, battles, broken supply lines, plunder, crazed fireside dances, child sacrifice, disease, slaughter, herds of starving cattle, floods, fire, and misery. The occasional glimmer of civility, such as the "painted codex" presented as evidence in a lawsuit, only makes the war seem more awful. It would be easy to read this section as supporting the "Black Legend" were it not for Altman's sensitive focus on Spanish-Indian relations. Guzmán thought that he could coerce Indians to serve him like war dogs. He was wrong, and his *entrada*(expedition) "left a legacy of resentment, defiance, and disorder that contributed quite directly to the massive rebellion of 1540-42" (p. 168).

Altman contrasts Guzmán with Viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza, who "attracted the genuine and even enthusiastic support of Indian rulers" thanks to his fair and moderate approach to leadership (p. 168). Here Altman draws on documents from an investigation of the Mixtón War housed in the Archivo General de Indias, supplementing these with the account of Don Francisco Acacitli, one of the native leaders who served under Mendoza. Through shrewd, thoughtful, and relatively humane behavior, Mendoza was able to establish relations between native people and the colonial government. The horrors unleashed by Guzmán taught Spaniards the value of treating Indians diplomatically. War, it seems, was a savage teacher for Spaniards as well as Indians.

There were many instances in which America and its peoples punished Europeans for their arrogance. John Chuchiak shows that the conquistadors who spurned the aid of native allies generally failed, and that historians have often ignored the importance of native bearers, scouts, and warriors in the conquest of Yucatan. To substantiate these claims, Chuchiak casts a broad investigative net and snares many fascinating details. For instance, he offers an intriguing discussion of the ethnic and occupational composition of the conquering parties. Most warriors originated in central Mexico, while most bearers were semi-enslaved encomienda workers from regions closer to the Yucatan peninsula. What is most impressive here is the research. Chuchiak has gleaned most of his information not from secondary sources or chronicles, but from fragmentary, recalcitrant, nonnarrative primary sources examined mainly in the Archivo de Indias in Seville. Anyone who has tried it knows how much work goes into the creation of a coherent narrative on such a tangled documentary basis.

Yanna Yanakakis makes a similar argument for the importance of native allies in the Oaxacan context, but she does so over a longer time period and makes more sweeping claims about the nature of Spanish colonialism. "How," she asks, "did Mexico's imperial overlords maintain colonial rule in the empire's hinterlands despite a notoriously underdeveloped provincial bureaucracy and the lack of a standing army" (p. 227)? Her answer is a subtle one, pointing at once to cooperation and coercion. The harsh terrain, numerous Indians, and prevalence of idolatry in the Oaxacan sierra made it essential for the Spaniards to bring native allies from central Mexico. The Spaniards were dependent on warriors from the town of Analco during the conquest of the region, and remained dependent on the descendants of the Analco fighters throughout the seventeenth century. The Spanish were terrified of rebellions and relied on the conquistador communities to keep a lid on violent unrest. In the eighteenth century, the Spanish took a stronger and more competent interest in the region, and the importance of the Analco communities began to fade. The documents securing the privileges of the Analco conquistadors were lost or stolen, and successive court cases undermined their claims to self-governance. Here, as in so many other places, the Indian conquistadors were slowly transformed into mere "Indios."

Things were different in the Mexican north, as Brett Blosser argues in his essay on a region known as Fronteras de Colotlán. Companies of *flecheros* (archers) served alongside central Mexican Indians in the Spanish struggle against the "Chichimecas" of the north. For their services, they won land, water rights, forests, and legal privileges. Blosser sifted through an impressive array of documents to show that the flecheros used their service as leverage to obtain privileges, and that they enjoyed these privileges through the end of the colonial period. Among the many ironies and reversals to be found in this book, one of the strangest comes in Blosser's account of a revolt in 1702. Flecheros seized an abusive crown official, literally crucified him, and shot him through with arrows. Amazingly, the Spanish superior government simply de-

clared a general pardon for this shocking act in exchange for flechero promises that they would not do it again. The government claimed its lenience was fitting for a crime committed spontaneously by a large crowd. But the truth was that the flecheros had become too powerful for the government to control. The cheapest expedient was simply to try to save face while letting the rebels go unpunished. In conclusion, Blosser writes, "Fronteras de Colotlán Indian leaders strategically deployed the leverage afforded by their pueblos' histories of military service and by the Crown's fear of rebellion to open, expand, and defend a relatively extensive and autonomous space for Indian cultural and political life for most of the course of the colonial period" (p. 309). Why the flecheros were able to achieve this and the Indian allies of central and southern Mesoamerica were not is perhaps a question for a further volume.

Indeed, there are many questions raised in this volume that will whet the curiosity of scholars. Beyond the issue of variations between northern and central Mesoamerica, historians may wonder about the role of disease in the relationships between the Spanish and their native allies, a question this volume only addresses in passing. Nevertheless, the essays in Indian conquistadors are shrewd, resourceful, perceptive, and collectively fascinating. They deserve an ample readership, much as Oñate, the aggrieved Tlaxcalan conquistador, deserves a place in the master narrative of Mexican history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

**Citation:** Raphael Folsom. Review of Matthew, Laura; Oudijk, Michel R., eds, *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica.* H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.
**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22982

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.