

How Spain Became
A World Power
1492-1763



By
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A New World

At the time of the conquest there was no Christian God nor king of Spain here, nor was there any justice, and so the Spaniards and the Indians gave themselves up to plundering and robbing, so that there was great hunger and very many people died throughout the kingdom.

Felipe Guaman Poma,
New Chronicle and Good Government (1614)

Like all states in the process of expansion, that of Spain resorted to procedures of conquest and occupation. The recovery of Naples for the Crown of Aragon, and the incorporation of Navarre with that of Castile, would not have taken place without the use of an army and all the attendant consequences of death, disruption and destruction. However, the Italian campaigns had demonstrated already that Castile had few resources to spend on an expansionist programme. In the New World, the nature of the enterprise ruled out from the very beginning any use of military force by the crown. Neither Ferdinand nor Charles V perceived the American venture as one of 'conquest'. When the Spaniards extended their energies to the lands beyond the ocean, they did not – despite the proud claims of their chroniclers – conquer them. The occupation and development of the New World was a little more complex than a mere act of subjugation.

Not a single Spanish army was expended on 'conquest'. When Spaniards established their control, they did so through the sporadic efforts of small groups of adventurers whom the crown later attempted to bring under its control. These men, who proudly assumed the description of 'conquistadors', were often not even soldiers. The group of men that seized the Inca emperor at Cajamarca in 1532, was made up of artisans, notaries, traders, seamen, traders, gentry and peasants, a small

cross-section of immigrants to America and in some measure a reflection of peninsular society itself. Similar groups were in action at other points in the New World. Most of them, especially the leaders, were *encomenderos* (132 of the 150 adventurers who accompanied Valdivia to Chile were *encomenderos*). This meant that they were engaged on their expedition by virtue of the crown conceding them an *encomienda*, a contract that gave the recipient rights to demand tribute and labour from the natives, and obliged him to serve and defend the crown and instruct the natives in the Christian faith. The wording of the contract frequently specified a form of feudal service, 'with arms and a horse',¹ making it evidently a military agreement. Thanks to the *encomienda*, the Crown was able to mount a military operation in the New World without the necessity, which it would in any case not have been able to fulfil, of sending an army there. The almost total dependence of the 'conquest' period on private enterprise was emphasized by the historian Oviedo, who as we have seen commented that 'almost never do Their Majesties put their income and cash into these new discoveries'. It was an all-important aspect that the *encomenderos* did not forget.

Moreover, the so-called 'conquest' of the Americas was never completed. The *encomenderos* were at no time in a position to subjugate the native populations systematically or occupy more than a fragment of the lands into which they had intruded. They were too few in number and their efforts too dispersed. Well over two centuries after the period of alleged conquest, and long after cartographers had drawn up maps in which the virtual totality of America was depicted as being 'Spanish', Spaniards in reality controlled only a tiny part of the continent, mainly the fertile coastal areas of the Caribbean and the Pacific. The fact is fundamental to understanding the nature of Spain's role in America. The overseas empire was a fragile enterprise that produced many significant benefits – mainly from the gold and silver mines – but that Spaniards by no means succeeded in controlling entirely.

Finally, the early Spaniards in the New World insisted that they had won what they had won through the traditional right, recognized in Old World societies, of 'conquest', but they were very soon disabused of this notion. The clergy who advised the Crown stated that Spaniards had no right to burst in like robbers, seize what they liked, and proclaim that they had 'conquered' it. On the Sunday before Christmas 1511 a

Dominican friar, Antonio de Montesinos, went into the pulpit of the church in Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, and denounced those Spaniards who had *encomiendas* of Indians. Other clergy, foremost among them another Dominican friar, Bartolomé de las Casas, subsequently joined in the campaign. In 1512 King Ferdinand sanctioned the issue of the Laws of Burgos, which attempted to regulate the activity of colonizers and the condition of the Indians. No one in the nascent colony took any notice of the laws, but out of them arose a special document drawn up by a member of the royal council, Juan López de Palacios Rubios, and known as the *requerimiento* (requirement), which based Spanish claims to authority not on simple conquest but on the donation of the new lands to Spain by the pope.

The document was meant to be read out publicly to Indians who would not accept the Spanish claims. Employed on numerous occasions by Spanish expeditions, it claimed that God had given the world to the papacy, that the pope in turn had given 'these isles and mainland' to the rulers of Spain, and that if the natives did not accept the Spanish obedience and the Christian religion they would be treated as rebels, dispossessed of their property and enslaved. Las Casas commented that when he first read the document he did not know 'whether to laugh or cry', and certainly many Spaniards thought the *requerimiento* ridiculous.² The author of the text himself realized that it was farcical. Fernández de Oviedo reported that Palacios Rubios 'could not stop laughing when I told him what some commanders had done with it'. In fact Oviedo had personally criticized one specific case, that of Pedrarias Dávila, first governor of Castilla del Oro (Tierra Firme), one of whose captains read out the document to a group of uncomprehending Indians. 'It seems to me', Oviedo told Dávila, 'that these Indians have no wish to listen to the theology of this Requirement, nor do you have any obligation to make them try and understand it; keep it for when we have some of these Indians in a cage, then they can study it at leisure.'³ A report made by Alonso Zuazo to Charles V explained how the reading was done: 'the *requerimiento* was read in Spanish, of which the Indians did not understand a word. Moreover it was read at such a distance that had they understood the language they could not have heard what was being said.'⁴ Where feasible the document was translated for the benefit of the listeners. Since the interpreters themselves did not understand what the document said, the final result was little short of grotesque.

It is tempting to consider the coming of the Europeans in terms of their ultimate success. Traditional accounts have therefore, with good reason, emphasized the factors that seemed to give them superiority. Spaniards are supposed to have had an advanced political civilization, a uniquely vital religious mentality, and a burning urge to battle against the heathen. Their feats have been explained by their superior technology, and their single-minded pursuit of gold. Some of these factors were no doubt present, but they did not necessarily culminate in success, for the history of the Spaniards was also one of immense failures. In perspective, of course, many of the participants in the conquest refused to admit any failure. Old, blind and living modestly in retirement on his lands in Guatemala, the historian and conquistador Bernal Díaz could reminisce: 'I often pause to consider the heroic actions of that time. I seem to see them present before my eyes, and I believe that we performed them not of our own volition but by the guidance of God.'⁵ The Spaniards' own chroniclers combined to foster a myth of a successful God-given conquest. The reality was more complex: there were specific 'successes', but the general picture was one of a need to adapt to circumstances that were not always favourable. Between success and failure, the Spanish enterprise in the New World, the first of its type to be undertaken by any European nation, took on characteristics of its own.

From the Caribbean the Spaniards made sporadic ventures to the north and south. In the south from 1509 onwards they made contact with the indigenous population of the mainland (called *Tierra Firme*) and began to find evidence of the use of precious metals. In the north they settled further islands (Cuba in 1511) and also made contact with the mainland of Mexico. Governor Velázquez sent out expeditions from Cuba northwards to the Gulf coast and to the Yucatan (which Ponce de León reached in 1513). In this area of the Caribbean the decisive event was the success of Cortés in discovering and subduing (1519–21) a rich and powerful civilization in the interior of the continent. Mexico fell to the Spaniards a quarter of a century after their discovery of America. The feat sparked off a fever among other restless groups of Spaniards, who dispersed throughout the continent in search of riches. This second phase of the conquistadors, during which some of the most spectacular discoveries of the time were made, occupied another quarter of a century.

Mainland America was home to extensive and highly developed

civilizations that in central Mexico and the Andes took on the form of 'empires', in which local communities made regular payments of tribute to the ultimate overlords, the Mexica in their island city of Tenochtitlan (centre of a Nahuatl confederation that dominated the peoples of Mexico) and the Incas in the Andes. In these empires the noble class had special privileges, religion had a pervasive ceremonial role, and landed property tended to be controlled by communal bodies (called *calpulli* in Mexico and *ayllu* in Peru). Outside these imperial areas the vastness of America was peopled by numerous sedentary and non-sedentary peoples whom the Spaniards barely got to know.

'On Holy Thursday 1519 (April 21)', the companion in arms of Hernando Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recorded in his chronicle, 'we arrived with all the fleet at the port of San Juan de Ulúa. The royal standards were raised on the flagship, and within half an hour of our anchoring two large canoes came out to us full of Mexica Indians. They said that their lord, a servant of the great Montezuma, had sent them to find out what kind of men we were and what we were seeking, also to say that if we required anything for ourselves or our ships, we were to tell them and they would supply it.'⁶ On this courteous note the Mexicas welcomed the small expedition that had sailed from Cuba a few months before and worked its way up the Yucatan coast. In February the expedition chanced to encounter a Spaniard, Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatan but had settled in the area and married a Maya wife. Shortly after, a local Maya chief had presented the Spaniards with twenty female slaves. One of them, renamed Marina, was a Mexica whose mother tongue was Nahuatl but who had also learned the local Maya dialect during captivity. Aguilar and Marina turned out to be a godsend for Cortés. When dealing with Mayas, Aguilar interpreted from their language for the Spaniards. When contact was made with the Nahuas, Marina – in the period before she began to learn Spanish – interpreted what they said, and Aguilar translated her words to Cortés.

For some time past the Indians had been receiving reliable information of the strangers who had come to their shores. They had many doubts, however, about the way to receive them. Cortés had landed with four hundred soldiers, sixteen horsemen, some artillery and a firm conviction that the land he now trod belonged by right to his sovereign king. The natives overwhelmed Cortés and his men with gifts, priceless gold and ornaments 'and many other things that I cannot remember, since all this

was very long ago', reminisced Bernal Díaz. For Cortés, however, the gifts served merely to confirm him in his principal objective, to get the Mexicas to recognize the rulers of Castile as their overlords. If achieved, the objective would strengthen his own position. Very soon after his arrival, he decided to renounce the authority of Velázquez and rely exclusively on the support of the crown in Spain. So began the fascinating chain of events whereby the Spaniards worked their way through the terrain of Mexico, allying with some tribes and terrorizing others, until eventually in November they entered the mighty city of Tenochtitlan, with its population of at least a quarter of a million people, and faced the great Montezuma.

A respectable historical tradition has presented the Mexicas as overcome with doubt and fear at the coming of the white gods. The native sources, written a generation after the conquest, were anxious to explain, through the medium of symbols and omens, why the collapse of their civilization took place. 'Ten years before the Spaniards came to this land, a wonderful and terrifying thing resembling a flame of fire appeared in the sky.'⁷ The Nahuatl account spoke of the appearance of eight omens, for eight was a standard amount in Nahua usage, and the omens were treated as a sort of prologue to the story rather than as symbols of impending doom. The first contact was, as Bernal Díaz has indicated, cordial. During the progress to Tenochtitlan the Spaniards made many friends. At their first stop on the coast, at Cempoala, they won the alliance of the Totonacs by defying the messengers sent by Montezuma. In August 1519 they were at Tlaxcala, a Nahua city that was traditionally hostile to Tenochtitlan and where the leaders resisted the Spaniards by force until they realized that the newcomers were by no means friends of the hated Montezuma. After three weeks of negotiation and contact with the Tlaxcalans, the Spaniards managed to seal an alliance that was to have decisive consequences. The Tlaxcalans were eager to use the strangers to help them in their own wish to overthrow the hegemony of the Mexicas. Unwilling to become simply a tool of the Tlaxcalans, however, Cortés insisted on deciding his own route towards Tenochtitlan, and his men, accompanied by a large force of five thousand Tlaxcalans, headed for the city of Cholula.

The Cholulans, faithful allies of the Mexicas but enemies of Tlaxcala, had already planned with Montezuma's agents to lay a trap for the Spaniards. Cortés was unaware of any danger, and believed that he

could also win over the Cholulans. But after three days in the city, he began to have suspicions, and told his men that 'we must keep on the alert, for they are up to some mischief'. Fortunately, Cempoalan and Tlaxcalan agents who accompanied him were able to reveal details of secret movements being made by the Cholulans. The next day Cortés and his men made signs of preparing to leave, and summoned the Cholulan warriors into a central courtyard. The Spaniards and their allies then sprang their own trap, and launched a merciless attack on the warriors. 'They attacked them with spears and killed as many as they could, and their allies the Indians possibly killed even more, while the Cholulans carried neither offensive nor defensive weapons and in consequence died miserably.' Thousands of Tlaxcalans poured into the city and executed a bloody revenge on their enemies, until Cortés managed to put a stop to the killing. Possibly over three thousand Cholulans died in five hours of fighting.

The massacre caused a great impression throughout the region. 'All the peoples in Mexico and in all the areas to which the Spaniards went, all of them were distressed and distraught; it was as if the earth shook, all went in fear and terror.' Cortés was concerned to leave behind him a peaceful and friendly Cholula, and succeeded over the next few days not only in consolidating this but also in arranging peace between the Cholulans and the Tlaxcalans. He now had the chief cities of the plain on his side, and made plans to advance to Mexico. He did so, however, using a strategy that could have undone the Spaniards. He chose to approach Tenochtitlan with a relatively small force, his own 450 Spaniards, and a support of probably 1,000 Indians as porters and guides. 'The Spaniards with all the Indians who were their allies came in a great crowd in squadrons, making a great noise and shooting off their guns; their weapons glittered from far off and caused great fear in those who were looking on.' Very many writers, both Nahua and Spanish, have described their entry into the legendary capital, passing through the city of Iztapalapan. Cortés was preceded by five files of his men, last of all the musketeers, who 'when they went into the great palace repeatedly shot off their arquebuses. They exploded, sputtered, thundered. Smoke spread, it grew dark with smoke, every place filled with smoke.'⁸ Behind the Spaniards came 'those from the other side of the mountains, the Tlaxcalans, the people of Tlilihquitepec, of Huexotzinco, came following behind. They came outfitted for war . . . they went crouching, hitting

their mouths with their hands and yelling, singing in Tocuillan style, whistling, shaking their heads. Some dragged the large cannons, which went resting on wooden wheels, making a clamour as they came.'

Montezuma gave a traditional greeting of welcome, which Cortés reported to his emperor as a speech of homage. Montezuma's speech was indeed fulsome enough to permit such an interpretation. 'This is your house and these are your palaces,' he said to Cortés, 'take them and rest in them with all your captains and companions.' In the subsequent six months that they were in the city, the Spaniards effectively controlled Montezuma but were themselves wholly vulnerable. The Mexica leaders, resigned but sullen and indignant, became outraged when Cortés began ordering the destructions of their statues. At this stage Montezuma informed Cortés of the arrival of more Spaniards at Veracruz, eighteen vessels from Cuba under the command of Pánfilo de Narváez, who had been sent by governor Velázquez to arrest Cortés and take charge. Cortés at once decided to leave Tenochtitlan for the coast, taking most of his men with him in order to confront the superior forces of Narváez, and leaving behind Pedro de Alvarado with enough men to protect Montezuma. It was not an easy decision, for Montezuma had warned him that the Mexica leaders were plotting to kill all the Spaniards. Bernal Díaz describes the state of permanent alarm faced by the men. They got used to sleeping fully clothed and fully armed, or even not sleeping at all. Díaz never reverted to sleeping normally again. 'I always lie down fully dressed,' he wrote many years afterwards, 'what is more, I can only sleep for a short time at night, I have to get up and look at the sky and stars and walk around for a bit in the dew.'

Cortés left Tenochtitlan in May 1520 and went out to meet Narváez, whose forces he defeated in a quick action that he had preceded by secret overtures to the incoming Spaniards. Narváez was wounded and lost an eye; five men were killed on his side and four on that of Cortés. Most of the Spaniards agreed to join Cortés, who at this moment received a message brought from Tenochtitlan by two Tlaxcalans, saying that Alvarado and his men were in serious trouble as a result of an attack they had made on the Mexica chiefs during a festival. Cortés hurried back to the capital. 'There were over one thousand three hundred soldiers,' writes Díaz, 'counting Narváez's people and our own, also some ninety-six horses, eighty bowmen and as many musketeers. In addition the Tlaxcalan chiefs gave us two thousand warriors. We arrived

at Mexico on 24 June 1520.' However, they found the city openly in revolt against the Spaniards, and after bitter fighting in the streets were forced to consider withdrawing. The situation became untenable when the Mexica chiefs elected a new emperor, and Montezuma himself was killed during an attack with stones. Assailed by thousands of Mexicas, the Spaniards fled in total disorder. On that fatal night, or 'Noche Triste' as it came to be called, of 10 July,⁹ the Spaniards lost around eight hundred men, five Spanish women, and over a thousand Tlaxcalan allies. After the retreat the Indian allies complained to Marina that if the Spaniards withdrew the Mexicas would finish them off. But Cortés told them, 'Don't worry, if I leave I shall be back soon, and I shall destroy the Mexicas.' This greatly solaced the Tlaxcalans. 'When the Spaniards had gone to sleep, far into the night wind instruments were being played, wooden flutes and wooden fifes, and there was drumming, war drumming.'¹⁰ The Spaniards had to take a rest in Tlaxcala, for 'they were too few to go to battle again with the Mexicas'.

The preparations for an attack on Tenochtitlan took some eight months.¹¹ From his base at Tlaxcala, Cortés gave first priority to replenishing his meagre forces, which he achieved thanks to men and supplies that arrived on the coast in subsequent weeks from Cuba, Jamaica and Spain. 'To Tlaxcala came Spanish soldiers with many horses as well as arms and munitions, and this encouraged the Captain to get ready again to go back and conquer Mexico.' The Tlaxcalans also began a programme of building boats with which to ferry men across the lake of Tenochtitlan. Cortés, with the support of the Tlaxcalans, carried out raids on neighbouring towns. By the end of 1520 a large part of the plain of Anahuac, including the cities of Tlaxcala, Cholula and Huejotzingo, had with Spanish help established an alliance against the Mexica, whose empire was now in a state of collapse. The next step in the campaign was to break up the union between the cities of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco, the basis of power of the Mexica state. Just after Christmas 1520, ten thousand Tlaxcalan warriors escorted Cortés and his men on a march towards Texcoco. The ruler of the city, Ixtlilxochitl, seeing how the tide of power in Anahuac was turning against the Mexica, greeted Cortés warmly and promised his support. All was now set for the attack on Tenochtitlan. In March and April several successful sorties were made against towns adjacent to the capital that were friendly to the Mexica. By the end of April the city of Tenochtitlan stood alone

against its enemies. The brigantines built for the Spaniards were, from their base at Texcoco, in command of the northwest shore of the lake. A formal siege was begun in the second week of May 1521.

The situation had changed dramatically since Cortés's first landing on the coast with four hundred men and the power of the entire Nahu people ranged against him. His band of Spaniards was now not much bigger, just over nine hundred men thanks to recent arrivals. But he had on his side the majority of the cities that had been vassals and allies of the Mexica. The Indian historian of Texcoco, Alva Ixtlilxochitl, reported that just before the siege the ruler of Texcoco reviewed his men, and 'on the same day the Tlaxcalans, Huejotzingoans and Cholulans also reviewed their troops, each lord with his vassals, and in all there were more than three hundred thousand men'.¹² The total Indian forces supporting the Spaniards were a vast army that could be supplemented from the rear whenever necessary, whereas the Mexica in their island city were cut off from outside help. The city, now ruled by Montezuma's nephew Cuauhtemoc, had also been suffering an epidemic of smallpox, apparently brought to the region by one of Narváez's soldiers. As the siege progressed, lakeside towns that had initially supplied the capital came forward to Cortés and offered him their support. Despite their situation, the Mexica resisted their attackers for three and a half months, in a desperate struggle that cost tens of thousands of lives and impelled the attackers to destroy the city systematically as they entered, as the only way of reducing the defenders. Finally, Cuauhtemoc was captured as he attempted to flee. Tenochtitlan perished with thousands of corpses within it, and it took three days for the survivors to be evacuated.

'When the news spread through the provinces that Mexico was destroyed', Bernal Díaz recalled, 'the lords could not believe it, they sent chieftains to congratulate Cortés and yield themselves as subjects to His Majesty and to see if the city, which they had so dreaded, was really razed to the ground.' A Nahu song lamented that

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow
Are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco
Where once we saw warriors and wise men.

Cortés and his men achieved immortal fame. They became folk heroes within their own lifetime, not only in Spain but in every European nation. Who were these men? They were for the most part young: Cortés

was aged thirty-four at the time, Bernal Díaz only twenty-four. An examination of nearly two-thirds¹³ of the Europeans who took part in the conquest of Tenochtitlan shows that ninety-four per cent were Spaniards and six per cent from other nations, mostly Portuguese and Genoese, with a sprinkling of Greeks and Netherlanders. At least two were black. Of just over five hundred Spaniards whose places of origin are known, one third came from Andalusia, the rest principally from Extremadura, Old Castile and León. A long historical tradition has tended to present the early Spaniards in America as the scum of the earth, but it cannot be credited. By the same token there is no foundation to the legend, common in much Spanish historical writing, that they were hidalgos. The men who made it to the New World, survived the Atlantic crossing, and lived through the travails of hostile tribes and a savage climate, were robust, intelligent and (if they were lucky) survivors. Out of five hundred of the Spaniards who were at Tenochtitlan nearly eighty-five per cent could sign their names, a piece of evidence that often indicates literacy. Much less is known of their professional status. The callings of only thirteen per cent of the five hundred can be identified: they were principally artisans, sailors, soldiers and scribes.¹⁴

The fame of having helped to overthrow Mexico was the only profit gained by many of the Spaniards. After the fall of the great city, reported Bernal Díaz, 'we were all disappointed when we saw how little gold there was and how poor our shares would be'. They quarrelled among themselves, and most went off to seek treasure elsewhere. 'When we realized', Díaz wrote, 'that there were no gold mines or cotton in the towns around Mexico, we thought of it as a poor land, and went off to colonize other provinces.' The majority of those who took part in the fall of Tenochtitlan ended their days in poverty.¹⁵ Nor were they fortunate enough, like Bernal Díaz, to live long. Up to eight hundred Spaniards died in the Noche Triste, and over half of all the known conquistadors who took part in the campaigns died during wars against the Mexicas.¹⁶ Overthrowing the American empires was an extremely costly undertaking, and did not always bring rewards to those who took part in the enterprise.

Not until ten years later did a further group of Spaniards, based in the isthmus of Panama, begin to pool their resources and send expeditions down the Pacific coast of South America. The newly founded town of Panama became a typical frontier melting pot where all types of

adventurer concentrated in search of a quick profit. Three of them decided to pool their limited resources in order to fund an expedition. They were Francisco Pizarro, the illegitimate and illiterate son of a former soldier from Trujillo in Extremadura; Diego de Almagro; and the priest Hernando de Luque, who could count on a local contact of the Castilian financier Espinosa in Seville as back-up for the required capital. A first expedition southwards along the South American coast in 1524 was a failure, but by contrast a second in 1526–7 made contact with unmistakable signs of wealth. In order to get the highest possible backing for a further journey, Pizarro in 1528 returned to Spain and obtained in the summer of 1529 at Toledo (where he also met and talked to Cortés) the desired grant conceding him rights as governor and adelantado of an immense stretch of territory along the Pacific coast. He also brought back with him his four brothers and a cousin, when he sailed from Sanlúcar early in 1530.¹⁷

In January 1531 an expedition of 3 ships carrying around 180 men and with 30 horses on board left Panama under Francisco's command. They were joined further along the coast by two vessels under Sebastián Benalcázar. Later on Hernando de Soto arrived with two ships, about a hundred men and twenty-five horses. Together they were by no means a force to sneer at, but the Spaniards had to counter bitter resistance from coastal Indians. They spent several months around the bay of Guayaquil, in the vicinity of Tumbez, and began to learn about the territory that they were entering.

The empire of the Incas was one of the most remarkable in human annals, dating from the twelfth century, when the Quechua peoples began to extend their control over a vast area that by the fifteenth century stretched over five thousand kilometres from the south of modern Colombia down to central Chile, and stretching inland across the Andes to the Amazon forest. The ruling tribe were the Incas, who formed an élite that was superimposed on the local élites of the Andean valleys. For a territory that was technologically primitive, without knowledge of the wheel or of writing or of the arch in construction, the empire achieved heights of efficiency and sophistication that have continued to amaze posterity. At the time of the Spaniards' arrival, the land of the four quarters – known as Tawantinsuyu – was divided by a civil conflict between two respective claimants to the title of supreme Inca. The last unquestioned Inca ruler, Huayna Capac, died leaving sons, Atahualpa

and Huascar, who bitterly contested the succession, while other sons were too young to participate in the struggle. Huascar dominated in the south, in the royal capital of Cusco, while Atahualpa became based in the north, in the city of Cajamarca. Atahualpa was obviously interested in making contact with the strangers, who in the autumn of 1532 prepared to strike inland and cross the Andes, a small band of sixty horsemen and one hundred on foot.

Atahualpa envisaged no threat from the small number of strangers, and sent envoys to greet them as they made their descent into the fertile valley of Cajamarca. He was in a position of strength, for his general Quisquis had just succeeded in defeating the forces of Huascar and capturing the rival Inca. Atahualpa hoped to lure the Spaniards into his territory and deal with them there.¹⁸ The latter were almost paralysed by fear, more so when they learned that the emperor was camped with a huge army outside his capital city. Pizarro had to speak to his men to encourage them. In the afternoon of 15 November 1532 the Spaniards entered a half-deserted Cajamarca. The emperor had been kept fully informed of the men's movements. Pizarro sent a delegation under Soto to Atahualpa inviting him to meet the Spaniards on his scheduled return the following day. As the hour for the emperor's return late in the afternoon of Saturday 16 November approached, Pizarro carefully disposed his own trap. Atahualpa entered the ceremonial square of Cajamarca, carried aloft on his palanquin by eighty nobles and accompanied by a redoubtable host of several thousands of his people. Seated in majesty in the centre of the huge square, he contemplated the small handful of men who had managed to penetrate his domains. The Indian interpreter Felipillo began to translate for the Inca's benefit the words of the *requerimiento*, read by Pizarro. Then the Dominican friar Valverde began to exhort the Inca to accept the true God. Atahualpa rejected the breviary offered by him and threw it on the ground. Valverde was outraged and ran back to Pizarro, who 'raised a cloth as a signal to act against the Indians'.¹⁹ A single cannon, strategically placed, was now exposed and fired directly into the crowd of Indians, causing indescribable terror. The soldiers and horsemen, till now hidden in the buildings on the sides of the square, charged out to cries of 'Santiago!' and directed their arquebuses on the massed ranks of people with the deliberate aim of killing as many as possible. At the same time Pizarro and his aides flung themselves on the Inca and made him prisoner. The panic-stricken

and wholly defenceless people²⁰ trampled each other to death and demolished an entire wall with the force of their bodies as they attempted to escape from the square. 'They howled out loud in terror, asking themselves if these things were really happening or if it was a dream; possibly more than two thousand of them perished.'²¹ Not a single Spaniard died ('apart from a black man on our side', states a soldier who took part in the massacre). Night had now fallen, and the many thousands of Andeans who had been waiting outside, unable to enter the city, were in their turn seized by the panic of those fleeing desperately from the terror in the square. The whole valley of Cajamarca, as far as the eye could see in the failing light, was filled with fleeing Indians.²²

The capture of Atahualpa was a unique event in the history of the Spanish empire. For the first and last time, a small band made up almost exclusively of Spaniards, and without any help from native allies, managed to carry out an incredible feat against overwhelming odds, and with no guarantee of continuing success. Until the very last minute before the action in the square, they were filled with dread. 'We thought our lives were finished', a young Basque soldier wrote shortly afterwards to his father, 'because there was such a horde of them, and even the women were making fun of us and saying they were sorry for us because we were going to get killed.'²³ It was an accomplishment that far outdid in audacity the action of Cortés and his men at Tenochtitlan.

The hundred and sixty men who captured Atahualpa had no immediate plans other than to make themselves rich. They were by no means professional soldiers, though like most Spaniards on the American frontier they were familiar with the use of arms. They represented a fair segment of the peninsular population, with artisans, notaries and traders preponderant; three-quarters were of plebeian origin.²⁴ Adventurous and young – ninety per cent of them were aged between twenty and thirty-four, and only Pizarro exceeded fifty – they accomplished an exploit that ranked (in the opinion of Europeans) among the most fabulous of all time. Atahualpa was kept as an honoured prisoner at Cajamarca, and eventually agreed to pay an unprecedented ransom for his freedom: he would fill the dimensions of the room in which he was kept, twenty-two feet long, seventeen feet broad and nine feet high, with gold and treasure from his subjects in the Inca empire.

The amassing of the Inca's treasure was one of the most emblematic acts in the history of all empires. It displayed to perfection the obsession

of Europeans with the wealth associated with precious metals. Above all, it displayed their complete indifference to the destruction of the cultures with which they came into contact. As the ornaments were rounded up by the Inca's messengers from the four corners of his part of the empire – plates, cups, jewellery, tiles from temples, artefacts – they were systematically melted down under Spanish supervision, and reduced to ingots. Over those four months from March to June 1533, bit by bit the artistic heritage not simply of the Incas but of a great part of Andean civilization disappeared into the flames. For two thousand years the craftsmen of the Andes had applied their techniques to working and decorating with gold. This became no more than a memory. At Cajamarca alone the Spaniards managed to reduce the ornaments to 13,420 pounds of gold and 26,000 pounds of silver. In subsequent weeks, they came across equally fabulous treasures, which were likewise consigned to the furnaces.

Francisco Pizarro's promise to liberate the emperor was not kept. On the excuse that he was fomenting plots, and had usurped the throne and murdered his half-brother Huascar,²⁵ Atahualpa was condemned to death at the insistence of Almagro and other Spaniards and strangled and then burnt as a criminal (he was 'mercifully' garrotted because he agreed to accept baptism and die as a Christian) in the square at Cajamarca on 28 June 1533.²⁶ Pizarro defended himself afterwards by claiming that he was unable to intervene. 'I saw the marquis in tears', reported a witness, 'because he was unable to save his life.' Other Spaniards, including Soto, openly condemned the murder and the fabricated evidence used to justify it. Subsequent Spanish commentators never ceased to view the killing as a crime. José de Acosta judged that 'our people sinned gravely when they killed the ruler'. In the memory of the people of the Andes the strangling of their emperor as though he were a common criminal became transformed into something much nobler, a decapitation, a royal death that would lead at some distant time in the future to his resurrection.

The conquerors made haste to confirm their claims with the Spanish government (and also to set aside for the Crown the obligatory fifth). A portion of the Inca treasure was carried overland to Santo Domingo, and excited wonderment everywhere. In Panama a man who saw it swore that 'it was like a dream'; in Santo Domingo the historian Oviedo assured a friend that 'it is not a myth or fairy tale'.²⁷ At the end of 1533 the first of four vessels carrying the news and treasure arrived in Seville,

followed within a few days by Hernando Pizarro, who was escorting the royal fifth. The search for similar treasure became immediately the aspiration of all newcomers to the Indies. Francisco Pizarro and his men proceeded to the Inca capital, Cusco, which had formerly been in the hands of Huascar. There in the month of March 1534 they obtained further treasure, possibly around half the quantity obtained in Cajamarca. In the autumn of 1534 Pizarro left Cusco for the coast, where on 6 January 1535 he founded the city of 'the Kings', 'Los Reyes', later to be known as Lima.

The Inca empire was not yet overthrown, only beheaded. Its overthrow would in fact cost another thirty-five years and be achieved only through the collaboration of the Indian population with the Spaniards. The next conquistador to come southwards was Pedro de Alvarado, followed by Sebastián del Benalcázar. Almagro also headed southwards towards Lake Titicaca and Chile. He found no gold, the expedition cost the lives of well over ten thousand Indians who were helping his expedition, and he returned empty-handed. The whole Andean region was plunged into a generation of war that left the once-great Inca empire in ruins. The first leader of the resistance against the Spaniards was Manco, a younger brother of Huascar whom Pizarro had installed in Cusco as supreme Inca. Manco had welcomed the Spaniards when they came, thinking that he could use them against the generals of Atahualpa. After three years of humiliation at their hands, he escaped from Cusco, raised a huge army of fifty thousand men from the four corners of Tawantinsuyu, and laid siege to the capital city, held by a small Spanish force of less than two hundred men under Hernando, Juan and Gonzalo Pizarro, supported by their Indian allies. What should have been an easy task for the Peruvians turned out to be quite the opposite. The siege of Cusco lasted over a year, from March 1536 to April 1537. When they were all but reduced to desperation, a group of Spaniards broke out of the city and galloped at speed directly to the old stone fortress of Sacsahuaman, on the height overlooking Cusco. They occupied and used it as a base from which to turn the tables on their attackers. 'The battle was a bloody affair for both sides', according to the son of Manco Inca, 'because of the many natives who were supporting the Spaniards, among them two of my father's brothers, with many of their followers.'²⁸ After the success of their sortie, the Spaniards garrisoned Sacsahuaman with fifty soldiers and a large number of Indian auxiliaries. It was one of the great

heroic moments of Spanish valour. The survival of the Spaniards, however, had been made possible only by the constant help they had received during the year from local tribes who had always opposed the Incas.

Manco next attempted to profit from the civil war that was taking place between the forces of Pizarro and those of Almagro. When this failed, he withdrew in 1537 to the mountains, to Vitcos in the province of Vilcabamba. With him went a host of Indians from all corners of the empire. There in the wooded highlands overlooking the River Urubamba, in an area that included the old sacred centres of the religion of the sun and whose exact location remained unknown till the twentieth century,²⁹ Manco resurrected the Inca state, which survived for a generation until its fall in 1572. Meanwhile the Spaniards quarrelled among themselves, and after a battle between the factions in 1538 Almagro was taken prisoner by Pizarro and executed.

The successes of the Spaniards came less from military superiority than from an ability to adapt to seemingly unfavourable conditions. They were always very few in number, in contingents of between two hundred and five hundred men, faced by unfamiliar terrain, inadequate food supplies, and a far more numerous enemy. In such circumstances they had to use their few resources with the maximum of skill. Cortés's brilliant march to Mexico set a pattern that most subsequent adventurers attempted to emulate. Firearms and (when available) cannon were of strictly limited use: they were insufficient in number, and rendered easily unreliable by lack of powder or tropical rain. Cortés tended to employ them with the specific purpose of inducing fear rather than of killing. The Spaniards enjoyed, in the circumstances, little effective technological superiority, and in any case were often more vulnerable to the arrows of skilled indigenous archers than the latter were to European firearms. The few horses brought from Europe were infinitely more valuable. A larger animal than any known to the Indians, the mounted horse gave advantages of height, mobility and speed that easily demolished opposition. In Pizarro's campaign against the Incas, the bulk of a few charging horses easily crushed the massed ranks of the enemy and always guaranteed victory. Apart from the tools of conquest, however, there were three fundamental factors that no historian can fail to emphasize.

First, the Spaniards soon learnt to use against their enemy all the symbols of the supernatural environment that enveloped friend and foe

alike. Second, they enjoyed a superior mobility by sea that served to isolate and defeat enemies. Finally, and most important of all, the conquerors always worked hand in hand with native peoples who opposed the ruling empire.

The supernatural omens seem to have favoured the Spaniards from the beginning. It is possible, of course, that this version of events in Mexico and Peru developed much later and was a way, exploited by the Spaniards and accepted by native writers, of rationalizing the conquest through hindsight. The songs that survived from the Nahua peoples seem to support the vision of a civilization that had little hope in the future,³⁰ though many recent scholars have questioned this view. Spanish chroniclers conveyed the idea that Cortés was viewed as a returning god (the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl) and that the Spaniards as a race were treated as gods. A similar idea may be found in sources relating to the Incas. Other indigenous sources that describe the coming of the Spaniards, however, do not always support the idea and may be interpreted in different ways.

The Europeans came from the sea and owed their success to it. The American peoples were at home in their rivers and lakes, and traded actively along the seacoasts, but never developed an ocean-going capacity. By contrast the Europeans – like the Arabs – had a long familiarity with the sea, which gave them an exceptional mobility. At key moments of their adventure in the New World, they were capable of suddenly bringing in supplies and reinforcements out of nowhere and dramatically changing the course of events.

An enduring legend of the early Atlantic empire was the superhuman capacity of the conquerors. An early chronicler and witness of the great events in Peru, Cieza de León, commented: ‘who can tell of the unheard-of exploits of so few Spaniards in so vast a land?’³¹ ‘Hernando Cortés with less than a thousand men overthrew a great empire’, wrote a veteran of the American frontier, Vargas Machuca, ‘Quesada with a hundred and sixty Spaniards conquered the kingdom of New Granada.’³² An official historian, Gómara, continued in his *History of the Indies* with the same extravagant story, written for the eyes of the emperor: ‘never has a king or a people ventured so far or conquered so much in so small a time as our people have done, nor have any others achieved or accomplished what we have done, in feats of arms, in navigations, and in the preaching of the holy gospel’. Virtually all the

chroniclers of the period exercised their imaginations in playing the numbers game. In doing so, they created for their fellow countrymen (and for many historians even today) an ineffaceable image of Spanish valour, prowess and racial superiority. Among the very few conquerors who protested against this was Bernal Díaz, indignant at the exaggerated role given to Cortés by the official historian Gómara.

It is unjust to minimize the astonishing daring of the conquerors. But it is also essential to remember that Spanish military success was made possible only by the help of native Americans.³³ The conquest of some indigenous Americans by others laid the basis of the Spanish empire. The help was of two kinds, on a humble level, from men of service, and on a more elevated level, from military allies. Men of service were the hundreds of natives who carried out indispensable duties of carrying baggage and supplies, searching for food and water, tending animals, preparing meals and attending to all the needs of the Spaniards. Without such support the efforts of the latter would quite simply have been in vain and they would never have attained their objectives. Without Indians to help him, Balboa would never have reached the Pacific. The Indians were often used to performing such services for their own lords, but in the major Spanish expeditions they were more usually forced to help, and over-exploited until they died. After the fall of Tenochtitlan, when Alvarado went southwards he took with him three hundred Spaniards, but the effective bulk of his force consisted of nearly twenty thousand Indians, according to a native chronicler.³⁴ His journey by sea and land to Ecuador was effected by five hundred Spaniards, but they had with them three thousand Indian slaves from Guatemala. Valdivia’s first expedition into Chile, in 1540, consisted of only 150 Spaniards. It would nevertheless have been impossible without the indigenous guides and the one thousand native porters who went along.

The crucial help was, of course, that from military allies. Both against the Mexicas and the Incas the Spaniards were able to count on alliances with native peoples, who exploited the situation for their own purposes. The Inca Huascar expressed his support for Pizarro, and later his brother Manco also took the Spanish side. ‘If the Incas had not favoured the Spaniards’, commented a witness of the capture of Atahualpa, ‘it would have been impossible to win this kingdom.’³⁵ Allies supplied valuable information, acted as spies and scouts, recruited service helpers, and advised on questions of terrain and climate. A memorial from the people

of Huejotzingo in New Spain to Philip II in 1560 explains in detail how that city helped Cortés:

We took all our nobles and all of our vassals to aid the Spaniards. We helped them not only in warfare but also we gave them everything they needed. We fed and clothed them, we would go carrying in our arms and on our backs those whom they wounded in war or were simply very ill, and we did all the tasks in preparing for war. And it was we who worked so that they could conquer the Mexica with boats; we gave them the wood and pitch with which the Spaniards made the boats.³⁶

Above all, the Indian allies fought. Their substantial numbers invariably tipped the balance of a contest in favour of the Spaniards. Cortés made his first recorded use of Indian auxiliaries in the assault on Tlaxcala in September 1519, when in addition to his own men he had the help of four hundred men from Cempoala and three hundred from Ixtacmaxtitlan. By the time that Cortés undertook the siege of Tenochtitlan in 1521, he was as we have seen helped by a vast army that made the fall of the Mexican capital inevitable. Meanwhile, he had gained the aid of an unexpected ally: a smallpox epidemic, which reached the city after having devastated Hispaniola in 1519. Thousands died, enough to affect the Mexica battle capacity. 'When the plague lessened somewhat', the Nahuatl chronicler reported, 'the Spaniards came back. They had been gone two hundred days. And the people of Xaltocan, Quauhtitlan, Tenanyocan, Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, and Coyoacan all entered in here.'³⁷

At the siege the massed ranks of the Tlaxcalan allies sang; 'Aid our lords, those who dress in iron, they are besieging the city, they are besieging the Mexican nation, let us go forward with courage!'³⁸ The message that Marina gave to the Mexicas after the great siege of Tenochtitlan had commenced was unequivocal. They should hand over Cuauhtemoc, they should cease fighting. 'Here', she said, pointing to the Indians who accompanied the Spaniards, 'are the rulers of Tlaxcala, Huejotzingo, Cholula, Chalco, Acolhuacan, Cuernavaca, Xochimilco, Mizquic, Cuitlahuac, and Culhuacan.'³⁹ Should the Mexicas attempt to resist such a powerful alliance of enemies? In later years, the native allies did not fail the Spaniards. We have seen that Tlaxcalan soldiers took part in Alvarado's march to Guatemala in 1524, and six years later they aided Nuño de Guzmán in western Mexico.⁴⁰ Almagro's expedition to Chile in 1535 was made possible by the twelve thousand Andean war-

rriors he took with him from the area of Cusco and Charcas. Gonzalo Pizarro's venture to the Amazon turned out to be ill-fated, but its preparation had been made possible by ten thousand natives who accompanied him from Quito. In one combat in Chile in 1576 two thousand natives aided the thirty Spaniards; in another in 1578 one thousand natives supported the Spaniards.⁴¹ Three thousand Tlaxcalans joined Cortés's expedition to Honduras in 1524.

The Spanish campaigns, it is clear, were made possible only by massive help from native Americans, who were rightly proud of their contribution. Like the original Spaniards, the Tlaxcalan lords after the conquest enjoyed the right to title themselves 'conquistador'. But conquest was always incomplete. There were obviously territories, principally in the Caribbean, that were taken over wholly by the newcomers because the indigenous population ceased to exist. Throughout the mainland, by contrast, Spaniards rarely 'conquered' more than a limited area where they could survive, usually on the coasts or in a focal centre, such as the Nahuatl and Inca cities. Beyond these areas they found it difficult to subjugate the natives, and continued for generations in an uneasy relationship with vast unconquered areas of America. Many regions remained free of Spanish control simply because the Spaniards had had no reason to intrude. For example, when Pizarro's envoys were making their way from Cajamarca to Cusco there were tribes that did not consider it necessary to impede them, so they were left alone; 'and so', as the tribes stated later, 'nobody came to this region to conquer it, because no resistance was ever offered'.⁴² Literally and legally, they were never conquered; they did not feel, therefore, that they should be treated as a conquered people.

The indigenous role in the conquest of America was also to be seen in the Yucatan peninsula, home of Maya civilization. Spaniards had touched on the Yucatan coast since 1502 but over the next two decades most encounters with the Mayas were sporadic and brief. After 1527 more serious attempts were made to penetrate the territory, a phase that culminated with the foundation in 1542 of the Spanish settlement of Mérida. A large force of Nahuatl warriors accompanied the Spanish group that entered the territory in 1541. A Maya leader recorded the occasion years later in his chronicle:

I was then just a boy, following my father, who was in office; meanwhile it was all clearly observed and I now relate it. It took place here beside a well where

there stood a great tree . . . When the strangers arrived, there was on the horizon a sliver of sun as it dawned in the east. When they reached the entrance to this community of Calkini they fired their guns once; when they arrived where the savannahs begin they also fired their guns once; and when they arrived at the houses they then fired their guns a third time.⁴³

The Nahuas were not the only people to help the Spaniards in the Yucatan. As in Mexico and in Peru, there were indigenous leaders among the Mayas who seized the opportunity to use the Spaniards against their enemies. The leaders of families such as the Pech and the Xiu instructed their clans to help the invaders. The Pech rulers told their *cab* (community) 'that nobody would wage war but that they would commit themselves to going and helping the Spaniards in their conquests and to travelling together with the strangers'.⁴⁴ These Maya were proud of their part in the creation of the Spanish empire, seeing the defeat of their people as in fact a victory that they had won over their Maya enemies. A leading member of the Pech family went so far as to describe himself as 'the first of the hidalgo conquistadors' (*'hidalgos concixtador en'*).⁴⁵ The collaboration between some indigenous tribes and the strangers continued for generations, for there was a permanent frontier to the Spanish presence. As late as 1583 the Maya chronicles offer 'an account of how we, the Mactun people, who live in Tixchel, went and campaigned to make Christians of the unconverted'.⁴⁶

The survival of an unconquered America is often described as 'revolts' or 'rebellions', terms which suggest mistakenly that the natives were somehow reneging on an accepted allegiance. The major Indian actions against Spaniards were in fact always 'wars', legitimate acts from their own free sovereign territory against incursions by strangers from outside. The Mixtón wars (see Chapter 6) in 1541 were one example. In Chile, from the end of the sixteenth century, the indigenous population also began an extensive struggle against the Spanish presence. During this war, which lasted a generation and led to the Spanish abandoning the entire south of Chile beyond the River Bío-Bío, seven Spanish towns were wiped out and the Araucanian Indians improved their techniques with use of the horse and guns. In the campaigns subsequently mounted by Spanish settlers against the so-called 'rebellion', the thousands of native auxiliaries pressed into service played a crucial part. The Indians in Chile, says an official report of 1594, 'are those who have most contributed with

their persons and their goods to the provisions of the war'.⁴⁷ The Araucanian wars, in effect, demonstrated the capacity of undeveloped tribal societies to resist the European presence. By 1599, in the opinion of a Spanish priest, the Araucanians had developed a good infantry and a highly proficient cavalry based on horses taken from the Spaniards.

No less impressive than the achievements of the conquerors, whether Spanish or Indian, were those of the handful of adventurers who penetrated the unknown interior of the new continent. Settlement was only one dimension of empire. Equally powerful was the urge to extend its fringes, a task that kept Spaniards constantly on the move. 'In this land', reported one, 'a man is never fixed but always moving from one place to another'.⁴⁸ The histories of Cortés and Pizarro are ample confirmation that the primary aim of the adventurers was gold, whose existence was confirmed by their own experience but above all by the persistent myths, current among the indigenous population, of peoples and lands where gold was a commonplace item of everyday use. In his *Chronicle*, Guaman Poma commented bitingly on the motives that had driven Columbus and his men:

They did not wish to linger a single day in the ports. Every day they did nothing else but think about gold and silver and the riches of the Indies of Peru. They were like a man in desperation, crazy, mad, out of their minds with greed for gold and silver.

Through questioning natives and following up stories they heard, the Spaniards soon built up a corpus of stories – what we may call myths – about possible locations of gold. The finding of gold in part of Tierra Firme caused the area to be renamed 'Castilla del Oro' (Golden Castile) in 1514, and from the 1530s Spaniards reported finding gold in burial grounds in the Sinu area inland from Cartagena. The myth of 'El Dorado' (The Golden Man) began to appear from this date, in the lands associated with the Chibcha peoples. When Quesada was governor of Santa Marta, he heard for the first time of the story of El Dorado and of the ceremonies at the sacred lake of Guatavita. Shortly after, Benalcázar, who was coming up from Peru, encountered near Quito an Indian who told him of 'a certain king who went naked aboard a raft to make offerings, smeared all over with powdered gold from head to foot, gleaming like a ray of the sun'.⁴⁹ Thereafter the search for the fabled site, where gold

was so commonplace that it could be used to decorate the body, became a part of the mythology of exploration and conquest. Fifty years later, a brother of St Teresa of Avila reported from Quito that he was hoping to form an expedition to look for 'the Golden Man, in whose search a thousand captains and men have so often been lost'.⁵⁰

After the fall of Tenochtitlan the Spaniards went their separate ways, pursuing the continuous reports that reached them of peoples as wealthy as the Mexica. One of the first to venture north, in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, was Nuño de Guzmán, who in 1529 led an expedition into the region of Culiacan. The most famous of the ventures into North America (see Chapter 6) belonged to this period: that of Hernando de Soto in 1539-42, which set out from Cuba, and that of Coronado in 1540-2, with its base in Mexico. The spin-offs from the Pizarro expeditions to the Andes also had important consequences. Perhaps the most notable hero was Pedro de Alvarado, who had played a leading role in the campaign of Mexico and after it departed southwards with a large force of auxiliaries to the region of Guatemala. When he heard of the events in Peru, Alvarado in 1534 took ship down the Pacific coast and made for Quito, where he arrived shortly after Almagro and Benalcázar, and narrowly avoided a battle with them. Benalcázar in his turn took men with him to the lands further north, where he founded the town of Popayán (1536) and even further north, in 1538, came into contact with another Spaniard, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, a native of Andalusia.

The most important of the non-Spanish expeditions also entered at the same time into the same area. The contract granted to the Welser family in Venezuela allowed them to penetrate the interior of the continent. Expeditions were made by Ambrosius Alfinger in 1531 and Georg Hohermuth in 1535-8, but the best known is that of Nicolaus Federmann, who in 1537 set off into the mountains and made his way towards El Dorado. 'I lost', he reported later, 'many people and horses; of the three hundred persons with whom I left no more than ninety survived.'⁵¹ The cost in lives was everywhere enormous. When Quesada reached his objective only 166 remained of the nearly 900 with whom he had set out. An early Italian historian of America, Benzoni, reported that 'of those who went to Peru, eighty died out of every hundred'. The intrepidity of the early pioneers became legendary, and the chroniclers never ceased to insist on it. 'As for the hardships and hunger they have faced,'

wrote the chronicler Cieza de León, 'no other nation in the world could have endured it.' In the chroniclers' hands, the legend quickly became racially exclusive, and the intrepidity was converted into something possessed only by Castilians and by nobody else. The endurance of the thousands of Indians who made the expeditions possible was effaced from historical memory. 'What other race', asked Cieza de León, 'can be found which can penetrate through such rugged lands, such dense forests, such great mountains and deserts, and over such broad rivers as the Spaniards have done, *without help from others*, solely by the valour of their persons?'

After the execution of Almagro, Francisco Pizarro felt able to consolidate his authority in the lands to the south. He entered into an agreement with Pedro de Valdivia, a veteran of the Italian wars who had come to Peru in 1536. Early in 1540 Valdivia left Cuzco with an expedition of 150 Spaniards and over 1,000 Indians, which made its way southward and in February 1541 founded the town of Santiago de Chile. In the following years Valdivia set himself up as governor of the region, and for the first time made contact with the hostile Araucan people. In 1542 he returned to Peru in order to help the new royal viceroy Gasca eliminate the rebellion of the Pizarros. He was rewarded with the governorship of Chile, but returned in 1549 to Santiago to deal with the problem of the Araucanians. The Araucanian wars were a continuous conflict that ended for Valdivia, with his capture in a battle in January 1554 and his execution by ritual torture. The wars went on, with a pause in the year 1558, when the Araucanians were for a period defeated. A young soldier who served in the Spanish forces, Alonso de Ercilla, narrated their heroic story of resistance; his poem *La Araucana* remains one of the greatest of all epics.

The Atlantic coast was not forgotten. Among the first visitors was the Venetian Sebastian Cabot, who conceived the idea that there was a shorter route to Asia through the American land mass than that taken by Magellan (on the latter, see Chapter 5). He received official support and set out from Sanlúcar in April 1526 with 4 vessels and 210 men, the majority of whom were Germans and Italians.⁵² The vessels reconnoitred the South American coast and early in 1528 entered the estuary of a river which Cabot named the 'river of silver', the Río de la Plata, in the hope of coming across more of the precious metal that they had already encountered. The silver had come across the continent from the still undiscovered Inca empire, but Cabot and his men were unable to

continue their expedition and had to return to Spain. Discovery of the Incas five years later unleashed excitement over the possibility of reaching Peru from the Atlantic.

On 14 January 1534 Hernando Pizarro arrived in Seville with part of the Inca treasure. The reaction was swift: a flood of volunteers demanded to go on expedition. In May 1534 a royal contract with the Andalusian soldier Pedro de Mendoza authorized him to explore the Río de la Plata, gave him the rank of adelantado, and conceded a vast territory for him to govern and pacify. The expedition set out in August 1535 in fourteen large ships, with at least fifteen hundred Spaniards and around a hundred Belgians, Germans and Portuguese. According to the historian Gómara, it was the largest fleet to have sailed to the Indies till that date. The chronicler of the enterprise, the German Huldrich Schmidt, describes how the main body of the men under Mendoza suffered extreme hardships and Indian attacks in the Plata estuary (where they began the settlement of Buenos Aires) and were soon reduced to a fifth of their number. He himself went with a group up the Paraná under their leader Juan de Ayolas; in August 1539 they founded the town of Asunción, Mendoza returned to Spain but died *en route*. In 1540 Charles V passed on Mendoza's privileges to Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, veteran of extraordinary explorations (see Chapter 6) in the North American continent. Cabeza de Vaca's experiences were put to good use, and his small but efficient expedition pushed up towards the River Iguaçu in December 1541, spending a relaxed Christmas among friendly Indians. In January they discovered the spectacular Iguaçu Falls, and shortly afterwards changed direction, moving back downstream by the Paraná towards Asunción.

Of the many, varied and always significant expeditions pioneered by Castilians, two stand out as exceptional because they were different in concept and consequence. The first was the highly individual quest of Francisco de Orellana, who was serving as an official in Guayaquil under the command of Gonzalo Pizarro, at the time governor of Quito. In 1540 Orellana accompanied Pizarro on a long and fruitless expedition into the interior of the continent. Pizarro returned empty-handed two years later; meanwhile he had sent Orellana and a small group ahead to look for food. The group was carried swiftly downstream by the current, with little hope of turning back. Surviving by wit and effort, the Spaniards made rafts and lodged when possible with friendly Indians. At the end of August 1542 they emerged out into the Atlantic, having spent eight

months descending the river, which they named the Amazon from the accounts they picked up about women warriors in that region. They then made their way by sea up the coast till they reached a port near Trinidad.

Another attempt was made on the Amazon in 1558, from the direction of Peru. The expedition, led by the Navarrese Pedro de Ursúa, planned to make its way to the great river from its tributary the Marañón. Unfortunately, Ursúa had recruited a number of undesirable elements, including the soldier Lope de Aguirre. He also made the mistake of bringing along as his companion a beautiful widow, Inés. Shortly after they began descending the Marañón, Aguirre led a coup, murdered Ursúa (December 1560), seized Inés and later murdered her also. He went on to murder other possible rivals, and proclaimed himself king and in rebellion against the king of Spain. His bloody journey and career was short; at its end he was seized and executed.

Neither of these expeditions advanced the process of empire. But they helped to stamp the Spanish presence, however cursorily, on extensive and almost inaccessible expanses of the continent. The mere act of exploration became in some measure an act of conquest. In the strange European way of thinking, simply to be there confirmed possession of those territories. The Amazon as a consequence now became subject to the king of Spain, in the same way that centuries later other rivers, waterfalls and lakes in Africa and Asia would be claimed for European nations because an explorer happened to come upon them. The Falls of Iguaçu, whose thunder echoed through the ears of Cabeza de Vaca during the five miles that he and his group had to trek through the forest in order to avoid them, became in this way part of the cultural heritage of the Spanish empire.

By around 1570, three-quarters of a century after Columbus, Spaniards were to be found in every corner of the Atlantic world. Their presence, however, was so thin as to make them virtually invisible. After struggling against great odds for two generations, they managed to make their presence more acceptable to native Americans. But their small numbers and the immensity of the New World landscape made it impossible for them to carry out a European-style occupation. There was never in any real sense a 'conquest' of America, for the Spaniards never had the men or resources to conquer it. All their settlements were tiny and vulnerable. The whole of Cuba had only 322 households in 1550; 20 years later the

town of Havana had only 60. In 1570 the city of Cartagena had only three hundred. Around 1570, according to the king's official geographer López de Velasco, the total number of Spaniards in all the settlements of the New World came to 25,000 households.⁵³ The entire Spanish population of America, in other words, could have fitted easily into a moderately large European town, such as Seville. There were few colonists outside the major towns. Their main concern always was to occupy a useful coastal strip, then make the zone round it secure, as they did around 1545 with their settlements in the Yucatan at Mérida and Campeche.

For Spanish power in America to become viable, it was essential to work out a system based on collaboration rather than 'conquest'. Wherever they claimed authority, one of the first acts of the Spaniards was to distribute *encomiendas*, which gave them 'rights' over the labour of the natives. To do this they had to reach some agreement with local chiefs. Where possible, they opted to retain existing patterns of authority among the native Americans, placing themselves at the top in the place previously occupied by the Aztecs and Incas. The old system of tribute was continued, this time with local Indian leaders helping to extract payment from the population. The process can be seen in the Peruvian area of Huamanga, where the Spaniards founded a town in 1539. Many of the local communities allied willingly with the Spaniards, hoping in that way to gain freedom from Inca rule and a position of advantage for themselves.⁵⁴ It proved to be valuable help in establishing Spanish power. For many decades after the beginning of Spanish rule, and especially in remoter areas such as the valleys of Peru, native Indian societies continued their traditional way of life, unhindered by the changes that were certainly taking place elsewhere in the New World. In the central zones of Spanish settlement, two parallel societies developed: a Spanish world, where everything was organized in response to the demands of colonists, and an Indian world, with its own culture and ruling élite. The two often remained autonomous for generations, though in time they began to converge. In Huamanga by the 1550s the Indians, guided by their curacas, were helping to make the local economy function to serve the needs of Spaniards. Even this system was breaking down a decade or so later, as the number of Indians declined.

As soon as the Spaniards had consolidated their impact, their first concern was always to set up a township, the basic unit of life in the

Iberia from which they came. By the mid-sixteenth century there were small towns, often with names taken directly from Spain (Trujillo, León, Santiago), dotted over the landscape. Having made sure that they had access to the sea and to local sources of wealth, they set about organizing their labour force. This involved making agreements with the local native chieftains (the *caciques* in Mexico, the *curacas* in Peru), for men to be supplied for work in the *encomienda*, the fundamental economic institution of the early colonial period. Indian labour, and also by now some black labour, made possible the survival of Spaniards as the new governing class in America. 'Through my services in war', a proud young conqueror wrote home from Chile in 1552 to his father in Medina del Campo, 'I have obtained a repartimiento of Indians, and am owner of a valley on the sea coast which has over a thousand Indians. I built a fortified house where I live, with horsemen serving me, and I have subjected the whole province, burning houses and hanging Indians.'⁵⁵ Labour services had been traditional in the imperial scheme of both Mexicas and Incas, as defenders of the *encomienda* did not fail to point out. For a high proportion of the early settlers, it was their mainstay. 'I am aiming to obtain some Indians', explained one newly arrived Spaniard in 1578, 'because here in these parts the man who has no Indians has no way of making a living.'⁵⁶

Confronted by the enormous extent of the New World and their own exiguous numbers and limited capacity for conquest, the Spaniards never achieved adequate control over the native population. In areas where it was possible to implement the *encomienda* and make use of native labour, the Spaniards used Indians to build houses, plant crops, tend the fields and irrigate them, spin and weave textiles for domestic use, and transport goods. This type of basic economy functioned adequately for the first generation of the colony. But when more Spaniards came to live in the New World, the resources of native labour became inadequate. Spaniards required items with which they were familiar and with which the natives could not supply them, such as wheat, olives, sugar, wine, weapons, and quality cloth. The emphasis moved, for them, from local production to import of essential items. Inevitably, many Indians on the fringe of this scheme of things returned to their own way of life. The Spanish market system remained important for many natives, but for the majority it became secondary, for they had their own parallel society and parallel markets. Where, above all, there was

no mining industry, the Indian managed to survive in his own society.

The principal question round which the Spanish presence in the Atlantic revolved, was that of the survival of the native population, or, to present the other face of the same problem, the use of Indian labour. Spaniards, like many of the early French and English in the New World, came in search of quick wealth, not with the intention of settling and working. Ever on the move, the early European population relied entirely on the settled indigenous population for food and survival. In every essential respect, the natives of the New World constructed the economy and society of the empire controlled there by Spain. Production in America rose and fell according to the productive labour supplied by the natives. 'All our Spaniards', runs an unequivocal report from Chile in 1600, 'are sustained by the labour of the Indians and the work of their hands and are maintained thanks to their sweat.'⁵⁷ It was well known, chroniclers reported time and again, that Spaniards from the peninsula did not go to America to work, but to live off the exploitation of native labour.

The Spanish presence, in consequence, involved the enslavement of large numbers of the indigenous population of America.⁵⁸ In medieval Europe slavery had normally been practised as a consequence of war, but no war had taken place when in February 1495 Columbus seized and sent to Spain as slaves five hundred young people from the Caribbean, followed by three hundred more in June the same year. Queen Isabella forbade any further slavery in October 1503 and in December decreed that natives of the New World should be considered 'free and not to be enslaved'. After her death, however, slavery continued to be widely practised on the indigenous population, especially in the Caribbean, and was expressly permitted if the subjects were defined as cannibals or rebels. King Ferdinand admitted to Columbus in 1511 that the practice was 'something that weighs on my conscience', but did nothing to restrict it. The first serious attempt by the crown to stop slaving was an order by Charles V in 1530. He had life-long scruples about the issue. Though obliged for practical reasons to withdraw his ban shortly after, he grappled firmly with the problem in 1542 by a decree that was incorporated in November into the famous New Laws. It was a historic step. Thereafter the Spanish crown formally permitted slavery on only one occasion, when in 1608 it allowed Araucanian 'rebels' in Chile to be enslaved (the law was revoked only in 1674).

Rules and regulations issued by Spain were, however, in practice ignored on the other side of the Atlantic. Slavery, and the slave trade in Indians, continued to have a fundamental impact on the indigenous population long after it had theoretically ceased to exist legally. The entire history of the first century of contact between Europeans and native Americans is tied up with it. There were areas, often forgotten if we look only at the main centres of colonial activity, where the impact was deadly. When the Spaniards settled in Panama, and later after 1530 extended their interest to Peru, they desperately needed assistance from native labour. As a consequence, the Pacific coast of Nicaragua became one of the biggest centres of slaving. It has been suggested that in the decade 1532-1542, when demand for slaves was highest, as many as two hundred thousand natives were seized from this coastline and shipped off into slavery.⁵⁹ Already in 1535 an official was reporting that a third of the population in the Nicaragua area had been disposed of for purposes of slavery.

The scant details demonstrate beyond any possibility of controversy, that the indigenous peoples of the New World were those who, with their labour and with their lives, contributed principally to making possible the establishment of a European presence. The undoubted heroism of the conquistadors pales into insignificance before the involuntary heroism of the native Americans, who in their hundreds of thousands participated in and attempted to survive the new order of things.

Almost unconsciously, Spain became the channel through which the agrarian and social life-cycle of the Atlantic world was transformed. The first Castilians in the New World were faced by an environment that did not supply the foods they normally consumed, the liquids they drank, the clothes they wore, the tools they used, or the animals that helped them to perform their labour or to move about. New World food provoked some of the gravest illnesses they suffered, and was possibly the chief cause of mortality among early European immigrants. Spaniards therefore brought with them everything they needed. In so doing they set in motion (see Chapter 6) profound changes in the biological processes of the continent.

Few historical issues have provoked so much contention as the impact of the European presence on the demography of the New World. Bartolomé de las Casas began the debate by offering in his polemical

writings the spectacle of a native population that was virtually exterminated. He estimated that twenty million Indians were wiped out by Spanish cruelty. There can never be any doubt over the disaster that took place. In the thirty years after the arrival of Columbus, the indigenous population in parts of the Caribbean and sections of the mainland were completely extinguished. Like Las Casas, many subsequent commentators blamed the cruelty of the Europeans for what happened. A jurist, Tomás López Medel, sent out to Guatemala in 1542 to assess the need for the New Laws that had just been decreed, came to a conclusion that may have been exaggerated in its calculations but was inspired by the facts as presented to him:

Our Old World has been responsible in the New World of the Indies for the deaths of five or six million men and women who have been wiped out in the wars and conquests waged over there, as well as through mistreatment and mortal cruelty and other causes of the same character, intolerable conditions of work in the mines, forced labour, personal service and very many other ways in which the insatiable greed of our men from over here has inflicted itself on those wretched people in America.

The cruelty of the Spaniards was incontrovertible. It was pitiless, barbaric, and never brought under control by the colonial regime. The Spaniards of course had no interest whatever in destroying the natives; to do so would evidently have hurt their primary institution, the *encomienda*. Yet to establish themselves in the land with security they had no hesitation in employing extreme violence. Mistreatment by colonial settlers, widespread and always pernicious, was sufficiently terrible for the Franciscan friar Toribio de Motolinía, in his *History of the Indians of New Spain* (1541), to list it among the Ten Plagues that had destroyed the Nahua people. The examples of cruelty were endless. During the war against Manco Capac in 1536 the Spaniards in the Jauja district, according to one who took part in the action, 'captured a hundred Indians alive; they cut off the arms of some and the noses of others, and the breasts of the women, and then they sent them back to the enemy'.⁶⁰ When the Spaniards were settling into the Mérida area in Yucatan, the Maya in 1546 attacked them and killed fifteen to twenty colonists. In retaliation the *encomenderos* killed hundreds of Maya, enslaved an estimated two thousand, burned six of their native priests, and hanged the women.⁶¹

Such incidents were repeated throughout the New World. All the contemporary reports speak, like a Maya chronicler in the sixteenth century, of 'how much suffering we went through with the Spaniards'.⁶² The reports give relatively little importance to the loss of lives in hand-to-hand fighting, but narrate what their authors witnessed and experienced directly from day to day: the consequences of enslavement, of overwork, of ill-treatment, of under-nourishment and famine. Contemporary chroniclers, both native and Spanish, offer impressive figures for the deaths caused among the Indians. The image of Spanish cruelty was rapidly transmitted to Europe and became engraved on the minds of Europeans. When Michel de Montaigne was writing in France, the cruelty of Spaniards was already proverbial. Some European commentators eventually settled on the figure of twenty million Indians for a total of those killed by Spain.⁶³

Yet the cruelty inflicted on the inhabitants of the New World was responsible for only a small part of the subsequent disaster. There were never enough Spaniards in America to kill the vast number of natives who perished. Without any doubt, the main reason for the catastrophic drop in the population of the Americas was infectious disease brought by the Europeans. Natives of the Atlantic world were free neither from illness nor epidemic.⁶⁴ But the European invasion brought new and cruel forms of death. Bacterial organisms carried by Spaniards hit the Caribbean area soon after the landfall of Columbus, and reached the mainland even before Cortés. The first major pandemic (of smallpox) broke out in Hispaniola at the end of 1518, reached Mexico in 1520, and seems to have travelled well into North America and possibly also into the Inca empire. The Europeans brought with them from their continent and from Africa a hideous range of killer infections, including smallpox, typhus, measles, diphtheria, influenza, typhoid, the plague, scarlet fever, yellow fever, mumps, colds, pneumonia and gonorrhoea.⁶⁵ Syphilis also became known in America, though it may have been simply a mutation of an existing disease; logically its appearance in Europe at this time made many attribute it to the contact with America. The direct impact of disease was devastating and was recorded by the Indians in their chronicles. There were other causes of mass mortality, but they were all indirect or long-term.

The fall in the indigenous population of the New World is amply documented. Statistics have normally been arrived at on the basis of

reports drawn up at the time, and of subsequent censuses made by administrators and clergy. Controversy has arisen, however, on the fundamental and unresolved question of the size of the pre-contact population:⁶⁶ how many people were there in the Caribbean and the mainland before the epidemics hit? Demographers have made learned guesses, with a tendency always⁶⁷ to settle on the highest figures for the pre-disease population. The high figures offered by historians of distinction have logically led to stark conclusions when compared with the very low figures of population censuses effected by authorities in America from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. All that is certain is that extensive depopulation took place. The island of Hispaniola within half a century of the arrival of Columbus had been totally denuded of its original inhabitants. Within a generation the outer fringes of the Spanish-occupied territories were affected. In northwestern New Spain the Totorame and Tahue peoples of Nayarit and Sinaloa had by 1590 been reduced by around ninety per cent, though other tribes suffered less.⁶⁸

The epidemics, moreover, often preceded contact with the invaders, whose pathogens were carried in advance of their arrival, by the air, by insects, by animals and by natives. 'While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala [after the Noche Triste]', a Nahuatl text reports, 'a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan.' The last undisputed Inca, Huayna Capac, died of a pestilence just before 1528, a few years before the Spaniards arrived in Tawantinsuyu.⁶⁹ In this way smallpox prepared the way for the fall of the American empires. Bacterial infection appears almost as an immense, impersonal and continent-wide punishment inflicted on the New World by its contact with the Old. The coming of the European, no matter what barbarities he may subsequently have committed, appears to have had a small role in the epic of cosmic disaster. However, pre-contact ravages had limits both in space and time: they did not maraud freely⁷⁰ and were controlled by local conditions.⁷¹ In the post-contact period, by contrast, disease spread more rapidly. The epidemic of 1545–8 was probably the most disastrous ever to affect central Mexico.⁷² In another in 1576 a settler wrote: 'the epidemic here in Mexico is terrible; the Indians represented all our wealth, and since so many of them have died everything is at a standstill'.⁷³ But already with the colonial period came the contribution made by contact, and it was deadly. The total number of people affected can never be reliably

calculated, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that over ninety per cent of the deaths among the indigenous peoples of the New World were caused by infection⁷⁴ rather than by cruelty.

The birth of an Atlantic world in the sixteenth century, it has been pointed out, involved a gigantic international migration of people.⁷⁵ The Spaniards occupied a primary place in it.

Not a single Castilian accompanied Columbus on his first voyage; most of the sailors were Andalusians or from the Cantabrian coast, men who had more knowledge of the sea. Within the next decade, however, Castilians – the majority population of the peninsula – formed the greater part of the adventurers who went out to the Caribbean and then to the mainland. Men from Castile, Andalusia and Extremadura made up four-fifths of the 380 who left Cuba with Cortés on their way to Mexico; the same 3 regions answered for the majority of identified conquistadors. The places of origin of emigrants varied in subsequent years, depending on the economic circumstances that impelled them. Many, obviously, were fleeing from poverty, from a country of 'so much misery and suffering that there is no future for anybody there',⁷⁶ towards new horizons. 'I am determined', a settler in Mexico confessed, 'to raise my sons in a country where they are not oppressed by so much misery' as in Spain; in New Granada another wished to 'raise my sons in a good country where they are able to eat'.⁷⁷

The new lands attracted dispossessed Spaniards of all conditions, many of them soldiers and sailors unemployed after the wars in Granada and Italy had come to an end, others young and hardy men of limited means, including many hidalgos (like Cortés) and illiterate labourers (like Pizarro) who looked to America to better their fortunes. Emigration was the way to improvement: 'you must understand', a new arrival in Panama wrote back to his son in Spain, 'that those who want to better themselves cannot continue living where they were born'.⁷⁸ The procedure, as explained by a settler in Puebla to his brother-in-law in Extremadura, was: 'if you need to come to these parts the first thing you must do is go to Madrid to get a licence to emigrate, then when you have the licence sell whatever you have to raise as much money as possible, then go to Seville and arrange for your passage at the lowest price possible'.⁷⁹

The total figures for emigration from the peninsula did not by any

means amount to a flood. Emigrants had to register at the House of Trade in Seville, and about fifty-six thousand persons did so in the course of the sixteenth century. An historian has suggested that this may represent only about a fifth of the real total, since very many managed to emigrate without passing through the system of control. If this reasoning is accepted, many more went to the New World than the surviving records say. A recent estimate is that in the peak period 1500–1650 perhaps 437,000 Spaniards went to the New World, and over the two centuries 1500–1700 perhaps 100,000 Portuguese.⁸⁰ In reality, all such figures are arithmetical projections based on the (improbable) supposition that a continuous torrent of people went across the Atlantic. There is no firm evidence that this was the case. Unregistered emigration obviously took place, but it is likely, as has recently been argued,⁸¹ that the numbers were significantly lower. The Spanish population of the chief cities of America was always small, and was fed by fairly modest levels of immigration from the peninsula. As we can see from the correspondence of those who were successful in the New World and wished to attract their families over, it was not easy to convince Spaniards of the benefits of emigration.

Success in the New World depended, in the view of Spaniards themselves, on their own personal effort. ‘Someone who comes here from Spain as poor as I was’, stated an immigrant in Guatemala, ‘has to go through a great deal to find a living.’⁸² Others were frankly pessimistic about their chances: ‘America is not the place for people who come here poor; a man is hard put to earn enough to feed and dress himself.’⁸³ However, there was no lack of optimism, either: ‘those who apply themselves to work hard in this land can make more in one year than over there in a lifetime’. ‘The man who has a will to work will not go short,’ another wrote from central Mexico, ‘the opportunities here are better than in Spain.’⁸⁴ There were of course very many immigrants who made their way merely through the labour of their hands, such as the farmer in Puebla who around 1550 ‘was a farm labourer for one year together with another labourer, and later I obtained lands and bought four teams of oxen, and sold my wheat for making flour in Mexico city.’⁸⁵ The attraction was obviously enormous of a ‘land where there is no hunger and those who want to apply themselves become rich in a short time’, the reference being to Peru in 1559.⁸⁶

Reports from successful immigrants tended of course to leave out of

consideration the crucial contribution of the native population and of imported blacks, without whose help (as Las Casas pointed out) the Spaniards would have achieved little. A settler in Mexico explained succinctly that ‘in this country hunger is unknown and we have all the produce of Castile as well as much more from this land, with the result that Spain is not missed; so that even if you are poor you are better off here than in Spain, because here *you are always in charge and do not have to work personally*, and you are always on horseback’.⁸⁷ A settler in Lima explained that ‘the property I have is a farm with vineyards, a lot of land, and cattle that are worth many ducats; and its value is such that I have a dozen blacks working, without counting the Indians who bring much profit to the property’.⁸⁸ He was rich but also old, and pleaded with his son in Madrid to come out and take over the inheritance: ‘if you had come out here, son, each year you would have been earning more than four thousand pesos’. The continuing promise of America, based less on ‘work’ and more on opportunity, encouraged further emigration from Spain.

It is easy to forget that the terrors of a sea voyage deterred very many Spaniards from emigrating. The crossing to America was frequently a long and painful purgatory. During all voyages the mortality rate could be enormously high, but an even greater peril were the storms at sea that lasted for days and tore the small vessels apart. The sufferings of the passengers on the vessel (part of a convoy of twenty-seven ships) in which Bartolomé de las Casas set out from Seville in July 1544, are described vividly by one of his fellow passengers, Padre de la Torre.

The ship is a narrow, tight, prison from which nobody can escape even though there are no bars or chains, and so merciless that it makes no distinction between its prisoners. The feeling of being crushed, and of suffocation and heat, is intense; bed is usually the floor, some bring pillows, ours were poor, small and hard, stuffed with dog’s hair, and we had miserable goat’s hair blankets. There is a lot of vomit in the ship, and a great deal of bad temper, which makes many people lose control completely, some for a longer time than others, and some unceasingly. The thirst you suffer is unbelievable, made worse by the food, which is biscuit and salted things. The drink is a litre of water a day, you have wine only if you bring it. There is an endless number of fleas that eat you alive, and clothes cannot be washed. The smell is awful, especially in the hold, though it is insufferable everywhere in the ship . . . These and other travails are quite

normal in the ship, but we feel them particularly badly because it is not what we are used to.⁸⁹

Once they had arrived in the New World, new colonists were all too aware of the immense space between them and their home country. A colonist in Mexico in the 1590s lamented to his nephew in Spain that he would probably never see him again, the distances being such that 'it's not like me going to your house and you coming to mine, as we used to do'.⁹⁰

Those who emigrated were always highly selective about where they wanted to go. The government tried to encourage them to settle everywhere, but people had firm preferences. The failure of early endeavours in the Río de la Plata meant that nobody wished to go there. In 1558, when the authorities were trying to enlist colonists for a sailing to the Plata, they explicitly lifted the normal ban on foreigners, Jews and Muslims. It was still not enough, complained an organizer of the expedition. Even allowing in all the prohibited categories, as well as Moriscos, 'despite everything, in the whole of Spain people could not be found to come'.⁹¹ The expedition finally sailed, but mainly with soldiers, which had not been the intention of the council of the Indies.

In time the discovery of the mines of Mexico and Peru would give yet more boost to the attractions of coming over. Certain professions were evidently in short supply and offered quick gains to newcomers. A baker in Mexico commented that 'you earn more here than in Spain'; another resident of the same province confirmed that 'for poor people this country is much better than Spain'.⁹² Even for priests, whose numbers were reputed to be excessive in Spain, there were advantages: 'for the clergy', a settler reported from New Granada, 'America is a very good place'.⁹³ The most disliked of all the professions were the lawyers, whom the early conquerors tried to keep out of America. Their services, however, were soon seen to be essential, since they helped to protect disputed property rights. 'Over here even the donkeys earn their living', a priest wrote ironically from Quito, 'and the lawyers much more so'.⁹⁴

Many immigrants hoped to profit from opportunity and return home with their wealth: 'in three or four years we'll earn, God willing, more than thirty thousand pesos, then we'll come back to Castile'.⁹⁵ 'Those of us who live far out here', an old and infirm settler wrote from Trujillo to his family in Spain, 'live with no other wish than to end our days at

home, in our country'.⁹⁶ Many did go home, but only to live off what they had gained: a resident of New Spain commented in 1574 on a friend who 'now that he is rich wants to see the back of the Indies; he told me when he left to catch his ship that he never wanted to return to America, he was fed up with it'.⁹⁷ The poor, however, could not return: 'those who come out to this country cannot return to Castile without money, for everyone would laugh at them'.⁹⁸ In practice for a variety of reasons only a small proportion did so. The majority were too settled, too successful, or too old ('now that I am old, I shall stay here'⁹⁹) to return. Though they yearned to live again among their families and show off their newly acquired riches, they feared the old world that they remembered only too well. 'We did think of going back shortly to Spain', two brothers wrote home from Potosí, which by that date (1576) was awash with silver, 'but looking at the misery there and at what we have over here, we have no wish to go but will stay here in this country, which is rich and good'.¹⁰⁰

From the beginning, non-Spaniards played a significant role in the creation of the empire not only in Europe but also in the New World and Asia. Official chroniclers, however, tended to gloss over the fact. They often passed over in silence the detail that Columbus was Italian and Magellan Portuguese. A decree of 1499, repeated in another of 1501, prohibited the entry of any foreigner into the Americas, but the bans were never observed, and in any case it was easy for immigrants to claim that they came from some other part of the Habsburg territories. It was common for Germans and French to pass themselves off as citizens of the Netherlands. Foreigners were numerous in towns that had strong trading links. Seven of the group of men that founded the town of Panama in 1519 were foreigners; in the same half-century one tenth of the households in the town was foreign.¹⁰¹ The irregular situation of many 'foreigners' was set right by an order of Charles V on 17 November 1526 allowing any of the subjects in his realms to go to America. From that date immigration was virtually uncontrolled.

Non-Spaniards, of course, owned a good part of the New World, if the concessions made by Charles V to his Flemish courtiers were to be taken seriously. In the 1530s many Netherlanders received official permission to settle in the Caribbean, New Granada and the Río de la Plata. Castilians in the peninsula continued to harbour resentment

against the privileges granted in America to foreigners. The concession in 1528 of the territory of Venezuela to the German banking firm of the Welsers caused the greatest indignation, for it opened the door wide to foreign infiltration. When Welser's agent Hieronymus Köhler went to Venezuela in 1534, it was reported that those in his ship represented 'many tongues, many from Scotland, England and the Netherlands, but mostly Basques, Spaniards and Italians, around thirty persons who even if pushed to it could not understand each other'.¹⁰²

Despite attempts to control their presence, non-Spaniards, especially Portuguese and Italians, could be found everywhere. The situation elicited a comment from the historian Oviedo on 'so many different peoples and nations, of varied and diverse condition, who have come to America and pass through it'. In particular, he said, in the city of Santo Domingo 'every language can be heard, from every part of Christendom, from Italy, Germany, Scotland, and England, with Frenchmen, Hungarians, Poles, Greeks, Portuguese and all the other nations of Asia and Africa and Europe'.¹⁰³ America was too vast a continent to be closed off, and the non-Spanish element continued to be important throughout the colonial period. In the generation after Columbus it proved – as we have commented – very difficult to attract Spaniards to the Caribbean, and the government made intense efforts to bring in Spanish settlers from the Canary Islands.¹⁰⁴ In the end, the authorities had to be content with allowing Portuguese settlers into Hispaniola, where they flourished, contributed greatly to sugar production, and converted parts of the island into a 'little Portugal'.¹⁰⁵ In 1535 on the island there were 'over two hundred Portuguese who run the sugar mills, and others who are farmers, as well as many carpenters and masons and smiths and all the trades; there is a great number of them in all the settlements and they are very productive'.¹⁰⁶ In 1588 the city council of Santo Domingo complained to the government that the Portuguese 'in this town are more numerous than the Spanish, they trade publicly and thereby appropriate the wealth of the country'. In many areas of America the Portuguese continued to play a significant role. Five per cent of the population of Buenos Aires in the early seventeenth century, for example, was Portuguese; and by mid-century there was one Portuguese family for every three Castilian.¹⁰⁷ Since Portuguese controlled the slave trade in the same period, they used it as the channel for entry. An official of Cartagena de Indias reported in 1618 that 'the biggest problem is that

most of these slaving ships are Portuguese; each one transacts his business in blacks and then stays on to live in Cartagena'. Not surprisingly the officials at Seville complained that 'the Portuguese do so much business in the Indies that it appears the Indies belong to the Crown of Portugal rather than to Castile'.¹⁰⁸

The Italian presence was also pervasive. Italians participated in the early explorations, as we have seen, both in person and through agents. But they were also to be found everywhere in the New World in the first century of settlement, especially in Mexico.¹⁰⁹ Italians, mainly from Genoa, took part in all the expeditions of conquest: they could be found with Cortés in Mexico, with those who seized the Inca at Cajamarca, and among the companions of Valdivia in Chile. A native of Lombardy introduced printing into Mexico, a Sicilian was with Balboa when he sighted the Pacific. Italians were, in the 1530s, among the first to colonize the mouth of the Plata. The expedition to this area, led by Pedro de Mendoza in 1535, also brought from Nuremberg a shipload of German merchants and adventurers, some of whom helped in the colonization of Paraguay. The foreigners in early Spanish America were by no means an élite, apart from the few commercial agents of Genoese and Germans. In Hispaniola and Cuba the majority were, like the Spaniards, ordinary people seeking their fortune: they included sailors, farmers, traders and artisans.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile an equally significant, but wholly involuntary, immigration was taking place. Almost from the beginning of trade relations between Europeans and the African kingdoms, the former had purchased, in addition to the prime commodity of gold, quantities of slaves. Slavery had existed in medieval Western Europe, and warfare between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean continued to give life to the practice. Slaves also existed as part of the economic life of all African states, which made use of them at all levels and were only too willing to trade them for European commodities.¹¹¹

The taking of black slaves to the New World had always been permitted by the government, and Las Casas had suggested in addition that import of black labour might ease the lot of Indian labourers. The first import of blacks is normally dated to 1510, when King Ferdinand licensed the House of Trade in Seville to send to Hispaniola two hundred and fifty Christian blacks acquired in Lisbon. More and more blacks

were imported, commented Las Casas later, but 'it never led to any help or freedom for the Indians'. Blacks from the Iberian peninsula had the legal status of slaves, that is, they had originally been captured in aggressive raids on the African coast. But the need arose for many more than the peninsula could supply.¹¹² Since Spain had no access to them in her African territories, recourse was had to the Portuguese, who held outposts in tropical Africa.

Spain's direct participation in the trade of Africans to America, which dates from the first import of Africans to Hispaniola, established a model that became the standard one for all the enterprises, both civil and military, that contributed to the evolution of the colonies. The state did not have direct access to the resources or expertise necessary to carry out the trade. It advanced the money and made the rules, but left all other matters in the hands of the entrepreneurs. This had already happened in the case of the Portuguese. In the late fifteenth century the money for their slave trade to Africa was put up principally by the Florentine financier Bartolomeo Marchione and by Genoese colleagues.¹¹³ Throughout its long history, therefore, the African slave trade to the Spanish empire was dominated by international finance. The early permissions took the form of limited 'licences', later on a system of long-term contracts or 'asientos' was adopted. The first licence for importing slaves in quantity from Africa was granted in 1518 to the Franche-Comtois noble Laurent de Gorrevod, who in turn sub-contracted the licence to others. In 1528 the first asiento went to Heinrich Ehinger, agent of the German financiers the Welser.¹¹⁴ Slaves were transported mainly from the area known as Upper Guinea, stretching from the Senegal southwards to Sierra Leone, and from the Congo; the trade was managed by Portuguese merchants in the Cape Verde Islands and in São Thomé off Biafra.

The new Portuguese trade very soon aroused a storm of protest among Spanish officials and churchmen, because of its brutality. The outcry was such that Philip II for a while suspended it. Among the most outspoken critics was the Dominican friar Tomás de Mercado, who had lived in Mexico in the 1550s and seen it in action. He termed it 'barbarism' and 'injustice', describing the blacks as 'cheated, violated, assaulted and despoiled'; the death rate on the Atlantic crossing could be, he testified, four-fifths of the blacks transported.¹¹⁵ A few later Spanish writers, such as the Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval, whose *On the salvation*

of Africans (De instaurando Aethiopum salute) was published at Seville in 1627, also bitterly criticized the barbarity of the Middle Passage, as the long trip from Africa to the Caribbean came to be known. Sandoval concluded that 'slavery is the beginning of all offences and travails, it is a perpetual death, a living death in which people die even while they are alive'.

It is impossible to estimate satisfactorily the number of Africans who were transported across the Atlantic, and the problem has consequently always aroused controversy among scholars. A recent calculation¹¹⁶ suggests that around the year 1500 the number of slaves transported annually from the West African coast was 5,000, rising to 8,000 a year around 1550, then 13,800 a year around 1650 and 36,100 a year around 1700. Only a proportion of these went to the Spanish plantations (after 1650 the demands of other Europeans in the Americas boosted the trade). But imports from Africa to Spanish America were high: the main port of entry, Cartagena, received a possible annual average of four thousand a year in the early seventeenth century.¹¹⁷

There is no wholly satisfactory way to arrive at figures for the involuntary immigration of Africans into the New World before the eighteenth century. The documentation is inexact, fraud was extensive, and the high death rate on the Atlantic crossing cut deeply into the presumed number of persons on each voyage. On balance, a general perspective is perhaps more illuminating than any attempt to count the uncountable. Reputable scholars have suggested that between 1450 and 1600 the Americas may have received around 290,000 Africans and between 1600 and 1700, when the slave trade was at its peak, around 1,490,000.¹¹⁸ The proportion that went to the Spanish colonies remains highly problematic. A recent opinion is that up to the year 1600 Spanish America received around 75,000 and between 1600 and 1700 around 455,000,¹¹⁹ but the figures serve largely to help us view the question in global terms and cannot be accepted as reliable.

The very large number of blacks imported very soon had the consequence that blacks came to outnumber whites in the New World. 'Because of the sugar mills', the historian Oviedo reported from Hispaniola, 'there are so many of them on this island that it seems to be a veritable Ethiopia.' This is astonishing, when we consider the unremitting mortality rates imposed on African immigrants. It was estimated, even in the sixteenth century, that on the Atlantic crossing around one

quarter on average of the captives died of disease or because of the harsh conditions. There must have been many cases like that of the ship which (in 1717) reached Buenos Aires with only 98 survivors from its original shipment of 594 slaves.¹²⁰ That was, of course, after an already high death rate caused by the conditions of the slave trade on the African continent itself. Once in the New World the slaves had to journey yet again to their destination, which involved further suffering and mortality. When they finally arrived they were put to work in conditions that quickly cut their lives short. Despite all this, they endured and survived. Their ability to survive in the intolerable conditions to which they were subjected, earned them a reputation as a labour force. But the reality was that they died in their thousands, and generally failed to reproduce themselves,¹²¹ so that the need to import more slaves became a permanent one.

Though black slaves had initially been imported to meet the demands of labour in the Caribbean, they were quickly seen to be essential in all aspects of production, and the numbers in Spanish-occupied parts of the mainland rapidly rose. In Hispaniola they were the only labour in the sugar mills and in agriculture; 'only blacks till the soil', the city council of Santo Domingo stated in 1556.¹²² In 1553 the viceroy of New Spain informed the government that 'this land is so full of blacks and mestizos that they outnumber the Spaniards greatly. You Majesty should order that they do not send blacks, because there are in New Spain more than twenty thousand and they are increasing.'¹²³ In central New Spain in the 1590s they were the largest ethnic group after the native Indians, and outnumbered white Spaniards by two to one. In Peru the situation was the same. From the last decade of the sixteenth century, Lima was a city whose population was half African, a situation that prevailed until the middle of the seventeenth century.¹²⁴ In Chile in 1590 the European population of nine thousand was greatly outnumbered by the black population of twenty thousand.¹²⁵ In the isthmus of Panama the non-native population was overwhelmingly black. In 1575 the town of Panama had 500 Spanish households, but the area had 5,600 black slaves. By 1607 nearly seventy per cent of the town's population was black.¹²⁶

Africans played an appreciable role in the creation and defence of the empire, and took part in the campaigns of the early conquistadors. Blacks were with Balboa when he claimed the Pacific, with Pedrarias

Dávila when he colonized Panama, with Cortés when he marched to Tenochtitlan, with Alvarado when he entered Guatemala.¹²⁷ Almagro apparently had twice as many blacks as Spaniards serving with him, and Gonzalo Pizarro at the time of his rebellion had up to four hundred blacks in his forces.¹²⁸ The most famous black of the early frontier was Juan Valiente, a hero of the conquest of Chile, who served with Alvarado, Almagro and Valdivia, became an encomendero in 1550 and died in battle against the Araucanians in 1553. The prowess of blacks as soldiers became legendary, and blacks were in the front line of the defence of the American territories.

Throughout its first two centuries as an imperial power Spain was completely unable to send enough men to its colonies to serve in the armed forces. Blacks became the main component of the militias that fought the Indians, patrolled the frontiers, put down rebellions and fought foreign pirates.¹²⁹ Time and again the efficient black defences repulsed European invaders in the Caribbean. In Havana in 1600 the governor had at his disposal a coloured militia of free mulattos (the 'Compañía de Pardos Libres'). By the end of the seventeenth century blacks could be found as junior officers in the colonial militia. The alternative face of the picture was that runaway (cimarron) and rebel blacks also acted as a powerful aid to European military expeditions in their efforts to take over territories in the Caribbean. The first and most menacing sign was in the daring expedition of Francis Drake across the isthmus of Panama in 1572, a feat made possible only by the help given him by a group of thirty cimarrons.

The principal role of black Africans in the Spanish empire was as mainstay of the economy.¹³⁰ Production in the islands and mainland of the New World would, quite simply, have collapsed without their contribution. From the time that Spanish missionaries and authorities decided that the indigenous population could not put up with the intensive labour required in certain activities, African slaves became the substitute. They came to be the main workforce in the sugar mills, in mining, in agriculture. From the beginning of its introduction into the New World, sugar cane came to be identified with the mass importation of black slaves. Blacks produced the sugar of the Caribbean. They became crucial contributors to the mining industry, in the silver mines of Mexico and the gold deposits of Colombia and Peru. Their role supplanting the Indians in the gold mines of Colombia is cogently

echoed in the myth prevalent among the black miners of Güelmambi, at Barbacoas in Colombia:

Before we blacks arrived the Indians lived here, in this same place. When we arrived the Indians fled, under the earth towards the mountains where the rivers have their sources. But before fleeing they took all the gold, and broke everything up with their hands and feet, turning it all into gold dust. And now we, the blacks, must break our bodies to find the gold dust and keep ourselves alive in the places where the Indians used to live before.¹³¹

In the famous mines of Potosí, on the other hand, their role was only ancillary, for it was considered that they could not resist the altitude as well as the Indians. Above all, blacks served and slaved everywhere in Spanish America in the haciendas and the great ranches, helping to produce the crops and tend the animals on which Hispanic society depended.

They were also the basis of domestic service. Europeans had been familiar with blacks in the Old World, and may for that reason have found them more acceptable for positions of trust in New World society. Blacks, moreover, were an uprooted people, and showed an amazing ability to blend into their host societies. In Peru, they were used extensively in domestic service, and a large population of free blacks developed as owners granted certificates of liberty to those who had served them well. By around 1650 possibly one-tenth of Peru's black population was legally free.¹³² Outside the domestic household, blacks occupied the service trades, as blacksmiths, cobblers, carpenters and tailors. The small shipbuilding industry in Peru – mainly in Guayaquil – was manned principally by blacks of different racial grades.¹³³ Because they were mostly untrained and illiterate their success in the shipyards was relative; their efficiency was admirable, but the quality of vessels produced left much to be desired. In the long run, though there was a continuing process of manumission (that is, liberty granted on an individual basis) the blacks found it difficult to achieve a generalized legal freedom. It was a problem common to colonial societies. Indian slavery, which had been prohibited in the mid-sixteenth century, continued to be practised openly and illegally long afterwards. But at least the Indians had the protection of a law, even if it was not observed. Africans did not even have a law to protect them.¹³⁴

In no small measure, the black man created the empire that Spain

directed in the New World.¹³⁵ It is a role that, until recently, was wholly neglected by Spanish historians,¹³⁶ unlike Portuguese scholars who were always conscious of the part played by blacks in the origins of Brazilian civilization.

Stop

For the government in Spain, an even bigger problem than controlling Indians was that of controlling the settler class. In reality, the crown never managed to impose its will adequately on the colonial élite, which demonstrated from the time of the Pizarro revolt in Peru that it could dictate the rules of the game.

The Spaniards in America were convinced that the continent was theirs because they had gained it through their own sweat and blood. 'I shall declare', wrote Vargas Machuca in 1599, 'how much is owed to the discoverers and settlers of the Indies, since with the valour of their swords they have acquired for their prince notable realms, that have been discovered, conquered and populated.'¹³⁷ The claim was absolutely true. Since the time of the occupation of the Canary Islands, the crown had no cash, men or weapons to carry out its aspirations to empire, but it used freely the system of granting military commands (*adelantamientos*) and authority over natives (*repartimientos*) in order to satisfy the adventurers. The extension of the Spanish presence was by no means a haphazard process involving random marauders. In an unknown world filled with menace, men came together only with those they trusted, and made agreements carefully stipulating the contribution each would make. The classic agreement made at Panama by the Pizarros was typical. Trust was extended to those who came from the same family, town or province. Men from Extremadura formed a closely knit group that supported the Trujillo conquistador Pizarro during the campaigns of Peru; they split up only after the defeat of the rebellion of Gonzalo Pizarro.¹³⁸ The men who pioneered the opening of Florida were a network drawn from families of Asturias who were linked by kinship. They came from the towns of Avilés, Gijón, Santander, Castro Urdiales and Laredo. The Asturian creator of Spanish Florida, Pedro Menéndez, specifically recommended that the crown choose its agents in that area from Asturians and Basques, 'who are the people best fitted to work in Florida, some because of their nature and some because of kinship and friendship'.¹³⁹

Royal government was installed relatively late. It consisted mainly of a viceroy (in New Spain from 1535, in Peru from 1542) who in theory