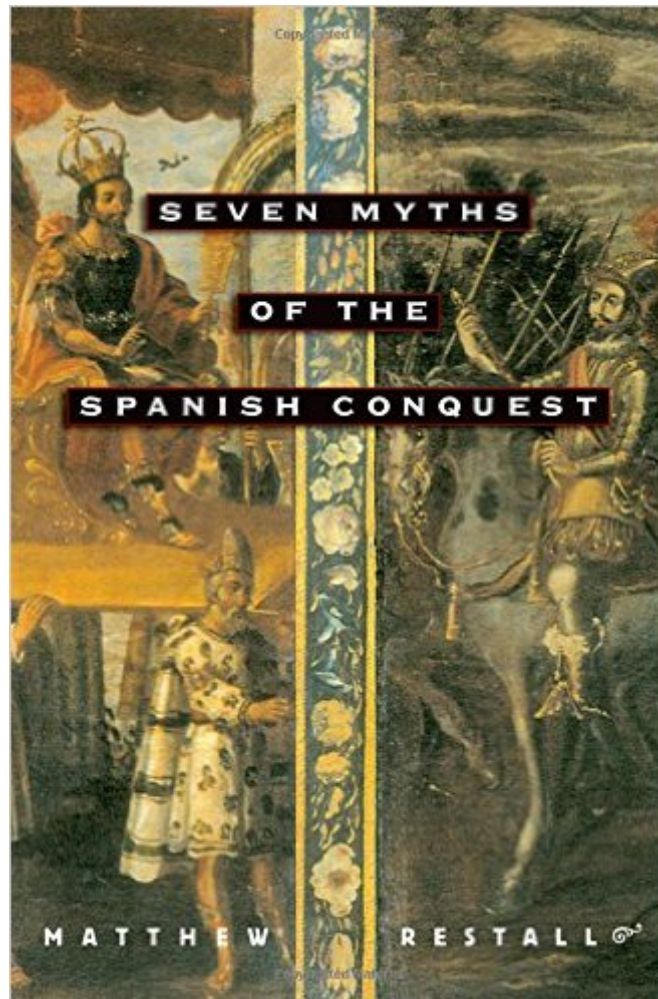


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# Seven Myths Of The Spanish Conquest



## Synopsis

Here is an intriguing exploration of the ways in which the history of the Spanish Conquest has been misread and passed down to become popular knowledge of these events. The book offers a fresh account of the activities of the best-known conquistadors and explorers, including Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro. Using a wide array of sources, historian Matthew Restall highlights seven key myths, uncovering the source of the inaccuracies and exploding the fallacies and misconceptions behind each myth. This vividly written and authoritative book shows, for instance, that native Americans did not take the conquistadors for gods and that small numbers of vastly outnumbered Spaniards did not bring down great empires with stunning rapidity. We discover that Columbus was correctly seen in his lifetime--and for decades after--as a briefly fortunate but unexceptional participant in efforts involving many southern Europeans. It was only much later that Columbus was portrayed as a great man who fought against the ignorance of his age to discover the new world. Another popular misconception--that the Conquistadors worked alone--is shattered by the revelation that vast numbers of black and native allies joined them in a conflict that pitted native Americans against each other. This and other factors, not the supposed superiority of the Spaniards, made conquests possible. The Conquest, Restall shows, was more complex--and more fascinating--than conventional histories have portrayed it. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* offers a richer and more nuanced account of a key event in the history of the Americas.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Matthew Restall's "Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest" is an illuminating introduction to the

Conquest of the Americas. The value of Restall's book is that it provides a broad overview of the facts, circumstances and personalities of the Conquest while diving deeper into particular "myths" around which Restall organizes his book. Although he calls his chapters "myths," it isn't clear to me that these are myths in the sense that they are erroneous things that people think about when they think of the Spanish Conquest. A lot of the myths are things that we don't normally think about at all, albeit if pushed to take a position, we might adopt the "mythicist" position sketched by Restall. For example, not all conquistadors were white, some were Africans who transitioned from slave to successful conquistadors while enslaved. This is a fascinating bit of history, particularly fascinating in the idea that a person from a sub-Saharan African tribe could make his way successfully into a completely alien culture. Is there a myth that all Conquistadors were white? I suspect that the answer is that most people just haven't thought about the subject. What we get from Restall's book is that the Conquistadors, generally acting as entrepreneurial free companies with only the most limited backing of their sovereign, had perfected a technique of conquest, which basically involved descending on the next likely looking territory, enlisting native allies, capturing the native leader and massacring natives where necessary. The strategy worked like gang-busters, particularly when aided along by the introduction of European diseases that killed off 90% of the native population. To the natives, it must have looked like the end of the world. Restall explores this strategy by a series of chapters addressing his "myths." In chapter one, Restall points out that it was not a "handful of adventurers" that conquered the Americas. It was a handful of adventurers backed by huge numbers of native allies. In chapter two, Restall points out that the conquistadors were not armies of the King. They were usually scratch troops put together on the spot of whoever was feeling like making a fortune. In chapter three, Restall introduces the reader to the African slaves who made up a substantial portion of the Spanish forces. In chapter four, Restall explains the idea of the completion of the Conquest was overstated; there were free Mayan groups in the Yucatan into the Twentieth Century. Chapter five discusses the asymmetry of communication. The Spanish were fortunate to find native speakers who could communicate with the Spanish. Thus, Cortez spoke to a shipwrecked Spaniard who spoke a Mayan language, who in turn spoke to Malinche - the Aztec princess who became Cortez' mistress - who could speak to the Aztecs. The Aztecs and other natives did not have that kind of access to the intelligence that knowing the other's language provided. In chapter six, Restall disputes the myth that the Indians were totally and utterly destroyed by the Conquest. The seventh chapter discusses why there should be such mythic understandings of the Conquest, i.e., outmanned adventurers conquering mighty civilizations by sheer cultural superiority. This is a good book for those who are looking for an introduction to the subject. I read

this book while listening to the Teaching Company lecture series on the Conquest of the Americas. I heartily recommend that combination as a way getting immersed in this important but often forgotten studied bit of history.

I have not even finished reading yet but had to write a review. I travel extensively and for all these years the Spanish conquest of Americas never made sense to me. A few hundred people against tens of thousands ; even with all the illness that was brought with them; even with the stories about the Spanish being viewed as gods; even with the muscat and the wheel and the alphabet; even with the inherent white supremacy of the theory of the intelligence of the conquistadors... it just did not make sense to me. Read this book and suddenly it starts to make sense. Thank you.

Interesting book with seven excellent points of the Spanish Conquest. For those who have done any kind of research into this period of history, would for the most part, agree to Mr. Restall's points. I was curious to see his explanations to the myths and his justifications. I found it enjoyable reading as a whole and agreed to most of his myths. This book would be more meaningful and insightful to a reader who has done some previous reading in this area.

Though I had to read this for a college course, I still found this book fascinating. I really thought that Restall's arguments were sound and his conclusions were perfect. I especially found it interesting that he talks about black conquistadors. That is something that is not discussed in history books. The myth of just the white conquistador has definitely been debunked. He does a superb job with this book by using the conquistadors own words. I definitely recommend it.

Synthesizing much of what is known about Spain's American conquests, SMOTSC argues convincingly for less amazing or miraculous, if still impressive, Spanish achievements. The seven myths include invincible military prowess and superior technology; that victories came without significant help from Indian allies; that many Indians thought Spaniards were gods; greater facility in communication; etc. The actual factors aiding the conquest have been known to scholars for some time, but Restall performs a valuable service in presenting them to a broad public in highly readable style. A main result is to restore agency to those indigenes who aided or acquiesced in the conquest, and even manipulated conquistadores for their own ends. Restall frequently draws on his own prior research along with selected secondary sources. While praising some scholars, he attacks many more, which raises some hackles. More could be done to address two related

questions: 1/ Do similar "myths" need correction regarding other conquests in the Americas, by other European powers? 2/ How was Spain able to hold so great an empire for so long? (Presumably the myths of conquest helped.) Tackling these issues would result in a stronger book, but probably is a task beyond Restall's intended focus. That leaves plenty of work for future historians, which is how it should be.

"Seven Myths" is one of the most important pieces of revisionist history with respect to how the Spanish pressed their conquest of those parts of the Americas that came under their influence. It challenges and gives nuance to the standard narrative at almost every turn. One must know that narrative, as told, for instance, by Hugh Thomas in *Conquest*, in order to appreciate the depth of research that went into the "Seven Myths" and the changes in perspective it demands of those desiring to understand how history changing was the encounter between Europe and the Americas. The bibliography is definitive up to the time of publication.

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