

AZTEC WARFARE: GOALS AND BATTLEFIELD COMPORIMENT

Barry L. Isaac
University of Cincinnati

Virtually everything written in this century on Aztec¹ warfare has stressed its ritual component and, whether intentionally or not, has fostered the impression that the main aim of most or all Aztec warfare was the capture of enemy soldiers for sacrifice to the god Huitzilopochtli. Vaillant (1950:208), this century's first synthesizer of Aztec ethnology, wrote, "Thus in warfare the great aim was to take captives." Again (1950:213): "Losses were chiefly felt in the number of captives taken, since these short hand-to-hand combats were not very damaging to the man-power of either side." Soustelle (1970:211, 212), currently the most well-known synthesizer in French and English, writes:

The Aztecs' intention was not to force the enemy to yield by ruining the country or massacring the population, but to make manifest the will of [H]uitzilopochtli. . . . Nothing would have seemed more incomprehensible to the ancient Mexicans, nor more atrocious, than the characteristic feature of our modern war: huge destruction, the systematic extermination of whole nations, the annihilation of states or their overthrow.

Mexican anthropologist Canseco (1966:95) writes, "During combat they did not tend . . . to seek the destruction of the opposing forces . . . ; their primordial preoccupations were, with respect to offense, not to kill the adversary but to take him prisoner. . . ." Again (1966:111): "[they] did not seek to destroy the enemy army but to capture alive the greatest possible number of enemies."² Monjarás-Ruíz (1976:257), another Mexican anthropologist who has recently made a special study of Aztec warfare, writes: "it is important to insist upon the fact that, in the greater part of the cases, war had a very special character for the Mexican: rather than annihilate the enemy they sought to obtain victims for their sacrifices."³

The objective of this article is to demonstrate that the above views of Aztec warfare are at sharp variance with the ethnohistorical sources. The emphasis here is upon reports of Aztec battlefield behavior and the aims of warfare. In scope, this article covers the period from the inception of the Aztec Empire in 1428-30 to the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519—with the exception of the famous "Flowery Wars" between the Aztec Empire and the autonomous kingdoms of the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Valley. The "Flowery Wars" are a complex, special case of Aztec warfare and will be analyzed in a separate article. Suffice it to say here that the general impression that the "ordinary" Aztec wars had mainly the aim of capturing soldiers for sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli has rendered more palatable the argument—which likewise is not supported by the ethnohistorical documents—that the "Flowery Wars" were entirely ritual in intent or even non-bloodletting in battlefield execution (Harner 1977a, 1977b).

THE WARS OF IMPERIAL FORMATION, 1428-1439

The Aztec Empire was itself born of war in 1428-1430, when Tenochtitlan (now, Mexico City) and Tetzco (Texcoco) overthrew the Tepaneca Empire which had dominated them for a century. The victorious cities subsequently invited the city of Tlacopan (Tacuba) to join them in a Triple Alliance in order to consolidate their political domination of the Valley of Mexico. According to the Codex Ramírez (1878:51), the forces of Tenochtitlan entered the Tepaneca capital of Azcapotzalco

killing and wounding without pity whatsoever . . . they razed the city and burned the houses and robbed and sacked everything they found, not sparing man or woman, children or old people, who were executed without any mercy or pity, without leaving a thing standing or person alive, except those who, fleeing, had taken refuge in the mountains, whom the Mexicans did not spare, because they pursued them like savage lions, filled with fury and ire.

Durán (1964:58-59, Ch. IX), also representing the Tenochtitlan (Tenochca) viewpoint, presents much the same account of this war; neither he nor Tezozomoc (1878:39-250, Ch. VI-IX), the other major Tenochca source, acknowledges any role for Tetzco in this Aztec victory.⁴ Ixtlilxóchitl (1965:150, Ch. XXXI), the major Tetzcocan source, stresses that city's role in this war but concurs with the Tenochca authors on its general nature and outcome: "the deaths of many people on both sides. These wars lasted 115 days . . . entering the city, they destroyed and razed it, tearing down all the most prominent houses of the lords and illustrious people and the temples, putting everything to the sword."⁵

King Maxtla of Azcapotzalco fled to Coyoacan (Coyohuacan, Cuyuacan), the second capital of the now ruined Tepaneca Empire, and plotted a counter offensive.⁶ He appealed for assistance to the defeated Azcapotzalco and was bitterly rebuked: "Are we to see the streets of our city bathed in blood again, covered with entrails, with arms and heads and severed legs?" (Durán 1964:61, Ch. X; also reported in Tezozomoc 1878:255, Ch. XI). When the Aztecs finally fell upon Coyoacan circa 1430, they put Maxtla's forces to rout and looted "slaves, gold, jewels, shields and insignia of rich feathers, clothing and many other things of great value"—and also took many prisoners for sacrifice and appropriated farming lands as booty (Codex Ramírez 1878:57). Tezozomoc (1878:264-271, Ch. XIV-XV) generally agrees with the Codex Ramírez in this regard, presenting an account of defeat by force but not specifying battlefield conduct. Durán (1964:68, Ch. X), however, reports that "blood drenched the ground. . . . [The Aztecs] massacred them without pity. . . . Everyone fled before them as though they were wildcats."

Around this same time (circa 1430), Tenochtitlan turned upon Xochimilco, a community on the southernmost lake that had vacillated between Azcapotzalco and Tenochtitlan during these latter states' bitter struggle:

the Mexican army routed them, with little loss to its own men, making a great slaughter of the enemy, who, seeing the battlefield filled with their dead, began to retreat in great haste with the Mexicans pursuing them . . . [into the city], and the Mexicans not ceasing to wound and kill them drove them to their temple, which the Mexicans then set afire and putting them to flight again pursued them to the mountains (Codex Ramírez 1878:59).

Tezozomoc (1878:276, Ch. XVII) also portrays this conquest as a bloody battle resulting in the capitulation of Xochimilco, which ceded substantial amounts of farming land. Durán (1964:79, Ch. XII) adds that "the Aztec soldiers . . . complained that they had not been given permission to loot as had been done heretofore"; to pacify them, each was given "a plot 330 yards long, since they were not allowed to sack the conquered city" (Durán 1964:79, Ch. XIII).

We should note at this point two recurrent features of Aztec warfare as it is reported in the ethnohistorical sources. First, the Tenochca sources repeatedly report looting and sacking as normal outcomes of Aztec victory (Durán 1964:69, 108, 159, 186, 230 [Chs. X, XIX, XXXIV, XLI, LVI]; Tezozomoc 1878:468-469, 543 [Chs. LXII, LXXVI]; see also Torquemada 1943, I: 163). Second, several sources report the seizing of farming lands, especially on behalf of Tenochtitlan, as a recurrent feature of the early wars of the Triple Alliance, beginning with the defeat of Azcapotzalco in 1428 (Codex Ramírez 1878:52, 57, 59; Tezozomoc 1878:248-249, 253-254, 268-271, 277, 286, 305 [Chs. IX, X, XV, XVII, XX, XXVI]; Durán 1964:70-72, 79, 90, 102 [Chs. XI, XII, XV, XVIII]; Chimalpahin 1965:95, 106, 112, 214, 230-231; Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1885:81, col. 1; Ixtlilxóchitl 1965:171, 256, 263 [Chs. XXXV, LIII, LV]. Although some of these lands were reportedly given to commoners early in the imperial period, most seem to have gone to members of the nobility, and by the time of the Spanish Conquest many Triple Alliance high officials and other nobles held large estates with bound tenants in the outlying provinces (see Hicks 1976).

THE WARS OF IMPERIAL EXPANSION, 1440-1519

With the ascension of Moteuczoma I (Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, ruled 1440-1469)⁷ to the throne of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec Empire began to expand eastward towards the Gulf Coast and southward into the present states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. At the same time, the government of Tenochtitlan gained clear dominance within the Triple Alliance; previously, this city and Tetzcoco apparently shared power fairly equally, while Tlacopan was (and remained) clearly a junior partner. Accordingly, I shall organize the rest of this brief account of Aztec warfare around the reigns of the Tenochca kings.

The Codex Ramírez (1878:63) credits Moteuczoma I with beginning the tradition of an inaugural war when a new king was installed in Tenochtitlan and says that this first such war was launched against Chalco, a federation at the southern end of the Valley lakes.⁸ This source reports that the battle resulted in "many captives" for the sacrifices on the new King's inauguration day, "but it did not leave the province of Chalco conquered." Neither Tezozomoc (1878:282-286, Ch. XIX-XX) nor Durán (1964:87-91, Ch. XV) specifically attributes the innovation of inaugural wars to Moteuczoma I, and neither reports a war with Chalco in the first year of his reign. Rather, they both report a Tenochca attack upon Tetzcoco, with this latter capitulating after slight resistance and then ceding lands to the Tenochca nobility (cf. Ixtlilxóchitl 1965:161-165, Ch. XXXIV). Durán and Tezozomoc have the war with Chalco beginning several years later, when Chalco refused to send construction materials for the new Temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan (Tezozomoc 1878:287-305, Ch. XXI-XXVI; Durán 1964:91-98, Ch. XVI-XVII). Chimalpahin (1965:97-98, 199), writing from the vantage point of Chalco itself, agrees with Tezozomoc and Durán in this regard; he dates the Tenochca-Chalca War at 1446, six years after the coronation of Moteuczoma I.

Regardless of when the Tenochca-Chalca war began, all sources agree that it was long and bloody. The Codex Ramírez (1878:63) states that "the war in which he [Moteuczoma I] had the greatest difficulty was that with the province of Chalco." Durán and Tezozomoc are in basic agreement about this series of wars. In what was apparently the second major encounter of these two powerful armies, "The soldiers were instructed to take prisoners alive" (Durán 1964:93) so that King Moteuczoma could fulfill his vow to dedicate the new Temple of Huitzilopochtli with Chalco blood. Nevertheless, Durán (1964:94) implies that at least as many enemies were killed as captured: "a great number of warriors from Chalco were killed; there was not a man or boy in the Aztec army who did not kill some or take one or two prisoners." Durán (1964:94) reports the number captured at

500, while Tezozomoc (1878:294) reports 200. At the next major encounter, "The battle raged with the greatest confusion, both sides slaying men right and left" (Durán 1964:95). In what was apparently the fourth major episode of this war, the Tenochca routed the Chalco army and then "wounded and killed all the people they caught up with . . . without sparing one," while also sacking the capital city (Durán 1964:98). Chimalpahin, the Chalco source, dates that polity's "first defeat" at 1455 and its total defeat at 1465; in the wake of this Aztec ultimate victory, some 16,000 citizens of Chalco reportedly fled to Huexotzinco, an independent kingdom in the Valley of Puebla (Chimalpahin 1965:201, 204-205).

King Moteuczoma I also sought to expand the Empire eastward. His armies fought their way to the Gulf Coast, "killing and injuring" as well as "capturing an infinite number of people," including "young women, boys and girls,"⁹ according to Tezozomoc (1878:314-315, Ch. XXIX). Durán (1964:108, Ch. XIX) reports that the Aztec army caught the Huastecs in an ambush and

annihilated them. Not one of the Huastecs escaped; all were killed or taken prisoner. . . . After this the Aztecs entered the city, sacked and burned the temple and killed old and young. All this was done with . . . the determination to remove all trace of the Huastec people from the face of the earth.

At Cuetlaztlan (State of Veracruz) the Aztec army "began to kill old people, women, young men, boys, girls, infants in the cradle," according to Tezozomoc (1878:331, Ch. XXXII), before allowing the city to surrender.

When some of these Gulf communities later stopped paying tribute to Tenochtitlan, Moteuczoma I reportedly ordered the towns "destroyed and razed" but eventually took the advice of his chief counsellors "that it suffices that half of them die, and . . . the other half remain, and that those who remain . . . pay double tribute" (Tezozomoc 1878:345, Ch. XXXIV). Durán reports that "there were many deaths on both sides" before the rebellious town of Orizaba was reconquered; the army of neighboring Cuetlaztlan, "seeing that their cities were sacked and their people massacred, agreed to pay a large amount of tribute to Mexico" (Durán 1964:117, Ch. XXI; see Torquemada 1943, I: 162).

Moteuczoma I also waged extensive campaigns in the present State of Oaxaca, on one occasion reportedly bringing an army of 200,000 soldiers and 100,000 porters to bear upon Coaixtlahuaca, where Valley merchants had been slain—a frequent pretext for wars of conquest. According to this source (Tezozomoc 1878:336, Ch. XXXIII), the Aztec forces took many prisoners there "and a great many that they did not want, they killed." Tezozomoc apparently is referring here to the outcome of the third of the annual battles against Coaixtlahuaca, because the first was a defeat for the Aztecs and the second was a draw, according to Torquemada (1943, I: 160), who reports large numbers of battlefield deaths. In a later campaign, the Oaxacans begged for mercy, but the Aztecs

turned upon them, making such a cruel slaughter that blood ran down the mountains, paths and roads, leaving such a multitude of dead that the animals of the mountains and the birds of prey had food for many days, because almost all of the natives [Mixtecs] of Oaxaca died; only the Zapotecs were taken prisoner. . . . (Tezozomoc 1878:359-360, Ch. XXXVIII).

King Axayácatl, who ascended the Tenochca throne in 1469, launched an inaugural war against Matlatzinco in the Valley of Toluca, on the Aztec Empire's western frontier. He reportedly was steered in this direction by the great general and advisor to kings, Tlacaelel, who was "convinced that the province should be conquered, since he feared that its inhabitants might ally themselves to Michoacan," a powerful kingdom farther west (Durán 1964:161, Ch. XXXVI). While Durán (above) reports conquest as the goal of this war, he also provides here one of the very few instances known to me of a specific battle in which the clearly

stated aim was to minimize battlefield killing. Axayácatl reportedly “did not wish any Matlatzinca to be killed; he wanted them all taken prisoners in order to redden his temple and the tables of the shrine with their blood” (Durán 1964:162). Durán does not specify the actual number of Matlatzinca captives. He (1964:164) says only that “they were so many that in order not to be called a liar or accused of exaggeration, I will not tell the number. . . . It is enough to say that on that occasion the Matlatzinca nation decreased considerably.” Tezozomoc (1878:402, Ch. XLVII) reports the battle orders as “not to kill many”; he also implies that large numbers of captives were taken but nowhere gives a numerical reckoning (Ch. XLVIII-L). We should note, with Berdan (1982:118), that large-scale capture followed by sacrificial death can reduce the military strength of a conquered province as effectively as battlefield slaughter.

King Axayácatl is also credited with the 1473 conquest—or reconquest (see Litvak King 1971)—of the great market city of Tlatelolco, Tenochtitlan’s closest neighbor. The battlefield report contained in the Codex Ramírez (1878:69) states that Axayácatl’s army there “captured many and killed many more . . . causing grand destruction among them, tinting the lake with blood.” Durán (1964:159, Ch. XXXIV) reports that “the Aztecs . . . were sparing no one” and that the city was sacked: “The houses were robbed . . . ; even the pots, jugs, plates, and bowls were carried away, and what the Aztecs could not carry away they smashed to bits, hoping to frighten and humiliate the Tlatelolca forever.” Tezozomoc (1878:391-393, Ch. XLV) reports a decisive victory but not utter destruction or looting.

During the reigns of Axayácatl (1469-1481) and his successor, Tizoc (1481-1486), the Aztec army suffered two costly, humiliating defeats. In 1478, under Axayácatl, the Aztecs launched a major offensive against Michoacan, the major independent kingdom to their west. Tezozomoc (1878:421-425, Ch. LII) reports that the attacking Triple Alliance force of 32,200 soldiers was met by a Michoacan force of 50,000 and was nearly annihilated: “upon counting they found that four hundred, including officers and all, had escaped” (Tezozomoc 1878:424). Tezozomoc’s use of the words “dead” and “death” in his account of this war implies that the Aztec forces died on the battlefield, not as sacrificial victims of their Tarascan (Michoacan) adversaries. Durán (1964:165-168, Ch. XXXVII) numbers the Michoacan force at 40,000 and the Triple Alliance army at 24,000, and says that only 3,100 of the latter returned from the battle. He speaks of “the multitude . . . that lay dead upon the field” and says that “the killing was so great that the Aztecs decided to withdraw those who were still alive in order to save at least a few.” Again, the clear implication is that the Aztecs’ devastating losses were incurred in battlefield deaths and not in captures for later sacrifices.

Three years later, in 1481, the Aztecs suffered an ignoble defeat in the unfortunate King Tizoc’s inaugural war against the independent kingdom of Metztitlan (State of Hidalgo, to the northeast of Tenochtitlan), after which he was only reluctantly enthroned and then “helped to die” five years later (Durán 1964:179-180, Ch. XL; Tezozomoc 1878:440-444, Ch. LVII; Codex Ramírez 1878:67). Durán is uncharacteristically terse about Tizoc’s defeat, but Tezozomoc (1878:442-443, Ch. LVII) tells of it in considerable detail. From his account, we can infer that the Aztec army had a high proportion of inexperienced troops who broke down under the stress of battle: “and the young soldiers and boys who were not versed in the art of arms, some were cowering, others were grieved, and others cried over their too early deaths.” One of the generals then suggested that fresh troops be advanced “among the young boys, one or two or three of us, to give them strength and spirit.” This strategy rallied the youths sufficiently for them to capture forty prisoners, whereupon the Aztec generals announced that they had “achieved the objective; every one of you, according to his ability, has now done what you could”—and quickly withdrew, with a loss of 300 soldiers.

When the army returned home in disgrace, the new king sank into despair (see Durán 1964:180). It is likely that King Tizoc paid the price for his predecessor's mistake, that is, Tizoc's army sorely missed the 20,000 to 30,000 seasoned troops that it had lost three years earlier in Michoacan.

Ahuítzotl ascended the throne of Tenochtitlan in 1486 and launched a vigorous program of conquest and resubjugation (Durán 1964:183-218, Chs. XLI-L). He seems to have avoided directly attacking Michoacan (to the west) or Metztlán (to the northeast), although he did apparently sever the province of Tototepec from this latter (see Davies 1968:28-29, 51-56). There are few reports of specific battles against the kingdoms of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula (to the east), although prisoners from these kingdoms were sacrificed in substantial numbers during the rededication of the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan in 1487 (Durán 1964:194). Tezozomoc (1878:458-554, Ch. LXI-LXXVIII) presents a wealth of information on Ahuítzotl's other campaigns (1486-1502), however. Tezozomoc's (1878:462-544, Ch. LXI-LXXVIII) account is liberally sprinkled with such characterizations of battlefield events as: "a great quantity of them died," "many old people, women, and children died," "and the small arroyos ran with blood, and the multitude of dead bodies [was such that the army] walked upon them and slipped on their blood," "the tangled bodies of old men, old women, young men, boys, girls, little children," "not one-fourth [of the enemy population] remained," etc.

Several of Ahuítzotl's campaigns also show interesting departures from previous practices as depicted in the historical sources. First, according to Tezozomoc (1878:468), when the city of Chiapan (State of Chiapas) capitulated after a bloody battle, the order was given to "release the prisoners first, and let us move on; let those ahead pay [as sacrificial victims]." Durán (1964:186) does not report this release of prisoners, but instead says, "They took all the priests prisoners, together with the other officials, and having tied their hands set fire to the temple"—clearly implying that these captives were executed thusly. Second, of a campaign on the eastern Gulf slopes, Tezozomoc (1878:541) states the battle orders as being "that no one take prisoners, rather they all must die . . . with neither children nor adults remaining"; indeed, when the enemy town sued for peace (i.e., offered tribute) and the fighting stopped, the Aztecs reportedly killed all their captives on the spot. Third, Tezozomoc (1878:526) reports for the campaign against Oztoman (State of Guerrero) that the battle orders were "that no one remain alive, neither women nor children . . . let half of the men live in order to take them to Mexico [as sacrificial victims] and [let] all the rest die [on the spot]." Durán (1964:200), however, says that "All were killed except the children who were brought as captives to the city of Mexico. Forty thousand two hundred children, boys and girls, were then distributed among all the provinces and cities of the region of Mexico [Tenochtitlan]." Finally, both Tezozomoc (1878:534) and Durán (1964:200-201) state that the now deserted Oztoman, as well as neighboring Alahuíztlan, were repopulated from the Valley of Mexico in an elaborate resettlement scheme (see, also, *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 1885:76, col. 1). Durán (1964:201) also contends that "the resettlement of abandoned [sic!] lands . . . had been done many times before."

Moteuczoma II, or Moteuczoma Xocoyotzin (ruled 1502-1520), is most famous for his so-called "Flowery Wars" with the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Valley states. Here, I limit the discussion to this king's other wars. Tezozomoc (1878: Ch. LXXXIII and LXXXIV) does not discuss an inaugural war as such for Moteuczoma II. Durán (1964:224, Ch. LIV) does not specify the inaugural war's target, although he says that the Aztec army "returned triumphant." The *Codex Ramírez* (1878:75), while not specifying the object of the campaign, provides the best account of the aims as well as outcomes:

Having subjugated the province . . . and taken many captives and other spoils for the coronation festivity, causing exemplary punishments, he left all that land very fearful, so that neither they nor others would dare to rebel against him.

King Moteuczoma II's subsequent campaigns (again, apart from the "Flowery Wars" with the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Valley states) also reportedly exacted heavy enemy losses. Against the Otomí of the present State of Mexico, the Aztec army

began to kill so many of the enemy, that they left neither old men nor old women, girls, nor infants . . . and they began to burn houses, and then the temple, which they razed and demolished, so that the towns looked like the smoke coming from a volcano. . . . they then began to capture men, women and children by breaking down the houses. Seeing such destruction, the miserable defeated Otomies cried out . . . : "Mexican lords, take pity on us; we will pay you tribute; suffice the deaths of so many old men, old women, mothers and children; with the dead and the captives you have taken, not a sixth of us remain." The Mexicans replied, saying: "No, scoundrels, you must all die. . . ." And, the Mexicans not ceasing their cruelty, [the Otomies] came back to beg with much . . . humility, begging mercy, that . . . they would pay their tribute. . . . (Tezozomoc 1878:584-585, Ch. LXXXIV).

Durán (1964) does not report this campaign. Torquemada (1943, I:215) reports that only 140 live Otomí captives were taken from one of this campaign's major skirmishes (at the town of Nopallan). He also notes that the Aztec army lost many of its own soldiers, including twenty officers.

King Moteuczoma II next turned his attention southward to the cities of Cuatzontlan and Xaltepec, and their respective satellite towns, in the present State of Oaxaca. Durán (1964:228, Ch. LV) writes that King Moteuczoma II

gave orders that no old man or woman over fifty years of age was to be spared. He said that these were the ones who committed treason, caused rebellions and incited the younger people.

So the different cities began to be conquered, the Aztecs killing any man or woman who seemed to be over fifty. They robbed and sacked the houses and villages, leaving them bare. The land was subjected. . . .

Tezozomoc (1878:599, Ch. LXXXVIII) states the battle orders as to take few prisoners and to sack the towns, "that no one of Xaltepec or Cuatzontlan remain." Qualifying this blanket order, he says that King Moteuczoma II ordered the killing of all people "except boys and girls of eight years and less." He implies that this order was carried out, partly as an object lesson to communities farther south, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, who were thought to be planning rebellion.

There swiftly followed a campaign against the cities of Tototepec and Quetzaltepec (State of Oaxaca), where Aztec traders or emissaries had been killed. According to Tezozomoc (1878:605-606, Ch. XC), the battle orders for Tototepec were that "no one except boys and girls remain [alive]." The Aztec army stormed this town's fortifications by night, taking 600 captives and, apparently, exterminating everyone else inside the fort "except boys and girls of eight years and younger; by nine A.M. there was no trace left of the people except for the infants," and the Aztec army, "all covered with blood," sat down to rest in a grove of trees. Durán (1964:230, Ch. LVI) says bluntly that the Aztec army "slaughtered all the people." Interestingly, he adds that many of the Aztec soldiers went "to the neighboring villages to steal and at midday they had not returned. It took the whole day to gather the soldiers together." Durán notes that the city of Quetzaltepec was taken only "after much resistance"; Tezozomoc (1878:606-609, Ch. XC-XCI) specifies two days of hard fighting in this case. This latter says that, on the second day, King Moteuczoma II gave the order that "no one remain [alive] except innocent boys and girls."

The only other of Moteuczoma II's campaigns that I wish to comment upon is the one carried out against the rebellious city of Tlachquiaco (State of Oaxaca), which had stolen the tribute being carried to Tenochtitlan by the nearby city or province of Coayxtlahuacan. As the Aztec army prepared for the initial assault,

they were given the order "to kill half and capture half [of the fighting men], that no one remain in the city except women and children and old people," according to Tezozomoc (1878:660-661, Ch. CII). Upon their return to Tenochtitlan, the triumphant Aztec army is said to have reported to King Moteuczoma II "that half of the people [of Tlachquiauco] had died and the other half remained alive." Durán (1964) does not mention this campaign.

CONCLUSION

On the evidence of the major ethnohistorical sources, Aztec "ordinary" wars (that is, exclusive of the "Flowery Wars") had the typical features of state-level warfare elsewhere: heavy slaughter of the enemy on the battlefield, calculated slaughter of noncombatants to lower the enemy's capacity to resist further or rebel later, the brutalization of selected communities as object lessons, seizure of agricultural lands, the burning of temples and other elite structures, and the incorporation of the vanquished into the victor's polity as tributaries.

In fact, tribute was clearly the foremost concern of the Aztec elite who determined warfare policy and foreign relations. We are told again and again that Aztec wars ended when the enemy leaders offered tribute (see, e.g., Tezozomoc 1878:463, 467-468, 483, 525, 541, 544, 554-555, 585, 609 [Chs. LXI, LXII, LXV, LXXII, LXXV, LXXVIII, LXXXIV, XCI]; Durán 1964:68-69, 78-79, 98, 100-102, 117-118, 186 [Chs. X, XII, XVII, XVIII, XXII, XLI]; Chimalpahin 1965:passim). Indeed, in view of the stark testimony of our sources, we can generalize Erdheim's (1978:214) statement about the extraction of tribute from the defeated Tlatelolco in 1473: "Tribute was the price they paid in order to continue living." Second, tribute was so central an aim of the Aztec state that foreign polities that had not taken aggressive steps against the Triple Alliance were often—perhaps typically—given the choice of peaceful submission for the lower tribute schedule than would have been the case if they had resisted and been subjugated by force (Tapia 1866:592; Conquistador Anónimo 1858:371; Zurita 1891:117, 161; Mendieta 1971:129; Motolinía 1971:346). In other words, the Aztec rulers were quite ready to settle for a relatively low tribute schedule that spared them the human and ordnance expenses of armed conquest, despite the fact that not a single prisoner would thereby be taken for sacrifice to the gods! Third, Tenochtitlan and Tetzoco were dependent upon food tribute; although this was especially the case with the ever-expanding nobility, it seems to have been so for the general population to some extent (Berdan 1975:112-126, 240-241, 251; Berdan and Durand-Forest 1980:20). This tribute was first obtained and then enforced through military policy. Fourth, the tribute requirements of the Aztec state increased markedly through time with increased bureaucratization, occupational specialization, and general urban growth in the Valley of Mexico. Accordingly, the pace of conquest quickened and tribute extractions became heavier, apparently throughout the empire (Berdan 1975:246-251, 255-257). One mechanism for this increase was the doubling of the tribute levy upon communities and provinces that had rebelled and were resubjugated by force (Berdan 1975:246; Berdan and Durand-Forest 1980:17). The brutalization of reconquered peoples also served as an object lesson to their potentially rebellious neighbors. Under Moteuczoma II (1502-1520), even a mild complaint about the tribute schedule could mean that the unhappy local satrap and his entire family would be executed (Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1885:81, Col 3).

It would be misleading to ignore the ritual component of Aztec warfare. The ordinary Aztec soldier doubtless viewed warfare mainly in terms of the opportunity it presented for the live capture of enemy soldiers for eventual ritual sacrifice. For commoners, the taking of war captives was practically the only avenue of entry into the ranks of the nobility; they received not only honors that could effect a permanent change in social status, but also substantial material

rewards (for a summary, see Monjarás-Ruíz 1976:258-263). These opportunities for socioeconomic advancement—as well as the opportunities for looting—helped make military service and the risks of war bearable. The personal risks were considerable; the Aztec army often suffered enormous battlefield casualties. As we would expect under these circumstances, the Aztec state supported thousands of priests in the major cities to provide religious reinforcement of the plebian socioeconomic motivations through exhortation and gaudy spectacles.

The fact is, however, that the ethnohistorical sources repeatedly depict battle orders and battlefield conduct—both directed by the highest echelon of the Aztec elite—that were at odds with the plebian desire for social advancement through the live capture of enemy soldiers. Nonbelligerent communities were permitted to submit peacefully as tributaries; bellicose or rebellious communities were attacked ferociously with the aim of massive slaughter of combatants and even of noncombatants. Clearly, the elite who controlled the aims, strategies, and consequences of war thought mainly in terms of political conquest, administrative control, the expropriation of landed estates, and the extraction of tribute.¹⁰ The capture of sacrificial victims was usually secondary or even incidental to these elite politico-economic aims. Indeed, the capture of enemy soldiers could serve to rationalize or disguise the *de facto* geopolitical defeat of the Aztec army—as was clearly the case in 1481 when King Tizoc's generals, disgracefully beaten by Metztitlan, announced that they had "achieved the objective" because 40 enemy soldiers had been captured.

NOTES

1. Aztec and Aztec Empire refer to the government and subjects of the Triple Alliance formed by Tenochtitlan (now, Mexico City), Tetzaco (Texcoco), and Tlacopan (now, Tacuba) in 1428-1430. "Tenochca," "Mexica," and "Mexican" refer to the people and government of Tenochtitlan itself, which became the most powerful of the Triple Alliance capitals after about 1440.
2. All translations from the Spanish writings cited herein are my own.
3. All of the authors cited above acknowledge that Aztec warfare had some materialistic, politico-economic aims. Yet, they consistently emphasize the ritual or religious elements in their summary statements and whenever they wish to contrast Aztec and European warfare. Two of the authors cited here, Vaillant (1950) and Soustelle (1970), have exercised great influence upon two generations of United States anthropologists and historians, because their works have been widely used as textbooks in ethnography and history courses.
4. Durán, Tezozomoc, and the anonymous author of the Codex Ramírez are often referred to collectively as "the Crónica X authors," because they apparently relied upon the same, now lost prehispanic "Chronicle X" in compiling their own works. This comment applies to the entirety of Tezozomoc (1878), Durán's book of secular history (Durán 1964), and the first half ("Relación del Origen de los Indios que Habitan esta Nueva España según sus Historias") of the Codex Ramírez (1878:17-92). Durán's (1971) book on ritual is a close plagiarism of the second half ("Tratado de los Ritos y Ceremonias y Dioses que en su Gentilidad Usaban los Indios desta Nueva España") of the Codex Ramírez (1878:93-149)—or else, both are independent plagiarisms of the same, now lost document (Ramírez 1878:11).
5. Torquemada (1943, I:108-113, 135-141) provides yet another account, perhaps drawn from the above sources. Chimalpahin (1965:91-95, 190-192) provides a view of this war from the vantage point of Chalco, on the south end of the lakes. Chapman (1959) and Gillmor (1977) offer very readable summaries of what is known about this war, although the latter's account is a fictionalized narrative. Davies (1973:166-180) gives a good, general political summary for the Valley of Mexico during this period.
6. Maxtla was the son of the famous King Tezozomoc (died c. 1426) whose reign saw a great expansion of the Tepaneca Empire. Maxtla usurped the throne from his younger brother, whom Tezozomoc had designated as his successor. Maxtla is not well represented in the ethnohistorical sources; as Gillmor (1977:206, n. 20) points out, "sometimes Maxtla of Azcapotzalco and Maxtla of Coyohuacan are handled almost as if they were distinct persons."
7. Almost every major source on Aztec history has a somewhat different set of dates for the Tenochca kings. Throughout, I shall follow the dating in Monjarás-Ruíz (1976).
8. Sahagún (1969, II:324-325) states the purpose of the inaugural wars as "to go conquer some province," to score "victory over that province that he [the king-elect] had gone to conquer," as well as to return to Tenochtitlan "bringing a great number of captives." The Codex Ramírez (1878:63) states the purpose of the inaugural wars as being only "to bring captives with which to make solemn sacrifices. . . ." Nevertheless, the Codex Ramírez itself provides rich material on plunder, slaughter

in combat, and territorial conquest in the inaugural wars of reigns subsequent to that of Moteuczoma I.

9. Almost all discussions of Aztec warfare give the impression that only soldiers were taken prisoner. Indeed, that was the usual practice, but from time to time substantial numbers of children and, occasionally, young women were captured and taken to Tenochtitlan. Their fate is not known. Very few of them could have been used as sacrificial victims, because the great preponderance of such offerings were male soldiers. Although a few might have been treated as slaves, most Aztecs of this status were enslaved criminals or debtors.

10. Once the urban food supply of the Valley of Mexico had been ensured through tribute extractions and irrigated production in the Central Mexican Highlands, the Aztec state charged tribute mainly in elite sumptuary goods, such as feathered cloaks, cotton cloth, and cacao (see Broda 1978; Berdan 1975:110).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anales de Cuauhtitlan (Código Chimalpopoca). 1855. Compiled by J. F. Ramírez. Translated from Nahuatl by F. Galicia Chimalpopoca, G. Mendoza, and F. Sánchez Solís. Mexico City. [written c. mid-16th century in Nahuatl using Latin script]
- Berdan, F. F. 1975. Trade, Tribute and Market in the Aztec Empire. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas.
- 1976. La Organización del Tributo en el Imperio Azteca. *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 12:185-196.
- 1978. Tres Formas de Intercambio en la Economía Azteca. *Economía Política e Ideología en el México Prehispánico*, eds. P. Carrasco and J. Broda, pp. 75-95. Mexico City.
- 1982. The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society. New York.
- Berdan, F. F., and J. de Durand-Forest. 1980. Matrícula de Tributos (Código de Moctezuma). Graz, Austria.
- Broda, J. 1978. El Tributo en Trajes Guerreros y la Estructura del Sistema Tributario Mexica. *Economía Política e Ideología en el México Prehispánico*, eds. P. Carrasco and J. Broda, pp. 115-174. Mexico City.
- Canseco Vincourt, J. 1966. *La Guerra Sagrada*. Mexico City.
- Chapman, A. M. 1959. Raíces y Consecuencias de la Guerra de los Aztecas contra los Tepanecas de Azcapotzalco. *Acta Anthropológica* 1:4 (entire issue).
- Chimalpahin (Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuauhtzin). 1965. *Relaciones Originales de Chalco Amaquemecan*. Compiled and translated by S. Rendón. Mexico City. [written 1620's]
- Codex Ramírez. 1878. El Código Ramírez. Biblioteca Mexicana, ed. J. M. Vigil, pp. 17-149. Mexico City. [written c. mid-16th century]
- Conquistador Anónimo. 1858. Relación de Algunas Cosas de la Nueva España, y de la Gran Ciudad de Temestitan Mexico, Escrita por un Compañero de Hernán Cortés. Colección de Documentos para la Historia de México, T. I, ed. J. García Icazbalceta, pp. 368-398. Mexico City. [written mid-16th century]
- Davies, (C.) N. (B.). 1968. *Los Señoríos Independientes del Imperio Azteca*. Mexico City.
- 1973. *Los Mexicas: Primeros Pasos Hacia el Imperio*. Mexico City.
- Durán, D. 1964. The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain. Translated by D. Heyden and F. Horcasitas. New York. [written 1581]
- 1971. *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*. Translated by F. Horcasitas and D. Heyden. Norman. [written 1570-1579]
- Erdheim, M. 1978. Transformaciones de la Ideología Mexica en Realidad Social. *Economía Política e Ideología en el México Prehispánico*, eds. P. Carrasco and J. Broda, pp. 195-220. Mexico City.
- Gillmor, F. 1977. *The King Danced in the Marketplace*. Salt Lake City.
- Harner, M. 1977a. The Enigma of Aztec Sacrifice. *Natural History* 86:4:47-51.
- 1977b. The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice. *American Ethnologist* 4:117-135.
- Hicks, F. 1976. *Mayeque y Calpuleque en el Sistema de Clases de México Antiguo*. *Estratificación Social en la Mesoamérica Prehispánica*, eds. P. Carrasco and J. Broda, pp. 76-77. Mexico City.
- Ixtlilxóchitl (Fernando de Alva). 1965. *Obras Históricas, T. II: Historia Chichimeca*. Compiled by A. Chavero. Mexico City. [written c. 1600]
- Litvak King, J. 1971. Las Relaciones entre Mexico y Tlatelolco antes de la Conquista de Axayácatl: Problemática de la Expansión Azteca. *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 9:17-20.
- Mendieta, G. de 1971. *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*. 2nd facsimile ed. Mexico City. [written 1573-1596]
- Monjarás-Ruíz, J. 1976. Panorama General de la Guerra entre los Aztecas. *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 12:241-264.
- Motolinía (Fray Toribio de Paredes). 1858. *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*. Colección de Documentos para la Historia de México, T. I, ed. J. García Icazbalceta, pp. 1-249. Mexico City. [written 1541]

- Ramírez, J. F. 1878. *Códice Ramírez, Advertencia*. Biblioteca Mexicana, ed. J. M. Vigil, pp. 10-15. Mexico City.
- Sahagún, B. de 1969. *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, 4 vols. Edited by A. M. Garibay K. Mexico City. [written c. 1570-1582]
- Soustelle, J. 1970. *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*. Stanford.
- Tapia, A. de 1866. *Relación Hecha por el Señor Andrés de Tapia sobre la Conquista de Mexico*. Colección de Documentos para la Historia de México, T. II, compiled by J. García Icazbalceta, pp. 554-594. Mexico City. [written 16th century]
- Tezozomoc (Hernando Alvarado). 1878. *Crónica Mexicana*. Biblioteca Mexicana, ed. J. M. Vigil, pp. 223-701. Mexico City. [written 1598]
- Torquemada, J. de 1943. *Monarquía Indiana*, T. I. 3rd ed. Mexico City. [written c. 1612]
- Vaillant, G. 1950. *The Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation*. London.
- Zurita, A. de 1891. *Breve y Sumaria Relación de los Señores de la Nueva España*. Nueva Colección de Documentos para la Historia de México, T. III: Pomar y Zurita, ed. J. García Icazbalceta. Mexico City. [written 1554-c.1570]