

# WHEN A VIRUS CHANGED HISTORY

Gripped as we all are in an extraordinary crisis, fearful and yet hopeful, **Mallika Ravikumar Iyer** tells you about another episode when a virus changed the course of history.

## THE YEAR IS 1521.

The setting is the ancient Aztec city of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City).

Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador, had set out to conquer a large part of the Americas for the King of Spain. The region was ruled by the Aztecs. Their king Montezuma was a formidable leader and wanted to protect his land and his people from the invaders.

Cortés tried to convince many of the native tribes to betray their leader and come over to his side. He knew he had to employ other means to win the fight, as the Spanish were greatly outnumbered. They had already suffered heavy casualties and Cortés had lost nearly a third of his men. The Spaniards were forced to retreat to the coast. If the Aztecs would have pressed further, he would have had no choice but to get his men into the waiting ships and leave.

The Spaniards needed a miracle. And a miracle it was indeed.

One of the slaves in the camp of the Spaniards had been infected by smallpox—an infectious disease that had existed in Europe for a while, becoming endemic among its people. However, the smallpox virus was new to the Native Americans, who did not have the immunity to fight it.

One night, the virus was transmitted from the European camp to the Aztecs and one after another, many of the Native American soldiers died of smallpox.

Gradually, smallpox spread beyond the warriors. Area after area succumbed to the infection. In some places, half the population was wiped out. From kings and leaders to farmers and children—the virus spared nobody.

The disease spread from town to town and it was followed by famine, as few people remained to till the soil. Three million natives were killed, estimated to be about one-third of the entire population. The Aztecs thought the disease was supernatural, a kind of curse, as it was only killing them and not the Europeans (who had grown immune to it). Their interpretation of this event was that they were being punished by angry gods and that the Spanish god was superior to the Aztec gods.

This paved the way for the local people who had survived to give up their own faith and adopt Christianity as their religion. There were mass conversions to Christianity and as we see even today, the Americas are for the most part white caucasian and Christian. And believe it or not, this is the fallout of a virus!

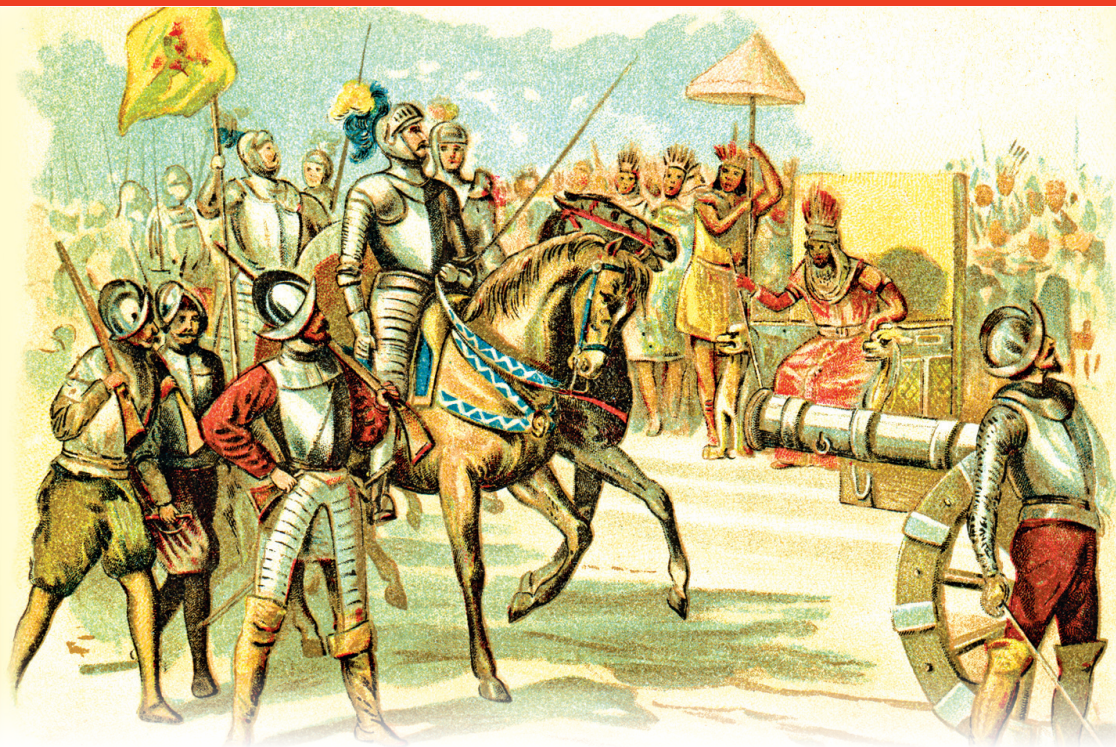
The conquest of the Americas by the Europeans,

starting with the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, provides us with the darkest chapter of the role of germs in history. Several thousand native Americans fell victim to the swords of the Spanish soldiers. And even more became hapless victims of Spanish microbes.



Christopher Columbus





The virus was no doubt virulent. But the legend of Quetzlcoatl brought in a dangerous edge to it. Quetzlcoatl was the native god of the Aztecs and legend had it that he would arrive from the east and destroy their empire. To the natives, the Spaniards led by Cortés perhaps appeared to be the living manifestation of that legend, as they arrived from the East in ships with sails that the natives had not seen before. Also, Cortés looked different from them—he was fair skinned, had a beard, rode on a horse, spoke a different language. These factors added to striking fear into their hearts.

All in all, the smallpox virus aided the decimation of Native American populations by the Europeans.



Cortés



Smallpox cell

## RIPPLE EFFECTS OF THE VIRUS

As a consequence of the destruction of the native population, the Europeans found that they did not have labourers to work on farms and mines. Slavery and the slave trade, through which huge numbers of people were brought in from Africa into the Americas in inhuman conditions to serve their white masters, was a fallout of the vanishing of the Native American population.

To think that all of this happened because of a virus—the vulnerability of one set of people to the virus and the immunity of another set of people to the same virus—is quite unbelievable and yet it is true.

Later, the Europeans used the virus to completely conquer the Americas. They realised that smallpox was spread by direct or indirect body contact. The Europeans coming into the Americas wiped out their Native American hosts by sending them gifts of blankets that had been previously used by smallpox patients. Just like the Trojan horse in Greek history, the blankets were a lethal gift. Hundreds and thousands of Native Americans, who had never encountered the smallpox virus before, died like flies, paving the way for the European conquest of Mexico and the rest of the Americas.



Trojan horse

## LESSONS FOR US

- This is not the first time humans have found themselves helpless victims of a deadly virus.
- While conspiracy theories about the use of a virus as biological warfare abound, history demonstrates that it is quite possible and has been done before.
- Just as we don't blame all Spaniards and white men for spreading smallpox, blaming every Chinese person and every Chinese-looking person is uncalled for.
- While superstitions and belief may no doubt provide mental relief in tough times, relying solely on a supernatural force and throwing caution and reason to the wind can make the problem worse and does not help in solving it.
- And perhaps most importantly, the smallpox virus, which killed nearly 300 million people in the 20th century alone—nearly three times more than all the wars in that century—has been successfully eradicated. So tough times though these are, they will not last!



## DID YOU KNOW?

It is said that caking the face with make-up originated in Europe as a way to cover up the scars, rashes and lesions caused by smallpox.



Mallika Ravikumar is a lawyer-turned-author who writes on history, plants and a whole host of other things, particularly for children. This article is from the blog section of [www.mallikaravikumar.com](http://www.mallikaravikumar.com)