

There are only a few surviving accounts of the Spanish conquest of Mexico as told by Aztec authors. This excerpt is from a history written in Nahuatl in 1528, by a group known as the "anonymous authors of Tlatelolco" (an Aztec city). It describes the start of the war between the Spanish and the Aztecs. The Spanish were led by Hernan Cortes, who is referred to as "the Captain" in this excerpt, and his second in command, Pedro de Alvarado, who is referred to as "The Sun." ♦ As you read, think about how the Spanish soldiers viewed this incident. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

## The Massacre in the Temple of Tenochtitlan

During this time, the people asked Motecuhzoma [Moctezuma] how they should celebrate their god's fiesta. He said: "Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments." During this same time The Sun commanded that Motecuhzoma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan. . . . They also murdered the king of Nauhla. . . .

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. The sentries from Tenochtitlan stood at one side of the gate, and the sentries from Tlatelolco at the other. But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli [the sun god]. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely



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unarmed. They brought only their embroidered cloaks, their turquoise, their lip plugs, their necklaces, their clusters of heron feathers, their tinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their timbrels.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

. . . The Sun treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the Captain left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

Source: *The Broken Spears*, by Miguel Leon-Portilla (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

## Questions to Think About

1. What actions by the Spanish had made the Aztecs wary?
2. How were the Aztecs celebrating the festival of the sun god?
3. **Recognize Cause and Effect** How did the Aztecs respond to the massacre?
4. **Activity** The Aztecs believed in many gods and goddesses. Huitzilopochtli was their main god. Research Aztec religion and create a chart that names ten other important gods of the Aztecs. Include a brief description and background information about each of the gods.