

LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY

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Overview Before the arrival of the Europeans, Latin America had a long history of the development of military technology, organization, and structure, which were used to protect the centers of civilizations as well as to assure access to resources and trade routes. Perhaps more than in any other part of the world, military maneuvers were considered an active part of their religions (and pleasing the gods through human sacrifice). When the Europeans arrived, the advanced military organization and self-discipline were remarkably ineffectual, in part due to the belief in an impending apocalypse from invaders from outside (and resulting self-fulfilling prophecy through a lack of resistance, perhaps in part to appease the gods through an initial self-sacrifice), and second through the waves of disease that lay waste to up to 90 percent of the indigenous populations. The next waves of organized military activity did not take place until the nineteenth century when Spanish colonies fought for independence from Spain. The resulting destabilization gave rise to pulses of conflicts throughout the twentieth century, almost always over control of trade, territory, and resources.

ANCIENT PERIOD

The large quantity of Stone Age artifacts found in Mesoamerica demonstrates that PreColumbian warfare was perhaps achieved the highest level of all Stone Age civilizations. It was unique in that all the warfare technology was developed without the wheel, metallurgy, explosives, pack animals, or ships.

Preclassical

Olmeecs The Olmeecs (1200 – 400 BCE), who lived in on the coast in southeast Mexico near what is now Veracruz, developed obsidian-edged weapons for hand-to-hand combat against encroaching groups.

La Venta (900 – 400 B.C.E.): An Olmec stronghold near Veracruz, Mexico, La Venta was an Olmec stronghold which shows evidence of extensive warfare and weaponry. In addition to creating a fortress-type structure, the Olmeecs developed weapons that included the sling, clay projectiles, obsidian-tipped spears, spear throwers, shields, yucca-fiber armor, and helmets made of animal hides.

Monte Alban (400 – 100 BCE): The largest fortified city in Mesoamerica, Monte Alban served as the center for a large territory, and in it they produced weapons such as obsidian knives, spears, axes, knives, shields and new kinds of armor. They used their military prowess to protect trade routes.

Tiwanaku (500 BCE): In the Andes, the ancestors of the Inca engaged in organized conflict and warfare, according to the artifacts that have been found. They fought their neighbors for control of trade routes and of resources, primarily arable land and water.

Classical (1st millennium CE)

Teotihuacan (100 – 700 CE): The people of Teotihuacan in the Valle of Mexico, appropriated the Monte Alban technology and improved it. The Teotihuacanos focused on combining military and trade routes. Their trade centers were well stocked with the latest weaponry, including larger and more effective obsidian-tipped spears, knives, axes, which could be launched with slings and different types of throwers. The warriors were equipped with protective gear, and there are storehouses for supplies such as tortillas as well as armor and equipment.

Maya (380 – 900 CE): The Maya added innovations to warfare and quickly dominated valuable trade routes. The Maya ruler, Smoking Frog, lived in the complex of Tikal and began to incorporate astronomy and religious ceremony into the warfare. There were many series of so-called “star wars” (planned around astronomical phenomena), and the different population centers were often at war with each other, which led to crippling battles, and potentially contributed to crop failures and the disappearance of the Maya.

POSTCLASSICAL

Toltec (900 – 1200): Long revered and feared as the most ruthless of the Mesamerican warriors, the Toltecs developed fire-tipped spear throwers, firing platforms, and military watercrafts. Like the Olmecs and Teohinacans before them, the Toltecs had a highly militaristic society that used its prowess to dominate commerce. They used psychological warfare as well as direct attacks, and their human sacrifices were both a means of appeasing their gods and inspiring terror in their rivals.

Aztec (1200 – 1519): The Aztecs had consolidated power through a series of bold moves, that spoke to a culture of war. They did not necessarily hold military superiority in terms of technology, but they used logistics and sheer numbers to their advantage. Located as they were in the Valley of Mexico, they were able to withstand long sieges, and to maintain production of arms and supplies, resulting in the ability for huge armies (100,000 or more) to maintain long campaigns, and to incorporate religious rituals with the captured warriors on imposing platforms and pyramids.

Incas (1430 – 1530): The Incas were a militaristic society, with obligatory training of soldiers, a clear rank and highly-structured hierarchy. They had large numbers of highly disciplined and organized warriors who tended to overwhelm their adversaries and to maintain control over their land, which was the most fertile part of the Altiplano, and which had been rendered extremely productive due to elaborate and complicated engineering that allowed high-yield crops and a water supply. Their technology included slingshots, maces, axes, spears which had copper and wood. They used copper and leather for armor and protection.

EARLY MODERN (COLONIAL) PERIOD

Conquest of Mexico: Historians continue to be astounded that a ragtag army of Spaniards who were, by all accounts, malnourished and with less than perfectly functioning firearms, armor, horsemanship, and European armaments, could subdue an army of more than 100,000. The accepted narrative is that the Spanish arrived at a convenient point in time, and in a convenient religious framework, in which the prevailing religious narrative asserted that the Aztecs would be dominated by invading, pale Sky Gods. The Aztecs, who had been so adept at practicing psychological warfare on their adversaries, were in large part vanquished by their own belief system and their own tactics. Once they let the Spanish in, they also had close enough contact to be victims of the contagion of smallpox and other European diseases, hitherto unknown in South America.

Conquest of the Incas: In a bizarre parallel to what happened in Mexico, when Pizarro arrived in Cuzco, he was greeted by large, militaristic society with highly advanced engineering and astronomical observatories. However, those same constellations and movements in the sky that gave them a surging sense of identity, destiny, and history to help them defeat neighbors also predicted a total extinction by an outside force; something that eerily coincided with the arrival of Pizarro. So, while it was true that Pizarro's groups of greedy mercenary soldiers had more advanced weapons (as well as being carriers of smallpox and other diseases), they were far outnumbered by the Incas. The Incas simply let Pizarro's army slaughter them in what looked like willing self-sacrifice.

Warfare associated with Conquest: Uprisings took place throughout Latin America, but disease was the most effective weapon that the Europeans had against the indigenous peoples. There were a few uprisings, such as the Inca Rebellions in the 16th century, but for the most part, the Church and the new criollo class (descended from the Spanish "peninsulares") controlled most of the resources, and thus were able to quash civil unrest.

19TH CENTURY

Raiding: Indians were renowned for their "raids" in which a group would attack a settlement, generally setting fire to the homes, killing the men, sometimes kidnapping women, and almost always taking scalps. It was a tactic so brutal that it inspired terror in the settlers and made them demand military protection.

False Flag: Groups that wanted to cast the blame on others or to provoke a war between two countries would often disguise themselves as members of another group as they attacked and performed war crimes (killing civilians, stealing their goods). Examples of this took place in northern Mexico as whites would dress up as Indians in order to blame them for attacks on stagecoaches and trains carrying gold.

Civilians as Targets: In the Spanish-American War, the military deliberately attacked civilian targets in order to break their spirit, and to break up any centers that were doubling as military hubs. Considering civilians targets is often legitimized in a setting where the civilians are also using guerrilla tactics.

Blockades: A foreign navy would attack all boats seeking to enter or leave a particular port, resulting in privation for the people as they ran out of food, supplies, and ways to earn a living. The blockades were particularly effective in the Spanish-American War because they did not allow munitions to enter, resulting in poorly outfitted Spanish troops.

Privateers: Privateers were pirates with a license to steal, granted by governments and the crown (English and French in particular) to attack Spanish galleons in order to rob them of their gold (and young men) to bolster their finances and troops (seamen). They were very effective in the Caribbean and in Baja California.

Wars

Wars of Independence: The first war of independence took place in Haiti, and started as an anti-slavery and anti-colonial insurrection by self-liberated slaves. The Haitian Revolution, which ended in 1804, was highly lauded by the French philosophes, as well as by Simon Bolivar, who recruited Haitian soldiers to help him fight to liberate Venezuela from Spain. Bolivar, with the help of various generals, travelled from country to country, attacking the Spanish centers of government. Bolivar's notions were enthusiastically received because they meant that the "criollos" of the various nations could throw off the shackles of Spain (and no longer have to pay the 20% tax (la quinta)), and could control the countries and the resources directly. What at first seemed to promise a solution actually destabilized many countries and triggered civil wars and uprisings. It also changed the role of the Catholic Church and made it more overtly political, as the church and its resources were marshalled into supporting the local elites / criollos. The wars of liberation began in Venezuela, to be followed by Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Central America, and Bolivia.

Civil Wars: After the rule of Spain was cast off, not surprisingly, a number of bloody turf wars arose over control of territory, trade, and resources. They took place throughout the nineteenth century, and many of the countries had several episodes of civil wars, as the warring factions were never completely content with the territory and resources they controlled. The first civil war took place in Colombia, and it had several episode. A Uruguayan civil war was triggered by the desire to control trade and competition with Argentina and Brazil, as well as to control the rivers (and trade). It gave rise to larger, more regional wars. The Chilean civil war involved European interests and was motivated by the newly discovered mineral resources, and the opportunity to take advantage of a newly weakened Bolivia (which at one point extended to the Pacific Ocean). Central America, which united under the Captaincy General of the New Spain (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala), fragmented into individual countries, which virtually assured control by a few dominant families, ease of corruption, and widespread poverty of the masses.

Mexican-American War (1848): Triggered by the corrupt and incompetent General Santa Ana, this war had disastrous consequences for Mexico as it lost approximately 50 percent of its territory; all of what had once been a part of "New Spain" with the capital in Santa Fe, New Mexico, north of the Rio Grande River.

French-Mexican War (1861-1867): The French, like citizens of other nations, took advantage of Mexico's independence in 1821 and the sudden opening of the borders to French emigrants. Later, in the 1860s, Maximilian I of Mexico allied himself with France. The French left many cultural impressions on Mexico, particularly in architecture, music, and cuisine. However, the French over-reached and invaded Mexico, resulting in bloody battles. Perhaps the most famous was the Battle of Puebla, which took place on the 5th of May (Cinco de Mayo), in which Mexican peasants defeated the French forces.

Uprisings: Extreme social inequality following independence resulted in a number of uprisings, as the elites (criollos) who controlled the lands after independence from Spain refused indigenous and poor to have access to land.

Brazilian Ragamuffin: The cattle ranchers of the south wanted to secede from the Brazilian nation because they were charged high taxes, which made their primary product, dried beef, uneconomic compared with that of Argentina. Their uprising was put down after much bloodshed.

Argentine Conquest of the Desert: Settlers of European descent fought the indigenous peoples of Patagonia in order to control the fertile territory which was converted into the breadbasket of South America. It is generally considered a genocide and it took place in the 1870 until 1884.

Comanche-Mexico / Apache-Mexico / Yaqui Wars: Mexican settlers wished to utilize the lands in Northern Mexico controlled by the Comanche, Apache, and Yaqui Indians. The battles were brutal and genocidal. As in the United States to the north, the Indians who were not killed were captured and deported (“resettled”), this time to the Yucatan.

Triple Alliance War (Paraguay – Argentina – Brazil): The most brutal of all the Latin American wars, which essentially reduced Paraguay from an important trade center to a massively depopulated and increasingly isolationist nation under the control of a series of repressive dictatorships. The war was fought from 1864 – 1870 in order to further control the River Plate area of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil in order to have a direct access to the Atlantic Ocean through the Parana River. Before the war, Paraguay was prosperous due to control of trade along a massive system of rivers. However, President Solano Lopez’s military tactics were disastrous, and the death toll was more than 400,000 people. Paraguay lost 70% of its male population and important territory to Argentina and Brazil.

Spanish American War (Cuba and Puerto Rico) – 1898: Famously referred to by President Theodore Roosevelt as a “bully war” (meaning a good little war), the battles were vicious and both sides committed atrocities, while troops were riddled by tropical diseases. The result was that Spain lost control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, which came under the control of the United States.

20TH CENTURY

Guerrilla Warfare: Guerrilla warfare was developed into an art form by Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution. He would not obey the traditional rules of engagement, but would attack by night, using the element of surprise. They would not use uniforms, but would dress as ordinary civilians, which increased the likelihood of unintentional slaughter of civilians and war crimes. It was, however, a good way to fight an asymmetrical war, where one side greatly outnumbered the other. Guerrilla warfare came to be practiced in many countries.

“Desaparecidos”: The military dictatorships of Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina responded to the guerrilla tactics of the Marxist rebels by secret, nighttime arrests that were effected without due process, and which amounted to kidnappings. The goal was to penetrate the Marxist rebel groups by taking the key members and then torturing them until they produced the information they needed. What happened in reality was that many young students who followed Marxist fashion and became involved in street protests were arrested, tortured, and killed, never to be seen again. Many were buried in mass graves or their bodies were dumped in the ocean. The goal of this tactic was to allow the dictator to maintain total control.

Domestic Terror: Embassies were bombed in Colombia and in Argentina. At first the attacks seemed to be motivated by conflicts between factions of the military. But, the reality was that they were attacks against the countries perceived to be financing one faction or the other. In Argentina, the Israeli Embassy was bombed. In Colombia, the American Embassy was bombed.

Cartel Warfare: Essentially a war for control of trade routes and the sources of supply (of people for human trafficking and of drugs for narco-trafficking), the tactics include kidnapping, symbolic ritual mutilation (with bodies dumped where most likely to be seen in order to communicate a terror-inducing message), money laundering, guerrilla warfare, and the misuse of the military in order to protect illegal (and immoral) activities. Cartel warfare has been a significant problem in Mexico, Honduras, and Colombia.

Wars

Mexican Revolution (1910 – 1920): The revolt against elitism that characterized much of the world manifested itself in Mexico as well. Anarchist, socialist, and communist ideologies united in order to oust the repressive regime of Porfirio Diaz, and to break up the stranglehold that a few families had on the nation’s resources. The result was a country with a Constitutional democracy and separation of church and state.

Colombia-Peru War (1932): The control of resources (rubber, oil and gas, lumber) was at the heart of the border conflict.

Chaco War (1932-1935): This war, which took place in the Chaco Desert of Paraguay and Bolivia, was over the control of land expected to be rich in hydrocarbons. Ironically, nothing economic has ever been found in that area. The war was brutal, with thousands of soldiers dying of thirst, and black dogs feasting on their cadavers at night. The war gave rise to many revitalized Guarani folktales, particularly of the “luison” or the black dog werewolf, often seen on nights with full moons in the

Peru Civil War (Sendero Luminoso): This ongoing civil war that took place throughout the 1970s and 1980s was an outgrowth of the Cold War, as communist guerillas united under the banner, “Sendero Luminoso” (the Shining Path), and followed the teachings of Mao Tse Tung.

Falklands War (1982): The Argentinian military dictatorship decided to retake the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands), largely because of the discovery of oil and gas in territorial waters. They miscalculated the response of the British, who dedicated all resources necessary to sink Argentine ships and to win the land war, the “Battle of Goose Green.” The Falklands stayed in the British Empire, with an economy fueled by wool, fishing, rockhopper penguin photography, and outfitting scientists heading to Antarctica.

Drug Wars: Cartels, narco-trafficking, and human trafficking (and kidnapping) account for a large portion of the unofficial gross domestic product (informal economy) of countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, and Peru. As a result, turf wars have erupted, often with government military involvement, often because government officials are a part of a particular cartel and they use the military to dominate the market. The wars started in the early 1980s, and continue to the present day.

Discussion/Questions

1. The wars waged by the Toltecs, Aztecs, and Incas were not just about a simple need to defend their territory or to keep trade routes open. They also served an important purpose in that they needed to keep the gods happy in order to keep apocalypse at bay. Describe the ways in which the ancient civilizations in Latin America blended warfare, the taking of prisoners of war, and their beliefs in the efficacy of blood sacrifice.
2. The military activities of the Incas often led to traumatic brain injuries. To deal with the potential for injury, the Incas developed copper and leather helmets. They also developed medical procedures to help relieve pressure on the brain. Please describe the battle surgery developed by the Incas, and the anthropological evidence we have for it.
3. Simon Bolivar, the Liberator of Latin America, led campaigns for independence from Spain. It happened at a moment when the philosophical mindset was ripe for change, as well as economic conditions. Describe how and why the monarchy of Spain lost its influence, while the families and traditional “criollo” encomenderos were actually more powerful than ever. Describe the economic benefits to the encomenderos and the role of the Catholic church.
4. Privateers were pirates who were legitimized by the monarchies of England or France, and as such, they were both economic and military agents of change. Many fortunes were made because the privateers were able to keep a part of the cargo that they seized. However, there were complaints from many the ethics of augmenting the Navy in this manner. What would you find morally or ethically problematic about using privateers when you do not have enough money to equip a navy?
5. The so-called Drug Wars of Latin America are in reality trade wars in the informal economy. Explain why they are difficult to resolve, and explain the role of corruption and why the national military is often involved.

Reading

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