

Assessing the Success of Portuguese and Spanish Exploration and Colonization

Written by Leighton James Hughes

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LEIGHTON JAMES HUGHES, SEP 20 2012

What are the most important factors behind the success of Portuguese and Spanish overseas exploration and colonization?

Spain and Portugal were considered to be the major exponents of 'The Age of Discovery', stretching from the early 15th century to mid-17th century. Spain had dominated much of the Americas; Ortiz goes as far to brand the period as "The Golden Age of Spain[1]". Portugal was most prominent in West Africa, Brazil and India, at its zenith, while simultaneously, holding significant influence over much of the sea in the Southern Hemisphere. With 'colonization' defined as "the establishment of a colony; the establishment of control over the indigenous people of a colony; appropriating a place for one's own use[2]", it is clear that there was indeed substantial Iberian success, evidenced by the large-scale exportation of goods, the effective operation of plantations, and control of land. Herein, we can examine how both Spain and Portugal, relative to other countries, and on their own merits, managed to flourish in their imperial pursuit.

When scrutinizing the reasons for success of empire and colonization, it would seem natural to assess both the role and strength of the military. It is clear that "the Western nations had managed to create the first global hegemony in History... thanks above all to military superiority[3]"; in terms of ordered armies, cannon, and, most notably, fully functioning firearms. Furthermore, when actually in a situation of war, there would have been a visceral difference between what the Incas and Aztecs and the Spanish were using to fight: the former with spears and "abysmal inferiority[4]" and the latter with a highly mobile and sophisticated set-up. European naval warfare was enhanced by adopting successful Islamic weaponry, "borrowing such techniques as the lateen (triangular) sail from the Muslims[5]" and then combining it with "the traditional square sail on the caravel", which gave greater mobility and stability to their boats. The Portuguese drove European innovation by being "the first to install cannon on the decks of their ships" and making ships "of iron spikes and nails, instead of planks together with ropes[6]".

This sort of constant innovation certainly explains the reason for Iberian success over opposition, particularly as the indigenous people greatly outnumbered the conquistadors and Portuguese colonialists: "on average the Spanish population never exceeded 2% of the native population[7]". However, the fact that colonialists had "more sophisticated weaponry" fails to address the question of why not *all* European nations were unable to compete for the same opportunity to colonize. Other European nations besides Spain and Portugal used similar or identical naval and military methods. Therefore, military organization could not have been a single, defining cause for success. It could even be argued that "some other factors actually were more critical to the ascendancy[8]". Characterizing military superiority as the over-arching cause for success "would be too simple", as there was the distinguishing fact that Spain and Portugal were much more colonially active than fellow Europeans.

Initial financial endowments, a partnership between state enterprise and private investment, enabled both the Spanish and the Portuguese to explore and colonize, something to which that other European countries either were unwilling to commit. Henry the Navigator, "inspired by both religious and economic factors[9]", is an example of a private investor, promoting, leading, and financing Portuguese maritime exploration until his death. "The Spanish state was strong, both in terms of military power and administrative organization[10]", and this was a decisive factor,

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as it made collection of levied taxes most effective. These accumulated cash reserves were used to finance colonial ventures, notably those of Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro. Such finance was, of course, perquisite for any successful mission, as it was essential to prepare supplies for the journey, manpower and shipping, and resources for the establishment and consolidation of colonies.

For a successful conquest, aside from the great influx of money initially, the existence of colonies needed to be viable. This was driven by trade, which is something the Portuguese, in particular, placed heavy emphasis on. If colonies were losing money, it would have become unsustainable to operate. Something had attributed to “the Spanish crown ending up defaulting on all or part of its debt no fewer than fourteen times between 1557 and 1696[11]”. Trade was, therefore, hugely important in the survival of Iberian influence around the world, and this was achieved namely through “the consolidation of Royal Monopolies”, such as Portugal’s sole ownership of the pepper trade, which each time was more profitable. This success gave colonialism economic legitimacy: the money and goods of silk et al were either sent back to Lisbon or re-invested by every year “five or six naus, each of around 700 tons, sailing from Lisbon carrying chests of silver and ballasted with artillery and supplies for the large numbers of soldiers[12]”. Even with Spain’s more territorially-orientated empire, shown by their sprawling empire on the West coast of South America and in Mexico, by 1600, “the tonnage [in Spanish ships] may have quadrupled, as the Spaniards were carrying not only gold and silver, but also hides, sugar and indigo[13]”.

Portuguese colonies benefitted most from trade primarily because it seemed “to be its greater focus”;\, more about commercial networking and less about their desire for cultural impression on ‘native’ society. This is evidenced by their engaging with Asian businessmen “to secure privileges”, as well as the formation of an effective trade route through Nagasaki, Macau, and Goa. Newitt argues further that “the single most important reason for growth of the unofficial empire was private trade[14]”. It is clear that the clear commercial objectives gave colonial activity a sense of direction. In fact, the enterprise-culture and, almost, ‘money-fetishism’ of the Portuguese is evidenced by their “readiness... to adopt the religions and customs of Asia and Africa[15]”, highlighting their prioritization of financial reward over their national identity. This flexibility would have been unlikely in the highly Catholicized countries of Europe, and this absolute flexibility was a clear reason for trade being a motor for Portuguese imperial success.

The relationship with the indigenous people was also an important factor for the success of colonialism. Treatment of the natives was very poor; particularly by the Spanish, where the natives were enslaved despite The Laws of Burgos (1512), which had declared: “we order and command that no person or persons shall dare to beat any Indians with sticks, or whip him, or call him dog, or address him by any name other than his proper name alone[16]”. However, ‘La Araucana’, about Spain’s conquest of Chile, alludes to the brutality of Spanish colonialism: “they are Chilean... and their tragic stories result from the Spanish presence in the New World.[17]” Even the Portuguese, although sharing amicable relations with trading partners of different ethnicity, engaged in early forms of slavery by Bandeirantes, forcing African men to work in sugar plantations in newly discovered Brazil. “By the year 1552, African slaves made up 10 percent of the population of Lisbon[18]”, and this is consistent with their pure mercantilist inclinations.

However, while moral insouciance would legitimate such practices for economic benefit, this does not necessarily equate to failure in terms of their goals. Slavery could be seen as a reason for success. It was beneficial for the both Portuguese and Spanish colonies in that “the labour of the native was exploited to the benefit of the *encomendero*[19]”. This had consequently increased output and the mining of silver, which by the late 16th century accounted for one-fifth of Spain’s total budget. The slave trade, particularly after the majority of indigenous peoples died from Spanish-imported diseases, allowed Spain to maintain its monopoly on American silver, a commodity attributed to the very existence of Spanish power. The broad policy of enslavement also brought a degree of stability, in the sense that potential for conflict with the natives was isolated and controlled by a clear hierarchy. While Pagden argues that “the would-be imperialist must also respect the customs of the peoples he seeks to control[20]”, incidents of dissent were “an unheard-of extreme[21]”; and that is testament to successful management of the indigenous population.

With “Italy hampered by political weakness, that of France by Wars of Religion, while Holland was too small... and England not interested[22]”, Spain, unified under *los Reyes Catolicos*, and an innovative Portugal had the clear opportunity for almost exclusive expansion overseas: carving up areas for colonization at the Treaty of Tordesillas in

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1494. Some Aztecs believed Hernán Cortes to be a deity, thus legitimating even the cruellest of his demands; however, this is certainly deficient as a wider reason for Spanish dominance. Thompson believes success was “thanks primarily to the edge in military technology[23]”, but the Iberian Peninsula had also developed an effective system of trade and finance, particularly on behalf of the Portuguese. There *were* differences between Spain and Portugal, the former being more military-orientated and the latter having a greater naval focus, “dominating the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean for the rest of the century[24]”. Spain was more uncompromising with its colonies’ natives; whereas, Portugal would do this only in situations of economic opportunity. Nonetheless, both Spain and Portugal had the initial will, sufficient military strength, and the systems of slavery and trade, at that time, to consolidate and support colonies. Henceforth, “as empires that had been thought of as invincible[25]”, they could monopolize their respective spheres, particularly in the Southern Hemisphere, for a great many decades.

[1] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659*; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page1

[2] Oxford English Dictionary; OUP Oxford; New ed of 2 Revised ed edition (11 Aug 2005); page 282

[3] Parker, Geoffrey; *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), page 154.

[4] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659*; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page280

[5] Nicholas, David; *The Transformation of Europe, 1300-1600*; Bloomsbury Academic (30 April 1999); page259

[6] Nicholas, David; *The Transformation of Europe, 1300-1600*; Bloomsbury Academic (30 April 1999); page259

[7] Mann, Charles; *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*. Madrid: Taurus, page136

[8] Thompson, William R; *The Military Superiority Thesis and the Ascendancy of Western; Eurasia in the World System*; *Journal of World History*, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 1999; Published by University of Hawai'i Press; page144

[9] Diffie, Bailey W.; *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580 (Europe & the World in the Age of Expansion)*; University of Minnesota Press (25 Nov 1977); page56

[10] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659*; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page279

[11] Ferguson, Niall; *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*; Allen Lane; First Edition / Second Impression edition (30 Oct 2008); page53

[12] Newitt, M. D. D.; *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668*; Routledge; 1st ed edition (December 22, 2004); Page140

[13] Nicholas, David; *The Transformation of Europe, 1300-1600*; Bloomsbury Academic (30 April 1999); page274

[14] Newitt, M. D. D.; *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668*; Routledge; 1st ed edition (December 22, 2004); Page121

[15] Newitt, M. D. D.; *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668*; Routledge; 1st ed edition (December 22, 2004); Page122

[16] <http://faculty.smu.edu/bakewell/BAKEWELL/texts/burgoslaws.html>; Clause24

[17] Galperin, Karina; “The Dido Episode in Ercilla’s *La Araucana* and the Critique of Empire”; *Hispanic Review*, Volume 77, Number 1, Winter 2009; Published by University of Pennsylvania Press; page37

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[18] Earle, Thomas Foster; "Black Africans in Renaissance Europe"; Cambridge University Press, 2005; page157

[19] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page312

[20] Pagden, Anthony; Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination: Studies in European and Spanish-American Social and Political Theory, 1513-1830; Yale University Press, New Haven and London (1990); page56

[21] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page313

[22] Ortiz, Antonio Dominguez; The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659; Basic Books (December 19, 1971); page279

[23] Thompson, William R; The Military Superiority Thesis and the Ascendancy of Western; Eurasia in the World System; Journal of World History, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 1999; Published by University of Hawai'i Press; page143

[24] Nicholas, David; The Transformation of Europe, 1300-1600; Bloomsbury Academic (30 April 1999); page265

[25] Galperin, Karina; "The Dido Episode in Ercilla's La Araucana and the Critique of Empire"; Hispanic Review, Volume 77, Number 1, Winter 2009; Published by University of Pennsylvania Press; page43

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Date written: January 2012