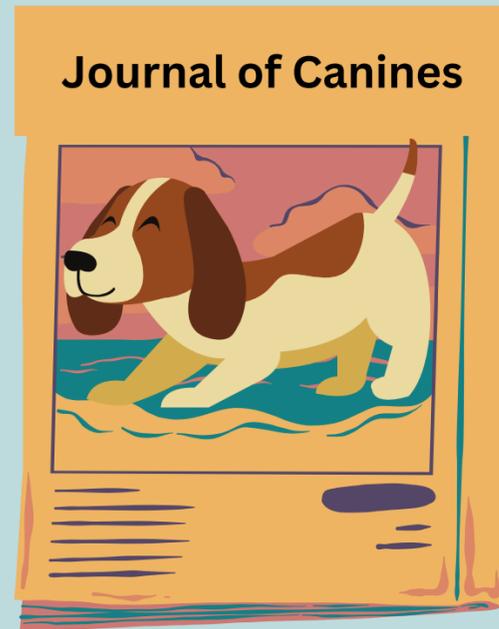


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TACTICAL FACTORS IN THE SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTECS

DOUGLAS A. DANIEL
Western Washington University

Author's name
and institution

Abstract/
Summary

A perspective largely unexamined in past works on the Spanish Conquest of Mexico has been the details of the tactical systems of the respective sides, and how these systems worked on the battlefield to produce the Spanish victory. This article examines the Conquest in terms of tactics, applying a military-historical perspective to ethnohistorical texts and data gleaned from modern works. It is shown that Spanish infantry tactics and horse cavalry were critical factors in the Spanish victory. [Aztecs, ethnohistory, Mexico, Spanish Conquest, war]

Introduction

Most interpretations of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs attribute the Spanish victory to psychosocial factors—the Aztecs had a different conception of warfare, or they were paralyzed by the Quetzalcoatl myth—or to technological factors

the Spanish victory in the Conquest can be found in the tactics of the two sides. In this interpretation the Spanish were able to win on the battlefield largely because of two facts: 1) the way in which the Spanish used their infantry formations (close order formation with tightly drilled bodies of men) gave them a decisive advantage over Aztec infantry

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presence on the lakes in the form of armed brigantines. This new order of Spanish forces was merely a variation of their usual tactical functions.

^aIt is beyond the scope of this article to examine the sufficiency of these "orthodox" interpretations. However, certain assumptions about the Aztecs and their way of war, and the ways in which they responded to the Spanish invasion, have been criticized or are susceptible to criticism. For example, the supposition that the Aztec conception of warfare was fundamentally different from the European is no longer defensible. Barry Isaacs (1983a) has demonstrated from the ethnohistorical record that Mexican warfare on the eve of the Spanish Conquest was similar or identical to "state-level warfare else-

where. . .," with the same heavy casualties, destruction of property and lands, and political objectives. The capture of enemy warriors for sacrifice, in Isaacs' view, fades to a secondary pursuit of peasant soldiers eager to advance in rank; the overall aims and methods of warfare were set by the elite, who had a different agenda (1983a). Even the special case of the "Flowery War" (*xochiyaoyotl*), which has usually been interpreted as wholly religious in motivation and content (Soustelle 1970: 101), in fact had very real strategic and attritional purposes (Isaacs 1983b). Similar criticism can be leveled against the assumption of the superiority of Spanish weapons, or the effects of the Quetzalcoatl myth on the Aztecs (see, for example, Havig 1988: 237-238, 240).

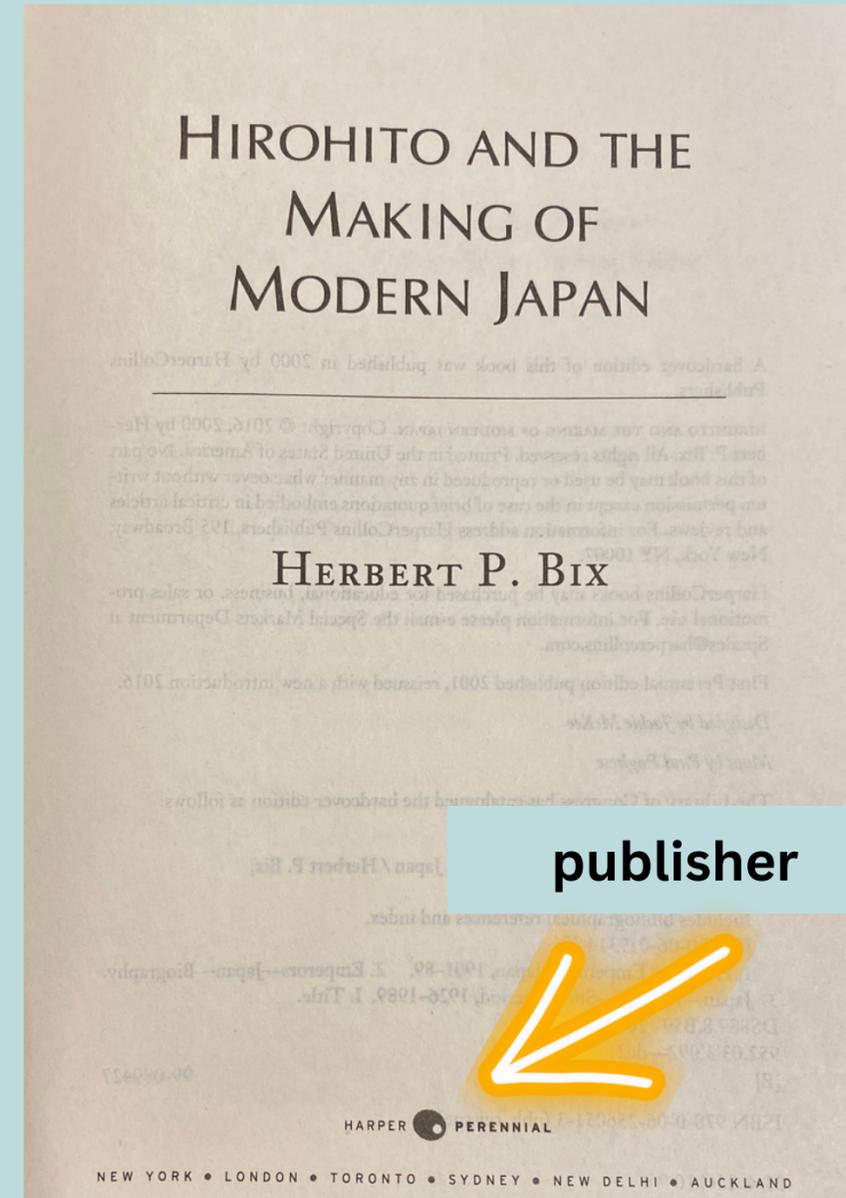
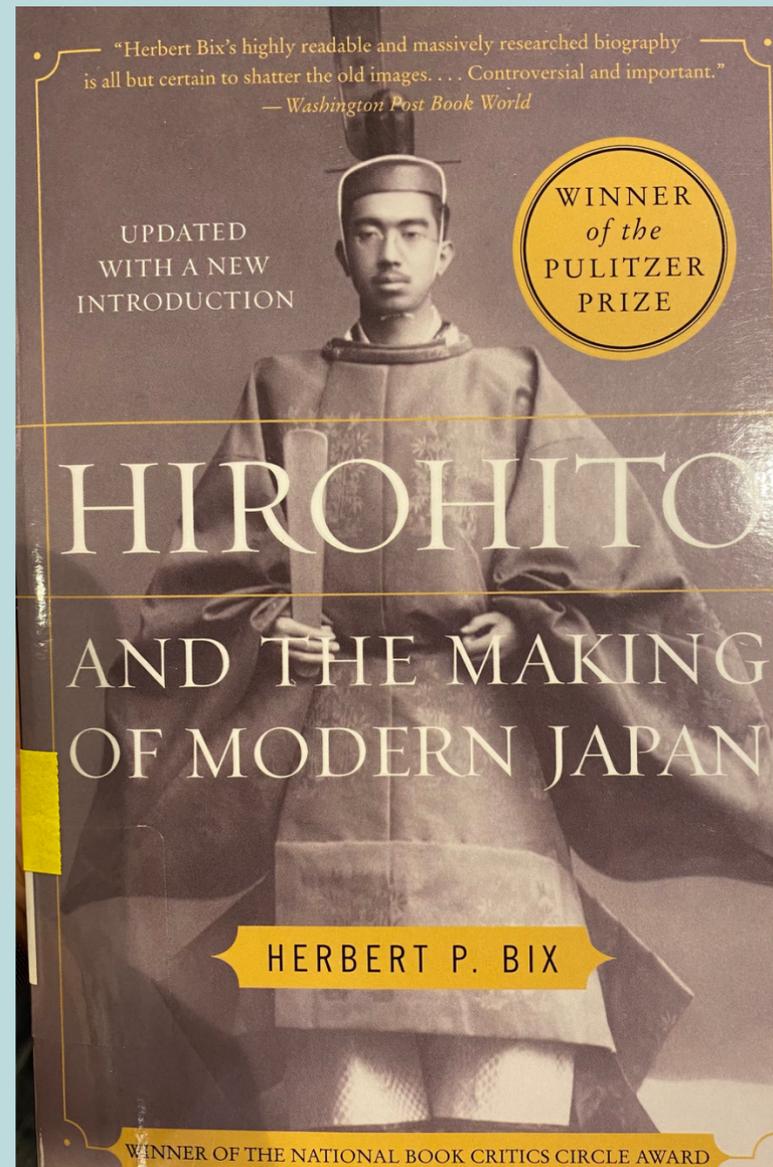
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About the Author

HERBERT P. BIX earned his Ph.D. in history and Far Eastern languages from Harvard University. For the past thirty years, he has written extensively on modern and contemporary Japanese history in leading journals in the United States and Japan. He is professor emeritus in history and sociology at Binghamton University and has taught at Harvard and the Graduate School of Social Sciences at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo.

author bio

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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2000 by HarperCollins Publishers.

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First Perennial edition published in 2001, reissued with a new introduction 2016.

Designed by Jackie McKee

Maps by Paul Pugliese

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Bix, Herbert P.
Hirohito and the making of modern Japan / Herbert P. Bix.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-06-019314-X
1. Hirohito, Emperor of Japan, 1901-89. 2. Emperors—Japan—Biography.
3. Japan—History—Shōwa period, 1926-1989. I. Title.
DS889.8.B59 2000
952.03'3'092—dc21
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21 ❖/HC 10 9 8

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