

The Conquistadors

Hernán Cortés

The first major American civilization to fall to the Spanish was that of the Aztecs. The empire was still growing when the Spaniards appeared. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was a splendid complex of cities, lakes, and canals that served as the centre of Mesoamerican civilization.

Hernán Cortés' goal was nothing less than the conquest of Mexico. He also explained to the king that he wanted to conquer the territory in the name of Christianity and the Spanish Crown. Cortés marched his troops along a route, led by La Malinche a native woman who served as a guide, was designed to recruit as many volunteers and supporters to the Spanish cause as possible. Cortés soon won the support of the surrounding tribes. With the support of several indigenous groups who acted as allies, interpreters and guides, the expedition took three months to complete the 300-kilometer journey. Arriving in Tenochtitlán the Aztecs believed Cortés to be the descendent of the white-skinned god Quetzalcoatl of Aztec prophesy. The prophesy stated that Quetzalcoatl had left Mexico but would return from the east to reclaim his authority over the Aztecs. The Aztec Emperor, Montezuma, saw Cortés' arrival as the fulfillment of this prophecy and welcomed the party warmly, presenting the Spaniards with lavish gifts.

After courteous initial meetings with Montezuma, relations between the Spaniards and the Aztecs deteriorated rapidly. Perhaps fearing that his company would become the next human sacrifices at the Aztec temple, Cortés seized Montezuma and made him a prisoner. This stunned the Aztecs into submission and the Aztecs began collecting treasure as ransom. Spanish troops had massacred an unarmed crowd at a religious ceremony thus provoking a massive popular uprising.

Cortés turned Montezuma, in hopes that the sight of their emperor would quiet the enraged populace. Unfortunately, Montezuma was struck in the head by a stone and died three days later. Cortés' only option was to retreat to, but during this retreat the company sustained heavy losses. After regrouping, and gaining reinforcements, the Spanish returned to besiege Tenochtitlán in 1521. The Spanish and their allies blockaded the city, denying the populace food and water. An outbreak of smallpox further weakened the city's defenders. Cortés finally pushed his way into the city and razed all of the Aztec buildings so that hardly a trace of the city remained.

Cortés' management of Spanish possessions in the Americas ensured that, by 1540, Mexico City was the metropolis of Spanish America. Cortes received riches, a title of nobility, and fame. After the defeat of the Aztecs, Spanish power spread rapidly through the Aztec Empire. Cortés' action was one of the single largest additions of land and treasure to the Spanish Empire ever secured by an individual.

1. Why did Cortes want to conquer Mexico?
2. Why were the Spanish welcomed into Mexico?
3. How did the Aztecs fall?

Francisco Pizarro

In 1502 he arrived in the Spanish colony of Hispaniola where he later joined the expedition to settle Panama in 1519. Here he led a fairly prosperous life. In 1522 sailors brought rumors of the existence of a rich and powerful indigenous empire to the south of Panama. Pizarro and his two partners organized three private expeditions in the conquistador tradition. The second expedition led Pizarro the Inca Empire. For the third expedition late in 1530, Pizarro sailed to the Incan Empire with 180 men. Pizarro remarked of the conquest: "I have not come for [God and the faith]. I have come to take away from them their gold."

The arrival of Pizarro was at first viewed as little more than a curiosity by the Incas, who did not recognize the danger posed by Spanish steel weaponry and horse cavalry. Pizarro and his men set a trap and successfully captured Atahualpa who assumed that the Spanish simply intended to raid the empire. He thus offered them a ransom of 13,420 pounds of gold and 26,000 pounds of silver in exchange for his release. Pizarro accepted and promised to release Atahualpa. However, when the ransom was delivered, Pizarro's partners suggested that Atahualpa be executed, fearing that the Inca leader could still rally the support of his demoralized armies. Eventually Pizarro was convinced of Atahualpa's threat to their position and had him executed in August 1533. Pizarro next set his sights on the looting of Cuzco, the Inca capital.

Pizarro marched to Cuzco where, he met and defeated what remained of Atahualpa's forces. In 1535, having consolidated his control, Pizarro established a new capital city now known as Lima. Pizarro also had to confront the internal divisions of his own partnerships. His chief ally, Almagro, now turned into his chief rival. Almagro and his supporters would eventually lose a pitched battle on the plains near Cuzco. Pizarro's brother would then order the execution of the defeated Almagro whose family then took revenge by assassinating Pizarro in 1541.

1. What was the purpose of Pizarro's expeditions?
2. Why were the Spanish dangerous?
3. Why did Pizarro execute Atahualpa?
4. What happened to the Incan Empire?

Bartolomé de Las Casas: Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies. (1542)

These people are the most obedient and faithful to their native masters and to the Spanish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges...neither excitable nor quarrelsome. These people are the most devoid of desire for vengeance. And because they are so weak, they are less able to endure heavy labor they soon die. They are also poor people, for they not only possess little but have no desire to possess worldly goods. They have intelligent minds and are open to doctrine, very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith. And once they begin to hear the tidings of the Faith, they are so insistent on knowing more and on taking the sacraments of the Church. This did not matter to the Christians...In truth, I believe without trying to deceive myself that the number of the slain is more like fifteen million.

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches. It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies.

From that time onward the Indians began to seek ways to throw the Christians out of their lands. They took up arms, but their weapons were very weak and of little service in offense and still less in defense. And the Christians, with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children, nor the aged, nor pregnant women, nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike.

They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!" Other infants they put to the sword along with their mothers and anyone else who happened to be nearby. They made some low wide gallows on which the hanged victim's feet almost touched the ground, stringing up their victims in lots of thirteen, in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles, and then set burning wood at their feet and thus burned them alive. To others they attached straw or wrapped their whole bodies in straw and set them afire. With still others, all those they wanted to capture alive, they cut off their hands and hung them round the victim's neck, saying, "Go now, carry the message," meaning, Take the news to the Indians who have fled to the mountains.

After the wars and the killings had ended, when usually there survived only some boys, some women, and children, these survivors were distributed among the Christians to be slaves. The men slaves were sent the to the mines to dig for gold, which is intolerable labor, and to send the women into the fields of the big ranches to hoe and till the land, work suitable for strong men. And the men died in the mines and the women died on the ranches from the same causes, exhaustion and hunger. And thus was depopulated that island which had been densely populated.

1. How does De Las Casas describe the Indians?
2. What was the purpose of this document?
3. What other account would be useful in understanding the Spanish conquests?