Conquest in the Americas

In 1492, explorer Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands that are now called the West Indies. The first arrival of Europeans in the Americas would have drastic, far-reaching consequences for the people who already lived there.

First Encounters in the Americas

Columbus’ first meeting with Native Americans began a cycle of encounters, conquest, and death that would be repeated throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Meeting the Tainos

When Columbus first arrived in the West Indies, he encountered the Tainos (TY noh) people. The Tainos lived in villages and grew corn, yams, and cotton, which they wove into cloth. They were friendly and open toward the Spanish. Columbus noted that they were “generous with what they have, to such a degree as no one would believe but he who had seen it.”

Despite the friendly reception, relations soon soured. The Tainos offended the Spanish when out of ignorance they failed to pay proper respect to Christian symbols. Columbus’ actions showed that he felt himself superior to the Tainos and could therefore decide their fate. He claimed their land for Spain, and then took several Tainos as prisoners to take back to the Spanish king.

Columbus’ encounter was repeated by a wave of Spanish conquistadors (kahn KEES tuh dawrz), or conquerors, who soon arrived in the Americas. They first settled on the islands of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti), Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

Vocabulary Builder

High-Use Word

compel, v.

Definition and Sample Sentence

The bailiff compelled the witness to leave the courtroom.
Throughout the region, the conquistadors seized the Native Americans’ gold ornaments and then made them pay for more gold. At the same time, the Spanish forced the Native Americans to convert to Christianity.

Guns, Horses, and Disease  Although Spanish conquistadors only numbered in the hundreds as compared to millions of Native Americans, they had many advantages. Their guns and cannons were superior to the Native Americans’ arrows and spears, and European metal armor provided them with better protection. They also had horses, which not only were useful in battle and in carrying supplies, but also frightened the Native Americans, who had never seen a horse.

Most importantly, an invisible invader—disease—helped the conquistadors take control of the Tainos and other Native Americans. Europeans unknowingly carried diseases such as smallpox, measles, and influenza to which Native Americans had no immunity, or resistance. These diseases spread rapidly and wiped out villages after villages. As a result, the Native American population of the Caribbean islands declined by as much as 90 percent in the 1500s. Millions of Native Americans died from disease as Europeans made their way inland.

Checkpoint How did Spanish conquistadors treat the Tainos?

Cortés Conquers Mexico  From the Caribbean, Spanish explorers probed the coasts of the Americas. They spread stories of empire rich in gold, but they also told of fierce fighting people. Attracted by the promise of either as well as by religious zeal, a flood of adventurers soon followed.

Cortés Advances on the Aztecs  Among the earliest conquistadors was Hernán Cortés. Cortés, a landowner in Cuba, heard of Spanish expeditions that had been repelled by Indians. He believed that he could succeed where none had before. In 1511, he landed on the coast of Mexico with about 600 men, 16 horses, and a few cannons. He began an inland trek toward Tenochtitlán (tay noh cheel tuh TEHN oh chih tuh), the capital of the Aztec empire. A young Indian woman named Malinche (mah lihn cheh), called Doña Marina by the Spanish, served as his translator and adviser. Malinche knew both the Maya and Aztec languages, and she learned Spanish quickly.

Malinche told Cortés that the Aztecs had gained power by conquering other groups of people. The Aztecs sacrificed thousands of their captives to the Aztec gods each year. Many conquered peoples hated the Aztecs, so Malinche helped Cortés arrange alliances with them. They agreed to help Cortés fight the Aztecs.

Moctezuma Faces a Dilemma  Meanwhile, messengers brought word about the Spanish to the Aztec emperor Moctezuma (mah toh zoe oh mah). Terrified, he wondered if the leader of the pale-skinned, bearded strangers might be Quetzalcóatl (kwoh tahl KOH kehl kohl), an Aztec god-king who had long ago vowed to return from the east. Because Moctezuma did not know for sure if Cortés was a god, he did not know how to respond to the news. He sent gifts of turquoises, feathers, and other goods with religious importances, but warned the strangers not to continue to Tenochtitlán.

Moctezuma, however, had no intention of turning back. He was not interested in the Aztec religious objects, but was extremely interested in the gold and silver ornaments that Moctezuma began sending him.

Malinche’s parents sold her as a slave when she was a child, believing that she was born under an unlucky star. Despite her unfortunate beginning, she left a major mark on the history of the Americas.

A Maya book written in the 1500s describes life before the arrival of the Spanish. What does the writer say was the main effect of Europeans on the Maya?

64. There was then no sickness; they had then no aching bones; they had then no fever; they had then no sneezing; they had then no burning chest... At that time the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here.

Malinche History Malinche’s parents sold her as a slave when she was a child, believing that she was born under an unlucky star. Despite her unfortunate beginning, she left a major mark on the history of the Americas.
■ Introduce: Vocabulary Builder

Have students read the vocabulary term and definition. Point out that Cortés used Moctezuma’s fear that he might be a god, as well as Native American hatred of the Aztecs, to compel Moctezuma. Use the idea wave strategy (TE, p. T22) and ask students to list other tactics that people use to compel others to do something.

■ Teach Explain how and why Cortés conquered the Aztecs. Ask What motivated non-Aztec Native Americans to help Cortés fight the Aztecs? (The Aztecs conquered neighboring peoples and sacrificed thousands from those groups to their gods.) What conditions prevented Cortés from defeating the Aztecs in 1519, but enabled him to prevail in 1521? (In 1519, competing conquistadors arrived and in the fighting that followed, half the Spanish died. By 1521, European diseases had killed many Aztecs, allowing Cortés’s brutal assault to succeed.)

■ Analyzing the Visuals Direct students to the visuals in the Traveler’s Tales feature on this page. Have students describe the city of Tenochtitlán, including its location, size, grid-like layout, great plaza with temple, and so on. Then ask them how the Spanish might have felt upon seeing it.

Independent Practice

Traveler’s Tales To extend students’ understanding of the conquest of Mexico, have them read the selection Bernal Díaz and the Conquest of New Spain and complete the worksheet.

Monitor Progress

Check that students’ responses on the worksheet reflect a solid understanding of the Traveler’s Tales enrichment selection. To confirm student understanding of Díaz’s remarks, have them discuss the Thinking Critically questions in pairs. Use the Think-Write-Pair-Share strategy (TE, p. T23) to guide discussion.

Answer

They believed that Cortés might be one of their gods, and therefore were more welcoming than they might have been otherwise.

Cortés became more determined than ever to reach Tenochtitlán. Fighting and negotiating by turns, Cortés led his forces inland toward the capital. At last, the Spanish arrived in Tenochtitlán, where they were dunned by the granjeador of the city.

Tenochtitlán Falls to the Spanish Moctezuma welcomed Cortés to his capital. However, relations between the Aztecs and Spaniards soon grew strained. The Spanish desired the Aztecs’ religion and sought to convert them to Christianity. At the same time, as they remained in the city, they saw more of the Aztec treasure. They decided to imprison Moctezuma as they could gain control of the Aztecs and their riches.

Cortés compelled Moctezuma to sign over his land and treasure to the Spanish. In the meantime, a new force of Spanish conquistadors had arrived on the coast to challenge Cortés. In the confusion that followed—with various groups of Spanish, Aztecs, and Native Americans all fighting for control—the Aztecs drove the Spanish from the city. More than half of the Spanish were killed in the fighting, as was Moctezuma.

Cortés retreated to plan an assault. In 1521, in a brutal struggle, Cortés and his Indian allies captured and demolished Tenochtitlán. The Spanish later built Mexico City on the ruins of Tenochtitlán. As in the Caribbean, disease had aided their cause. Smallpox had spread among the Aztecs from the 1519 encounter, decimating the population.

Checkpoint What impact did the Aztecs’ religious beliefs have on Cortés’s approach to Tenochtitlán?

Cortés might have obtained this knowledge. Then have students write a short scenario in which Moctezuma is able to thwart the advances of the Spanish. Ask volunteers to read their scenarios to the class.
Pizarro arrived in Peru in 1532, just after the Incan ruler Atahualpa (ah tap WAT), who had won the throne from his brother in a bloody civil war.

Francisco Pizarro’s success inspired other adventurers, among them Spaniard Hernán Cortés, who arrived in Mexico in 1519 and conquered the Aztec empire, which was reputed to have even more riches than the Incas. Cortés’s success inspired other adventurers, among them Spaniard Hernán Cortés, who arrived in Mexico in 1519 and conquered the Aztec empire, which was reputed to have even more riches than the Incas.

In response, Pizarro, aided by Indian allies, captured him and slaughtered thousands of Inca. The Spanish demanded a huge ransom for the Inca ruler. The Inca paid it, but the Spanish killed Atahualpa anyway.

Despite continuing resistance, Pizarro and his followers overran the Inca civil war, Indian allies, superior weapons, and European disease aided Pizarro’s success. Unlike Cortés, Pizarro’s efforts followed a bloody civil war that probably weakened the Incas.

In what way did the Spanish conquest affect Native Americans who survived? (They were demoralized and hopeless. Their cultures and ways of life were often destroyed.)

Primary Source

To extend students’ understanding of the impact of the Spanish conquest of the Americas on Native Americans, have them read the selection “The Broken Spears.”

Independent Practice

To extend students’ understanding of the impact of the Spanish conquest of the Americas on Native Americans, have them read the selection “The Broken Spears.”

Answers

Think critically

1. Diaz described the Inca city as the most magnificent he had ever seen. What does this suggest about the Inca civilization?

2. Make a reasoned judgment. Do you agree with Diaz that the best historical accounts are written by people who participated in or witnessed the events? Explain your answer.

Pizarro Takes Peru

Cortés’s success inspired other adventurers, among them Spaniard Francisco Pizarro (pee SAHR oh). Pizarro was interested in Peru’s Inca empire, which was reputed to have even more riches than the Aztecs. Pizarro arrived in Peru in 1532, just after the Incan ruler Atahualpa (ah tap WAT), who had won the throne from his brother in a bloody civil war.

A civil war is fought between groups of people in the same nation.

History Background

La Malinche Also known as Doña Marina, La Malinche was the daughter of Aztec nobles. As a young girl, her mother sent her into slavery and she was eventually given, with 19 other slaves, to Cortés when he arrived in the Yucatan.

Cortés had been relying on a Spanish priest who could not speak the Aztec language. Malinche could. She spoke various Mayan dialects along with her native Aztec language and quickly learned Spanish. Her work as Cortés’s interpreter helped save thousands of lives since it allowed him to negotiate rather than fight. He acknowledged the tremendous contribution she made when he wrote; “After God, we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina.”

Thinking Critically

1. Diaz’s account gained credibility by stating that “many soldiers among us” were persuaded to support the Spanish conquest of the Aztec. Díaz’s account gained credibility by stating that “many soldiers among us” were persuaded to support the Spanish conquest of the Aztec.

2. The Americas. Use the lesson suggested in the transparency book to guide a discussion.

Instruct

■ Introduce Display Color Transparency 90: Inca Shirt. Use the lesson suggested in the transparency book to guide a discussion about Incan culture.

■ Teach Discuss Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca and the broader effects of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Ask students to Compare and contrast Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca to Cortés’s conquest of the Aztec. (Like Cortés, Indian allies, superior weapons, and European disease aided Pizarro’s success. Unlike Cortés, Pizarro’s efforts followed a bloody civil war that probably weakened the Incas.) In what way did the Spanish conquest affect Native Americans who survived? (They were demoralized and hopeless. Their cultures and ways of life were often destroyed.)

■ Quick Activity Display Color Transparency 89: The Americas. Use the lesson suggested in the transparency book to guide a discussion.

Monitor Progress

Check Reading and Note Taking Study Guide entries for student understanding.

Answers

1. The Inca civil war, Indian allies, superior weapons, and disease

2. Firsthand accounts of events provide authenticity, but others who read and synthesize a variety of firsthand accounts can provide a broader view.

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Effects of the Spanish Conquistadors

The Spanish conquistadors accomplished a major victory in the Americas. Within a few decades, a few hundred European soldiers—helped by superior weapons, horses, and especially disease—had conquered millions of Native Americans. The Spanish had amassed huge quantities of valuable goods. And they had used Native-American labor to establish silver mines in Peru and Mexico to finance their new empire. In the 1500s and early 1600s, treasure fleets sailed each year to Spain or the Spanish Philippines loaded with gold and silver. With this wealth, Spain became Europe’s greatest power.

The effect on Native Americans, however, was quite different. Some Native Americans believed that the diseases they suffered marked the world’s end. As tens of thousands of Indians died, some of the bewildered and demoralized survivors felt that their gods were less powerful than the gods of their conquerors. They therefore stopped resisting. Many Native Americans converted to Christianity in the hope that their suffering would end.

Yet more Indians continued to resist the Spanish in any way they could. For centuries, the Maya fought Spanish rule in Mexico and Central America. Long after the death of Ahankalo, revolts erupted among the Incas. And throughout the Americas, Indians resisted European influence by preserving aspects of their own culture, including language, religious traditions, and clothing. In time, Native American culture came to influence the cultures of Latin America.

The early encounters between the Spanish conquistadors and Native Americans had long-lasting impacts that reached far beyond these two groups. By establishing an empire in the Americas, Spain dramatically changed the pattern of global encounter set in motion with the first European exploration of Africa. For the first time, much of the world was now connected by sea routes, on which travelled ships carrying goods, people, and ideas.

Checkpoint: In what ways did Native Americans resist European rule?