

Summary: Conquest of the Americas

Cortés Conquers the Aztecs

European rulers wanted explorers to find riches to bring back to Europe. Hernán Cortés led an expedition to Mexico in 1519. His ships carried 600 conquistadors with horses and weapons. They wanted fame and riches. Cortés had heard about the Aztecs. The Aztecs ruled an empire that covered much of present-day Mexico. Its capital city, Tenochtitlán, was beautiful and huge. It was twice as big as any European city. The Aztec ruler, Moctezuma, welcomed Cortés, but Moctezuma soon sent the Spaniards away. The conquistadors were greedy for gold. Cortés got help from neighboring Indian nations that had been conquered by the Aztecs. His soldiers had horses, guns, and armor, and the Aztecs did not. Smallpox made the Aztecs weak. Cortés defeated them. In 1535, Spain controlled the Aztec empire and named it New Spain. After Cortés, conquistadors explored Central and South America to find gold and treasure. Pizarro conquered the Inca empire in South America in the 1530s.

Exploring North America

Conquistadors went north looking for gold. Juan Ponce de León claimed present-day Florida for Spain in 1513. He was looking for a “fountain of youth.” A legend said it would make an old person young again. Spain sent de Soto to search for gold in the area beyond Florida in 1539. He traveled as far as the Mississippi River. He found no gold. The conquistadors fought against and enslaved the American Indians they met. In 1540, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and his men traveled 3,500 miles looking for gold. Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to see most of North America. They learned about the geography and peoples of the region.

Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

expedition *noun*, a journey to achieve a goal

conquistador *noun*, Spanish word for conqueror

empire *noun*, many nations or territories ruled by a single group or leader

After You Read

REVIEW Why did people inside the Aztec empire help Cortés defeat the Aztecs? Highlight the sentence that tells why some Indian nations helped Cortés fight Moctezuma.

REVIEW What did the Spanish hope to find in the lands north of Mexico? Underline the words that tell why conquistadors made expeditions to the north. Circle the names of the leaders of the expeditions.