

conquistadors Spanish soldier-explorers, especially those who conquered the native peoples of Mexico and Peru

Although Aztec emperor Montezuma greeted Cortés peacefully, Cortés suspected the warm welcome was a trap. He later took Montezuma prisoner. With the help of Aztec enemies and smallpox, Cortés also captured the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán.



By the late 1400s, European explorers in West Africa were trading guns and other goods for slaves captured by African traders.

In the 1500s, European slave traders began shipping slaves to the Caribbean for sale. Over the next three centuries, millions of Africans would be carried across the Atlantic in crowded, disease-infested ships. The terrible voyage lasted anywhere from weeks to months. Many died before it was over.

When the Africans arrived in the Americas, they were sold to their new masters at auctions. Many perished from disease and overwork. Those who survived faced a lifetime of forced labor as slaves.

Cortés Conquers Mexico After Columbus's voyages, Spain began sending soldiers called **conquistadors** (kahn-KEES-tah-dors), across the Atlantic. Their mission was to conquer a vast empire for Spain. The conquistadors hoped to get rich along the way.

In 1519, Hernán Cortés (ehr-NAHN kohr-TEHZ) arrived in Mexico with horses and 500 soldiers. There he heard about the powerful Aztecs who ruled much of Mexico. When Cortés and his men reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (tay-noch-teet-LAN), they could not believe their eyes. A beautiful city seemed to rise out of a sparkling lake. One Spaniard wrote, "Some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream."

The Aztecs were unsure what to make of the strangers. They had never seen men dressed in metal armor and riding horses. Some mistook Cortés for the great Aztec god Quetzalcoatl (kwet-zul-kuh-WAH-tul) and welcomed him as a hero. They would soon change their minds.

With the help of Indians who hated their Aztec rulers, and with the spread of smallpox—which killed large numbers of Aztec warriors—Cortés conquered Tenochtitlán.

The Spaniards pulled the city down and used its stones to build Mexico City, the capital of a new Spanish empire called New Spain.

Pizarro Conquers Peru Smallpox also helped another Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro (fran-SIS-co pi-ZAR-oh), conquer an empire in South America. In 1532, Pizarro led an attack on the powerful Inca Empire in present-day Peru. Luckily for Pizarro, smallpox reached Peru many months before him, killing thousands of Incas and leaving their empire badly divided.

Pizarro captured the Inca ruler, Atahualpa (ah-tuh-WAHL-puh), but promised to release him in exchange for gold. To save their ruler, the Incas filled three rooms with gold and silver treasures. Pizarro killed Atahualpa anyway and took over the leaderless Inca Empire. From there, Spanish conquistadors conquered most of South America.

Explorers from several European countries took various routes to the Americas. Voyages were long and difficult and often involved travel on both land and sea.

