Spanish Conquests in the Americas

Main Idea

The voyages of Columbus prompted the Spanish to carve out the first European colonies in the Americas.

Why It Matters Now

Throughout the Americas, Spanish culture, language, and descendants are the legacy of this period.

Setting the Stage

As you read in the previous chapter, competition for wealth in the East among European nations was fierce. This competition prompted sea captain Christopher Columbus to make a daring voyage for Spain in 1492. Instead of sailing east, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic in search of an alternate trade route to Asia and its riches. Columbus never reached Asia. Instead he stepped onto an island in the Caribbean. That event set in motion a process that would bring together the peoples of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. And the world would change forever.

Columbus’s Voyage Paves the Way

No one paid much attention as the Niña, Pinta, and Santa María slid out of a Spanish port around dawn on August 3, 1492. In a matter of months, however, Columbus’s fleet would make history. It would reach the shores of what was to Europeans an astonishing new world.

First Encounters

In the early hours of October 12, 1492, the long-awaited cry came. A lookout aboard the Pinta caught sight of a shoreline in the distance. “Tierra! Tierra!” he shouted. “Land! Land!” By dawn, Columbus and his crew were ashore. Thinking he had successfully reached the East Indies, Columbus called the surprised inhabitants who greeted him, los indios. The term translated into “Indian,” a word mistakenly applied to all the native peoples of the Americas. In his memoirs, Columbus recounted his first meeting with the native peoples:

A Voice from the Past

I presented them with some red caps, and strings of glass beads to wear upon the neck, and many other trifles of small value, wherewith they were much delighted, and became wonderfully attached to us. Afterwards they came swimming to the boats where we were, bringing parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and many other things which they exchanged for the articles we gave them . . . in fact they accepted anything and gave what they had with the utmost good will.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, Journal of Columbus

Columbus, however, had miscalculated where he was. He had not reached the East Indies. Scholars believe he landed instead on an island in the Bahamas in the Caribbean Sea. The natives there were not Indians, but a group who called themselves the Taino. Nonetheless, Columbus claimed the island for Spain. He named it San Salvador, or “Holy Savior.”

Columbus, like other explorers, was interested in gold. Finding none on San Salvador, he explored other islands throughout the Caribbean, staking his claim to each one. “It was my wish to bypass no island without taking possession,” he wrote.

In early 1493, Columbus returned to Spain. The reports he relayed about his journey delighted the Spanish monarchs. Spain’s rulers, who had funded his first voyage, agreed
to finance three more trips. Columbus embarked on his second voyage to the Americas in September of 1493. He journeyed no longer as an explorer, but as an empire builder. He commanded a fleet of some 17 ships and several hundred armed soldiers. He also brought 1,000 settlers. The Spanish intended to transform the islands of the Caribbean into colonies, or lands that are controlled by another nation.

Columbus and his followers began a process of colonization that would reach nearly every corner of the Americas. Over the next two centuries, other European explorers began sailing across the Atlantic in search of unclaimed lands.

**Other Explorers Take to the Seas** In 1500, Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral reached the shores of modern-day Brazil and claimed the land for his country. A year later, Amerigo Vespucci (vehs-POO-chee), an Italian in the service of Portugal, also traveled along the eastern coast of South America. Upon his return to Europe, he claimed that the newly discovered land was not part of Asia, but a “new” world. In 1507, a German mapmaker named the new continent America in honor of Vespucci. Eventually, America became the name for both continents in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1519, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan led the boldest exploration yet. Several years earlier, Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa had marched through modern-day Panama and had become the first European to gaze upon the Pacific Ocean. Soon after, Magellan convinced the king of Spain to fund his voyage into the newly discovered ocean.

With about 230 men and five ships, Magellan sailed around the southern end of South America and into the mysterious waters of the Pacific. The fleet sailed for months without seeing land. Food supplies soon ran out. “We were eating biscuits...
that were no longer biscuits but crumbs full of weevils [beetles],” one crew member wrote. “We also often ate sawdust.”

After exploring the island of Guam, Magellan and his crew eventually reached the Philippines. Unfortunately, Magellan became involved in a local war there and was killed. His crew, greatly reduced by disease and starvation, continued sailing west toward home. Out of Magellan’s original crew, only 18 men and one ship arrived back in Spain in 1522—nearly three years after they had left. They were the first persons to circumnavigate, or sail around, the world.

**Spain Builds an American Empire**

In 1519, as Magellan embarked on his historic voyage, a Spaniard named **Hernando Cortés** landed on the shores of Mexico. After colonizing several Caribbean islands, the Spanish had turned their attention to the American mainland. Cortés marched inward, looking to claim new lands for Spain. Cortés and the many other Spanish explorers who followed him were known as **conquistadors** (conquerors). Lured by rumors of vast lands filled with gold and silver, conquistadors carved out colonies in regions that would become Mexico, South America, and the United States. The Spanish were the first European settlers in the Americas. As a result of their colonization, the Spanish greatly enriched their empire and left a mark on the cultures of North and South America that exists today.

**Cortés Conquers the Aztecs**

Soon after landing in Mexico, Cortés learned of the vast and wealthy Aztec Empire in the region’s interior. (See Chapter 16.) After marching for weeks through difficult mountain passes, Cortés and his force of roughly 600 men finally reached the magnificent Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (teh-NAWCH-tee-TLAHNN). The Aztec emperor, **Montezuma II**, was convinced at first that Cortés was an armor-clad god. He agreed to give the Spanish explorer a share of the empire’s existing gold supply. The conquistador may have lacked in physical strength, he more than made up for in determination, courage, and ruthlessness. Upon arriving in Mexico, for example, Cortés reportedly burned his ships to keep his men from turning back. The Aztecs also experienced Cortés’s toughness when they refused to surrender after months of fierce fighting. In response, Cortés ordered that the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, be destroyed.

**HISTORYMAKERS**

**Hernando Cortés** 1485–1547

To look at Hernando Cortés, it may have been difficult to guess he was a daring conquistador. According to one description, Cortés stood only about five feet, four inches tall and had a “deep chest, no belly to speak of, and was bow-legged. He was fairly thin.”

But what Spain’s first conquistador may have lacked in physical strength, he more than made up for in determination, courage, and ruthlessness. Upon arriving in Mexico, for example, Cortés reportedly burned his ships to keep his men from turning back. The Aztecs also experienced Cortés’s toughness when they refused to surrender after months of fierce fighting. In response, Cortés ordered that the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, be destroyed.

**Montezuma II** 1480?–1520

While Cortés was a feared leader, Montezuma was a much beloved ruler who showed particular talent as an orator. “When he spoke,” commented one historian, “he drew the sympathy of others by his subtle phrases and seduced them by his profound reasoning.”

His words, however, would ultimately fail him. During a speech in which he tried to convince his subjects to make peace with the Spanish, the crowd denounced him as a traitor. “What is that which is being said by that scoundrel of a Montezuma . . .” shouted Montezuma’s own cousin, Cuauhtémoc. “. . . We must give him the punishment which we give to a wicked man.” And with that, the crowd stoned to death the Aztec ruler.

The Spaniards, however, struck back. Despite being greatly outnumbered, Cortés and his men conquered the Aztecs in 1521. Several factors played a key role in the
A stunning victory. First, the Spanish had the advantage of superior weaponry. Aztec arrows were no match for the Spaniards’ muskets and cannons.

Second, Cortés was able to enlist the help of various native groups. With the aid of a native woman translator named Malinche, Cortés learned that some natives resented the Aztecs. They hated their harsh practices, including human sacrifice. Through Malinche, Cortés convinced these natives to fight on his side.

Finally, and most important, the natives could do little to stop the invisible warrior that marched alongside the Spaniards—disease. Measles, mumps, smallpox, and typhus were just some of the diseases Europeans had brought with them to the Americas. Native Americans had never been exposed to these diseases. Thus, they had developed no natural immunity to them. As a result, they died by the hundreds of thousands. By the time Cortés launched his counterattack, the Aztec population had been greatly reduced by smallpox and measles. In time, European disease would truly devastate the natives of central Mexico.

**Pizarro Subdues the Inca** In 1532, another conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, marched an even smaller force into South America. He conquered the mighty Inca Empire. (See Chapter 16.) Pizarro and his army of about 200 met the Inca ruler, Atahualpa (Ahtuh-WAHL-puh), near the city of Cajamarca. Atahualpa, who commanded a force of about 30,000, brought several thousand mostly unarmed men for the meeting. The Spaniards crushed the Inca force and kidnapped Atahualpa. Atahualpa offered to fill a room once with gold and twice with silver in exchange for his release. However, after receiving the ransom, the Spanish strangled the Inca king. Demoralized by their leader’s death, the remaining Inca force retreated from Cajamarca. Pizarro then marched on the Inca capital, Cuzco. He captured it without a struggle.

As Cortés and Pizarro conquered the once mighty civilizations of the Americas, fellow conquistadors defeated other native peoples. Spanish explorers also conquered the Maya in Yucatan and Guatemala. By the middle of the 16th century, Spain had created a wide-reaching American empire. It included New Spain (Mexico and parts of Guatemala), as well as other lands in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

**Spain’s Pattern of Conquest** In building their new American empire, the Spaniards drew from techniques used during the reconquista of Spain. When conquering the Muslims, the Spanish lived among them and imposed upon them their Spanish culture. The Spanish settlers to the Americas, known as peninsulares, were mostly men. As a result, marriage between Spanish settlers and native women was common. These marriages created a large mestizo—or mixed Spanish and Native American—population. Their descendants live today in Mexico, other Latin American countries, and the United States.

Although the Spanish conquerors lived among and intermarried with the native people, they also oppressed them. In their effort to exploit the land for its precious resources, the Spanish forced Native Americans to labor within a system known as encomienda. Under this system, natives farmed, ranched, or mined for Spanish landlords. These landlords had received the rights to the natives’ labor from Spanish authorities. The holders of encomiendas promised the Spanish rulers that they would act fairly and respect the workers. However, many abused the natives and worked many laborers to death, especially inside dangerous mines. The Spanish employed the same system in the Caribbean.

**Background**

The Aztecs practice of human sacrifice was based on the belief that if they did not feed human blood to the sun, it would fail to rise.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**

**C. Analyzing Issues**

What factors enabled the Spanish to defeat the Aztecs?
The Portuguese in Brazil

One area of South America that remained outside of Spanish control was Brazil. In 1500, Cabral claimed the land for Portugal. During the 1530s, colonists began settling Brazil's coastal region. Finding little gold or silver, the settlers began growing sugar. Clearing out huge swaths of forest land, the Portuguese built giant sugar plantations. The demand for sugar in Europe was great, and the colony soon enriched Portugal. In time, the colonists pushed further west into Brazil. They settled even more land for the production of sugar.

Along the way, the Portuguese—like the Spanish—conquered Native Americans and inflicted thousands of them with disease. Also like the Spanish, the Portuguese enslaved a great number of the land's original inhabitants.

Spain Expands Its Influence

Spain’s American colonies helped make it the richest, most powerful nation in the world during much of the 16th century. Ships filled with treasures from the Americas continually sailed into Spanish harbors. This newfound wealth helped usher in a gold-en age of art and culture in Spain. (See Chapter 21.)

Throughout the 16th century, Spain also increased its military might. To protect its treasure-filled ships, Spain built a powerful navy. The Spanish also strengthened their other military forces, creating a skillful and determined army. For a century and a half, Spain’s army never lost a battle. Meanwhile, Spain enlarged its American empire by settling in parts of what is now the United States.

Conquistadors Push North

Dreams of new conquests prompted Spain to back a series of expeditions into the southwestern United States. The Spanish actually had settled in parts of the United States before they even dreamed of building an empire on the American mainland. In 1513, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León wandered through modern-day Florida and claimed it for Spain.

By 1540, after building an empire that stretched from Mexico to Peru, the Spanish once again looked to the land that is now the United States. That year, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led an expedition throughout much of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. He was searching for another wealthy empire to conquer. Coronado found little gold amidst the dry deserts of the Southwest. As a result, the Spanish monarchy assigned mostly priests to explore and colonize the future United States.

Catholic priests had accompanied conquistadors from the very beginning of American colonization. The conquistadors had come in search of wealth. The priests who accompanied them had come in search of converts. In the winter of 1609–1610, Pedro de Peralta, governor of Spain’s northern holdings—called New Mexico—led settlers to a tributary on the upper Rio Grande. Together they built a capital called Santa Fe, or “Holy Faith.” In the next two decades, a string of Christian missions arose among the Pueblo, the native inhabitants of the region. Scattered missions, forts, and small ranches dotted the lands of New Mexico. These became the headquarters for advancing the Catholic religion.

Opposition to Spanish Rule

Spanish priests worked to spread Christianity in the Americas. They also pushed for better treatment of Native Americans. Priests spoke out against the cruel treatment of natives. In particular, they criticized the harsh
pattern of labor that emerged under the *encomienda* system. “There is nothing more detestable or cruel,” Dominican monk Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote, “than the tyranny which the Spaniards use toward the Indians for the getting of pearl [riches].”

Largely in response to the writings of Las Casas and others, the Spanish government abolished the *encomienda* system in 1542. To meet the colonies’ desperate need for labor, Las Casas suggested the use of Africans. “The labor of one . . . [African] . . . [is] more valuable than that of four Indians,” Las Casas declared. The priest later changed his view and denounced African slavery. However, many others promoted it. The Spanish, as well as the other nations that colonized the Americas, would soon enslave Africans to meet their growing labor needs.

**Native Resistance** Opposition to the Spanish method of colonization came not only from Spanish priests, but from the natives themselves. Resistance to Spain’s attempt at domination began shortly after the Spanish arrived in the Caribbean. In November of 1493, Columbus encountered resistance in his attempt to conquer the present-day island of St. Croix. Before finally surrendering, the inhabitants defended themselves by firing poison arrows. Efforts to control the Taino on Hispaniola were even more difficult. After several rebellions, the Taino submitted to Columbus for several years. They revolted yet again in 1495.

As late as the end of the 17th century, natives in New Mexico fought against Spanish rule. While there were no silver mines to work in the region, the natives there still felt the weight of Spanish force. In converting the natives to Christianity, Spanish priests and soldiers often burned their sacred objects and prohibited many native rituals. The Spanish also forced natives to work for them and sometimes abused them physically. Native Americans who practiced their own religion were beaten.

In 1680, Popé, a Pueblo ruler, led a well-organized uprising against the Spanish. The rebellion involved some 17,000 warriors from villages all over New Mexico. The native fighters drove the Spanish back into New Spain. For the next 12 years—until the Spanish regained control of the area—the southwest region of the future United States once again belonged to its original inhabitants. By this time, however, the rulers of Spain had far greater concerns. Nearly 80 years before Popé ran the Spanish out of New Mexico, the other nations of Europe had begun to establish their own colonies in the Americas.
The Legacy of Columbus

In the years and centuries since his historic journeys, people still debate the legacy of Christopher Columbus's voyages. Some argue they were the heroic first steps in the creation of great and democratic societies. Others claim they were the beginnings of an era of widespread cruelty and bloodshed.

HISTORIAN’S COMMENTARY
Samuel Eliot Morison

Morison, a strong supporter of Columbus, laments that the sea captain died without realizing the true greatness of his deeds. One only wishes that the Admiral might have been afforded the sense of fulfillment that would have come from foreseeing all that flowed from his discoveries; that would have turned all the sorrows of his last years to joy. The whole history of the Americas stems from the Four Voyages of Columbus; and as the Greek city-states looked back to the deathless gods as their founders, so today a score of independent nations and dominions unite in homage to Christopher, the stout-hearted son of Genoa, who carried Christian civilization across the Ocean Sea.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT
Bartolomé de Las Casas

Las Casas was an early Spanish missionary who watched fellow Spaniards unleash attack dogs on Native Americans. He predicted that Columbus’s legacy would be one of disaster for America’s original inhabitants.

. . . Their other frightening weapon after the horses: twenty hunting greyhounds. They were unleashed and fell on the Indians at the cry of Tómalo! [“Get them!”] Within an hour they had preyed on one hundred of them. As the Indians were used to going completely naked, it is easy to imagine what the fierce greyhounds did, urged to bite naked bodies and skin much more delicate than that of the wild boars they were used to. . . .

This tactic, begun here and invented by the devil, spread throughout these Indies and will end when there is no more land nor people to subjugate and destroy in this part of the world.

ESSAY
Suzan Shown Harjo

Harjo, a Native American, disputes the so-called benefits that resulted from Columbus’s voyages and the European colonization of the Americas that followed.

“We will be asked to buy into the thinking that . . . genocide and ecocide are offset by the benefits of horses, cut-glass beads, pickup trucks, and microwave ovens.”

Alphonse Lamartine

Lamartine, a French writer and politician, praises Columbus for bringing the virtues of civil society to the Americas. All of the characteristics of a truly great man are united in Columbus. Genius, labor, patience, obscurity of origin, overcome by energy of will; mild but possessing firmness . . . fearlessness of death in civil strife; confidence in the destiny—not of an individual but of the human race. . . . He was worthy to represent the ancient world before that unknown continent on which he was the first to set foot, and carry to these men of a new race all the virtues, without any of the vices, of the elder hemisphere. So great was his influence on the destiny of the earth, that none more than he ever deserved the name of Civilizer.

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Supporting an Opinion Find several opinions about Columbus in 1992—the 500th anniversary of his discovery of America. Choose the opinion you agree with most and write a brief paper explaining why.

Connect to Today
For another perspective on the legacy of Columbus, see World History: Electronic Library of Primary Sources.