1.6 Cultural Exchange
How did interaction between European, African, and Native American cultures shape early American history?

Explore

Conquering the American Empires
How did the Spanish take control of land in the Americas?

Cultural Exchange: Main Idea Web
As you read the text and watch the video segments, use the web diagram to list important details about Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro and their conquest of the Americas.

Spanish soldiers, or conquistadores—Spanish for “conquerors”—followed the explorers across the Atlantic Ocean in search of gold in the “New World.” Catholic priests accompanied them, hoping to convert Native Americans to Christianity.

Although they were greatly outnumbered by the Native Americans, the Spanish were able to conquer the large Aztec Empire in Mexico and the Inca Empire in South America. How? There were three main factors that helped the Spanish. They had superior weapons—swords made of steel, crossbows, and guns—as well as horses and armor. Second, the Spanish joined forces with local peoples who resented the rule of the Aztec and the Inca empires.

The third factor was something the Spanish could not have predicted: disease. Because Europeans and Americans had lived in isolation from each other, they had experienced different diseases and developed different natural immunities. However, even people who did not suffer from a disease could carry the germs for it in their bodies. When Europeans and Americans met each other, they exchanged germs. For example, Native Americans had never come across smallpox and had no natural defense against it. After meeting the Europeans who carried the germs, smallpox killed massive numbers of Native Americans and weakened their empires. On the other hand, the Europeans were extremely fortunate that they did not die from American diseases.

Cortés and the Aztec

In 1519, Hernán Cortés came to the land now known as Mexico, following rumors of gold. As Cortés marched up the Mexican Gulf Coast, local people told him of a great empire with large quantities of gold. Cortés claimed the area as New Spain, and he and his conquistadores marched inland to Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire. As they traveled, Cortés received messages from the Aztec king, Montezuma II, both...
warning him to stay out of Tenochtitlán and offering him payments if he would go away.

Cortés ignored the warnings. He spent nearly two years plundering the Aztec Empire while the Aztec resisted his rule. In 1521, Cortés and his conquistadores destroyed Tenochtitlán and built on its ruins a capital for New Spain, which they called Mexico City.

**Pizarro and the Inca**

Francisco Pizarro had been a part of Balboa’s expedition in 1513 that crossed the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean. While on this expedition, he heard rumors of an empire to the south that had many riches. In the 1520s, he took two expeditions south that led him closer to the Inca Empire, centered in what is now Peru. These expeditions provided him with proof of the Inca riches, such as turquoise jewelry and sculptures and vases of solid gold.

In 1530, Pizarro set out from Panama to attempt his conquest of the Inca. Taking advantage of chaos caused by a civil war, Pizarro moved closer to the heart of the empire. When the conquistadores met up with the Incan emperor Atahualpa, they opened fire, killing thousands of unarmed men and capturing Atahualpa. The Incan emperor tried to buy his freedom by offering vast amounts of gold and silver, but Pizarro had his conquistadores kill Atahualpa anyway.

While Pizarro’s conquistadores clashed with Atahualpa, smallpox took its own victims. Estimates suggest that smallpox killed millions of Inca. Pizarro was able to seize control of the capital and the entire Inca Empire. However, resistance to Spanish rule continued for another 39 years.