

Conquistadors

¹ Spain was one of the world superpowers of the 1500s. Spain sent many *conquistadors* to the New World. *Conquistadors* (*conquerors*) were soldiers from Spain who explored, conquered, and settled in the New World. They came looking for gold, silver, land, and glory. They brought cannons aboard their ships. Their weapons were made of iron and included crossbows, swords, and spears, and they had iron armor.

² One historian who wrote about the Spanish explorers in the New World used these words to describe them: bravery, cruelty, endurance, greed, and suffering. Could all of these words really describe the same group of people? Read about two of the Spanish conquistadors and decide for yourself.

³ Hernan Cortes had been Chief Magistrate of Santiago, Cuba. In 1518, he was appointed "captain-general" of an expedition to search for gold and other riches in Mexico. To do that, he set out to fight the Aztec civilization that was led by Moctezuma (also spelled "Montezuma").

⁴ Cortes arrived with blasts of cannon fire from his ships. This must have frightened Moctezuma and his people, who had never seen cannons, but they eventually welcomed Cortes and the Spanish troops. Cortes used this to later massacre thousands of Aztecs and take Moctezuma prisoner. At the same time, smallpox and measles killed and weakened many more Aztecs. By 1521, the Aztec civilization had been conquered.

⁵ Francisco Pizarro set out in 1523 to explore and conquer what is now Peru, along the Pacific Coast of South America. He, too, was searching for gold and other treasure. His journey took him over snow-covered mountains and through scorching deserts as he fought to take over the land of the Inca people.

⁶ Pizarro captured the last Inca emperor, Atahualpa, and had him killed by strangulation. Still, the Incas did not give up. Other Inca leaders led the fight to get their empire back. They were finally defeated in 1572.

⁷ Why were the Spanish explorers able to destroy the Incas and Aztecs? These groups of Native Americans had developed and maintained civilizations in America for hundreds of years. Here are some possible reasons. The Native American armies had already been weakened by civil wars. Their armies were spread too thin. The wars were getting too expensive. Also, their equipment, which included bronze and copper shields, stone knives, and cloth armor, were no match for the iron weapons of the Spanish. Finally, smallpox and measles wiped out

thousands of the Incas and Aztecs. These deadly diseases had been unknown in America before the arrival of the Europeans. These two diseases may have done more to decide who would rule America than all of the weapons combined.

° The Aztec and Inca civilizations became so weakened that the Spanish conquistadors were able to take over. The same thing has happened over and over again throughout history in all parts of the world -- one civilization conquers another. What would you call these explorers of America? Some people call them heroes. Some people call them criminals. The Spanish explorers of the New World in the 1500s were called conquistadors.
