

Hernando Cortés

Conqueror of the Aztecs



With an army of only a few hundred men, Hernando Cortés (1485–1547) sailed from Spain, reached Mexico, and conquered a mighty Aztec empire. He then claimed all of Mexico for the Spanish crown.

Hernando Cortés had come to the New World in 1508 to seek his fortune. Immediately, he sought out Velasquez, the governor of Cuba, and introduced himself. Velasquez gave Cortés some farmland and Native Americans who had been taken slaves. He suggested that Cortés use them to cultivate the land and become a farmer.

Soldier of Fortune Agriculture was not the way Cortés intended to spend his life. He was the son of a soldier. Word had spread all over Europe of the lands that Columbus and others had explored. Columbus thought the new lands were part of Asia. Others thought the lands made up a new world. Either way, the lands contained great wealth. A man willing to risk his life could get rich.

By 1518, after several run-ins with Velasquez, Cortés had run out of patience. It was time to show what he could do. He heard Velasquez was organizing an expedition to the mainland of North America. He used all his persuasion to be named commanding officer. When Velasquez heard from loyal soldiers about some of Cortés's plans, though, he tried to have him arrested again.

Before that could happen, Cortés set sail for Mexico in 11 small ships. He took about 600 soldiers and sailors, some Native American slaves, and plenty of weapons. Most important, Cortés took horses.

The Conquistadors The *conquistadors*, a Spanish word meaning conquerors, landed on the eastern coast of Mexico. They were attacked by Native American warriors who had met the Spanish before. They knew of the slavery, misery, and disease that the Spanish brought. Just when the Native Americans were about to defeat the

Spanish, Cortés sent his horse soldiers forward in one last attempt at victory.

When the warriors saw an armored horse and rider, they thought it was one huge, terrible creature. Their fear gave Cortés the upper hand. By the end of the day, over 800 dead Native Americans littered the battlefield.

Completely horrified by Cortés and his soldiers on horseback, the Native Americans gave him slaves. Some of the slaves were taught to be translators. The soldiers began a march toward the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, where Mexico City is located today. When soldiers loyal to Velasquez learned that Cortés actually believed he could conquer the mighty Aztec empire with just a few hundred men, they begged him to reconsider.

Instead, Cortés ordered one ship sent back to Spain to ask the king to make him governor of all the lands he conquered. He had the rest of his ships sunk. His men had only two choices now: to be defeated and killed by the Aztecs, or to conquer the land for the glory of Spain.

Feathered Serpent For the Aztec ruler, Montezuma, news from his scouts about Cortés was disturbing. Aztec prophecies had said that the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl would return from the east that year. Could it be that these strange people from the sea were representatives of Quetzalcoatl? Or they might be other gods coming to challenge the feathered serpent for the right to rule the Aztecs. Either way, Montezuma knew that the best course of action was to make sacrifices to the gods. Then they might go away and leave the people in peace.

Montezuma sent precious gold, jewels, and animals to Cortés. Instead of satisfying him, the riches only made Cortés more greedy and

determined to conquer the Aztecs. In March of 1519, the Spanish reached the city of Tenochtitlán, built in the middle of Lake Texcoco.

Montezuma was unsure what to do about the Spanish. He could not take a chance offending them, in case they were gods. He allowed them to march into the city and welcomed them like royalty. The Spanish were amazed at the city, which they said was the largest, most magnificent they had ever seen. At first, both sides got along well. Then the Aztecs took the Spanish to one of their temples, where they were cutting the hearts out of prisoners while they were still alive. The Spanish were horrified.

Immediately, the Spanish killed the Aztec priests in charge of the sacrifice. This set off a battle between the Aztecs and *conquistadors*. Meanwhile, problems for Cortés were increasing. He received word that Velasquez had sent another Spanish army to kill him and stop his planned attack on the Aztecs.

La Noche Triste Cortés left some of his soldiers in Tenochtitlán and took the rest to face Pánfilo de Narváez and the second Spanish army. Cortés attacked Narváez during a driving rainstorm, killing many of his soldiers before they knew what was happening.

The rest were persuaded to follow Cortés, who promised them great riches. Back to Tenochtitlán they marched to defeat the Aztecs. Cortés captured Montezuma and held him prisoner. Cortés thought his prisoner would force the Aztecs to surrender. The Aztecs attacked anyway.

In the fighting, Montezuma was murdered, though by whom is unclear from the historical accounts. Then, during a horrible night known as *La Noche Triste*, the Spaniards and Aztecs battled in a wild duel to the death for control of Tenochtitlán. For six days, the fighting continued until the Spanish, having retreated to the mountains outside the city, met the Aztecs in the Battle of Otumba.

So many Aztecs were killed in the battle that the Spanish complained their arms were too tired to kill any more. Yet still the Aztecs came on,

hoping to finally overwhelm the *conquistadors*. When all seemed lost for the Spanish, Cortés saw the Aztec chief who replaced Montezuma being carried by his royal guards. Their only chance, Cortés decided, was to kill the chief and create confusion.

The plan worked. When the Aztecs saw their new chief killed on the field of battle, they stopped fighting for a moment, giving the Spanish the upper hand.

Destroying Tenochtitlán Cortés then began melting down all the Aztec gold and sending it back to Spain. He also ordered crosses hung over all the Aztec temples, insisting that Aztecs be converted to Christianity or suffer the consequences. Aztecs who resisted were killed immediately.

Several times the Aztecs tried to muster their forces to defeat the Spanish, but Cortés was always one step ahead of them. By 1521, Cortés had finally convinced the Aztecs they could never defeat him. He had conquered Mexico with a few hundred soldiers, leaving over 200,000 Aztecs dead in his wake.

Review Questions

1. Why had Cortés come to the New World?
2. Why did Montezuma allow Cortés to enter the Aztec's capital city?
3. What had Aztec prophets said would happen the year Cortés came?

Critical Thinking

4. **Drawing Conclusions** Velasquez didn't think he could trust Cortés, yet he always gave him another chance. Why?
5. **Summarizing** What are some of the ways in which both Cortés and the Aztecs demonstrated their cruelty?
6. **Sequencing Events** What were some of the important events in Cortés's life?