

Clash of Cultures: Cortes Conquers Moctezuma and the Aztecs

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Titled "Entrance of Cortes into Mexico," this illustration shows Spain's Hernan Cortes (right) being welcomed by the Aztec leader Moctezuma (left). Library of Congress

Moctezuma, ruler of the Aztec empire of Mexico, was the unluckiest of kings. He oversaw the ruin of the last great Central American empire.

Though other Aztec rulers had encountered setbacks in their conquests, it was different for Moctezuma. He faced a foreign empire from across the sea with a leader, the Spaniard Hernan Cortes. He was as intelligent and skillful as Moctezuma himself. But in the end, Cortes and his army conquered the Aztecs.

After Christopher Columbus' historic voyage to North America in 1492, expeditions swarmed into the Aztec territory in present-day Mexico. They came in search of gold, and in the process spread Christianity.

Within a generation, America's ancient civilizations were crushed and both the Aztec and Inca empires quickly collapsed. Historians have suggested many causes for this rapid defeat.

An undefeated Spanish army

The Spanish army was one of the strongest fighting forces on Earth. It had not suffered a single defeat for 150 years. The Spaniards possessed cannons, guns and swords that terrified the American tribes. Horses, which the Aztecs had never seen, gave the Spaniards greater mobility. Against all this, the Aztecs' primary weapons were wooden clubs studded with glass-like rocks.

Wars were religious practices to the Aztecs and one of their main goals was the capture of prisoners for sacrifice. During the battle of Tenochtitlan, the largest city in the pre-Columbian Americas, and now Mexico City, Spanish conquistadors watched from a distance as the Aztecs dragged captives up the steps of the Great Temple to kill them. Meanwhile, Spaniards killed Aztec leaders whenever they could.

The Aztec Empire was a loose union of allies, many of whom resented the Aztec rule. In the Spanish they saw their saviors, and Cortes used this to his benefit. In his final attack on Tenochtitlan, his band of 900 Spanish soldiers was joined by as many as 150,000 natives.

The Europeans brought with them diseases such as measles and smallpox against which the American tribes had no natural immunity. Illness spread like wildfire, killing rulers of both the Aztecs and Incas along with millions of other people.

Gifted generals, but one made a crucial mistake

Finally, the personalities of Moctezuma and Cortes must be considered. Both were gifted generals and political leaders. But while Cortes was hardheaded and viewed things as they were, Moctezuma believed in magic and superstition.

Long before Cortes arrived in 1519, signs of doom appeared. A comet "bright as to turn night into day" lit the sky. Then, an important temple burned. Lastly, hunters brought Moctezuma a bird with a mirror strapped to its head. In it he saw large numbers of people "advance as for war; they appeared to be half-men, half-deer."

Then, spies brought tales of mountains floating upon the sea (Spanish ships), and men with "flesh very white ... a long beard and hair to their ears." Moctezuma did not know if Cortes was a man or a god.

He sent Cortes the feathery costume of Quetzalcoatl along with other gifts. Cortes took the bold move of marching on Tenochtitlan. With a force of 500 Spanish soldiers and whatever warriors he recruited along the way, he faced Moctezuma on the city's southern causeway on November 8, 1519. Moctezuma invited him in.

Moctezuma is kidnapped, Tenochtitlan later falls

Was this a political blunder or a smart tactical move? Once inside the city, Cortes found himself isolated and at the mercy of the Aztec Empire. He quickly rectified matters. In another bold stroke, he kidnapped Moctezuma. With 30 seasoned soldiers, he entered the royal palace and gave the emperor a choice: come with us, or die. Moctezuma was fearful of these men-gods, and so he submitted to them.

Months later, while trying to calm an Aztec uprising against the Spanish, Moctezuma was killed and Cortes and his crew barely escaped.

Nine months later, Cortes returned with a huge army of Spaniards and native fighters. They denied Tenochtitlan food and fresh water and on August 13, 1521, Tenochtitlan fell.

Francisco Pizarro conquers the Incas 10 years later

About 10 years later, the Incas, who controlled the largest empire in pre-Columbian America, faced Spanish soldier and explorer Francisco Pizarro. The Incas suffered a similar fate as Pizarro conquered the Incan Empire and claimed their land for Spain.

These great civilizations live on in their legends, art and architecture. Their foods transformed Europe — tomatoes, corn, and potatoes became staple foods in Europe. A new Atlantic world that incorporated elements of European, African and American cultures was taking shape.

Quiz

- 1 Which detail BEST supports the CENTRAL idea of the article?
- (A) The Spanish army was one of the strongest fighting forces on Earth.
 - (B) Both were gifted generals and political leaders.
 - (C) He sent Cortes the feathery costume of Quetzalcoatl along with other gifts.
 - (D) Their foods transformed Europe — tomatoes, corn, and potatoes became staple foods in Europe.
- 2 Which answer choice is the BEST summary of the section "Montezuma is kidnapped, Tenochtitlan later falls"?
- (A) Cortes was isolated inside the city of Tenochtitlan, but he managed to escape with his soldiers and Montezuma. After Montezuma died, Tenochtitlan fell.
 - (B) Cortes gave Montezuma the choice of dying or coming with him and his soldiers. Montezuma left with Cortes, but later died when the Aztecs fought the Spaniards.
 - (C) In the city of Tenochtitlan, Cortes boldly kidnapped Montezuma from his royal palace. Months later, Montezuma died in a battle, and months after that, Tenochtitlan fell.
 - (D) Cortes went inside the city of Tenochtitlan and found Montezuma. He kidnapped Montezuma, then later killed him. After that, he returned to Tenochtitlan.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

The Aztec Empire was a loose union of allies, many of whom resented the Aztec rule.

How does the sentence contribute to the development of the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It helps explain how the Aztecs were able to build an empire.
- (B) It describes a problem that the Aztecs had ruling their empire.
- (C) It compares the Aztec Empire with the union of other natives.
- (D) It helps explain why Cortes was able to defeat the Aztecs.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the article.

The Europeans brought with them diseases such as measles and smallpox against which the American tribes had no natural immunity. Illness spread like wildfire killing rulers of both the Aztecs and Incas along with millions of other people.

How does the paragraph help develop the idea that the Aztec Empire collapsed for many reasons?

- (A) It describes a cause of large numbers of Aztecs dying.
- (B) It describes a problem that the Europeans had with the Aztecs.
- (C) It describes a strategy used by the Europeans to kill the Aztecs.
- (D) It describes how millions of Aztecs were affected by wildfires.

Answer Key

- 1 Which detail BEST supports the CENTRAL idea of the article?
- (A) **The Spanish army was one of the strongest fighting forces on Earth.**
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 - (C) **In the city of Tenochtitlan, Cortes boldly kidnapped Montezuma from his royal palace. Months later, Montezuma died in a battle, and months after that, Tenochtitlan fell.**
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