Spain Claims an Empire

ONE EUROPEAN’S STORY

In 1493, the rulers of Spain and Portugal wanted Pope Alexander VI to decide who would control the lands that sailors from their countries were exploring.

In May 1493, Alexander VI issued his ruling. He drew an imaginary line around the world. It was called the Line of Demarcation. Portugal could claim all non-Christian lands to the east of the line. Spain could claim the non-Christian lands to the west. In this section, you will learn how Spain and Portugal led Europe in the race to gain colonies in the Americas.

Spain and Portugal Compete

King John II was unhappy with the pope’s placement of the line. He believed that it favored Spain. So he demanded that the Spanish rulers meet with him to change the pope’s decision. In June 1494, the two countries agreed to the Treaty of Tordesillas. This treaty moved the Line of Demarcation more than 800 miles farther west.

The change eventually allowed Portugal to claim much of eastern South America, which later became the Portuguese colony of Brazil. After making this agreement, Spain and Portugal increased their voyages of exploration in search of wealth, power, and glory.

European countries had three main goals during this age of exploration. First, they wanted to spread Christianity beyond Europe. Each expedition included missionaries, or people sent to convert the native peoples to Christianity. Second, they wanted to expand their empires. Third, they wanted to become rich.

By increasing their wealth, European countries could gain power and security. An economic system called mercantilism describes how
Europeans enriched their treasuries. (See *Economics in History,* above.) Colonies helped nations do this in several ways. They provided mines that produced gold and silver. They also produced goods such as crops that could be traded for gold and silver. Finally, they served as a market for the home country. The search for riches spurred European exploration.

**Europeans Explore Foreign Lands**

After Columbus’s first voyage, many explorers went to sea. Amerigo Vespucci (vehs•POO•chee) was one of the first. He was an Italian sailor who set out in 1501 to find a sea route to Asia. Vespucci realized that the land he saw on this voyage was not Asia. A German mapmaker was impressed by Vespucci’s account of the lands, so he named the continent “America” after him.

Another famous explorer was the Spaniard Vasco Núñez de Balboa. Balboa heard Native American reports of another ocean. In 1513, he led an expedition through the jungles of Panama and reached the Pacific Ocean. Raising his sword, Balboa stepped into the surf and claimed the ocean and all the lands around it for Spain. (See page 59.)

Perhaps no explorer was more capable than the Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan. He proposed to reach Asia by sailing west around South America. The Spanish king agreed to fund Magellan’s voyage.

In 1519, Magellan set out from Spain with five ships and about 240
men. After a stormy passage around South America, Magellan entered the Pacific Ocean. For several months his crew crossed the Pacific, suffering great hardship. A member of the crew described what they ate.

*A VOICE FROM THE PAST*

We were three months and twenty days without . . . fresh food. We ate biscuit, which was no longer biscuit, but powder of biscuits swarming with worms . . . . We drank . . . water that had been putrid for many days.

Antonio Pigafetta, quoted in *The Discoverers*

Eventually, Magellan reached the Philippines, where he became involved in a local war and was killed. But his crew traveled on. In 1522, the one remaining ship arrived back in Spain. The sailors in Magellan’s crew became the first people to sail around the world.

**The Invasion of Mexico**

While Magellan’s crew was sailing around the world, the Spanish began their conquest of the Americas. Soldiers called *conquistadores* (kah•n•KWIHS•tuh•DAWRZ), or conquerors, explored the Americas and claimed them for Spain. Hernando Cortés was one of these *conquistadores*. He landed on the Central American coast with 508 men in 1519.

The Spanish arrival shook the Aztec Empire, which dominated most of Mexico. The Aztec emperor Montezuma feared that Cortés had been
sent by an Aztec god to rule Mexico. Montezuma sent Cortés gifts—including two disks of solid gold and silver—to get him to leave. But the gifts only excited Spanish dreams of riches.

The Spaniards marched inland and formed alliances (agreements with friendly peoples) with the native peoples who hated Aztec rule. After a few months, Cortés reached the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (teh•NAWCH•tee•TLAHN). Montezuma received Cortés with great ceremony and housed the conquistadors in a magnificent palace. But Cortés took Montezuma captive and tried to rule the Aztec Empire by giving commands through Montezuma. The Aztecs rebelled.

The Aztecs surrounded the Spaniards and their allies in their headquarters in Tenochtitlán. On the night of June 30, 1520, the Spaniards tried to sneak out of the city, but the Aztecs discovered them and vicious fighting broke out. About 800 Spaniards and more than 1,000 of their allies were killed that night. The Spaniards later called the event La Noche Triste (lah NAW•cheh TREES•teh)—the Sad Night.

Despite this defeat, the Spaniards and their allies regrouped. In May 1521, Cortés led his forces back to Tenochtitlán. At this point, the Spaniards got help from an invisible ally. Many Aztecs fell victim to an outbreak of smallpox, which severely weakened their ranks. The germs

**Background**

One of the people whom Cortés brought into his group was Malintzin. She was the daughter of a local chief and served as an interpreter for Cortés.
that caused this disease had been brought to America by the Europeans.

Cortés placed Tenochtitlán under siege for three months. When Tenochtitlán finally fell, the Aztec Empire lay in ruins. An Aztec poet described the scene.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

Broken spears lie in the roads; we have torn our hair in our grief. The houses are roofless now, and their walls are red with blood. . . . We have pounded our hands in despair against the adobe walls, for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.

Aztec poet, quoted in *Seeds of Change*

On the rubble of the Aztec capital, the Spanish built Mexico City. Over time, the populations and cultures of Spain and Mexico merged and produced a new society, that of the present-day nation of Mexico.

**The Conquest of the Incan Empire**

Despite the fall of the Aztecs, a people called the Inca still had a powerful empire centered in the Cuzco Valley in what is now Peru. By 1525, the Inca ruled a 2,000-mile-long territory in the Andes Mountains along the western coast of South America. The Inca also possessed much gold and silver.

Native American stories of Incan wealth reached the Spanish. In 1531, a conquistador named Francisco Pizarro led an expedition of 180 men into Peru. Like the Aztecs, the Incas feared that the Spanish might be gods. The Incan emperor Atahualpa (AH•tuh•WAHL•puh) ordered his troops not to fight. Then he went to meet the conquistadors. The Spanish attacked quickly. They killed thousands of Incas and took Atahualpa captive. In an attempt to free himself, the Incan emperor gave the Spanish a treasure of gold. The Spaniards strangled him anyway.

With Atahualpa dead, the Incan Empire collapsed. Having been ordered by Atahualpa not to fight, the Incas refused to defend themselves even after his death. Then Pizarro took control of this area for Spain. The Spanish called the area Peru.

**Reasons for Spanish Victories**

People have long been amazed that the great Aztec and Incan empires fell to such small groups of Spanish conquistadors. But Spanish success can be explained by four major reasons.

1. The spread of European diseases killed millions of Native Americans and weakened their resistance to conquest.
2. The Spanish were excellent soldiers and sailors. They also had superior weapons, such as guns, that helped them defeat much larger Native American armies.
3. Spain made alliances with Native Americans who were enemies of the Aztecs and Incas.  
4. The Spanish *conquistadors* acted brutally toward the Native Americans under their control. 

Having conquered the major Native American empires in Central and South America, the Spaniards began to explore other parts of North and South America.

**Other Spanish Explorers**

The Spaniards hoped to collect treasures from North America as they had from Mexico and Peru. Rumors of golden cities kept Spanish hopes high. For example, a few men, including the Spaniard Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Estevanico, a slave of North African descent, survived a shipwreck off the North American mainland. As the men wandered across the continent, they heard Native American stories about cities of gold. When they reached Mexico, Cabeza de Vaca and Estevanico thrilled the Spaniards with these rumors.

Between 1539 and 1542, three expeditions set out to find these cities. Francisco Vázquez de Coronado traveled through present-day Arizona and New Mexico. Hernando de Soto set out from Florida to explore the southeast. Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailed up the California coast. But all three failed to find the fabled cities of gold.

For a while, it seemed that the Spaniards would explore the Americas all by themselves. As you will read in the next section, however, the Spanish would soon face competition from other Europeans.