Spain Claims an Empire

MAIN IDEA
Spain claimed a large empire in the Americas.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
The influence of Spanish culture remains strong in modern America.

ONE EUROPEAN’S STORY
Pope Alexander VI had an important decision to make. In 1493, the rulers of Spain and Portugal wanted him to decide who would control the lands that European sailors were exploring. Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain expected Alexander VI to give Spain the rights over many of these lands. But King John II of Portugal claimed territories, too. What would the new pope do?

In May 1493, the pope 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 (tawr•day•SEEL•yahs). This treaty moved the Line of Demarcation more than 800 miles farther to the west. The change eventually allowed Portugal to claim much of eastern South America, which later became the Portuguese colony of Brazil. Following this agreement, Spain and Portugal increased their voyages of exploration.

European countries had three main goals during this age of exploration. First, they wanted to spread Christianity beyond Europe. 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 on page 52.) Colonies helped nations grow rich in several ways. Colonies provided
various raw materials as well as mines that produced gold and silver. In addition, colonies served as markets for goods made in the home country.

Europeans Explore Foreign Lands

After Columbus’s first voyage, many explorers went to sea. Italian sailor Amerigo Vespucci (veh•POO•chee) 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. In 1513, he led an expedition through the jungles of Panama and reached the Pacific Ocean.

In 1519, Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan set out to reach Asia by sailing west around South America. During the long journey, he and his fellow sailors suffered 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

Although Magellan died during the trip, his crew carried on and became the first people to sail around the world.

CONNECT TO HISTORY

1. Finding Main Ideas Under mercantilism, what did a country need to do to become rich? Discuss the way colonies enriched a country according to mercantilism.


CONNECT TO TODAY

2. Making Inferences Think about your own family budget. What do you think would happen if your family collected less money than it paid for goods for several years? Do you think this situation would be the same for a nation as it would for a family?

For more information on mercantilism . . .

RESEARCH LINKS

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For more information on mercantilism . . .

Background

Magellan was killed after becoming involved in a local war in the Philippines.
The Invasion of the Americas

While Magellan’s crew was sailing around the world, the Spanish began their conquest of the Americas. Soldiers called **conquistadors** (kahn•KWIHS•tuh•DAWRZ), or conquerors, explored the Americas and claimed them for Spain. **Hernando Cortés** was one of these conquistadors. After landing in Central America in 1519, Cortés and his army of 508 men set their sights on conquering the mighty Aztec Empire.

The Spaniards marched inland and formed alliances (agreements with friendly peoples) with the native peoples who hated Aztec rule. Upon reaching the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (teh•NAWCH•tee•TLAHN), Cortés received a warm greeting from the Aztec emperor, **Montezuma**. Relations between the two sides quickly collapsed, however, as Cortés sought to take control of the empire. After several fierce clashes, the Aztecs drove the Spanish out.

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 that caused this disease had been brought to America by the Europeans. After months of fighting, Cortés conquered the empire.

**AMERICA’S HISTORY MAKERS**

**HERNANDO CORTÉS**
1485–1547

Hernando Cortés was born in Spain to a noble but poor family. In 1504, at the age of 19, he sailed to the Americas to seek his fortune. Although he became a wealthy landowner in Cuba, he was not satisfied. “I have come to win gold,” he said, “not to plow the fields like a peasant.” His great chance came when he was picked to lead the expedition to Mexico. Strong-willed, shrewd, and cruel, Cortés succeeded against great odds.

**MONTEZUMA**
1466–1520

Montezuma, ruler of the Aztec Empire, rose to the throne in 1502. Eloquent and wise, his words carried weight with his subjects. According to Juan de Tovar, a Jesuit, “When he spoke, he drew the sympathy of others by his subtle phrases and ... by his profound reasoning.” Montezuma lived in great luxury, receiving officials and commoners alike at his lavish palace. His subjects treated him almost as a god and were not allowed to look at him. Though brutal at times, he was said to be a just and effective ruler.

**Which man would you prefer to have as leader of your country? Why?**
In 1531, a conquistador named Francisco Pizarro marched on the Incas. The Incas had built a powerful and wealthy empire centered in the Cuzco Valley in what is now Peru. With an army of only 180 men, Pizarro conquered the Inca.

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 three major reasons.

1. The spread of European diseases killed millions of Native Americans.
2. The Spanish were excellent soldiers and sailors. They also had superior weapons, such as guns.
3. Spain made alliances with Native Americans who were enemies of the Aztecs and Incas.

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, the Spaniard Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Estevanico, a slave of North African descent, wandered across the continent and heard Native American stories about cities of gold.

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.