The Spanish Conquest

Lured by stories of the riches of the Aztec, a Spanish adventurer, Hernán (sometimes referred to as Fernando or Hernando) Cortés, assembled a fleet of eleven ships, ammunition, and over 700 men and in 1519 set sail from Cuba to Mexico. The party landed near present-day Veracruz in eastern Mexico and started its march inland. Superior firepower, resentment against the Aztec by conquered tribes in eastern Mexico, and considerable luck all aided the Spanish in their conquest of the Aztec. The Aztec and their allies had never seen horses or guns, the Spanish had interpreters who could speak Spanish, Maya, and Náhuatl (the Aztec language), and perhaps what was most important, Cortés unwittingly had the advantage of the legend of Quetzalcóatl, in which the Aztec are said to have believed that a white god would arrive in ships from the east in 1519 and destroy the native civilizations.

Unwilling to confront the mysterious arrival whom he considered a god, the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II (anglicized as Montezuma), initially welcomed the Spanish party to the capital in November 1519. Montezuma soon was arrested, and the Spanish took control of Tenochtitlán. The Aztec chieftains staged a revolt, however, and the Spanish were forced to retreat to the east. The Spanish recruited new troops while a smallpox epidemic raged through Tenochtitlán, killing much of the population, possibly including Montezuma. By the summer of 1521, the Spanish were ready to assault the city. The battle raged for three weeks, with the superior firepower of the Spanish eventually proving decisive. The last emperor, Cuauhtémoc, was captured and killed. In the nineteenth century, the legend of Cuauhtémoc would be revived, and the last Aztec emperor would be considered a symbol of honor and courage, the first Mexican national hero.

New Spain

After the fall of Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards' task was to settle and expand the new domains on the mainland of North and Central America that became known as New Spain. Cortés dispatched several expeditions to survey the areas beyond the Valley of Mexico and to establish political control over the land and its inhabitants. Once released from the central political control of Tenochtitlán, most towns surrendered to Cortés's men. As a symbol of political continuity, the capital of the new colony was to be built squarely atop the ruins of Tenochtitlán and was renamed Mexico after the Mexica tribe.

Source: U.S. Library of Congress