

Latin America and the Conquistadors

The general term “conquistador” refers to Spanish and Portuguese adventurers/warriors who led the expeditions into the New World during the Age of Exploration. These conquistadors invaded and conquered lands in the Americas and the Caribbean from the late fifteenth through the late seventeenth century. Conquistadors can also be understood as colonizers who were acting in the name of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. Overseas expeditions and voyages were typically sponsored by the monarchy or by members of the nobility. Spreading Catholicism and converting indigenous peoples acted as a major impetus for colonization and imperial expansion. The conquistadors are known today in part for their harsh behavior toward natives throughout the early phases of colonization. As professional soldiers, these men utilized European technology, weaponry, and cavalry against unknowing indigenous populations.

Old World versus New World

Although scholars today refer to the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century as the Age of Discovery, many of the lands that Europeans “discovered” were already inhabited by rich and vibrant indigenous civilizations for tens of thousands of years. When Christopher Columbus first landed in America, the population of Central America was around 45 million people. The cultures in the Americas were extremely diverse and distinct from one another. Columbus and his fellow conquistadors mistakenly believed that they had reached the East Indies and, as a result, labeled any and all indigenous peoples “Indians.” By grouping together such disparate groups of people, the Europeans perceived unity among the indigenous population that did not always exist.

The major differences between the peoples of the Old World and the New World were the relative isolation of the New World from exposure to other peoples and cultures. Unlike Europeans, who had been in contact with peoples from Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and Asia for centuries, natives from the New World were extremely susceptible to diseases brought over by conquistadors from the Old World. Diseases, such as smallpox, ravaged New World populations, who had never come into contact with peoples affected with such diseases. Europeans also had access to newer technologies, such as steel and iron, which provided them with the military advantage that allowed them to successfully dominate the peoples of the New World.

Factors Leading to the Conquest of Latin America

There were several motivations behind the expansion and conquest of South America. Religion was a commonly used justification for colonization. The Spanish victory and expulsion of the Muslim Moors from the Iberian Peninsula (referred to as the Reconquista), after hundreds of years of occupation, occurred at the same time as the beginning stages of the Age of Discovery. Many Europeans regarded the liberation of their land as an extension of the medieval Crusades, during which time Catholic soldiers

had fought to redeem the Holy Land for Christianity. As Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors ventured into unknown territories and came across new discoveries, they viewed themselves as a new kind of crusaders whose mission was to bring Roman Catholicism to the indigenous populations and spread its message throughout the newly conquered lands. A primary goal for these overseas expeditions was to convert people Europeans considered savage and barbaric. Catholic priests and friars travelled with the conquistadors on their voyages overseas.

There were also important political and economic motivations driving these New World expeditions. Conquering territories in the New World expanded the size and strength of the fledgling Spanish empire. It provided Spain with power, influence, and prestige within the European community. During the earlier phases of overseas exploration, Spanish conquistadors successfully acquired monopolies on the spice trade in the East. In addition to spices, the Spanish discovered silver and gold in Latin America, which, for a short time at least, generated an enormous amount of wealth for the Spanish Empire.

The Conquest of the Aztec and Incan Empires

Some of the most famous conquistadors and their territories of conquest include Hernan Cortes (Mexico), Juan Ponce de Leon (Puerto Rico and Florida), and Francisco Pizarro (Peru). The Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Incan Empires were two of the major episodes in the Spanish colonization of Latin America. From 1519 to 1521 the Spanish, led by Hernan Cortes, conquered the Aztec Empire. Initially, it seemed as though Cortes and his men were going to try and preserve some of the Aztec's social and cultural structure. The Aztecs were integrated into the Spanish Empire and in the first phase of Spanish conquest many wealthier, elite Aztecs were considered to be noblemen. This leniency and flexibility came to an end when the Spanish government rewarded the conquistadors with considerable pieces of land throughout present-day Mexico, along with Aztec slaves who would work the land under the Spanish agricultural system referred to as the *encomienda*.

The structure of the *encomienda* was meant to better regulate the land and labor in Spain's newly colonized American territories. In theory, the landowners were appointed a certain number of indigenous peoples to protect and care for. It was meant to replicate the basic structure of Europe's medieval feudal system. Landowners were expected to guard natives against rival tribes, to teach them Spanish, and to inculcate them with Catholicism. In exchange for this physical protection and intellectual and spiritual "improvement," native laborers were expected to pay tribute to their landlords in the form of labor, money, and/or goods. In most situations, the reality of the *encomienda* amounted to slavery, as natives were forced to work extremely hard labor. Over time, the system evolved into one of subjugation and exploitation. The native peoples of Latin America grew to fear and loathe the Spanish conquistadors, and the word "conquistador," or conqueror, continues to have a lasting stigma to this day.