

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 was a ruler of the Aztecs. The Aztecs were the native people of Mexico in the 1400s.

Moctezuma was an unlucky king. He was the ruler when the Aztecs were defeated for good. He could not protect his people from Spanish armies who came in the early 1500s.

The Spaniards were led by Hernan Cortes. Spain is a country in Europe. The Spaniards traveled by ship to Mexico.

Spain comes to America in search of gold

This was after Christopher Columbus' famous trip in 1492. After Columbus, many ships started coming from Europe. People came in search of gold.

Soon, these Europeans took over. They controlled the land and the people. The Aztecs tried to fight back. They were soon defeated. This also happened to the Incas of South America.

Both the Aztecs and Incas were destroyed forever. There are many reasons how this happened.

A strong Spanish army

The Spanish army was strong. It had not been defeated for 150 years. The Spaniards had better weapons than the Aztecs. Spanish fighters had cannons, guns and swords. The Aztecs had spiked clubs.

The Spaniards also had horses to help them travel. The Aztecs had never even seen horses before.

Other native tribes fought Aztecs

The Aztecs ruled over other tribes. Many of these tribes did not like the Aztec rule. The Aztecs made them pay a lot of money. The other native groups thought the Spanish would save them from the Aztecs. Cortes used this to help his army. These tribes helped the Spanish defeat the Aztecs in the final fight.

The Europeans brought with them new illnesses that killed millions of native people. They could not fight off the diseases.

Moctezuma's belief in magic was a mistake

Finally, the personalities of Moctezuma and Cortes were important. Both were smart and gifted leaders. Cortes saw things as they were. Moctezuma believed in magic. This may explain why he didn't fight back very hard against the Spaniards.

Before Cortes arrived in 1519, bad signs appeared to the Aztecs.

Aztecs believed in mystical warning signs

A comet so "bright as to turn night into day" lit up the sky. Then, an important temple burned. Lastly, hunters brought Montezuma a bird with a mirror strapped to its head. In it he saw large numbers of people. They "appeared to be half-men, half-deer" and were coming to fight them. Then spies said they saw giant ships filled with white men. These signs upset Moctezuma. He thought that the Spaniards might be gods.

Cortes' army takes Tenochtitlan

Cortes boldly marched in to face Moctezuma on November 8, 1519. Moctezuma invited him into the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.

Inside the city, Cortes kidnapped Moctezuma. He told Moctezuma to come with the Spaniards or die. Montezuma went with them. He was killed months later during an Aztec uprising against the Spanish, but Cortes escaped alive.

Cortes returned to the city nine months later. He had a huge army of Spaniards and tribes that fought. They defeated the Aztecs.

Aztecs and Incas live on

About 10 years later, the Incas faced Spanish soldier Francisco Pizarro. He conquered the Incas and took their land for Spain. The Incas were also defeated.

Today, the Aztecs and Incas live on in their folk stories, art and food.

Quiz

- 1 What is the MAIN idea of the section "A strong Spanish army"?
- (A) The Spanish army became strong because the fighters had to pull cannons everywhere they went.
 - (B) The Spanish army was strong, but the Aztecs were stronger because they had spiked clubs.
 - (C) The Spanish army was strong and had much better weapons than the Aztecs did.
 - (D) The Spanish army used to be strong many years ago, but then it was defeated.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Montezuma's belief in magic was a mistake."

Finally, the personalities of Montezuma and Cortes were important. Both were smart and gifted leaders. Cortes saw things as they were. Montezuma believed in magic. This may explain why he didn't fight back very hard against the Spaniards.

How does the paragraph above support a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It explains another reason why Cortes was able to defeat the Aztecs.
 - (B) It explains why magic was important to Montezuma.
 - (C) It describes the types of things Cortes saw when he was fighting the Aztecs.
 - (D) It describes how Montezuma tried to be friends with Cortes.
- 3 Which section of the article gives information about HOW Montezuma died?
- (A) "Other native tribes fought Aztecs"
 - (B) "Aztecs believed in mystical warning signs"
 - (C) "Cortes' army takes Tenochtitlan"
 - (D) "Aztecs and Incas live on"
- 4 What is the purpose of the section "Other native tribes fought Aztecs"?
- (A) to explain why other tribes did not want to go into battle against the Aztecs
 - (B) to explain why Cortes was able to get other tribes to help him defeat the Aztecs
 - (C) to describe a problem that the Aztecs had when they ruled over other tribes
 - (D) to describe how the Aztecs and other tribes fought off diseases brought by the Europeans