New Empires in the Americas

Section 3

Main Ideas

1. Spanish conquistadors conquered the Aztec and Inca empires.
2. Spanish explorers traveled through the borderlands of New Spain, claiming more land.
3. Spanish settlers treated Native Americans harshly, forcing them to work on plantations and in mines.

Key Terms and People

conquistadors  Spanish soldiers who led military expeditions in the Americas
Hernán Cortés  conquistador who conquered the Aztec empire
Moctezuma II  ruler of the Aztec empire
Francisco Pizarro  a conquistador who captured the Inca capital and killed the Inca leaders
encomienda system  a system that gave settlers the right to tax Native Americans or to make them work
plantations  large farms that grew just one kind of crop and made huge profits for their owners
Bartolomé de Las Casas  a priest who encouraged better treatment of Native Americans

Section Summary

Spanish Conquistadors

The Spanish sent conquistadors to the Americas on military expeditions. Conquistador Hernán Cortés went to present-day Mexico in 1519. He had heard of land to the west ruled by Moctezuma II, the king of the Aztec empire. The Spaniards believed the Aztec lands were a rich source of gold and silver. They also wanted to convert the Aztec to Christianity.

Although they were greatly outnumbered, the conquistadors had superior weapons and formed alliances with enemies of the Aztec. Cortés took control of the Aztec capital and killed Moctezuma. Smallpox and other European diseases sped up the fall of the Aztec empire.

Why might Cortés have wanted to conquer the Aztec?

What advantage did the Spanish have over the Aztec?
While seeking gold Francisco Pizarro led his troops to capture the great Inca capital at Cuzco. Within a few years Pizarro had conquered the entire Inca empire. The Spanish then began to create a vast empire which they called New Spain. They established settlements to serve as trading posts, missions to convert local Native Americans to Catholicism, and military bases.

EXPLORING THE BORDERLANDS OF NEW SPAIN
Spain’s empire in America extended well beyond the lands taken from the Aztec and Inca. Regions claimed by the Spanish explorers included the island of Puerto Rico, the coast of present-day Florida, and the coastal regions of the Gulf of Mexico. The Spanish also explored what is now the southwestern United States, looking for cities of gold that were rumored to exist there. They traveled through unclaimed areas of Texas, Oklahoma, and as far north as Kansas.

SPANISH TREATMENT OF NATIVE AMERICANS
California was among the last borderlands settled by the Spanish. To pay back settlers for their work, Spain established the encomienda system. It gave settlers the right to tax Native Americans and make them work. Most of the workers were treated as slaves and forced to work on plantations in New Spain. Many Native Americans died of disease and exhaustion. The priest Bartolomé de Las Casas spoke out against the terrible treatment of Native Americans.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY
Critical Thinking: Identifying Cause and Effect Make a chart showing the causes and effects of Spain’s conquests in the Americas.

Why did Pizarro first enter the Inca empire?

Why might de Las Casas have spoken out against the encomienda system?

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