

[Indigenous American Empires and the Spanish Conquest]

SUBJECT [American History]	TEACHER [?]	GRADE [High School]	DATE [November 11, 2020]
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OVERVIEW

When the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they had no clear understanding of the size and breadth of the new lands they'd reached. Equally so was their ignorance of the great and diverse nations to be encountered along the way - some in the very prime of their power, others long since reaching their epoch. Usually, the Empires of the Inca and Aztec are mentioned in tandem with their fall to the Spaniards, but what of their rise to power in the preceding centuries? Indeed, just who were they; how did they administer vast empires; and why did these crumble so quickly?

Moreover, what of those indigenous groups who actively fought alongside the Spanish as allies, against their longtime rivals? That the Tlascalans of Mexico steadfastly fought alongside Cortes's Conquistadors throughout the conquest of the Aztec is mentioned haphazardly, but sheds considerable light on the diverse response of indigenous people to the coming of the Spanish. Not all fought against them; indeed, many profited by their coming.

Unit Goal

- By unit's end, students will understand that indigenous people had great agency during the Spanish Conquest, choosing to fight against, or beside the invaders, depending upon their own interests. There was no universal response as the peoples of Mesoamerica were as politically diverse as Europe or Asia.
- Students will know to contextualize the actions of all participants firmly within the sixteenth century time period in which they lived, as well as understand the cultural and strategic picture driving the actions of key participants.
- Conquest affected the culture of many groups who were exposed to it, forcing them to adapt, or die. Students should pay close attention to the means by which certain groups survived the arrival of Spain. The Tlascalans fought beside them and prospered; the Mapuche of Chile, however, overhauled their entire society, and forced the Spanish to seek peace, after one hundred years of war.
- Finally, the agency of the Indigenous nations is too often ignored. Great empires, like the Inca and Aztec, were not sitting idle while the Spanish waltzed in. Students should be able to contextualize indigenous responses to invasion. How did they react and why? What were their handicaps, and what were their advantages? They were actors in this great unfolding drama, not mere props.

Schedule:

- **Monday:** Overview of Mesoamerica (Units: Mesoamerica, Maya) – It's people, history, geography, and cultures. How did Mesoamerican states make war; the rise and fall of the Maya – their culture; setting the stage for the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century.
- **Tuesday:** The Aztec of Tenochtitlan (Units: The Aztec, Tenochtitlan– The origins of the Mexica - Aztec), their rise to power in the valley of Mexico. Their capital and empire; how did it work, what were their achievements?

- **Wednesday:** Fall of the Aztec(Units: Montezuma Xocoyotsin, Hernan Cortes, Tlaxcala)- The Emperor of Tenochtitlan was a complex and capable man. Understand his reign to contextualize the empire's position on the eve of Cortes's arrival. Reforms and military expansion; his wars against the Tlascalans; His actions upon meeting the Spaniards. Cortes's arrival; alliance with Tlaxcala - who were they and why they fought with the Spaniards. Meeting of Montezuma and Cortes. Why did Cortes succeed, and Montezuma fail?
- **Thursday:** The Rise and Fall of the Inca (Units: The Inca, Francisco Pizarro)– The powerhouse of South America. Who were they, how did they come to power? Describe their government, significant cultural aspects, and the achievement of their builders. What events led to their weakening, just as the Spanish showed up? Who was Pizarro? What led him to the Inca, and why did he succeed against so great an Empire?
- **Friday:** Spain meets the Mapuche (Units: The Mapuche, Diego de Almagro) – Natives of Chile, the Mapuche were never united, but with the arrival of the Spanish, they formed a Confederation to oppose them. Look to their culture, geography, and the overextended nature of the Spanish. How and why did the Mapuche succeed, where so many others didn't? Who was Almagro? Why did he venture down into Chile, and what happened while he was there? How did he meet his end?

Resources

- Unit summaries on www.huntthepast.com. These units to be utilized at teacher's discretion: Mesoamerica, Maya, The Aztec, Tenochtitlan, Montezuma Xocoyotzin, Tlaxcala, The Inca, and The Mapuche, Hernan Cortes, Francisco Pizarro, Diego de Almagro.
- Books, particularly primary sources, provided in footnotes.
- Videos, books, images, activities, and maps. provided by www.huntthepast.com, as well as any the instructor may deem appropriate, are to be utilized as teaching aids.

Essential Skills

- Students will gain an appreciation for certain Indigenous American cultures, and their responses to the arrival of the Spanish.
- Students will be able to contextualize key events and people within their proper historical and geographic settings, and come to understand the physical limitations geography, communication, distance, and time placed upon different groups.
- Students will realize that the Indigenous nations were different - politically and culturally - while similar in other respects; they often fought one another. Hence, their responses to conquest differed, but they did respond. They had agency in the events of their day.
- Students will utilize the voices of participants to gain insight into conditions on the ground, through the use of primary source materials, littered throughout the units. These are not the last say on the matter, rather they're a gateway for independent student research.
- Finally, students will appreciate the difficulties and boldness surrounding the actions of men like Cortes, Pizarro, and Almagro; gain insight into why they succeeded; and comprehend their ruthless tendencies. These weren't men from the top of the Spanish social ladder, but self-made Emperors, who let power consume them. Students will come to understand possible reasons why, within the context of events. Contextualization is key!