

[Indigenous American Empires and the Spanish Conquest]

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

OVERVIEW

Spain's arrival in the western hemisphere comes at a time when great Indigenous Empires in Meso and South America are reaching their political and military peak. Within decades, however, most of these empires have fallen. How, and why? The Spanish did not achieve this by themselves, but allied themselves to enterprising groups - like the Tlascalans of Mexico - to topple the might of the Aztec. Without such allies, Hernan Cortes would not have become the conqueror of the Aztec. Indigenous responses to conquest differed between nations. Some fought for the Spanish, others fought against them. Certain groups were victorious, while others weren't. But the Indigenous peoples responded, their decisions driven by their own interests and opportunism. The Spaniards could not have conquered what they did without native allies, and yet, there were limitations to their power.

Unit Goals

- Students will understand the context of the great empires of the Americas, on the eve of the Spanish conquest. How they came to rule vast lands and many peoples; their cultural and military practices; and account for their ultimate decline and fall.
- Students will take into account the political and strategic interests of different groups, as it relates to their decision-making process. The Tlascalans, for example, could not outright defeat the Spaniards, so they saw an opportunity to fight with them, against the hated Aztec. The Indigenous people had as much agency as the Spanish; their decisions affected the outcome of events as much as the Conquistador's.
- In coming to understand the events and people surrounding the Spanish Conquest, students will learn that there were limits to Spanish power; that the adaptability of groups in response to invasion often decided whether they were conquered or remained independent.
- Finally, students will consider the motivation of such men as Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro, in boldly marching against established powers and ruthlessly cutting them down. Understanding their familial background, resources on the ground, and the luck they carried with them, these conquerors become human once again: flawed, malleable men.

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 did they fight 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, and 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 be able to utilize primary source writings used throughout the units, and contextualize their thoughts and attitudes within the proper historical context.
- They will understand that the Indigenous nations were not merely passive victims: they had agency and power to thwart the invaders' advance, or die fighting them. Many did. Many others fought beside the Spaniards to affect a paradigm shift that saw them masters of their old rivals.
- Students will come to appreciate the cultural, intellectual, architectural achievements of the Inca, Maya, Aztec, and others. These were masters of their domain for a reason; it's essential to remember that their cultures were the epicenters of some of the greatest empires the world has ever known - all of which was achieved in complete isolation from the rest of humanity.
- Finally, students will come to understand - as much as possible - men like Hernan Cortes, Francisco Pizarro, and Diego de Almagro: their goals, motivations, and actions will be contextualized. They will come to understand these figures as men; bold, ruthless conquerors who toppled great empires, but not without support.