Chapter 3 – New Empires in the Americas
**The Conquistadores: Hernan Cortes**

- **Conquistadores** were Spanish soldiers and mercenaries that explored the New World and claimed lands on behalf of Spain. Many of these soldiers gained military experience during the Reconquista, the effort to drive the Islamic Moors from Spain in the late 15th century. In addition to claiming new lands for Spain, they also looked for sources of wealth and hoped to win glory and power for themselves.

- **Hernan Cortes** invaded present-day Mexico in 1519, where he encountered the Aztecs. His ships landed at present-day Veracruz, Mexico, where he burned his ships so that his men would be well-motivated to succeed. Marching inland, he encountered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. **Moctezuma II**, the Aztec leader, sent Cortes and his men gifts of gold and silver in hopes he would be satisfied and leave in peace. However, this only encouraged Cortes, who led fewer than 600 men to attack the Aztecs. Cortes then kidnaps Moctezuma, holding him for ransom. Even though the Aztecs pay the ransom, the Spanish execute Moctezuma anyway.

- Despite being outnumbered, Cortes was able to eventually conquer the Aztecs, for the following reasons:
  1. **Superior technology** (guns, cannons, steel weapons, armor, etc.)
  2. **Psychology** – At first, many Aztecs mistook Cortes and his men for gods, and their weapons and armor frightened the Aztecs.
  3. **Assitance from other tribes** that had been previously conquered by the Aztecs.
  4. **Other advantages** included the Spanish use of horses, superior military experience and training, and the unintentional introduction of diseases such as smallpox to the Aztecs, which would kill thousands.

- The Spanish eventually built what today is Mexico City on the ruins of Tenochtitlan.
Francisco Pizarro was another conquistador who, like Cortes, was a veteran of the Reconquista. He led a small group of about 200 men into the Andes Mountains of South America, where they encountered the Incan Empire in 1531. Pizarro had studied the tactics and strategy used by Cortes in his conquest of the Aztecs, and would put these strategies to use against the Inca.

The Inca ruled an empire that spanned the length of the Andes Mountains. The Inca were a highly advanced Mesoamerican civilization, with a centralized, bureaucratic government, with the Emperor Atahualpa ruling over the various provinces, each of which were ruled by a governor. The Inca built a network of roads throughout the Andes to facilitate fast travel and communication, as well as defense. Like the Aztecs, the Inca spread their empire through conquest of weaker neighboring tribes.

When Pizarro encountered the Inca, Atahualpa invited them to his capital city. He did not see 200 men as a threat. But like the Aztecs, he underestimated the superior technology and skill of the Spanish soldiers. The Inca would also be weakened by diseases introduced by the Spanish. The Spanish also had a tremendous psychological advantage as well. Spanish weapons and appearance frightened the Inca, making them easy to defeat. As indicated above, Pizarro would use tactics similar to those of Cortes. He would kidnap Atahualpa, but once the ransom was paid, have him executed. This was a major blow to the morale of the Inca, who lost the will to fight against the Spanish. And like Cortes, Pizarro would get assistance from local tribes eager to take revenge on the Inca who had conquered them in the past. In 1534, the Inca Empire would fall to the Spanish.
Cortes and Pizarro are by far the most important Conquistadores in terms of Spain’s claims to land in the New World. Cortes’ conquest of the Aztecs would lead to the establishment of the **Viceroyalty of New Spain**, and Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca would lead to the establishment of the **Viceroyalty of New Grenada, Peru, and La Plata**. These would be the four major administrative subdivisions of Spanish colonies in the Americas.

-Other conquistadores searched for new sources of wealth and riches in the New World, some real, and some mythical. Stories told to conquistadores by local natives would often encourage this exploration. **Juan Ponce de Leon** explored present-day Florida searching for the mythical **Fountain of Youth**. Despite never finding such a fountain, he did explore, claim, and name Florida on behalf of Spain.

-**Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca** and his companion, a Moor named **Estevanico**, were shipwrecked on the Gulf Coast while on another expedition with **Panfilo de Narvaez**. De Vaca and Estevanico reached Texas, where they were captured by local natives. They escaped and slowly made their way south to Mexico City, a journey that would take almost eight years. De Vaca encountered many native Americans during his journeys, from whom he would hear fantastic stories of cities containing vast wealth.

-**Hernando de Soto** was a conquistador that fought with Pizarro in Peru. He met de Vaca in Spain, who related stories of wealth to de Soto in the Americas. De Soto explored the modern Gulf Coast, eventually becoming the first European to discover and cross the **Mississippi River**.

-**Francisco Coronado** was another conquistador that searched for the mythical **Seven Cities of Cibola**, which were rumored to exist somewhere in modern-day Texas or New Mexico. He never found this mythical place, which was most likely a native pueblo that glimmered in the sunlight. However, his exploration would lead to Spain’s claim over what today is the Southwest part of the United States.

-Finally, **Juan Cabrillo** was a Portuguese explorer that sailed for Spain. He would sail around South America, following Magellan’s route, and eventually claim California for Spain.
Spain exercised very tight control over its colonies in the New World. It established several major viceroyalties (listed from north to south): the **Viceroyalties of New Spain, New Grenada, Peru, and La Plata**, each ruled by a governor known as a **vicereoy** on behalf of the King of Spain. The **Council of the Indies** helped govern the colonies as well. In addition to appointing viceroys, they would advise the Spanish king on colonial matters. Ruling over such a vast empire was difficult, however, and Spanish officials in the Americas would often pursue their own goals and ignore Spanish law.

- The wealthiest areas of the Spanish colonies included the former Aztec and Inca territories, which were rich in gold and silver, which would be exported to Spain in large quantities.
- The Spanish established three primary types of settlements in the Americas. The **pueblos** were towns, centers of trade, and centers of government. The **missions** were religious settlements dedicated to the conversion of natives to Christianity, as well as teaching natives the way of European/Spanish life and “modern” agriculture. The **presidios** were Spanish forts dedicated to the protection of the pueblos and missions.
- The Catholic Church had a major hand in the development of the Spanish colonies. One of the main goals of the Spanish monarchy was to spread Christianity, and **King Philip II** would declare this to be the primary goal of Spanish settlement in the Americas. Native Americans living in Spanish missions would live a very regimented life of prayer and work from sun-up until sun-down.
- In Spanish America, there were various social classes, from “top” to “bottom”: **Peninsulares** (colonists born in Spain), **Criollos** (Spanish people born in the Americas), **Mestizos/Mulattoes** (people of mixed European and native ancestry/European and African), **Amerindians** (native Americans), **Africans** (slaves). These social classes would determine wealth and status within Spanish colonial society.
Spanish settlement in the Americas included the use of the encomienda system, in which Spanish encomenderos were allowed to tax native Americans or force them to work. In exchange, settlers must agree to provide the natives with protection, teach them the Spanish way of life, and encourage conversion to Christianity. Unfortunately, many settlers simply used the natives for labor and did not fulfill their obligations, thus making the natives the equivalent of slaves.

One person who spoke out against this system was Bartolome de las Casas, a former encomendero turned priest, who basically equated the system with slavery. Despite his efforts, the system continued.

Primarily in the Caribbean, many natives fought against this system. In addition, many natives died from disease, overwork, and exhaustion. This led to the Spanish importation of slaves from Africa to work on plantations, large farms dedicated to the production of a cash crop, or a crop produced in order to make a profit. The use of slave labor made agriculture profitable. Africans were a likely choice because they had immunity to European diseases, were used to difficult labor, and came from a similar climate.

While most people lived at the “center” of the Spanish colonies near existing towns and settlements, some chose to settle in the borderlands, or those areas furthest away from population centers. The need to protect these areas from interference from both native Americans as well as newly arrived French settlers in the Americas prompted the Spanish to build the El Camino Real, or “Royal Road”, a series of roads connecting the various Spanish settlements in the Americas together. This allowed for the faster transportation of resources, troops, and settlers, and enabled the Spanish to gain greater control of outlying areas.
-During the 15th and 16th centuries, there were many important social, political, and economic changes going on in Europe.  

-One such change occurred within the Church in an event known as the Protestant Reformation. A German Catholic priest, Martin Luther, posted a list of theses, or basic conclusions, on the door of a church in Germany. This list detailed what Luther thought to be abuses or mistakes of the Catholic Church. He felt that the Church was too powerful politically, implying that church and state should be separated. He disagreed with the ornamentation of the Catholic mass, claiming that worship should be simpler. He felt that the church misused funds given to it for the construction of churches and cathedrals, education, and charity. Much of this money was put aside for the personal use of the Pope himself. He also disagreed with the use of indulgences, essentially fines people could pay to be absolved of sin. He felt that sin could only be absolved through confession and penance. He also felt that people should have a more personal relationship with God and be able to interpret the Bible on their own, rather than relying on a priest for interpretation. The invention of the printing press made this more possible than before, as it allowed the Bible to be printed in many people’s native languages instead of Latin. The printing press also allowed the spread of Luther’s ideas across Europe. The Catholic Church was very angry with Luther and threatened him with excommunication, or removal from the Church. Despite this, Luther’s ideas quickly gained popularity in Europe.  

-Luther’s ideas also led to conflict between Catholics and the supporters of the Reformation, now known as Protestants. In England, King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church and formed the Church of England, or Anglican Church.
Conflict Between England and Spain

Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church and formed the Church of England primarily so that he might obtain a divorce in order to remarry and have a male heir. Henry would have only one son, Edward, who was sickly and would die at a young age. Henry’s eldest daughter, Mary, would become queen of England. Mary was a devout Catholic and tried to revert England to Catholicism. She would have many English Protestants arrested, charged with heresy, and executed. She became known as Bloody Mary. After Mary’s death, her half-sister, Elizabeth I, became queen. Elizabeth would return England to Protestantism.

Another European monarch who wished to reverse the Protestant Reformation was Spanish ruler King Philip II, also a devout Catholic and widower of Mary. He hoped to destroy Protestantism throughout Europe, especially in England. Philip was angered by the coronation of Mary’s sister Elizabeth. He was further angered when Elizabeth turned down a proposal of marriage and Elizabeth’s resistance to Spain’s growing power in Europe, and vowed to have Elizabeth removed from the throne and Catholicism restored in England.

Because England was not powerful enough to openly engage the Spanish in warfare, she used more “covert” tactics against Spain. She hired the Sea Dogs to attack Spanish shipping around the world. The Sea Dogs were privateers, or private ship captains given permission to attack a country’s enemies (essentially legalized piracy). The most famous and successful of the Sea Dogs was Sir Francis Drake, who attacked and captured many Spanish treasure ships and became the first Englishman to sail around the world. For this, he was given a knighthood.

Philip II planned to invade England with the largest naval fleet the world had ever seen: the Spanish Armada. In 1588, as the Armada approached England, Elizabeth gathered every available ship for England’s defense. The smaller, faster, more agile English fleet defeated the more powerful but slower Spanish ships, who were forced to retreat. Storms further destroyed the Armada as it tried to escape. This would lead to the decline of Spanish power, and the rise of English power around the world.
The Decline of the Spanish Empire

- After the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Spain’s power began to decline. Spain’s navy was greatly weakened, which allowed other European countries to not only attack Spanish shipping with greater ease, but challenge Spain’s territories in the Americas.

- Another factor that led to Spain’s decline was the rise of inflation in Spain. Much of Spain’s currency, or money or coins, was made from silver, which the Spanish imported in large quantities from the Americas. The supply of silver in Spain was so large that it led to a decline in its value, and thus a decline in the value of Spanish currency. This led to inflation, or the decreasing value of money and the corresponding rise in prices of goods. Spanish people began to import cheaper foreign goods instead of paying the high price for Spanish goods. This further weakened the Spanish economy.

- This led to the end of Spain’s Golden Age. A golden age is a period in a country’s history in which great advancements are made in various areas such as art, literature, etc. Important artists like El Greco created many works of art during this time. Authors like Miguel de Cervantes wrote classic works of literature such as Don Quixote. These works were inspired by the success of Spanish conquistadores in the Americas as well as Spain’s world supremacy.

- The defeat of the Spanish Armada changed all of this. Spain’s power would begin to decline, while the power of other European countries such as England, France, and the Netherlands would gradually increase, paving the way for new colonization efforts in the Americas. However, these colonies would be entirely different than Spain’s in terms of their goals, governments, exports, and people.
The Race for Empires

- With the defeat of the Spanish Armada, this opened the door for other European countries such as England, France, and the Netherlands, who began their own colonization efforts in the Americas.

- The French Huguenots (French Protestants fleeing religious persecution in Europe) first attempted settlement in Florida, which brought them into conflict with the Spanish, who quickly drove them out. The French then focused their colonization efforts around the Great Lakes, the Ohio River Valley, and eastern Canada, where they primarily engaged in the trapping and trading of furs. Samuel de Champlain and Jacques Cartier explored the St. Lawrence River area, where Champlain founded the colony of Quebec. The French also made contact with local native Americans such as the Algonquin and Huron tribes, with whom they established trading relationships. The French also explored the Mississippi River, and explorer Rene Robert de La Salle claimed the area known as Louisiana, named for French king Louis XIV. The French established the settlements of Detroit and New Orleans in the 17th century.

- The Netherlands also established colonies in North America at this time. Peter Minuit established the colony of New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island through a joint-stock company called the Dutch West India Company. The Dutch attracted settlers to New Amsterdam through offers of cheap land and religious freedom.

- England also attempted to establish its first colonies on the west coast of North America. After receiving a charter, or official royal permission, Sir Humphrey Gilbert attempted a failed English colony in Newfoundland. Sir Walter Raleigh then established a colony at Roanoake Island in an area he named Virginia (in reality the location of the colony was in present-day North Carolina) in 1587. This colony was beset with problems. Lack of adequate food and water, disease, and conflict with natives led to its failure. Another attempt to settle the colony was made the next year, but it too failed. These colonists disappeared without a trace, except for a single word carved into a tree: “Croatoan”. The English would not attempt to settle another colony until 1607.