

# HERNÁN CORTÉS



## BIOGRAPHY

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Hernán Cortés was born in Spain around 1485, and traveled to the New World in 1504 in search of wealth and power. He held various positions in the colonies of New Spain, before commanding an expedition to Mexico.

In 1519, a band of men led by Cortés landed on the Gulf Coast of Mexico at the site of what is now Veracruz. Cortés and his 'conquistadors', which means 'conquerors', were following up the fable that America was rich in gold and silver. Cortés had just ten small ships, four hundred men, and sixteen horses. But in just a few years he managed to conquer the vast Aztec empire.

Cortés could not do this alone. Instead, he used the rule of 'divide and conquer'. At this time, the Aztecs ruled a vast empire in Mexico. They were a warrior people, and they wanted to get taxes and other riches from the people of their empire. They also killed or made their enemies slaves. Unsurprisingly, all their enemies needed was a strong-minded and skilful leader like Cortés to make them all come together to defeat the Aztecs.

As it happened, Cortés and his men had quite unwittingly come with another weapon – disease. The peoples in the Americas had never been exposed to diseases like smallpox, and they had no resistance to it.

Aztec cities were rich in gold, but Cortés wanted more than gold. He wanted power. Cortés, his men, and their Native American allies looted, burned, and destroyed almost the entire civilization, leaving the Spanish in control of Mexico.

Cortés was an exceptionally ruthless man. Gradually, the native tribes who had helped Cortés to beat the Aztecs found themselves being oppressed as well. The native peoples were put to work mining gold and silver for the Spanish to send back to Spain.

For a while after he had gained control of Mexico, Cortés was governor of New Spain. But he soon faced rebellions against his rule, and he eventually retired to Spain in 1540. He died seven years later.

# Understanding words

Before we can understand a story we have to know what all of the words mean. Let's try one...

a Write the sentence in which you found the word 'exposed'.

b From that sentence, suggest what 'exposed' means.

c Write a new sentence using the word 'exposed'.

d Use a dictionary to find words with a similar meaning (synonyms) to 'exposed'.

e Draw a small picture showing what you think 'exposed' means.

Try this for other words, too. 

# Finding key words

Next, we need to find the key words that tell us what the story is about...

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list like the one below. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym). You don't have to use all the spaces, but you should not use more.

Key word	Synonym (similar word)
Example: wealth	riches

# Sequencing

Sequencing means getting the events in the right order. Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense.

Cortés did this by bringing together the Aztecs' enemies and using them against the Aztecs.

Later, Cortés faced rebellions and lost his power, so he returned to Spain.

Cortés took gold from the Aztec empire, and took control of it.

In 1519, Cortés commanded an expedition to Mexico.

But Cortés and his men had also brought diseases that the Aztecs had no resistance to, which killed many of them.

Hernán Cortés was born in Spain in the late fifteenth century.

Over the next few years, Cortés conquered the Aztec empire in Mexico.



# Get to the facts

1 Where was Hernán Cortés born?

2 When did Cortés and his men land in Mexico?

3 How many ships did Cortés have?

4 What were the Aztec cities rich in?

5 What did Cortés and his men unwittingly bring with them?

# Make a story...

When you read a description it often gives you ideas about how the event might be described differently.

## City of gold

When I set foot in the Aztec city, I could not believe my eyes. There was gold everywhere... (now complete the story)

**Below is a plain text version for printing:**



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Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym).

For example:

Key word – wealth                      Synonym – riches

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