

Conquistadors & Slavery

"Glory & Gold"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. When early explorers like Christopher Columbus landed in what is now South America, they returned home to brag. But the conquistadors wanted to stay. Conquistador is related to the words conquer and conquest, which are used when someone takes something over with threats or violence. So the conquistadors didn't care that people were already living in the newly discovered countries. They did not respect the authority of the advanced civilizations that had developed in those lands over thousands of years. Instead, they saw the current citizens as standing in their way. The conquistadors wanted land. They wanted gold. And they didn't mind killing to get it.

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2. When Hernán Cortés arrived in the Americas, he thought he might have to conquer unorganized, undeveloped tribes. He was not ready for the fully formed civilization of the Aztecs. His awe at the wonders of Tenochtitlán, the major city of the Aztec empire, quickly gave way to desire for ownership of this advanced city on a lake.

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Cortés met his match in Montezuma, the leader of the Aztec empire. Montezuma lived in a palace, wore gold sandals and was generally treated like a God. He was a feared warlord in what became Latin America. But when Cortés arrived, Montezuma treated him well. Only afterward did the Aztecs realize that Cortés had bad intentions. Suddenly, the Aztecs didn't want these outsiders around anymore. So the Aztecs drove the Spanish out.

But Cortés would not be stopped. Cortés returned with thousands of soldiers and destroyed the city in two years of bloody war. He killed Montezuma. He brought down the empire. Spain violently won control over the Aztecs.

3. Even though conquistadors such as Cortés and Pizarro rode in on horses and shot with guns, bullets ultimately did not kill most of the Aztecs, Incas and other Native Americans. In addition to the supplies that the explorers carried with them on their ships, secret passengers also sailed the choppy seas of the Atlantic: germs. The Native Americans had never been exposed to germs from smallpox, measles and influenza, so their bodies had not learned to fight them off. Disease killed thousands of Native Americans in only a few years.

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To understand how powerful of a weapon these diseases were, look at these population numbers: When Columbus arrived in Haiti in 1492, approximately 100,000 people lived there. By 1570 there were only 300 people left! Before the conquistadors arrived, 25 million people lived in Mexico. Within a hundred years, there were only 3 million people left.

4. Spain knew that it was possible to defeat the natives. Cortés' victory over the Aztecs inspired Francisco Pizarro to take down the empire of the Inca, known for their massive mountains of gold. Pizarro and his men were obsessed with gold. The Incas actually found that strange—they mainly used gold for art and didn't consider it to be all that valuable. Even though Pizarro had a small army of only 200 soldiers, they had the advantage of guns and horses. Near the end of battle, Pizarro and his men captured Atahualpa, the Inca king.

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King Atahualpa told Pizarro he'd have his men fill a room with gold in exchange for his freedom. Pizarro agreed, and the Incas melted down much of their gold art to fill the room. But Pizarro killed Atahualpa anyway. Out of a leader and out of gold, the Incas could not fight back. So the Spanish took over the empire, which was in modern-day Peru. The Incas revolted and assassinated Pizarro in 1541. But by that point, the Spanish held a strong grip on the area and wouldn't let go.

5. It is said that the explorers and conquistadors explored for "God, Glory and Gold." Therefore, once they conquered lands, they looked to convert the native people to Christianity. People who spread Christianity were called missionaries. Missionaries believed they were on a holy mission from God to convert the Native Americans to Catholicism. In fact, just before the Age of Exploration, Spain held the great Inquisition, where the government forced non-Christians to convert or be killed.

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6. The Spanish created tobacco and sugar plantations in the new world. Work on plantations was challenging and endless. The Spanish and Portuguese needed cheap labor. Slavery was about as cheap as it got. In fact, the conquistadors saw easy workers in African men, women and children. Europeans believed they were being reasonable—since the Africans were black, and more importantly not Christian, the conquistadors believed that they were less than human. The Europeans didn't think they had to treat the Africans as they treated other people, since they didn't really believe they were people. Through brutal force, they turned free Africans into property.

The triangular trade was the way that Europe and the New World both profited from the misery of slaves. Colonists in the Americas would send crops and other raw materials over to Europe. That was the first line of the triangle. Then Europeans would use these goods to manufacture items and bring their manufactured items to Africa. This was leg two. Then they would trade their items for humans and bring the slaves across the Middle Passage of the Atlantic Ocean to trade for American crops. The trade effectively said that slaves weren't humans, but products.

7. Once they became slaves, Africans would wait in dungeons for weeks, sometimes not seeing the light of day. Moving from a dungeon on land to a prison at sea, the Africans suffered a terrible journey across the Atlantic. They were packed together, forced to eat, and if they disobeyed any rule, they were beaten mercilessly. Slave ship owners forced the slaves to dance for exercise, and they would crack whips at them to keep them moving. If the slaves died, ship-owners simply tossed them overboard. One out of five Africans died before they even reached the New World. Those who arrived faced a life of slavery. Over 12 million people were enslaved this way. About 15 percent died on the trip over. Slavery in the United States would continue until the middle of the nineteenth century.

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