The Spanish introduced new forms of government, religion, economy, and culture to the Americas. After the 1500s, the Spanish empire stretched from the southern coast of South America through the California mission system west to the Pacific Ocean. Even though the colonies were far away from Spain, the Spanish kept strict control over them. The king decided who ran the colonial government. He allowed the colonies to trade only with Spain. The Catholic Church was very important in the colonies. Church leaders often helped to run the government. They also worked to convert Native Americans to Christianity. Growing sugar cane became a large business. At first, Native Americans were forced to work on sugar plantations. The Spanish then brought slaves from Africa to do the work.

In Spanish America, the mix of peoples led to a new social structure. A new social structure developed. People born in Spain made up the highest social class. Those of European and African descent born in the colonies were next. People of mixed European and African descent were in the middle. Native Americans and people of African descent were at the bottom of the social structure.

**Review Questions**

1. What were two ways in which Spain controlled its colonies?
2. Diagram Skills. What group had the most power in the Spanish colonies? What group had the least power?
The First Global Age: Europe, the Americas, and Africa (1492–1750)

SECTION

CONQUEST IN THE AMERICAS

TEXT SUMMARY

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in the West Indies. At first, the Native Americans were friendly and generous toward the Spanish. However, these friendly feelings did not last. The Spanish soon forced the Indians to work for them. Many Indians died from cruel treatment.

Many Spanish conquistadors, or conquerors, followed Columbus to the Americas. They came to find riches. Some also wanted to convert Native Americans to Christianity. Within a few years, the Spanish had conquered several Indian civilizations. Hernan Cortés defeated the powerful Aztec empire in Mexico. Francisco Pizarro destroyed the Incan empire in Peru. (See timeline below.)

The Spanish were able to conquer these empires so quickly for several reasons. The Spanish used horses and powerful weapons that the Indians had never seen before. They also had Native American allies who fought on the Spanish side. Diseases brought by the Europeans also killed millions of Indians. Their deaths made others feel that their gods had deserted them.

THE BIG IDEA

Desire for riches, as well as religious zeal, encouraged Spanish explorers to travel to the Americas.

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: Early Spanish Conquests in the Americas

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<td>Cortés destroys the Aztec Empire.</td>
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<td>1492</td>
<td>Columbus lands in the Americas.</td>
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<td>1532</td>
<td>Pizarro destroys the Inca Empire.</td>
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The Spanish conquered the Aztec and Inca empires.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Give two reasons that the Spanish were able to conquer the Native American empires.

2. Timeline Skills Name two Native American civilizations that were destroyed by the Spanish conquistadors.