**SS6H1a. Describe the encounter and consequences of the conflict between the Spanish and the Aztecs and Incas and the roles of Cortes, Montezuma, Pizarro, and Atahualpa.**

**The Aztec**

The Aztec were nomads who came to the Mexico valley around 1250 A.D. The people who lived in this valley were not happy to see the Aztec arrive. One king was so upset with the Aztec he granted them snake filled land in hopes they would be killed off. The Aztec only feasted on snake and grew stronger.

Because the Aztec were nomadic, they knew how to survive in any situation. They had wandered for hundreds of years looking for their “promised land”. They believed they were promised this land from the serpent sun god Quetzalcoatl. The sun god was the most important god to the Aztec. Being in the presence of the sun god was the highest honor an Aztec could receive. Legend tells that the Aztec sacrificed a local princess to one of their gods. The princess’s father vowed revenge against the Aztec, so they left the area. They eventually made it to Lake Texcoco where they believed they had found their promised land! The gods told the Aztec to build a great city on the two islands on the lake so the Aztec worked day and night until their city was built. They also built floating gardens for their crops and bridges to the mainland. They called their city Tenochtitlan. The Aztec began conquering neighboring tribes and grew more powerful. Merchants traded gold, silver and pottery in large marketplaces.

The King was the head of Aztec society. He was chosen by a council of warriors, priests, and nobles from the members of the royal family. The council looked for someone who would bring glory to the Aztec. The king was followed by the four classes of people: 1) nobles; 2) commoners; 3) unskilled workers; and 4) enslaved people. The commoner class (the largest class) was formed of farmers, artisans, and traders. A commoner could become a noble by one act of bravery during war. The afterlife was very important to the Aztec. They believed soldiers who died in war, captives who gave their lives in sacrifice and women who died in childbirth were worthy of the afterlife. Everyone else (ordinary people who did not die in the service of the gods) went to the “land of the dead” which was the lowest level in the underworld.

From an early age, the children knew their duty in the Aztec world. Boys were expected to become warriors and girls were expected to become wives and mothers. Girls, however, were honored every time they gave birth.

The Aztec built The Great Temple in the center of the city where thousands of victims were sacrificed to the gods. The Great Temple was built to honor the god, Huitzilopochtli.

**Hernan Cortes**- Cortes was a Spanish nobleman who led the armed forces that defeated the Aztec. As a young person, Cortes was given the choice of being a lawyer, a priest, or a soldier. Although his parents wanted him to be a lawyer, he chose to be a soldier. As a young soldier, Cortes was part of the army that invaded and controlled Cuba. He impressed his commander so well, he was put in charge of several Native American villages. Cortes quickly gained rank and became an important soldier. Six years after the invasion of Cuba, smallpox (brought over by the soldiers) spread across Cuba and wiped out most of the population. Cortes was told to find new workers to work the cane fields. He went to the Yucatan and invaded Mexico. Montezuma II was the Aztec emperor at the time of the invasion. Montezuma claimed he saw the invasion in a dream. In April, 1519, Cortes landed what now today Veracruz. He had 550 soldiers, 16 horses, 14 cannons, and a few dogs. Although his army was small compared to the vast Aztec Empire, he had a few things going on his side:

1. He used his guns and cannons to shock the Aztec. 2) Through a Mayan translator who knew the Aztec language, he was able to learn about the Aztec empire and gain alliances along the way that helped him gain more power. 3) Cortes had the greatest weapon of all- GERMS! Smallpox and measles killed more Aztecs than any sword, gun, or cannon could.

Although it was a 400 mile journey to Tenochtitlan, Cortes reached the capital by November, 1519. Messengers of Montezuma reported the Spaniards every move, however, the Aztec though Cortes was a light skinned god named Quetzalcoatl who had “promised to return someday to reclaim his land”. Because Montezuma thought Cortes was this god, he did not attack the Spaniards. As Cortes got closer to Tenochtitlan, Montezuma decided to attack, but Cortes attacked first killing over 6,000 Aztec. Cortes then took control of the city and took Montezuma hostage to keep the Aztec from rebelling. Cortes ordered the Aztec to stop sacrificing people, which made the Aztec furious. A rebellion began driving the Spaniards into the mountains. In the process, Montezuma was killed. The Spanish plan to attack again, but before they could, smallpox broke out killing thousands of Aztec. The Spaniards easily took control of the weakened Aztec empire and destroyed their capital.

**Montezuma II-** From about 1500-1520, Montezuma II was the Aztec ruler. He is the most known Aztec ruler because he was the ruler during the Spanish invasion by Cortes. While ruler, the Aztec empire expanded greatly for central and southern Mexico. People conquered by Montezuma had to pay high taxes to him and also give him humans to be sacrificed. He was very unpopular with people he conquered, however, he was very popular with his own people and was considered a great leader. Montezuma welcomed Cortes to Tenochtitlan with open arms. He gave Cortes and his men elaborate gifts of gold. Montezuma was hoping Cortes would take the gifts and leave, however, Cortes took Montezuma hostage and ruled the empire while Montezuma was a prisoner in his own palace. In 1520, a battle took place and Montezuma was killed. Both Aztec and Spanish were saddened by his death.