

# The columbian exchange and transatlantic slave trade essay

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Europe's maritime dominance and the opening of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans had major consequences in world history.

Including creating a new international pool for the basic exchange of foods, diseases, and a few manufactured products. While this exchange had its high points such as introduction of new crops and new animals to the Americas and other countries it also brought widespread demographic destruction. At the same time Native Americans who had never been brought into contact with the diseases that the Europeans carried many died. In 1972, the historian Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. , proposed that Christopher Columbus's voyages to the New World produced even greater consequences biologically than they did culturally.

The Columbian Exchange is the term Crosby coined to describe the worldwide redistribution of plants, animals, and diseases that resulted from the initial contacts between Europeans and American Indians. This process had a profound impact on both societies. Columbus brought the first horses and pigs to the Americas; both animals became integrated into many Indian societies. Likewise, the new plant and animal species that Columbus and other explorers encountered in North America such as tobacco, corn, and turkeys presented a challenge to traditional Christian conceptions of the world and opened new opportunities for European farmers and businesspeople.

The impact of wider exchange became visible quickly. Chief positive contributions to the Americas resulted as part of this Columbian Exchange such as the introduction of new crops and animals. On the other hand

perhaps the most powerful currency of the Columbian Exchange, however, was epidemic disease and how the extension of international contacts spread disease. The complete list of infectious diseases that were present in the Eastern Hemisphere but not in the Americas at the time may never be known. Still most scholars agree that the list should include: smallpox, bubonic plague, measles, whooping cough, malaria, yellow fever, diphtheria, amoebic dysentery, and influenza (Tomaske). Everyday European diseases were unknown in North America before Columbus's arrival. The victims were millions of Native Americans who had never been exposed to Afro Eurasian diseases such as these and who therefore had no natural immunities. From the 16th to the 17th century they died in large numbers.

Overall, in North and South America, more than half the native population would die; some estimates run as high as 80 percent (Stearns). Whole island populations in the West Indies were wiped out. This was a major blow to earlier civilizations in the Americas as well as an opportunity for Europeans to forge a partially new population of their own citizens and slaves imported from Africa. The damage occurred over a 150-year period, although in some areas it was more rapid. When Europeans made contact with Polynesian and Pacific Coast Indians in the 18th century, the same dreadful pattern played out, again devastating vibrant cultures. Political and spiritual leaders died and left traditions in disarray; subsistence cycles were disrupted; family life was devastated. These losses put American Indians at a disadvantage when they fought to protect their lands or attempted to negotiate treaties with imperial powers (Houghlin Mifflin).

Largely immune to the diseases that corroded native life, Europeans were able to take and hold an advantage over the tribes, turning their attention to learning to use the domesticated animals and plants they encountered in the New World. However there were exchanges with impacts less disastrous. New World crops such as corn and sweet potatoes spread rapidly via Western merchants. Adopted widely in China, the Mediterranean, and parts of Africa these interactions spurred population growth. For example, China began to experience long-term population pressure in the 17th century, and new crops played a key role. Ironically Europe itself was slower to take benefit from them.

The use of tobacco, sugar, and coffee spread, but corn and particularly the potato were adopted only in the late 17th century at which point they triggered major population upheaval in Europe as well. Likewise European and Asian animals were introduced into the Americas, which had previously lacked animal power. Domesticated animals that could be put to good use such as horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, and chickens (Tallant). The spread of basic products and diseases formed an important backdrop to world history from the 16th century on, with varying impacts on population structures and diverse regions and the long-term effects of the Columbian Exchange were mixed. It created an enormous increase in food production and human populations, but it also destroyed the ecological stability of vast areas, increased land erosion, and led to the extinction of many civilizations (Houghton Mifflin).