

Changes continues from 1492-1750



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The Renaissance in Western Europe marked the end of the middle Ages and the start of Europe's rise as a global power. States in Western Europe became more centralized, and monarchs exercised more control over their subjects. Christopher Columbus's voyage to America and triumphant return signaled the beginning of a new era of exploration. Likewise, Prince Henry the Navigator's expeditions along the West African coast led to increased trade with Africa.

Long isolated from the rest of the world, the Native Americans' lives were drastically changed by the presence of European explorers, and later, colonists. Some aspects of life, such as domination by the elite in Europe, trade in Africa, and Native American ways of life in the Americas, have remained the same through the period. New contacts among Western Europe, Africa, and the Americas, however, led to interaction that has only increased with time. New contacts and increased trade led to the rise of a middle class in Western Europe. Traditionally, and throughout the feudal period, nobles had controlled government and wealth. As trade with Africa and the Americas increased, however, a new merchant class rose. As the new class became wealthier, they began to agitate for political power, eventually leading to conflicts such as the 1789 French Revolution.

In the Americas, social transformations were huge. Deadly diseases brought by the Europeans decimated local populations, who had no resistance to smallpox, measles, etc. In one notorious case, during Spaniard Hernan Cortez's conquest of the Aztecs, the Spanish intentionally gave the Aztecs disease-ridden blankets. Such tactics also led to the downfall of the Incas, who were conquered by Francisco Pizarro. From residing in mighty cities and

presiding over huge empires, the Native American people were reduced to serving as servants or slaves of the new conquerors. A similar trend occurred in North America. Unlike the Aztecs or Incas, North American natives were decentralized, and loosely organized by tribes.

Columbus's initial subjugation of the Haitians, forcing them to mine gold, set a precedent for future domination. Africa was particularly affected by the slave trade. Large amounts of labor were needed on the Spanish and Portuguese sugarcane plantations, and Native American populations were often unable or unwilling to work as slaves. Especially after Bartolome de las Casas's campaign against the subjugation of Native Americans, the Europeans needed another source of labor. Thus, the Atlantic slave trade began, ultimately resulting in the forced movement of 12 million slaves from Africa. The slave trade had both positive and negative effects on African society. While slavery was cruel and exploitative, the money some empires such as Benin acquired from working with the Europeans allowed them to build stronger empires.

Despite massive change, some aspects of life stayed the same. In Western Europe, the gap between the poor and the rich remained; even though a middle class had developed, the power was still concentrated in the hands of a few. Every Western European country was a monarchy, and there was almost no popular representation. Even in Britain, by 1750 only about 2% of the population could vote, due to property ownership requirements and other standards. The period from 1492 to 1750 was still one of control. In the Americas, many tribes were still able to maintain their traditional way of life. Many tribes displaced by British settlers in North America moved west, and

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since the French had yet to settle the huge Louisiana Territory, they were free to continue with traditional methods.

Africa was still, for the most part, free. Not until the 1880's would the majority of Africa become colonized. Though less powerful than the Western Europeans, African nations remained independent and gained wealth through trade. In conclusion, the interaction between Western Europe, Africa, and the Americas has resulted in both change and continuity. One irreversible trend, however, was the growing interconnectedness of the global community. Columbus united the New World with the Old, creating a bridge that has never since been broken. Recent developments such as globalization and information technology have metaphorically shrunk the world.

Interaction between 1492 and 1750 set a precedent for future actions.