

# The transition from feudalism to capitalism in europe history essay



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Feudalism existed in Europe from about 300 to 1400 AD, as the concept of capitalism started to take shape. It's generally believed that feudalism ended with the renaissance in Europe, a time in which there was a great revival of art, science, literature and human freedom. Although the renaissance played a key role in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, several other factors also contributed to the transition. These factors include flaws within the feudal system as well as external forces that created a long-lasting impact on the medieval societies.

Some of the internal factors that led to the collapse of feudalism include internal wars, rebellions by the common folk and inefficiency of the system as a whole. The feudal system placed heads of groups between the monarch and the inhabitants, thereby increasing tension between the common folk and the monarch. A Peasant Revolt ensued all over Europe in the 14th century, which resulted into the old system being broken up and the beginning of the modern social economy. The Revolt led to the division of national wealth among small landed entrepreneurs.

The Crusades and travel during the middle ages opened new trade options for England. More trade saw the growth of more towns and thus more merchants. Another disruptive force was the increase of communication, which broke down the isolated homesteads, assisted the rise of towns, and facilitated the emergence of the middle-class. This process was greatly accelerated in the 14th century and did much to destroy the feudal classifications of society. Towns and cities in turn provided alternative employment opportunities, improving the livelihoods of the peasants and in the process encouraging rural to urban migration. Fiefs left their lords for

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towns and cities, leaving landlords labor less hence contributing to the demise of feudalism.

Lords were to ensure that their fiefs had access to the church. They were also not permitted to force the fiefs to work on Sundays. In essence, the feudal arrangement was a subsistence system that focused on two elements, survival and salvation (Hamilton 2007). As Europe became safer, merchants invaded the rural society giving way to wealthy towns and cities. Vassals and fiefs were replaced by private armies and commoners, as merchants became the new source of power for the kings.

Karl Marx points out the fall of feudalism should be mainly attributed to internal factors. As demand for commodities grew as a result of new markets and increase in trade, the inefficiency of the rigid feudal structure of production failed to meet new demand. New methods of production arose, thereby increasing division of labor which enhanced productivity. As capitalist modes of production improved, landlords began to perceive themselves as businessmen, thus striving for higher economic returns. As technology improved, new modes of production were only probable if farming was on larger fields. Fiefs were kicked off the land, those who left moved on to join towns and cities while the rest remained to become paid laborers.

One of the major external factors that led to the transition from feudalism to capitalism was the expansion of trade. Merchants began to prosper as Europe became more stable. They were a unique class of individuals in that they were not bound by obligations, thereby conducting trade in their own

interest, or else everything would come to a standstill. Merchants started to transform society, from subsistence to an economic one, thereby revitalizing the notion of capital gain. The new merchant class also provided important money for kings, who stood much to gain by encouraging their trade.

Monarchs could now raise money through merchants and build armies that were only loyal to the king, instead of relying on the commoners for military force. Mercenaries had few loyalties, except to money, and were feared all through Europe. The threat of mercenaries led to the employment of professionally trained private soldiers; the Standing Armies, and ultimately the end of Feudalism in Europe. The system of raising armies for wars ultimately led to the substitution of money for land. The old system of feudal levy, which formed the basis for feudalism, became obsolete as money became the symbol of power. Land ceased to be as valuable as it once was in the eyes of the monarch. In this sense, Europe started transforming from a land based economy to a money based economy. Land was later-on rented in exchange for money and the rights of lords over labor decreased.

Another external factor that weakened feudalism was the demographic crisis in the 14th century. The Great Famine (1315-1317) led to a decline in agricultural production, meaning the lords had to come up with new strategies to obtain sustainability. The Black Death (1348-1350) severely decreased Europe's population, thereby making labor a valuable commodity. The lords tracked their tenants as capital pleaded for labor. All provisions to control labor proved futile, as poor men entered into service of their own lords as hired laborers.

In conclusion, the platform that held feudalism in place failed to pass the test of time. The mechanisms put in place weren't stable enough to fend off the concept of capitalism, what came to be termed as economic freedom. The renaissance in Europe also took its toll on feudalism, as the people embraced art, technologies and change, which marked an end of the medieval times and transition into the modern world.