



1958

3. The Expansion of Europe

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "3. The Expansion of Europe. Pt IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 18-24.

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3. The Expansion of Europe

Abstract

Concurrent with the political and diplomatic developments just described, and exercising a significant influence upon them, there occurred a vast overseas expansion of Western Civilization. Although the Crusades were the first phase of this expansion, not until the early modern period did European energies burst forth with sufficient vigor that their impact became worldwide. In the intervening centuries such things as the growth of commercial capitalism, the rise of the strong national state, and the intellectual upsurge associated with the Renaissance prepared Europeans for the mighty task of discovering, exploring, and colonizing areas in all parts of the globe. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Colonial Expansion, Crusades, Commercial Capitalism, Renaissance, Colonization

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History

Comments

This is a part of [Section IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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One of the earliest and most effective promoters of this expansion was Prince Henry of Portugal (1394-1460). His small state had won its very existence in battle with the Moslems and preserved its independence by fighting off the Castilians, facts which help to explain its high degree of national unity. Henry shared many of the same motives which guided later participants in the adventure of expansion. These motives have been summarized conveniently as gospel, glory, and gold. Henry was a prince in whom the crusading instincts were still strong. He was also fully aware of the fame that would accrue to Portugal and its royal house if important discoveries were made beyond the narrow rim of Europe's horizon. Finally, having heard tales of precious metals to the south in Africa, he was anxious to determine their truth, since Portugal was short of gold. He learned everything he could about navigation and taught what he knew to those who entered his service. Though known as Prince Henry the Navigator, he left the actual ocean travel to others. By his time the compass, the astrolabe, improved maps, and more seaworthy vessels gave greater promise of success than ever before to the projects he had in mind. He sent expeditions westward, which discovered such islands as the Azores, while others sailed southward, comfortably close to the African coast. Gradually his hardy seamen overcame their fear of the unknown seas before them, first passing the hump of Africa and then, after Henry's death, crossing the Equator. By this time, if not before the Portuguese wanted to advance the glory of Portugal by discovering an all-water route to India which would break the Venetian and Moslem monopolies of the spice trade and replace it with a monopoly of their own.

A few years after the death of Prince Henry, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), a Genoese navigator living in Portugal, tried to persuade the king that the most practical way to reach the Indies was by sailing west, not south. In this he failed, but he next proposed an expedition to test his theory to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Although these monarchs were interested, at the moment they were preoccupied by domestic problems and the recapture of Granada from the Moslems. Only after about eight years of waiting was Columbus granted his

request. Two months and nine days after he set sail from Spain he sighted one of the Bahama Islands (October 12, 1492). He sailed along the coasts of Cuba and Haiti before returning to Spain, confident that he had discovered the eastern approaches to Asia. The only flaw in his calculations had been his serious underestimation of the size of the earth, which eliminated the two American continents from his considerations.

The thirty years which followed the entrance of Columbus into the Caribbean was a momentous period of discovery unmatched in the history of the world. It forced upon Europeans a radically different understanding of the earth's geography. After a ten months' voyage a Portuguese, Vasco da Gama (c. 1469-1524), reached India by sea in 1498. In the same year John Cabot (1450-1498), sailing under the flag of England, discovered Newfoundland while cruising along the coast of North America. In 1500 a Portuguese fleet touched Brazil. In 1513 Vasco Nunez da Balboa (1475-1517), a Spaniard, looked upon the Pacific Ocean from the east at about the same time that a Portuguese vessel entered it from the west. Finally, in 1522 one of the vessels in an expedition commanded by Ferdinand Magellan (c. 1480-1521) circumnavigated the globe, proving once and for all that such a feat was possible.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to build a colonial empire. About a decade after the voyage of Vasco da Gama, which established a permanent link between India and the Western World, the Portuguese defeated a Moslem fleet (1509) and gained a measure of control over the Indian Ocean. They set up fortified trading posts and established the necessary contacts in India, the East Indies, and China. The Portuguese were little interested in conquering territory or in making settlements. The possession of these posts, defended by a few soldiers, and the protection afforded by the navy enabled them virtually to monopolize the spice trade for more than a century. They brought the pepper, cinnamon, and other spices to Lisbon, allowing others to distribute the cargoes from there. In the seventeenth century the Dutch and the English made serious inroads on this empire, which about 1,000,000 Portuguese scarcely had the manpower and other resources to defend successfully, try as they might. Possibly because for 250 years Portugal has maintained close ties with England, sizable parts of its empire remain to the present.

About 1450, while the Portuguese were exploring along the western coast of Africa, they began bringing a few enslaved Negroes back with them, thus reviving an institution which had virtually disappeared in Europe during the Middle Ages. The Portuguese had little use for slave labor at home. It was only after the natives in colonial areas were eliminated in one way or another or refused to work, and after plantation agriculture began, that there was much demand for Negroes. Then the slave trade became an enormous and most lucrative undertaking, which the Portuguese tried to monopolize as they did the spice trade. But Portugal was soon forced to share this trade with the same competitors who almost drove her from the East.

Although Spain claimed the Philippine Islands and settled them, most of her overseas efforts in the sixteenth century were in the New World. Fanning out from the Caribbean area which Columbus had discovered, Spanish adventurers, sometimes on their own initiative and at their own expense, conquered the Aztec empire in Mexico and the Inca empire in Peru, explored as far as southern Chile and Argentina, and as far north as the southern part of the United States. The government of Spain was quick to recognize that, if this vast area were organized and foreigners excluded, it could be made to yield great wealth for the mother country. Already by 1525 steps were taken to concentrate control of most colonial affairs in the hands of the king, a tendency which increased as the years passed, in spite of the fact that Madrid was far away. When the rich silver mines of Peru and Mexico were opened a new stage in Spanish exploitation of the New World began. Ordinarily two great fleets, convoyed by warships, each year carried silver and gold to Spain and brought back many manufactured goods to America.

Unlike the Portuguese in Asia, Spain made a heroic and notably successful attempt to carry Western Civilization to the New World. By 1600 there were more than 150,000 Spaniards in America. The Roman Catholic church was already a powerful institution; even the Inquisition was transplanted. The Jesuits in particular converted the Indians and taught them handicrafts and new methods of agriculture, the latter of which became increasingly important to the Spaniards as the best veins of silver were worked out. Cities were established. The Universities of Mexico City, Lima, and Santo Domingo, which were the first in the New World, date from this period. Although the Spanish government forbade the practice and the church tried to prevent it, many Indians were enslaved to provide the labor on which this civilization rested. When they proved to be unsatisfactory workers, their places were taken by Negroes.

Like the Portuguese, the Spanish had to fight to preserve their empire, but they were much more successful for a long period of time. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries English, French, and Dutch buccaneers constantly preyed on the Spanish fleets, which after 1600 carried less and less silver to an already declining Spain. Spain was unable to prevent widespread smuggling of cheaper and more abundant foreign goods into her colonies. In time she was forced to grant important commercial privileges there to England. But it was not until the first quarter of the nineteenth century that most of these colonies slipped from the Spanish grip.

By the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) Spain and Portugal had tried, in effect, to divide the non-European world into two large colonial preserves, one for each. During the sixteenth century they had it largely to themselves. Neither the Dutch, French, nor English seemed able to spare the energies for more than exploration and sporadic efforts to break through the Spanish and Portuguese monopolies. The seventeenth century, however, was a different story.

When in 1594 the Lisbon spice market was closed to the Dutch and the English, they began looking for spices at their source in the East Indies. The Dutch organized the East India Company in 1602. With considerable powers and intimate ties with the government, this agency replaced the Portuguese with a Dutch spice monopoly, which like its predecessor was to last for more than a century. The Dutch established themselves in Ceylon and the East Indies, and defeated the English, who then turned their attention to India. In 1652 the Dutch made a settlement at Capetown on the southern tip of Africa, thereby gaining a most valuable way station that had been neglected by other powers. In the 1640's a Dutch explorer sailed around Australia, discovered New Zealand, and gave his name to Tasmania. Between 1638 and 1854 the Dutch were the only Westerners whom the isolationist Japanese allowed to trade with them.

The Dutch were less successful in the New World. A West India Company was chartered in 1621, which preyed upon the Spaniards and Portuguese and attempted to capture the slave trade. The Dutch competed with the Spaniards, French, and English for the rich Caribbean islands, which promised to yield an abundance of sugar, tobacco, and tropical fruits. But the Portuguese expelled them from their foothold in Brazil and about the same time the English seized New Netherlands (1664). The Dutch empire resembled the Portuguese in that it was primarily a trading empire. Few Dutchmen ventured forth to plant their culture on foreign shores. Many of their valuable East Indian possessions were maintained until the mid-twentieth century.

As late as 1600 France was still without permanent overseas colonies. A few voyages of exploration had been undertaken, but no permanent settlement followed until Quebec was founded in 1608. In time French dominion in North America stretched through the valley of the St. Lawrence River to the mouth of the Mississippi, a settlement having been made at Biloxi in 1699. The French were disappointed at not finding large amounts of gold and silver, as had the Spanish, but they did develop a thriving fur trade in Canada. Few Frenchmen came to the New World, despite government encouragement. An economy based on the fur trade required few people, but many persons who might have come were kept out because they were not Catholic. The French also acquired several Caribbean islands, including two which are still French: Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Shortly after Colbert became finance minister (1661) he chartered an East India Company to enter belatedly into active competition with the Dutch and the British in that area. Rivalry between the British and French for influence in India became intense about the middle of the eighteenth century. During the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) the issue was decided in favor of the English, who reduced the French possessions to a few small trading posts and at the same time virtually eliminated French influence in North America. It is clear that the French empire, in spite of the interest of Colbert and others, was always something secondary to French interests on the continent

of Europe. The commercial classes never had an opportunity to divert French policy from its preoccupation with dynastic rivalry and the acquisition of territory in Europe.

As late as 1600 England, like the Netherlands and France, was still without permanent overseas colonies. For almost a century Englishmen had searched for a northwest and a northeast passage to India and had buccaneered against Spain. Then, on the last day of the year 1600, the famous English East India Company was chartered, and within a decade the first permanent English colony on the North American continent was established. Beginning in 1609 the English began acquiring valuable Caribbean islands: Barbados, Jamaica, and others. The East India Company got trading rights in India, defeated a Portuguese fleet, and later established itself at Madras (1639), Bombay (1661), and Calcutta (1690). Although at first trade with India was most desired for spices, soon such things as cotton, textiles, and tea far surpassed spices in importance.

The British colonies in North America deserve more than passing mention. Many British subjects emigrated there with the intention of remaining permanently, a motive less pronounced in Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, or French overseas expansion. The British allowed almost anyone to settle in their part of North America, no matter what his religion or national origin, another almost unique policy. As a result, there were about 2,500,000 people in the Thirteen Colonies in 1776, exclusive of those in what is now Canada. The British had permitted these people to have "the rights of Englishmen," which included some sort of representative government. For more than a century colonial legislatures trained men in the art of self-government and gathered important political powers to themselves. During the same period many of the colonial economic regulations were not rigorously enforced, a policy described as "salutary neglect." After 1763, when the British sought to reorganize and tighten their greatly enlarged empire, they met with strong objections from these colonies, where men no longer felt any great dependence on the mother country.

This expansion of the Atlantic powers into the Western and Eastern hemispheres ultimately had profound effects on almost every aspect of life in Europe itself. One of the most far reaching was the shift in the center of economic activity, with all that entailed, from the Mediterranean and the Baltic Seas to the Atlantic Ocean. Although such prosperous cities as Venice and Augsburg did not decline immediately, they could not long compare in income and wealth with London, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bordeaux, Lisbon, or Cadiz, especially since these Atlantic ports were located in states which actively promoted commerce.

Another far-reaching effect of the expansion was the cumulative increase and shift in world commerce and industry which it promoted. Until about 1650 almost the only significant imports from the East were spices and from the New World silver

bullion. After that, however, their places were taken by such popular beverages as cocoa, tea, and coffee; sugar (which soon became cheap enough to be within the reach of most people); tobacco (to which many Europeans took with gusto); chinaware; cotton, cotton textiles, and other cloths; and furs. Some of these imports were new to Europeans, while others were now available for the first time on a large scale. All of them made life somewhat more comfortable for many Europeans than it had even been before. In return for these commodities Europe exported such things as guns and gunpowder; trinkets of many kinds; and woolen, linen, and silk textiles. These exports had the effect of promoting European industry as well as commerce. Few industries were stimulated more than shipbuilding.

The influx into Europe of tremendous quantities of gold and silver, especially the latter, brought a third far-reaching effect of expansion. In the century before Columbus there again had been a shortage of precious metals, which was only partially relieved by the opening of new German silver mines and the importation of African gold by the Portuguese. Then, from the time of Columbus until about 1650, more than 40,000,000 pounds of silver from the New World arrived in Spain alone. The total stock of precious metals in Europe may have been tripled by this feat. Much of this increase found its way into the money systems, first that of Spain and then those of other parts of Western Europe. Not only did it establish more securely than ever before a money economy for these areas, but it also played havoc with the price level. Assuming that certain other factors remain constant, an increase in the amount of money in circulation without a corresponding increase in the amount of goods and services available normally results in a rise in the price level, a phenomenon called inflation. Spain was hardest hit by this "price revolution." Her price level tripled. Eventually these effects were felt elsewhere as well, although not quite to the same degree as in Spain, until the effects of this injection of silver wore off in the seventeenth century.

Inflation

As is virtually always the case where there is inflation, some persons benefited by the price revolution while others, whose incomes did not increase proportionately, were harmed. Since prices rose more rapidly than wages, the wage earner was hurt, as were the landlords and others whose incomes were fixed and could not be increased. Some of the landlords found in the enclosure system a device to extricate themselves at the expense of those who held land of them. As is often the case, the price rise helped the business class, partly because of the stimulus which this particular inflation provided to a money economy and to commercial activity in general.

Another effect of the expansion of Europe to be noted here grew out of the fact that it brought Europeans into contact with people hitherto remote from the Western World or, in so far as Europeans were concerned, nonexistent. Some of these people were primitive. Others, while very different from

Westerners, nevertheless had ancient and proud cultures of their own. The European took his political leadership and his military strength with him across the ocean. They enabled him to subdue the native, whether primitive or not, thus encouraging a feeling of superiority which was later to have painful consequences for the West.

attitude of states toward new economic conditions