The Early Modern Period, 1450–1750: The World Shrinks

PART IV

PART OUTLINE

Chapter 17  The World Economy
Chapter 18  The Transformation of the West, 1450–1750
Chapter 19  Early Latin America
Chapter 20  Africa and the Africans in the Age of the Atlantic Slave Trade
Chapter 21  The Rise of Russia
Chapter 22  The Muslim Empires
Chapter 23  Asian Transitions in an Age of Global Change

Explorer Vasco de Gama kneels before the king under a Portuguese flag while his ship waits in the distance. European ventures in trade and exploration helped define a new world history period.
THE OVERVIEW: THE WORLD MAP CHANGES

These maps depict two of the big changes in world history that occurred between 1450 and 1750. Over these centuries, a number of new empires came into being, replacing smaller political units characteristic of the preceding postclassical period. Several European countries acquired overseas empires, a clear first in world history. Equally important, new land-based empires arose in Asia and eastern Europe. The Russian and Ottoman empires extended over both European and Asian territory, while the new Mughal empire ruled much of the Indian subcontinent.

The second big change involved trade routes. In 1450, transregional trade focused on exchanges among Asia, Africa, and Europe across some overland routes, but also via seaways in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. By 1750, oceangoing routes across the Pacific and particularly the Atlantic had become increasingly important, although the Indian Ocean sea routes remained significant. For the first time, the Americas and, soon, Pacific Oceania were caught up in global exchanges, with results not only in these regions but for the rest of the world as well.

Change, of course, is never complete. Even as world geography shifted fundamentally, some political features persisted during the three Early Modern centuries. Trade routes also maintained some holdovers from the past.

Big Concepts

Three themes predominated during the Early Modern period. First, contacts with the Americas ushered in a vital series of biological exchanges—of diseases, crops, animals, and people. This Columbian Exchange led to major population shifts in many different parts of the world. It also had environmental impact, particularly in the Americas. Second, obviously, the transregional trade network was redefined, becoming global. Levels of trade increased, with major impact on economies from China to Africa to the Americas. Shipping technology improved once again, and naval contacts were transformed with the use of ships' cannon. Third, partly because of the use of guns, the various new empires formed. Several European powers staked claims in the Americas, but also in certain coastal regions and island groups in Asia. New Islamic empires were joined by the rise of Russia and also renewed political energy in China.

The Early Modern period saw important social changes, particularly in the establishment of Atlantic slavery and an intensification of serfdom in several key regions. Exploitation of labor increased in many societies, responding to new pressures to produce for global trade and also to population changes. Gender relations shifted in several societies, though there were no global patterns.

Finally, the Early Modern period did not experience systematic cultural change. Important developments occurred, but these must be explored in individual societies or through particular sets of contacts. Precisely because economic exchanges were expanding, many societies proved eager to defend a separate cultural identity.

TRIGGERS FOR CHANGE

Several developments sparked the beginning of the Early Modern period, distinguishing it from the postclassical period that preceded it. The first was the revival of empire building. A striking example of this development involved the Ottoman Turks, who conquered Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire. Soon the Ottomans extended their rule over most Byzantine territories and beyond, putting a Muslim power in charge of one of the great Christian cities and territories of the past. Worried Christian leaders elsewhere in the world turned to new activities to compensate for the loss of influence and territory. The second development visible by 1450—the steady progression of explorations by Europeans along the Atlantic coast of Africa—was motivated in part by the desire to find ways to trade with east Asia that would circumvent the centers of Islamic power. New European outreach would soon have wider effects.
Major Political Units, c. 1450

- The Silk Road (opened during the "Mongol Peace" c. 1250–1350)
- Arab Trade Routes
- Chinese Trade Routes
- Genoese Trade Routes
- Main Hanseatic Trade Routes
- Venetian Trade Routes
- Other Trade Routes

Major Political Units of the World, c. 1450

PART IV The Early Modern Period, 1450–1750: The World Shrinks 379
New military technologies constituted the third development that played a vital role in defining the new framework for this period. European mariners began to use compasses and other navigational devices, first introduced by the Chinese and Arabs. Europeans also learned how to design better sailing ships. The most important new military technology was the growing use of guns and gunpowder, another Chinese invention now adapted by Europeans and others. New guns played a vital role in the creation of new empires both on land and overseas. Guns also affected political patterns within Africa, Japan, and Europe, although with less sweeping results.

Larger, sturdier ships, armed with cannon and featuring greater shipping capacity, sailed the new trade routes across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Europeans exercised disproportionate dominance over these routes, and they employed the new military technologies in establishing their new overseas empires.

**THE BIG CHANGES**

The changes in world empires and trade routes depicted on the maps on page 379 and the effects of new naval and military technologies highlight the distinctive features of the Early Modern period. Every major society reacted differently, depending on world position and existing tradition. In general, however, these developments led to the three broad changes: (a) the forging of a new global economy and through this the unfolding of an initial phase of globalization; (b) new biological exchanges of food, animals, and people; and (c) the new importance of large political units and their diplomatic and military interactions.

**A New Global Economy and Proto-Globalization**

International trade increased, for the first time including the Americas in the exchange. This was a major step in bringing the various regions of the world closer together and exposing them more widely to international influences. The result was a process called proto-globalization—a foretaste of the fuller range of contacts now called globalization but (hence the term *proto*) in a more preliminary sense.

Globalization involves intense and varied interactions among regions that help shape human lives; proto-globalization in this period helped set this process in motion. Several changes separated proto-globalization from the transcontinental network that had emerged in the postclassical period—although world trade still relied on some of the exchanges developed earlier, such as trade between East Africa and the Middle East. Most obviously, commerce was now global, including all major parts of the world and not just the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. The intensity of contacts increased as well: Trade, and production for trade, now involved more people, more effort, and it began to help shape political and social systems as well as commercial ones. Business forms changed. Major European powers now created new merchant companies, formed to organize trade with distant parts of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. These companies introduced more impersonal management structures. They depended less on kinship relations that had been true of Muslim trade during the postclassical period.

Migration across oceans, some of it forced, was a new phenomenon as well. New consumer tastes developed in several
societies that depended on goods imported from distant areas, going well beyond patterns in the earlier transcontinental network. Here, clearly, was an important step toward fuller globalization.

There was, however, still a gap between proto-globalization and the global patterns we see today. The new technologies that would revolutionize global travel and communication were still in the future. Trade contacts were important, but they had not yet reached contemporary levels. There were no internationally shared games or political standards, in contrast to the surge of cultural and political globalization that would emerge later on. Like contemporary globalization, proto-globalization brought both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the groups and regions involved. Those who profited from the new system would ultimately help prepare additional kinds of global connections.

Biological Exchange

The inclusion of the Americas global trade set in motion a number of biological exchanges of enormous consequence. Overall population leveled but also regional population balances were redefined. Foods from the Americas, like corn and the potato, began to be grown in Asia and, later, Europe. Combined with local improvements in agriculture, these new foods resulted in population increases. Europeans introduced new diseases into the Americas and Pacific island territories, decimating the native populations. Population loss encouraged new migrations, particularly from Europe and Africa, into the Americas. The massive African slave trade was in part a response to a labor shortage in the Americas. New animals, like the horse, greatly altered life in the Americas. These biological exchanges, called the "Columbian Exchange," altered many relationships among populations. New foods helped generate population increase worldwide, trumping the devastation wrought by new diseases. But new diseases and unprecedented levels of death were agonizing realities for many regions.

New Empires

The gunpowder empires formed large political units. Building and maintaining these new political structures required huge energies and huge expenses. New land-based empires in India, the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and Russia challenged political traditions in their imperial territories, while Spain, Portugal, France, England, and the Netherlands exerted pressure on their new overseas holdings.

The new empires also formed what would later be called "multinational" units, embracing different cultural and ethnic groups. The solidity of the multinational approach would be an important world history issue for the future.

The three main developments—the new global economy, the biological exchange, and the emergence of new empires—involved considerable shifts in world power. The world position of western Europe increased most obviously. Russia gained a new role as well. New masters ruled over many parts of the Americas, while portions of Africa found themselves immersed in novel orbits. Systematic patterns of inequality began to characterize some of the societies that supplied foods and raw materials to western Europe. Europe
became wealthier and ever more powerful as it supplied processed goods and commercial services to these same regions. But several Asian societies, although less active in foreign trade, benefited from the new economy as well. China, the world’s manufacturing leader, earned the greatest share of the silver exported from the Americas, brought by European merchants eager for Chinese goods. But India prospered also, until a major readjustment in the 18th century reduced Indian independence.

It is crucial to understand the complex balance among world regions during the Early Modern period. Western gains were important, but initiatives from several other societies helped shape both regional and global relationships.

CONTINUITY

Change is never complete. Even as world geography shifted, some political features persisted during the three centuries of the Early Modern period. Some existing trade routes continued to be important avenues of global exchange.

Many societies reacted to the big changes of the Early Modern period by preserving key features of their past. No sweeping, global cultural change occurred during this era. Although the spread of world religions was no longer a dominant theme, continued Islamic and Buddhist outreach affected parts of Asia and southeastern Europe, while the spread of Christianity to the Americas was a major development. Notable cultural innovations took place within individual societies, such as the new influence of science in western Europe or the rise of Japanese Confucianism. But cultural stability described much of the world, and global contacts did not overturn regional culture patterns.

No systematic changes occurred in gender relations in the Early Modern period. The new African slave trade affected gender balances on both sides of the Atlantic. More men than women were seized in Africa; as a result, the lack of adequate numbers of husbands encouraged African polygamy. New ideas sparked some debate over women’s conditions in western Europe, although there was little real change. Relations between men and women in most other societies adhered to established patriarchal patterns.

Aside from the new developments in the military sphere, there were no technological breakthroughs until after 1750. Many societies participated only gradually in the use of guns and gunnery. Manufacturing techniques changed modestly, and little change took place in agriculture beyond the foodstuffs.

While political change, signaled by the rise of empires, was more general, several societies emphasized continuity in this realm as well. China prided itself on reviving and then maintaining its system of government. Many African societies preserved earlier traditions of divine kinship.

IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE: WORK

Changes of the Early Modern period profoundly affected ordinary people in many parts of the world. Indians in the Americas died by the thousands as European and African immigrants brought diseases like smallpox and measles. Europeans used silver to pay for desirable Chinese goods. Flush with new wealth, the Chinese government began to require that taxes be paid in silver, thus compelling ordinary Chinese to find new ways to obtain money. Often such efforts were unsuccessful, and as a result many Chinese fell ever deeper into poverty. Millions of Africans were seized from their homes and subjected to a terrifying and often deadly passage to the Americas. Those who managed to survive the voyage discovered that they were now compelled to live out their lives as slaves.

The most general social change during the Early Modern period was the growing pressure to work harder. The Early Modern world was increasingly commercial and crowded. Population increases in some regions demanded more from workers to help sustain larger families and villages. Many manufacturers and landowners tried to force their workers to increase their pace. The new forms of race-based slavery in the Americas placed greater emphasis on production. In western Europe, for example, Protestantism preached a work ethic that convinced many people that labor was a way to demonstrate God’s grace.

People of all ages responded to the pressure to work harder. Child labor increased in many regions. Many European children were pressed into service as indentured laborers; for example, whole groups of orphans might be transported to work sites. By the 18th century, London orphans might be sent to work in new English factories or to North America as indentured servants. Even in old age, adults had to work if they wanted to survive. Master artisans, from makers of porcelain in China to gunsmiths in Europe, tried to compel their workers and apprentices to turn out more product. The pressure to work harder and longer was a personal side to the systemic changes that were reshaping the world.

The name commonly given to this period—Early Modern—captures complexity. The period is more recognizably modern than its predecessor. The renewed emphasis on political structures may strike a modern chord as well. But if modern, this was still early: Many features, including the continued dominance of traditional agriculture even in the most advanced economies, make it clear that there were still many changes to come in world history after 1750.

TRENDS AND SOCIETIES IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

The chapters that follow examine the differing reactions to the major developments and changes of the Early Modern period. Chapter 17 offers an overview of the new global trading
patterns that followed from the changes in naval technology and warfare. New trading opportunities and colonial expansion were closely related to significant changes within western Europe, the subject of Chapter 18. Chapters 19 and 20 return to the larger Atlantic world. The Early Modern era was a formative period for a new society in Latin America, born of interactions among native populations, Europeans, and Africans. Chapter 21 deals with Russia, one of the great new land-based empires of the period. Russian expansion affected not only eastern Europe, but also various parts of Asia, and complex interactions developed with western Europe as well.

Chapter 22, on the new Muslim states in the Middle East and southern Asia, concentrates on the emergence of other gunpowder empires. East Asia responded in its own, largely successful way to the new world economy. In these areas internal dynamics had more to do with developments that occurred between 1450 and 1750.

Each of the chapters in this part deals with reactions to world trade, biological exchange, and new pressures on labor. Each also highlights the diversity of patterns emerging in different parts of the world, depending on cultural orientation and shifts in positions of world power.