

The World Shrinks 1450-1750

During the years of 1450 to 1750, the civilizations of the world became truly connected for the first time in history. Without a doubt, the most significant trend of this era was the emergence of a fully global system of exchange and interaction. Regrettably, much of this interaction consisted of warfare, exploitation, and slavery. Nonetheless, trade, discovery, cultural interchange, and the faster and easier movement of peoples all did much to bring the various societies of the world into greater proximity. One can accurately speak of world cultures interacting, for good and for bad, during the period from 1450-1750.

One of the primary causes of this greater degree of interaction was the massive and sustained effort of the Europeans to explore the rest of the world, starting in the 1400s. Driven by scientific curiosity, the quest for power, the hope of spreading Christianity, and, above all, a burning desire for wealth, European sailors began seeking out oceanic trade routes that would link them directly with China, India, Japan, and elsewhere in the Far East. During the 1400s and 1500s, European explorers reached all these areas. In the meantime, they also encountered the Americas: a “New World” that had, for thousands of years, lain outside the bounds of knowledge of the peoples of Africa, Europe and Asia.

1. What were some new trends that developed over the years 1450 to 1750?
2. What were the causes for the new degree of interaction between world countries?

A new era of world history, the early modern period, was present between 1450 and 1750. The balance of power between world civilizations shifted as the West became the most dynamic force. Other rising power centers included the empires of the Ottomans, Mughals, Ming and Russia. Contacts among civilizations, especially in commerce, increased. New weaponry helped to form new or revamped gunpowder empires.

New or expanded civilization areas, in contact with leading centers, had developed during the postclassical period. A monarchy formed in Russia. Although western Europeans did not achieve political unity, they built regional states, expanded commercial and urban life, and establish elaborate artistic and philosophical culture. In sub-Saharan Africa, loosely organized areas shared vitality with new regional states; trade and artistic expression grew. Chinese-influenced regions, like Japan, built more elaborate societies. Some cultures—African, Polynesian, American—continued to develop in isolation. In Asia, Africa, and Europe between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries the key developments were the decline of Islamic dynamism and the Mongol conquests. After 1400, a new Chinese empire emerged and the Ottoman Empire reformed the Islamic world.

The West, initially led by Spain and Portugal, won domination of international trade routes and established settlements in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The West changed rapidly internally because of agricultural, commercial, political, and religious developments. The West also experienced a major scientific revolution.

1. What changed in areas like the Americas, Africa and Asia?
2. How was the West affected?

The West was impacted by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that changed world thought. And within decades, European traders, missionaries, and conquerors had spread throughout the world. It was a European mariner whose expedition, from 1519 to 1521, became the first in history to sail around the world. The Europeans established a presence in many parts of coastal Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of the Far East. Most dramatically, European colonizers conquered and transformed the Americas. The opening of the Americas to the rest of the world was done brutally and out of greed. But it also played a tremendous role in shifting the world's economic, linguistic, religious, and cultural patterns. It also changed forever the environments of the Americas, Africa, and Europe, as new animals, new foods, and new diseases were brought back and forth in a development known as the Columbian Exchange.

1. How did the role of Europeans change during the 1500s?
2. What is the Columbian Exchange?

Another major trend of this era (1450-1750) was the rise of Europe. Until the 1400s, Europe had been relatively weak and backward, compared with civilizations such as China and the Ottoman Empire. During the 1500s and 1600s, however, Europe began to pull even with China and the “gunpowder empires” of the Islamic east (Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia, and Mughal India) in terms of scientific advancement, global power, and overall wealth. During the 1700s, Europe overtook these other civilizations, becoming the militarily strongest, most technological adept and economically mightiest civilization in the world. By the middle of the 1700s, Europe would be well situated to do what it went on to do in the 1800s: dominate the vast majority of the globe, militarily and economically.

1. How did Europe change over time from 1450 to the 1800s?

Technological development intensified in many parts of the world during this time. The degree of scientific knowledge increased. Economic and technological practices that can be referred to as proto-industrial were appearing in such places as Europe, China and elsewhere. The foundations for the rapid and thorough industrialization and mechanization of many societies during the late 1700s and 1800s were laid during the 1600s and early-to-mid 1700s.

On a more traditional note, agricultural techniques in most societies improved dramatically during these years. In Europe, it is common to speak of an “Agricultural Revolution” during this era. Worldwide, the improvement of agricultural techniques helped lead to a significant increase in world population. The rate of growth was the fastest ever seen to that date, as the world population rose from 350 million in 1400 to 610 million in 1700.

1. How did the Agricultural Revolution affect the world?