Expansion and Consequences: Crash Course European History #5

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So today we're going to continue looking at European expansion and its impact on the world's humans. Like, imagine learning that there are people in places you did not know existed, that they eat foods you've never seen, that their world contains plant and animal species entirely different from your world.

What people thought was one world turned out to be two, and the collision of those worlds wrought devastation and opportunity on a truly mind-boggling scale. And today, we're going to ask you to look at the consequences of European expansion, and consider how those consequences change depending on where you find yourself. INTRO Destruction from Iberian expansion was truly extraordinary across the sixteenth century.

As Hernan Cortes commented: "We could not walk without treading on the bodies and heads of dead Indians."[i] Besides the slaughter of empire-building directly inflicted by the invaders and their local allies, the ongoing progress of smallpox, and measles, and other diseases that Europeans brought to the Americas completely overwhelmed the healthcare systems of native Americans. Many millions died. Within a century, the population of native Americans had fallen perhaps by as much as 90%.

Throughout the Spanish Empire in the Americas the colonizers made use of existing political structures that were already in place for collecting taxes and otherwise maintaining order. Even as the Spanish king appointed elite men from Spain as viceroys enforcing civil and military rule over what had been the Incan Empire for instance, the Incan systems of roads and communication networks facilitated Spanish domination. It's also important to remember that because the Spanish had never before experienced almost three-thousand-mile-long imperial operation, like the one the Incans had, the Spanish had very little understanding of how to maintain its functions or to provide for its upkeep.

Much as the Spanish empire initially depended on brute force, sustaining it required practical interactions with conquered people and in many cases their cooperation. The rewards of empire for the Spanish were truly astonishing. Thanks to the seizure of art and religious objects made with precious metals, the discovery of mines, and the know-how of native Americans and others in running those mines, by the mid-sixteenth century silver and gold were pouring into Spain.

And what had been a very poor kingdom became a very very rich one. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. It's now believed that pre-Columbian peoples knew how to use liquid mercury to process silver and gold--a method that's still used today.

It was also used by the Spanish and by the end of the century the Portuguese had discovered precious metals in Brazil, too. The Portuguese cut down trees in Brazillian forests to trade in Brazilwood. And sugar production flourished across the Caribbean beginning in Jamaica in 1515 and eventually spreading across tropical and forested regions of the New World where the vast tracts of trees could be felled to feed the fires needed for sugar refining.

To launch and sustain all these enterprises—mining, metallurgy, sugar refining, lumbering—Iberians initially used the forced labor and know-how of local peoples, as I mentioned earlier. The Spanish government awarded its soldiers and adventurers encomienda, that is the labor of local people on a large plot of land. But there were critics of this system among Europeans, perhaps most notably Bartolomé Las Casas, a Catholic missionary who had helped in the savage conquest of Cuba and who had received an encomienda for his participation.

But then the preaching of a Dominican friar made him see conquest in a different light and he began a campaign on behalf of local people. Las Casas, while underscoring the benefits of conversion to Christianity, lambasted his fellow conquerors for their murder, brutality, and pillage. He wrote of native Americans, "To subject them first by warlike means is a form and procedure contrary to the law … and gentleness of Jesus Christ." Las Casas wrote much more and lobbied the Spanish court (some would say he harassed it), beginning in some historians' minds the drive for what are considered today human rights.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. Las Casas' story is a reminder that the cause of human rights always needs people who have them in order to press it forward. But ultimately the people who are responsible for expansions in human rights are the people who are denied them and insist upon their humanity anyway.

So to shift perspectives for a moment, some Europeans were advocating for human rights but many many people without those rights were advocating for them. And as for indigenous people in the New World, to present one story of their response to colonization would be inaccurate--at times, communities and individuals resisted; at times, some cooperated. But it's hard to overstate how destabilizing it was to these communities to lose in many cases 90% of their population.

One of the huge changes though was the arrival of Christianity and the demand that the colonized become Christians. Christianity changed the Americas, but the Americas also changed Christianity. In the face of the demand of the Church that conquered people become Catholic, they might for instance blend their own beliefs with Catholic ones.

In 1531, the Aztec Cuauhtlatoatzin, whose baptismal name was Juan Diego, had five visions of the Virgin Mary on a sacred Aztec spot of the corn goddess, near Mexico City. Mary's miracles left an imprint of her form on Juan Diego's cape. And on the cape, Mary appeared to be an Aztec woman wearing a robe with Aztec designs and symbols.

This version of Mary, known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, was brown-skinned and was often called, "the dark virgin." Many shrines to Our Lady of Guadalupe were built, and her story was written down both in Spanish and in the Aztec language, Nahuatl. Our Lady of Guadalupe replaced some of the local goddesses that were suppressed by the Christians. Women in particular took up devotion to her as a symbol of motherhood.

And today, Our Lady of Guadalupe's basilica in Mexico City is said to be the most visited shrine in the world. It wasn't too long before other European powers, eyeing these profits, sought to literally capture Spanish wealth. Like English privateer Francis Drake began his career of attacking Spanish shipping in the 1560s and often seized huge fortunes for the queen and investors in his voyages.

While circumnavigating the globe, he captured stores of Spanish gold and silver from ships along the west coast of South America. In some cases, a single seizure might yield the equivalent of an entire year's income for the royal treasury. You heard that right--taking down one Spanish ship could equal all the tax collection in England for a year--which gives you a sense of just how much wealth was being extracted from colonies.

No wonder Elizabeth knighted Drake in 1581 after he returned from his historic circumnavigation—which was only the second circumnavigation of the globe in European history at the time. And Drake made it home Magellan. Stan am I allowed to make a joke about Magellan dying.

Has enough time passed? Stan says “yes”. Right.

So the French, Dutch, and other treasure-hungry people joined the English in Atlantic piracy, which increased the wealth of many European kingdoms and individuals of course. But those same European states also began imitating the Portuguese and Spanish in global exploration, trade, and eventually settlement. In 1497, Italian sailor John Cabot, which was not his Italian name by the way.

I’ve always found it very funny that the two most famous Italian sailors in history are named John Cabot and Christopher Columbus. At any rate John Cabot commissioned by Henry VII of England and landed somewhere north of Maine, probably on the Canadian coast. And then returned to London to great acclaim.

The English established the East India Company in 1600 to focus on their exploration efforts and the Dutch founded a similar United East India Company in 1602, which brought together several trading companies from various Dutch states. And other governments chartered similar corporations. These companies performed a variety of functions from gathering investors, and building ships, to raising armies and taking over new territory and enslaving people to work conquered land.

Lest you think that like corporations are newly evil. Which brings us to the slave trade. Initially, Portuguese sailors sought to catch Africans they happened to spot along the coast, and then sell them as slaves in Europe.

But by the end of the sixteenth century, the capture of Africans for sale to Europeans became routine and then eventually a massive business for both African slave traders and Europeans after 1650. And this was also partly due to disease and the devastation of colonization. The Spanish had trouble with sugar production in the Caribbean after the native Taino people had been wiped out by disease; the British then took over and began importing African slaves to work in sugar plantations.

By the eighteenth century British slavers had taken the lead in the Atlantic trade. Partly due to petitions like those from Las Casas, Spanish rulings that Native Americans could not be enslaved led the Spanish landowners and mine operators to import Africans and Asians to stay within the law, which did not yet say that you know people could not be enslaved. Some Asian slaves, once brought to the Spanish Empire, were able to pass as local people, and claim their freedom on that basis.

But almost everyone who was enslaved died in slavery. Life expectancy was very low; all manner of mistreatment was common; and legal protections were almost nonexistent. It’s very important to consider those perspectives too.

And also to consider why traditionally those perspectives have been ignored. We’ve talked about how the establishment of transoceanic travel meant that diseases, and people, and finished goods were traveling across oceans but so were plants and animal species. This whole process is sometimes known as the Columbian exchange.

This movement of goods and people and species across the Atlantic was tremendously important to history--before it, new world foods like pumpkins and tomatoes, maize, potatoes did not even exist in Afroeurasia. Did the globe open up? What’s in the center of the world?

It’s a pumpkin. You want to know why there were no jack-o-lanterns in 13th century Europe? There were no pumpkins. There was no popcorn because there was no corn. #sponsored. I wish. I love this stuff.

You know the famous bananas of South America? No, you don’t. Bananas are from Africa.

They didn’t exist in the Americas until the Columbian exchange. So much of what feels natural and even defining about our cultures and histories is in fact really really new. Nigerian cassava.

Irish potatoes. Vanilla Ice Cream in Europe. Tomatoes in Italy.

None of this was conceivable before the Columbian exchange. Europeans also learned a lot from the Americas about food preservation. Like the Incas dried some potatoes for instance, which made them lighter and easier to transport, and then would later reconstitute them so they could be eaten, a strategy which fortified messengers along the Inca’s extensive network of roads.

Similar processes came to be used in Europe and would eventually be used to fortify astronauts, who often eat reconstituted dehydrated food. And over time potatoes and maize (know here as corn) increased overall calories available to Europeans because they could be dried and stored in huge quantities. And that decreased starvation and increased populations.

Meanwhile, as we’ve discussed, the travel of microbes to the Americas devastated communities there, and a range of Afroeurasian animals--horses, sheep, and pigs to name a few--arrived in the New World for the first time. In some ways, these new animals were useful of course, but they also did extensive damage, stripping away vegetation necessary for soil conservation and trampling farm land. And deforestation began with the clearing of forests for sugar cane production, as we discussed earlier, a process that accelerated in Central and South Americas through the twentieth century.

In Europe, sugar was initially such a precious luxury that a sprinkle of it was all that even the wealthy could afford. Queen Isabella of Castille and Spain gave a small box of sugar to her daughter as a Christmas present to be treasured.

[[TV: Chocolate]] Chocolate began as a ceremonial drink for the powerful, as it was among the Aztecs. But as European communities became wealthier, more people transitioned from subsistence living to being able to afford goods from distant places. Treats of sugar, chocolate, tea, coffee and tobacco transformed attitudes, while the hot water that was needed for making tea and coffee and hot cocoa is thought to have extended the life spans in Europe by killing water-born germs.

And slowly the English and some of Spain and Portugal’s other competitors established their own colonies—the English had the unsuccessful colony of Roanoke in the 1580s, and then Jamestown in 1607, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620. Some of these settlers came in families but many came as single men and occasionally single women. And in the developing propaganda war among these rivals, English latecomers to the Atlantic world promoted an idea that came to be called the “Black Legend.”

It maintained that unlike the tolerant and kind English Protestants, the Spanish were bigoted Catholics, brutal and destructive of local people. That would be what Psychologists call “projection.” Today we know that English settlers slaughtered local peoples with abandon—even people on whom their own survival depended because many adventurers had no knowledge of farming.

Moreover most English settlers were as bigoted as other Europeans in those days. But the “Black Legend” was a really powerful idea in

history for a long time--in fact, when I was a kid growing up in Florida, I was told that it was unfortunate Florida had been a Spanish colony, because the English were much kinder rulers.

So by the end of the seventeenth century, the rush for trade and empire was in full swing. Plantations based on New World tobacco had been set up in North America and sugar mills in the Caribbean and South America. Mining and many other lucrative enterprises as well as the promise of exploitable land kept the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans crowded with voyagers. All the while most native people ruled by colonizers saw the vast majority of their labor's value exported.

It was the beginning of the true globalization we experience today, complete with all of its contradictions and complexities. We live in a world today of tremendous abundance where a pinch of sugar is not generally seen as a great Christmas present. Starvation and child mortality are more rare than they have ever been. But we also live in a world with profound inequality and injustice, where the powerful have legal and social protections that the weak do not. It's important to remember that in all those senses we are the products of history--but of course we are also producing history. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.