The Age of Exploration: Crash Course European History #4

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

So, remember back in May of 1453 when the Ottomans smashed the thick walls of Constantinople, captured the city, and beheaded the Byzantine emperor? You probably don't remember May of 1453, come to think of it, but you remember learning about it.

It was a bit of a footnote in our first episode, but you never know when the footnotes are going to be very important, but that one really did change the world. With the Ottomans now also controlling much of southeastern Europe, they established a navy, which they used in the Black, Adriatic, and other seas in the region. Ottoman domination meant that European kingdoms and empires needed to find different paths to Afroeurasian trading routes--which ultimately helped spark the voyages of explorers from the Iberian peninsula.

INTRO So we've talked already in this series about the importance of shifting perspective when looking at history, and today we're going to ask you to shift perspective several times, but let's begin with the perspective of the Portuguese. In the fifteenth century, Portugal was poor, and it became more so as the Ottomans contested their access to overland trade. But luckily for Portugal, the fourth son of their king was Prince Henry, who came to be called The Navigator because he funded and encouraged exploration, the study of navigation, and the development of new tools to aid in navigation.

The Portuguese began to increase their travels along the Mediterranean's southern shore. And by the mid-15th century, they were venturing southward along the Atlantic coast of Africa, where they expected to find vast wealth. In those days, Africa was rich in food, salt, gold, and slaves.

Mansa Musa, the Malian king who made a spectacular hajj to Mecca in 1324-1325, was legendary and very inspiring to the Portuguese. He had an entourage of 60,000 people including 12,000 slaves and huge quantities of gold. He seemed like the model of what the Portuguese hoped to become by traveling to

Africa: that is, rich beyond imagining. In this pursuit of food, slaves, and gold, the Portuguese gradually made their way down the African coast, locating island clusters like the Canaries. And they kidnapped local people to sell into European slave markets and began dotting the coast with stone fortresses that doubled as trading stations. And there, many European men partnered with African women and started families. These women were often themselves traders and would be crucial for all European nations; because they were the main force behind local markets and regional trade networks, and they provided essential connections to trade. Again, most of the Portuguese explorers were poor, and many of these female traders were wealthy and successful. From their perspective, Portuguese traders offered them access to new markets and access to new goods. I know we're all very accustomed to thinking of Europe as rich and Africa as poor, but that frame is both relatively new and way too essentializing--the truth as always resists simplicity. So in 1488, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, or, as it was called at the time, the Cape of Storms. And then the Portuguese ventured further afield into the Indian Ocean. When we talk about explorers and exploring, we often conjure up images of intrepid groups wearing hats trekking through empty lands in search of hidden treasures, but that was certainly not the reality when, for instance, Vasco De Gama reached India in 1498 and found a highly developed Indian Ocean commerce with trading posts run by sophisticated Muslim merchants. Da Gama's instincts were to menace and fight them and he did. And when the Portuguese reached Southeast Asia and China, they found a cornucopia of goods that Europeans came to crave and about whose production they hadn't the slightest knowledge: colorful, washable cottons, and finely crafted porcelain, also tea. Where would we be without Tea? Well, I'd be fine, actually. I'd just drink coffee. What's that? Oh, Stan informs me that coffee also isn't from Europe. By the seventeenth century, the Portuguese were importing millions of pieces of porcelain into Europe along with lots of delicious spices. And spices were not only important for flavouring, but also for food preservation. Which I suppose is a kind of flavouring if you like your food not-mouldy tasting. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. The Portuguese "empire" was, at first anyway, a trading empire, with small and agile ships known as caravels patrolling ports and collecting large fees. The wealth would be extracted from controlling shipping and trading routes, as the Ottomans were doing in the eastern Mediterranean. In contrast, the Spanish empire, which began in 1492 with the exploratory voyages of Genoese ship captain Christopher Columbus, was based on colonies-- that is, rather than controlling trade routes, the empire would control the land itself and the people who lived there, and extract wealth from them to enrich the empire. Columbus was a student of geography and maps and he'd lobbied the Portuguese king to back his voyages. But when that didn't go to plan, he headed for Spain to petition its devoutly Catholic rulers, Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon. These two monarchs were finishing up the drive to expel Muslims from Spain and to force Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity. But religious persecution wasn't cheap. The motto of the Iberian pathfinders—God, gold, and glory—perfectly described their ambitions. Although perhaps not in that order. Hopping the islands along the African coast and using the trade winds, Columbus's ships made it to the Caribbean islands, and his crews, which tellingly included both clergy and bankers, found signs of gold but not great quantities of it. However, they did find people to enslave, and because no one knew the size or shape of the Americas, there was the perpetual hope that gold or other riches might lie just on the other side of this river, or that mountain. Thanks Thought Bubble. So I want to stop here to shift perspective: From the perspective of European explorers, these lands were new, and potentially very lucrative, and the colonization model that Spain adopted, and that Portugal began using in Brazil, and that the rest of Europe's empires would eventually use, was built on the idea that colonies existed for the benefit and enrichment of the colonizers--and secondarily to convert human souls to Christianity. Much of the wealth that was generated by these empires was done so by claiming human beings as a form of property--both through the slave trade and through forcing colonized people to work. And the systems that were built to support the colonies--from roads and bridges to churches--were built to extract wealth and convert people to Christianity. So from the perspective of indigenous people living in colonized communities, colonization meant impoverishment in many forms--the loss of land for use, the loss of life itself at an unprecedented scale, the loss of long-held religious beliefs, and the loss of all sorts of community assets. But from the colonziers' perspective, it meant the possibility of getting rich, and so waves of ambitious sailors followed Columbus, searching both North and South America for extractable wealth. OK. Another breakthrough occurred in 1519-22, when Ferdinand Magellan's Spanish ships circumnavigated the globe. Magellan had alienated members of the Portuguese court and like Columbus he found no backing for his proposed trip there. Also like Columbus, he went to Spain to fund his voyage. If you were going to be somewhere between 1519 and 1522, on one of Magellan's ships was not necessarily the best place. The conditions and Magellan's no-nonsense discipline caused mutinies and other problems which Magellan also handled harshly, executing or marooning mutineering captains in the fleet. But after finding the straits at the tip of South America, the fleet set out across the Pacific, eventually returning to Spain despite Magellan's death at the hands of local leaders in the Philippines in 1521. Of the 237 original voyagers and five ships, only eighteen men and one ship returned to Spain in 1522. But, the voyage arranged and headed by Magellan was a revelation, it opened the world up to global transportation, exchange, settlement, and yes,

global slavery, warfare, pandemics, and conquest. The Spanish could now stock their new world settlements with Chinese and Indian luxuries by crossing the Pacific and fill their coffers from profits in New World goods by crossing the Atlantic. In 1519, Spanish invader Hernan Cortés came in contact with indigenous people in present-day Mexico, landing on its Mayan eastern coast with several hundred soldiers and making his way inland, starting battles and forging alliances. He eventually reached the center of the Aztec empire at Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards were astonished at the wealth of this civilization and Cortes bowed before its king, Montezuma II, who led a vast empire that stretched to present-day Honduras and Nicaragua. The capital had tens of thousands of inhabitants, perhaps hundreds of thousands. Markets overflowed with luscious produce and crafts, and the city had a sophistication that, like the wealth itself, was foreign to Europeans, even if the Aztec practice of human sacrifice was also foreign. A similar awe filled Francisco Pizarro when he saw the superb textiles and silver and gold objects crafted by the Incas, who'd also created thousands of miles of roads and efficient institutions to hold their vast empire together along the west coast of present-day South America. Both Pizarro and Cortes relied on help from rival indigenous communities to help them take control from the Incas and Aztecs. The conquerors also married the princesses and other noble women they had raped as a ritual of domination. And marriage gave them access to insider information, local networks, and the wealth that such women possessed—including wealth in enslaved peoples. So, Iberians were incentivized to set sail by their poverty and by their Catholic faith, but they were disadvantaged by a comparative lack of manufacturing skills when it came to trade. What they did have, at least at first, was sailing prowess and weaponry on their side. Iberian caravels were nimble and they could be loaded with cannons. The Portuguese borrowed the use of triangular sails from the Arabs, often combining them with square-rigged ones to make better use of the winds. And Iberians also employed a range of navigational instruments—technology generally taken from other cultures—in determining latitude, while their on-board cartographers created portolan charts--literally, charts related to ports--indicating coastal dangers, good harbors, and other details important to seafarers. Astrolabes, quadrants, compasses, and other instruments gave good indications of location and direction but you know what you really needed? A clock. That's right, there's a clock in the center of the world. This six dollar clock is an astonishing piece of technology. Stan would like me to point out that it was actually eight dollars. Thank you for your support on Patreon.com/crashcourse it wasn't until the eighteenth century development of the chronometer that sailors could chart longitudinal location, and even now, GPS relies on an extremely precise knowledge of the time. In short when it comes to history and also everything else, it's not just a question of where you are, it's a question of when you are. Early European explorers almost always had to enlist local people to advise them how to navigate the seas, especially the Indian ocean, and local, non-European traders served as intermediaries for the artisans in porcelain, cotton, and other crafted products. Through them, Europeans slowly learned about trading procedures, sources of goods, and the means of judging quality, as initially the Iberians were not well acquainted with the goods available in these trading ports. And there were other go-betweens, like translators, connecting Europeans and local people. One example is Malinche (or Doña Maria, as the Spanish called her). She facilitated the passage of Hernan Cortes and his small army across Mexico and into the capital of the Aztec empire, gathering allies for him and warning him of impending danger along the way. Because of the hostility among different groups, go-betweens who knew about the animosities and warfare among them could help mobilize support for the Europeans, so that one local group would lead the charge against another. That happened in the conquest of both Central America in the 1520s and the Inca Empire in the 1530s. In Europe meanwhile, all of this voyaging and conquering produced chaos between the Iberian kingdoms--what land would be Spain's, and what land would be Portugal's? A treaty sponsored by the Church eventually settled disputes between Spain and Portugal over territory that each was claiming. I mean, who do you call about property disputes, if not the pope? The Treaty of Tordesillas, which was signed in 1494, provided a permanent line of demarcation 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands off the Atlantic coast of Africa. In 1529, another treaty set bounds for each country in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions. But treaties of course did not prevent the death at the hands of European weaponry and diseases that contact entailed. In the Western Hemisphere, the local inhabitants' lack of resistance to European diseases was probably a more important factor than in conquest than weaponry was. In the long run, violence, enslavement, and European diseases like smallpox and measles led to the death of perhaps as much as ninety percent of the indigenous American population. Diseases spread and killed so quickly that entire communities ceased to exist almost --- at once, and with them their traditions, stories, and values. Meanwhile, colonization proved extremely lucrative for Spain and Portugal, which within a century went from being poor kingdoms to astonishingly rich ones, especially after 1545, when the Spanish uncovered a huge deposit of silver in Potosi, in present day Bolivia, and began conscripting indigenous people to do the most dangerous work in the mines. Migration to both regions swelled, and ships now criss-crossed both Atlantic and the Pacific. And this huge influx of wealth to Spain and Portugal would reshape power in Europe and also life everywhere else, as everything from microbes to ideas suddenly had a truly global reach. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.