CHAPTER TWO: WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE, 1492–1590

THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE
- European Communities
- The Merchant Class and the New Monarchies
- The Renaissance
- Portuguese Explorations
- Columbus Reaches the Americas

THE SPANISH IN THE AMERICAS
- The Invasion of America
- The Destruction of the Indies
- Intercontinental Exchange
- The First Europeans in North America
- The Spanish New World Empire

NORTHERN EXPLORATIONS AND ENCOUNTERS
- Fish and Furs
- The Protestant Reformation and the First French Colonies
- Sixteenth-Century England
- Early English Efforts in the Americas

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
*The European background of American colonization
*Creation of the Spanish New World empire and its first extensions to North America
*The large-scale intercontinental exchange of peoples, crops, animals, and diseases
*The French role in the beginnings of North American fur trade
*England’s first overseas colonies in Ireland and America

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE ENGLISH AND THE ALGONQUIANS AT ROANOKE
Sir Walter Raleigh founded the Roanoke colony off the North Carolina coast in 1585. Initially the English hoped for friendly relations with the Indians. Raleigh hoped to find furs for sale, develop plantation agriculture, and discover gold or silver. The Indians were to be agricultural laborers. Not surprisingly, conflict erupted as the English attacked their hosts. A new group of colonists arrived in 1587, more committed to cooperation with the Indians, but conflicts emerged. When the English returned after a three-year hiatus, all of the colonists were gone. The vignette illustrates how European imperialist goals created conflicts with Indians.

THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE
Western Europe was an agricultural society. The feudal system divided land into small areas owned by powerful landlords who commanded labor and tribute from the peasants. The majority of Europeans were Christians and the Jewish minority was persecuted by them. Living conditions were harsh for most people—famine was prevalent and one-third of Europe’s populations was wiped out by the bubonic plague between 1347 and 1353. But Europe’s agriculture continued to expand and by 1500 the population was around 30 million, close to its pre-plague level. Beginning in the 14th century, the monarchs of Western Europe began to ally with merchants and strengthen their hold on their estates. Europe had also experienced considerable commercial growth. Stimulated by the Crusades, several Italian cities
began trade with the civilizations of Asia. Along with products such as the compass and gunpowder, and techniques such as movable type, Muslim civilization reintroduced Europeans to the learning of Greece and Rome, which was essential for the Renaissance. Motivated by earthly concerns, Europeans adopted a humanistic view, which was part of the inquisitive and acquisitive spirit that motivated exploration.

After achieving nationhood, Portugal began exploring distant lands by sea. Prince Henry the Navigator established an academy to train seafarers who embarked on new trading expeditions designed to reach the Indies by sailing around Africa. By 1488, the Portuguese had established several colonies, reached the southern tip of Africa, and had begun the Atlantic slave trade. Ten years later, Vasco da Gama sailed around the southern tip of Africa to India. Christopher Columbus, who sailed with the Portuguese, proposed sailing westward to reach the Indies, drastically miscalculating the distance. He convinced Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain to finance his “Enterprise of the Indies.” In October 1492, he arrived at a series of Caribbean islands. He returned with two natives, talk of fabulous wealth, and suggested that the inhabitants could be enslaved. He later made several more trips to the Caribbean, where he engaged in violent slave raiding and an obsessive search for gold. He died thinking he had opened the way to Asia but Amerigo Vespucci was already describing the land as a New World.

THE SPANISH IN THE AMERICAS  Armies of Spaniards marched across the Caribbean islands, slaughtering the inhabitants. Soon the Spaniards had depleted the islands of inhabitants and gold. In 1517 the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, home of the Aztec empire. The Aztecs dominated central Mexico, extracting tribute, and sacrificing human captives. Hernan Cortes arrived in 1519. Forging an alliance with victims of Aztec oppression and aided by a devastating smallpox epidemic, he overthrew the Aztec empire whose bureaucracy was late in responding to the crisis. The Spanish then plundered Aztec society, capturing vast riches.

Many different Indian peoples resisted Spanish conquest, but they were no match for mounted warriors carrying steel swords. The population of Mexico, which had been 25 million in 1519, fell to just a million only a century later. Some losses were due to battle, some due to starvation and overwork, but most were due to the introduction of European diseases. Epidemics of smallpox, measles, influenza, and other diseases were a secret weapon of the Spanish that weakened the Indians even before Europeans arrived in large numbers. The Indian population had declined by ninety percent by 1900. Diseases were only one of many exchanges between Europe and the Americas. Silver that flowed from American mines into Europe resulted in runaway inflation. Corn, potatoes, and other crops went west to east; sugar, rice, coffee, horses, and cattle went east to west.

In 1513 the first of a series of unsuccessful attempts to colonize what is now the United States began in Florida. In 1539, two would-be conquerors went searching for golden cities. Hernan DeSoto traveled through the South, spreading disease that depopulated and undermined Indian societies. Francisco de Coronado left on a tour that took him through the Great Plains. Though he defeated the Pueblo Indians, Coronado did not find gold. Still, by the late sixteenth century the Spanish had a powerful American empire. Some 200,000 Europeans and 125,000 Africans lived there. Since few European women came, a racially mixed population developed.
The empire was governed by the Council of the Indies, which oversaw a centralized bureaucratic system. In practical terms, however, local autonomy prevailed.

**NORTHERN EXPLORATIONS AND ENCOUNTERS** The abundant fish of the Great Banks led to European exploration of the North American coastal waters. The French took the lead and established large land claims in North America. European-Indian relations were based on commerce, especially the fur trade. Disease epidemics and wars over hunting grounds reduced the Indian population while trade made them dependent on European manufactured goods.

The Protestant Reformation was critical to the expansion of northern Europeans to North America. John Calvin's teachings of thrift and industry influenced the transition from a Medieval agrarian to a commercial, industrial economy. In addition, the first French colonists were Huguenots, followers of Calvin.

The Enclosure movement stimulated English colonization when the woolen trade expanded and a growing number of farmers lost their land to make way for sheep, creating a large, unemployed population. During this period, King Henry VIII established the Protestant Church of England. Later rivalries with Spain led Queen Elizabeth I to order the conquest of Ireland. A brutal, vicious invasion followed that set the pattern for English colonization in North America. Various plans were made for colonies, including an expedition to Newfoundland and the ill-fated Roanoke colony. These incursions into the New World angered King Phillip II of Spain who tried to destroy England. The defeat of the Spanish Armada destroyed the Spanish monopoly on the New World.

**CONCLUSION** Spain had initiated the colonization of the America with disastrous consequences for the Indians. While no French or English colonies were created in the 16th century, they had developed a commercial colonial encounter.

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Discuss the Viking expeditions to North America and ask why we learn “In fourteen-hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue” but we don’t learn “In the year one-thousand and one, Leif Erikson sailed towards the setting sun.” In other words, why did Columbus’s voyage make a difference but Leif Erikson’s didn’t? Use this as a way to focus on the changes in European society that had occurred during the intervening 500 years.

2. As a way of focusing on those changes students could be asked to think about the notion of preconditions for overseas conquest. What did Europeans have going for them in 1500 that enabled them to mount a successful invasion of America? Focus on the economic growth that gave Europeans a reason to establish trading centers and look for Asian routes. Focus on political development that created strong centralized monarchies that could sustain overseas conquest.
3. Compare the Spanish and English conquests discussed in the chapter with the earlier conquests upon which these two kingdoms had embarked. The text refers to the Reconquista and the centuries-long struggle over the Muslims. In key respects the conquest of the Moors paralleled the conquest of the Aztecs. Both were hierarchical societies that Spain ruled by eliminating the leadership elite and through forced conversion. The text does not discuss the English conquest of Ireland, but it parallels in key respects English conquest of the Indians. In both cases the English saw themselves claiming land that was inhabited by “savages” who did not use it effectively. The English model in both cases was the plantation, in which groups of men and women were brought over with the intention of replicating the original English community, without too much regard to the original inhabitants.

4. Make the connection between the material found in Chapter One and the Indians’ interactions with Europeans. A popular idea is the notion of the Columbian exchange. Lecture on how Europe and America exchanged goods, ideas, and people. Remind students that African people and goods were brought over as well.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the nature of the community at Roanoke? Why did the community fail to sustain itself?

2. In the year 1000 Europe was flat on its back. By 1500 it was ready to embark on a path that by 1900 had led to global dominance. What had taken place between 1000 and 1500 that enabled Europeans to start on that journey? (You might break this into smaller questions: What economic changes occurred between 1000 and 1500 that enabled Europeans to be ready for conquest? What political changes had occurred as well?)

3. What factors enabled the Spanish to conquer the Aztec empire?

4. What were the key differences, in terms of overall objectives, between the English, French, and Spanish colonial encounters?

5. What role did the Protestant Reformation play in enabling Europeans to embark on the conquest of the Americas?
Out of Class Activity

Role playing often works well to get students to think through different perspectives. Students could be assigned (individually or as groups) to portray English, French, or Spanish conquerors. Others could be assigned to portray different Indian groups. Each would state its objectives in the encounter.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio-Visual Aids

“Age of Discovery: Spanish and Portuguese Explorations” Artwork and map animation help illustrate the voyages of Prince Henry the Navigator, Diaz, Columbus, Vasco da Gama, etc. (Color, 12 minutes, 1979)

“Age of Discovery: English, French, and Dutch Explorations” Examines the voyages of Cabot Verrazano, Cartier, Frobisher, Drake, and Hudson. (Color, 12 minutes, 1979)

“The Vikings and Their Explorations” Uses costumed dramatizations and artifacts to show home life, manners, and dress. Recreates explorations culminating in Leif Erikson’s voyage to the North American continent. (Color, 11 minutes, 1958)

“Sir Francis Drake—The Rise of English Sea Power” Shows Drake’s role in pushing England into a new continent, terrorizing the Spanish navy, and getting the English to look abroad. (B&W, 30 minutes, 1957)