

Unit II: CONTACT: EUROPE AND AMERICA MEET: 1492-1673

Question/Problem 3: Assess the effects of contact on the Indians and Europeans between 1492 and 1673.

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CONTACT: EUROPE AND AMERICA MEET

There were many benefits and many drawbacks to the contact between Indians and the Europeans between 1492 and 1673. Some of the positive and negative effects of contact for both the Indians and the Europeans will be highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Contact with the Europeans introduced the Indians to a variety of livestock, many plants, and new technology. One of the most important animals was the horse. As a result of this import, the Great Plains Indians no longer had to hunt buffalo and game on foot. This gave them the freedom to travel greater distances in a shorter period of time. Tribes from Minnesota and Missouri who had existed primarily on nuts and small game moved west to the plains to hunt buffalo. The horse helped the Indians to improve their diets, their hunting skills, and to make their lives a little easier. Later, cows, pigs, chickens, and sheep were also used by the Indians. Many grains, such as wheat, rice, and barley along with citrus fruit trees, plants, and bananas were brought from Europe. Indians adopted some of the European technology such as the plow. Various traps, axeheads, knives, ice chisels, and muskets helped the Indians improve their hunting. As a result of this new technology, the Indians in North America were able to get more furs and improve their trading opportunities with the Europeans. New techniques of American cloth production were gradually introduced by weavers, dyers, and other textile masters. By 1571, many workshops in central Mexico had hundreds of Indian workers.

Some of the drawbacks of contact with the Europeans were disease, slavery, and looting of treasures and cities. Many European conquistadors wanted to get as much wealth as possible from the New World and convert the Indians to Christianity. Their methods were sometimes cruel and violent. One of the most daring and scheming conquistadors was Hernando Cortes. In 1519, he invaded the Aztecs of Mexico and took their Emperor, Montezuma prisoner. Cortes and his men took many Indian treasures and jewels. Steel weapons, gunpowder, guns, armor, as well as horses and vicious Spanish bloodhound dogs enabled the conquistadors to kill large numbers of Indians and seize their land and wealth.

In addition to a passion for gold, the Spanish savored sugar. The Europeans learned that sugarcane flourished in the Caribbean climate. Many tropical forests were destroyed and replaced with sugar plantations. They also found that the growing and selling of tobacco, a plant native to America, could result in fortunes. Huge plantations were also established for growing tobacco and other plants. Labor was needed for the plantations, so many Indians were forced to work in the fields. They had no natural defenses against the diseases brought by the Europeans. Smallpox, typhus, measles, diphtheria, and whooping cough devastated the Indians. Between 50 and 90 percent of the native population died. To get the labor necessary to run the plantations, the Europeans turned to Africa for the workers they needed. This trade of human beings started a triangle of cruelty. Slavery linked Europe (slave dealers), Africa (slaves), and the Americas (where the labor was needed). Nearly 10 million slaves reached the Americas and were forced to do backbreaking labor on the plantations. The slave-based plantation system that started with sugar spread as crops of tobacco, rice, indigo, and cotton became valuable sources of income as a result of contact between the Indians and Europeans.

Explorers found much wealth in the New World. For instance, Spain became rich on the silver and gold taken from the Aztecs and Incas. Some precious metals were worked into jewelry. Other gold and silver was coined or shipped in bars or ingots. The Indians were often forced to work as slaves in order to mine the precious metals. Coins minted in the Americas stimulated commerce in Europe. Other European countries did not find the same great wealth in gold and silver that Spain had found.

When French explorers made contact with the Indians in what is now Canada, one of the few items the Indians could offer in exchange was the fur of the beaver. Felt could be made from the fine hair of the beaver and this felt would last for many years. Felt was used to make hats and rich Europeans prized their beaver hats. By 1600, the Canadian fur trade was so profitable that big businessmen of France competed for a monopoly on this trade. Further exploration also brought the realization that this land was very suitable for colonization.

Contact with the New World introduced Europeans to a variety of new plants and animals. Gradually these resources became more important to Europe than the treasures of silver and gold. Two of the most important crops were corn and potatoes. Corn was brought to Africa and became a staple product surviving where wheat and rice could not. This proved to be a mixed blessing since it helped the population to grow and this in turn kept the slave trade profitable. Corn was also found to be useful as food for animals, and this boosted Europe's supply of meat and dairy products. The potato proved to be ideal for northern Europe's soil and climate. Potatoes became a staple food in Ireland and helped save the Irish from starvation. Other crops such as beans, squash, tomatoes, and chili peppers provided variety to European diets. Sunflowers were welcomed in Europe as a different source of cooking oil. Other plants became valued as dyes. Mexico's cochineal dye, was used to dye cloth red, was second only to silver in its importance by the late 1500s. Columbus reported the first account of the Indian's use of tobacco. The export of tobacco became so profitable that Spanish kings claimed a monopoly and the use of tobacco became widespread. Thousands of medicinal plants were sent to Europe as Indians shared their knowledge of healing. Quinine, derived from a Peruvian bark, eased malaria. Tonic from Canadian evergreen needles cured scurvy. Turkeys were domesticated by the Aztecs and became widespread in Europe. People in Europe, Asia, and Africa got plenty of new goods from the Americas.

Not all of the results of exploration were successful. Many sailors never saw the New World because of treacherous storms and dangerous crossings. The rise of Spain as a leader in the search for treasure inspired other European nations to join in the race to accumulate the wealth of the New World. Privateers attacked Spanish convoys and seized the cargo before destroying the ships. Contact with the Indians sometimes proved disastrous also. Some ship captains reported the loss of lives in skirmishes with the Indians. For instance, in 1513, Ponce de Leon, reached a land he called Florida, searched there for gold and other treasures and tried to set up a Spanish settlement; the Indians drove the Spaniards out and killed Ponce de Leon in 1521.

Exploration led to contact between people who had previously been unaware of each other's existence. The contact between the two groups of people provided for an exchange of goods, ideas, technology, and practices. This exchange resulted in many benefits and drawbacks depending on one's point of view.

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