

THE EUROPEAN WORLD IN THE TIME OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

I. A World of Separate Peoples in Separate Countries

A. The Most Important European Countries for American History

1. We know from our survey of the “anchor facts” of history that there would be no United States of America if it were not for the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492.
2. After this discovery, Europeans took an interest in what there was to the west of Europe and in the *Age of Discovery* learned how immense the Americas are, ultimately colonizing the entire hemisphere.
3. Not all European countries participated in this equally. Some European countries have no connection to American history at all until modern times. Consequently, in looking at the European world in the time of Columbus *in American history*, our focus must be on those countries that are most relevant to how the story of America unfolded.
4. The European countries that are most important in the story of the discovery and exploration of America are Spain, Portugal, England, and France. It is evidently due to the actions of the explorers and colonizers from these cultures that the dominant languages of the Americas came to be what they are (English: USA and Canada, French: Canada and Haiti, Portuguese: Brazil; Spanish: Mexico, Argentina, etc.)
5. Later we see countries such as Germany and Russia as key actors in American history, but for now they are not relevant.

B. Why Separate Countries and Separate Languages (in Europe *and* America)?

1. After the fall of Rome in 476 AD, Europe was overrun by separate groups of people known as “tribes.”
2. A tribe called the Franks conquered the region we now call France. A tribe called the Angles conquered “Angle-land” (England). Another tribe known as Visigoths took over the Roman province of Hispania (today Spain) and Portugal.
3. Every region in Europe was claimed by such a group, and became a separate country with the conquering tribe ruling over native peoples and resisting attempts to take their claim by other tribes.
4. This arrangement gradually became stable. The territories claimed by tribes became their countries, with tribal chieftains elevated to the status of “king,” and relatively settled boundaries between them.
5. In each territory, where previously people had been united in speaking Latin due to their dealings with Rome, native languages now mixed with remnants of Latin and the language of conquerors to produce a unique blend. Portuguese became distinct from Spanish. English became distinct from German and French, etc.

6. By the time of Columbus, the tribal territories that had survived as kingdoms for centuries had gradually become “nations,” where the culture of the people was united by common language, history, & traditions.
7. These traditions included, importantly, the stories of how they had achieved their independence and won a place for themselves in the world, despite all their neighboring enemies. The identity of each nation thus included the tale of its violent struggles against other nations.
8. The variety of peoples and languages in Europe, though typically taken for granted by people, is actually a deeply significant fact, and was already important in the time of Columbus. The meaning of the separateness of European peoples is their inability to live together, and the violent involved in maintaining their *disconnectedness*, which became embedded and celebrated in their separate national cultures.

C. As Globalization Begins

The importance of the existence of Europe’s separate countries is that these separate peoples, so disconnected and hurtful to each other, were those responsible for bringing the world together through globalization. It is hardly surprising, then, that the story of globalization involves many conflicts between them and the separate peoples they met, who were also unaccustomed to, and typically unhappy to, become more connected to the rest of the world on any terms but their own.