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Period 1

AP US History

6. The European Age of Discover in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries was possible because of what important elements. Discuss.

The clichéd term, “gold, god, and glory,” does not give justice to the reasons why Europeans were motivated to explore the Atlantic, for a mix of many elements together were responsible for this feat. The vital elements responsible for the European Age of Discovery in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries was new ideas and technology as a product of the renaissance, unification of European nation states, and the desire to own and monopolize goods seen during the crusades. Although the desire find Christian converts and Prince Henry’s School of Navigation were also elements that enabled exploration, they are not pertinent to this essay.

Prior to the renaissance or “reawakening” of Europe, Western Europe was in what was called the Dark Ages, and lagged behind on technology and political structure. However, in the 14th century, Europe came out of isolation and bloomed with new inventions and technology. The movable type printer allowed mass production of books, increasing literacy rate across Europe. In addition, cheap and mass produced books allowed for many people to share stories of their travels. The increasing availability of education and production of traveling accounts (such as Marco Polo’s trip to China) increased the desire for Europeans to explore what they could read, and it became more possible because citizens were better educated. Other important technology created revolved around navigation and sailing. The compass, which originated in China, and the astrolabe, which allowed seamen to calculate their exact latitude, increased sea traveling accuracy. In addition, the lateen sail, aerodynamic Caravel ship, and rudders created a new and advanced type of vessel entirely. Increased accuracy in map making allowed explorers to sufficiently travel with less of a chance of getting misguided. Technological innovations allowed Europeans to travel faster, with less risk across the seas, making travel more reasonable for investors to invest in and travelers to feel comfortable traveling in, thus increasing a desire for exploration.

In addition to renaissance technology, the renaissance also brought a period of enlightenment, in which new, radical ideas were born. Humanism or the ability for humans to accomplish anything was quite popular during the renaissance period. This gave Europeans a sense of adventure and confidence to explore the open seas in a hope of gaining glory for their country. In addition, a more secular way of thinking allowed Europeans to not feel tied to the church that held them to their hometown, and allowed them to break free and explore. New ideas that blossomed gave way to courage and desire to explore the unknown in hopes of glory or adventure.

Another important element that fueled the European Age of Discovery was the unification of European nation states. During the Dark Ages, Europeans relied on a decentralized system called feudalism, in which lords would maintain plots of land for servants or serfs to live on. Due to the lack of a strong centralized government, the Roman Catholic Church acted as the political power, unifying Europe and in turn gaining enormous strength. As the renaissance blossomed however, new secular ideas of thought caused Europeans to revolt against the church and their demeaning qualities. Political and social chaos ensued. As the churches power goes down, many monarchies power increased as they took the power vacuum opportunity to claim the right to the throne. Soon, small states formed and armies and bureaucracies were born. Portugal was the first nation to be established, with Spain soon after. In addition, many monarchies allied with merchants and corporations, so the wealth would be shared between the government and the corporation. In order to gain more power and wealth, exploration would give the newly born monarchies an opportunity to gain enormous power, prestige and wealth. Therefore, exploration was ensued in order to give newly formed nation states more power and wealth over the other nation states.

As states formed and battles over the scant amount of land decreased new armies needed a new place to find land and be occupied with. This is the case with Spain and a primary motive for their exploration. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had recently been married in order to consolidate the nation of Spain. Soon after this, the royal army successfully had driven out all the moors during what is called the “reconquista” With no land to conquer, and no battles to be fought, Spain hired explorers such as Columbus to find new land to conquer and keep the army busy. Hence, the ending of feudalism and small amounts of land in Europe also caused political pressure to explore.

The final imperative motive that allowed exploration to grow at the rate of which it did was the impact of the crusades on Europe. The crusades were a series of religious wars that were fought between the Europeans and the Moors (Muslims) over the holy land in the then Islamic Empire. Although the crusades were not as successful as hoped, the crusades allowed Europeans to come out of isolation for the first time and interact with a society that was experiencing its golden age. Upon contact, the Europeans saw new goods which they did not own such as silk and gunpowder from China, Gold, Ivory and Slaves from Africa, and spices and dies from the East Indies and Islamic caliphates. The crusades opened the eyes of the backwards Europeans and created a craving for those goods, increasing exploration.

However, the goods wanted from the eastern part of the globe were extensively far away, and overland passage on the Silk Road proved to be dangerous and controlled by the Mongols and Muslims. In fact, most of the East Indies trade was monopolized by the Islamic empire, causing prices of the goods to be very expensive to the Europeans. The only European country that benefitted from the trading was the Italian city states that had direct contact with the Muslims on the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the European policy of mercantilism stated that more goods should be exported than imported in order to make a healthy profit, and the Europeans lacked a main export and imported much more. Thus, Europeans had a desire to monopolize the East Indies trade while cutting out the Islamic middlemen and find a way to have a large export. Hence, exploration was born to find a short route by sea to the Indies and possibly colonize land along the way. Famous explorers such as Magellan, Amerigo Vespucci, and

Pizzaro used new renaissance technology to find a water route around Africa to India. However, other explorers such as Christopher Columbus and French explorers such as Jacques Cartier searched west across the Atlantic in search of a “shortcut” to the Indies. What Columbus found was the western Hemisphere. This gave new land the Europeans to create crops and raw materials and exports for the mother country and continue with a mercantilist policy. Other English and French explorers continued to search for a northwest passage to the Indies to easily gain access to the foreign goods. The goods presented during the crusades lead to an almost desperate desire to own and control the movement of the goods throughout Europe thus pressuring Europeans to explore for a new route to control the trade.

In summation, creation of absolute monarchies and nation states in Europe, renaissance innovations, and a gluttonous desire for East Indies goods were vital components of Europe’s Age of Discovery in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. However, many other components such as Prince Henry’s navigation school and Christian missionary effort fueled European exploration, although not vital to this essay. European exploration was a greedy, yet needed movement.