



# History of Europe 1500-1815

*Carlton Hayes*

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Five hundred years ago a European could search in vain the map of “the world” for America, or Australia, or the Pacific Ocean. Experienced mariners, and even learned geographers, were quite unaware that beyond the Western Sea lay two great continents peopled by red men; of Africa they knew only the northern coast; and in respect of Asia a thousand absurd tales passed current. The unexplored waste of waters that constituted the Atlantic Ocean was, to many ignorant Europeans of the fifteenth century, a terrible region frequented by fierce and fantastic monsters. To the average European the countries surveyed in the preceding chapter, together with their Muslim neighbors across the Mediterranean, still comprised the entire known world. Shortly before the close of the fifteenth century, daring captains began to direct long voyages on the high seas and to discover the existence of new lands; and from that time to the present, Europeans have been busily exploring and conquering—veritably “Europeanizing”—the whole globe. Although religion as well as commerce played an important role in promoting the process, the movement was attended from the very outset by so startling a transformation in the routes, methods, and commodities of trade that usually it has been styled the Commercial Revolution. By the close of the sixteenth century it had proceeded far enough to indicate that its results would rank among the most fateful events of all history.

It was in the commonplace affairs of everyday life that the Commercial Revolution was destined to produce its most far-reaching results. To appreciate, therefore, its true nature and significance, we must first turn aside to ascertain how our European ancestors actually lived about the year 1500, and what work they did to earn their living. Then, after recounting the story of foreign exploration and colonization, we shall be in a position to reappraise the domestic situation in town and on the farm...

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