Ceuta, Bojadór, and Beyond:
Europeans on the Move

On a summer day in the year 1415 a fleet of Portuguese ships set off from Lisbon. On board were the king, John I, his three sons, and soldiers of noble birth from England and France, as well as Portugal. The flotilla was the largest in the country's history and among the most impressive assembled by Europeans to that date. The fleet's departure was accompanied by considerable public fanfare. Yet the event must also have been marked by confusion and uncertainty. King John had studiously avoided revealing the destination or mission of his ships. He had publicly quarreled with a ruler in the area now known as Holland, so it seemed likely that the fleet would head north. But the dispute was an elaborate ruse. The fleet took a southward course. Rounding Portugal's southwestern extremity, Cape St. Vincent, it sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar, controlled on both shores by Muslims known to Europeans as Moors. The ships dropped anchor upon reaching Ceuta, a North African port and trading center located directly across the strait from the Rock of Gibraltar. The Portuguese positioned themselves on both sides of the narrow promontory on which the town was built.

The next day they fulfilled King John's hidden objective by launching an assault on Ceuta. The town and its citadel were captured after a pitched battle. Victory was celebrated a few days later in the local mosque, hastily converted by exorcism—with salt and water—into a Christian church. Following High Mass the king knighted his sons, who, according to the royal chronicler of these events, had distinguished themselves in battle. The royal party then returned home, leaving behind twenty-seven hundred men to defend Portugal's new acquisition against expected counterattacks by the Moors.1

In many respects the capture of Ceuta was typical of other such episodes in the Middle Ages. The most enthusiastic advocates of the expedition were the king's sons, eager to win knighthood in battle, and attacking the Muslims carried on the tradition of the Crusades.2 Ceuta was, furthermore, part of the Mediterranean world, with a
history linking the town back to the empires of antiquity. Previous successful invaders included Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Vandals, Visigoths, and—early in the eighth century—Arabs.

In other important respects, however, the Portuguese expedition and victory marked a new phase in world history, the advent of a modern era of European-centered empires that was to extend around the globe. For seven centuries prior to 1415, Muslims descended from Arabs or North African Berbers held territory in western Europe. Muslim armies advanced through the Iberian Peninsula into central France before being defeated in 732 at the Battle of Tours. Territory controlled by the Moors was much reduced by the early fifteenth century. But not until 1492, when the ruler of Granada, in southern Spain, was defeated, would they lose their last western European foothold. With the capture of Ceuta, Europeans took the offensive to gain a foothold of their own in another continent.

This was not their first such foothold. Rome's troops had subdued Carthage and incorporated swaths of North Africa into the Roman empire. By the tenth century, Norse sailors founded settlements along the "New World's" northeastern reaches. Crusaders at times held portions of the Holy Land, and Venetians established trading centers along the North African coast in the Levant, and on the shores of the Black Sea well before 1415. But Ceuta became the first site since Roman times to be held by Europeans on a sustained basis and effectively administered from the capital of a European polity. The soldiers King John left behind were able to sustain Portugal's claims in the face of sieges and attacks by the Moors. In fact, Ceuta remained a Portuguese possession until 1580, when control passed to Spain, which still administers it. The little North African town whose capture marks the start of a long history of modern European imperialism is, ironically, one of the last relics of overseas empire today.

Portugal's victory at Ceuta represents a turning point in world history in other respects. The outcome was due in large measure to King John's ability to mobilize the material wealth and human energies of the first European nation-state. The domestic resources of a centralized and ethnically homogeneous polity were used to project the state's power overseas. Other west European countries would follow suit as their monarchs and bureaucrats gained strength relative to the regional nobles below and Roman Catholic Church above them. Imperial expansion in turn aided European state building by placing externally generated resources at the disposal of central government authorities.

Widely held conceptions of military and political power began to shift with the Portuguese victory. The ease with which ships transported soldiers from Lisbon to North Africa showed that control of the oceans could lead to conquest of lands and peoples far from imperial capitals. A precedent was set for expansion to wherever the
Europeans' ships might take them. A state's capacity to command the high seas became an important indicator of power in its own right. Naval power could also be the means to become a great land power, for it permitted inclusion within imperial boundaries of territories on other continents.

The capture of Ceuta had the significant effect of stimulating Portuguese efforts at exploration, trade, and conquest along Africa's Atlantic coast. The youngest of King John's sons on the expedition was Prince Henry, known to English-speaking posterity as Henry the Navigator. The prince's participation in this event evidently reinforced an already strong personal interest in Africa. Ceuta was a northern terminus of trade routes bringing gold, ivory, and slaves across the Sahara. Henry knew that if Portugal could access these valuable resources at the point of origin, its gains would exceed those from controlling Ceuta.

Direct access across vast territories held by Moors was out of the question. A sea voyage was required. But before 1415 no Portuguese vessels had ventured south of Cape Bojador, a desolate headland some 850 miles southwest of the Strait of Gibraltar. Prince Henry doubtless hoped that people living beyond the cape could supply the desired commodities. He also hoped and quite possibly expected that these people would be Christians. Persistent rumors circulating in Europe told of Prester John, a Christian monarch living somewhere south of the Muslim-controlled lands. If Prester John could be found, prospects for gainful trade and for a grand alliance of Christian forces to defeat Islam would be greatly enhanced.

Enticed by such possibilities and encouraged by the success of the Ceuta expedition, Prince Henry was instrumental in recruiting, outfitting, financing, and motivating the men who eventually sailed beyond Cape Bojador. Not long after returning from Ceuta he established a command post of sorts at Sagres, on Cape St. Vincent. There he sought to link the basic science of astronomy with the more applied sciences of ship construction, navigational equipment design, and cartography. For many years expeditions sent out under his semi-official aegis proved unwilling or unable to pass south of Cape Bojador. This landmark became known as the Cape of Fear, a sign that it was a psychological as well as a physical barrier to sailors. To pass beyond it a ship had to veer far out to sea to avoid mists and tricky currents near the coast. South of it lay unknown perils at sea. The cape itself offered no evidence that favorable trading prospects lay ahead, for its hinterland was a virtually uninhabited desert. Perhaps most troublesome was the challenge of returning home. Winds and currents prevented sailors from retracing the route close to the coast that took them to the cape.

At last, in 1434, Henry's squire Gil Eannes broke the barrier, rounding Cape Bojador in a small barca. Eannes resolved the return-voyage problem by heading seaward in a northwesterly direction toward the nearby Canary Islands, then taking
the westerly winds from those islands back to Portugal. The precedent was set for a
series of voyages that took Portuguese sailors as far south as Sierra Leone by the time
of Henry's death in 1460. Explorers found little gold as they pushed steadily away
from home base. But they did capture some of the people living along the coast,
selling them for handsome profits in Portugal as slaves. No fabled Christian kingdom
was found. But most inhabitants of the more verdant coastal lands south of the
desert whom the sailors encountered were not Muslims. This doubtless stimulated
Portuguese hopes that the Africans they met might readily be converted.6

Portuguese sailors set out upon the Atlantic in 1441 to enter the Mediterranean,
a miniature ocean whose outlines had been known for centuries. As its name indicates,
the Mediterranean occupies the center of a multicultural zone, facilitating economic and cultural exchange among the peoples of southern Europe, northern
Africa, and western Asia.7 Perhaps the most lasting effect of capturing a Mediterrane
an port was, ironically, to increase interest in the ocean lapping Portugal's own
shores. The size and contours of this immense body of water were unknown. Yet after
1434 there was good reason to believe that ignorance of these matters would some day
be dispelled. Once Gil Eannes showed that Cape Bojador need no longer be the Cape
of Fear, sailors from Portugal and other west European states could set out on the
Atlantic for distant lands whose inhabitants were far more culturally and physically
diverse than the Mediterranean's peoples. Beyond Bojador lay the coastlines of the
rest of the world.

EUROPE'S COLONIAL EMPIRES: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

In the half millennium following Ceuta's capture, the rulers of eight countries that
together account for a mere 1.6 percent of the land surface of the earth—Portugal,
Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Italy—
claimed vast territories and asserted sovereign rights over hundreds of millions of
human beings. It is highly unlikely that people from any part of the world should
have made such audacious claims, let alone backed up their words with effective
actions. Yet this is the implausible scenario that unfolded.

What occurred in the course of Europe's expansion had a profound impact on
the modern history of all continents. Since the fifteenth century west Europeans have
sent forth their inhabitants, their several versions of the Christian faith, their attitudes
toward nature, their languages, intellectual and political controversies, consumer
goods, diseases, death-dealing and life-enhancing technologies, commercial institutions, government bureaucracies, and values. Entire regions were directly incor-
porated, in a kind of global enclosure movement, into overseas empires.8

Europeans were not, of course, the only expansionist actors in the centuries
following Ceuta's capture. Western Europe itself, invaded from North Africa in the
eighteenth century and a new round of exit Turks, who in 1433
Eastern Orthodox and Islamic arts and advanced as far as
Suleiman I (r. 1520–
Europe.

Along the east
directions after the
Russian czars had
During the next two
southern flanks by
settlements were est
late eighteenth cen
Elsewhere in
Babur (1483–1530),
reached its height at
of trading and diplo
commencing explo
under the direction
African coast before
halted in the 1430s
under the Qing (Ma
conquest in Tibet. A
centuries a rapidly
control of portions
and numerous smal

In Africa the
height by the early
rose during the era
southern African so
Inca empires grew
centuries. Numerous

The formatio
dence and extractiis a recurring theme
with expansionist a
say nothing of the y
as Western Europe's commercial and political interests expanded, empires like the Ottoman and the Ming expanded as well.

During the fifteenth century, it was the Ottoman Empire that posed the greatest threat to the Christian powers of Europe. By the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had grown to control a vast territory stretching from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and the borders of Russia. The Ottoman conquests in the Balkans and the亚洲 (Asia) led to the establishment of a new front in Europe—what came to be known as the Eastern Mediterranean. The Ottomans established themselves as a major power, challenging the European nations for control of the eastern trade routes.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire was not without its consequences. The Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, leading to the expulsion of the Byzantine Greeks from Europe. This event had a significant impact on the political and cultural landscape of the region, as well as on the religious makeup of the Balkans.

The Ottomans also continued to expand their influence in the Americas, where they made contact with the indigenous peoples of the region. Their influence was felt throughout the Americas, from the Caribbean to the western coast of South America. The Ottomans traded with Native American peoples, exchanging European goods for gold and other valuable commodities.

The Ottomans also continued to expand their influence in the Americas, where they made contact with the indigenous peoples of the region. Their influence was felt throughout the Americas, from the Caribbean to the western coast of South America. The Ottomans traded with Native American peoples, exchanging European goods for gold and other valuable commodities.

The Ottomans also continued to expand their influence in the Americas, where they made contact with the indigenous peoples of the region. Their influence was felt throughout the Americas, from the Caribbean to the western coast of South America. The Ottomans traded with Native American peoples, exchanging European goods for gold and other valuable commodities.
Nonetheless, the overseas empires west Europeans constructed in the past five centuries have certain distinctive and in many respects unique features. Their formation was closely associated with the most systematic, extensive exploration of the globe ever undertaken. European explorers obviously did not discover lands already inhabited by other human beings. But they did discover the seas, in that their voyages familiarized them with the huge portion of the earth's surface—some 70 percent—covered by water. Their findings enabled European cartographers to produce the first reasonably accurate images of the size, shape, and interconnectedness of the world's oceans. Whether maritime explorers had imperialist designs or not, the knowledge they accumulated was essential for founding "saltwater" empires.

Because territories Europeans claimed were linked to the governing country, or metropole, by ships designed for lengthy sea voyages, colonies could be geographically dispersed in a way quite different from the empires just noted. Except for Russia (in Alaska) and Japan, the others advanced along land frontiers. The results were contiguous units, not multiple territorial fragments. The first modern European empire, constructed by Portugal, is a classic illustration of dispersed power. In the century following their Ceuta expedition the Portuguese set up trading and settler enclaves along the coasts of Brazil, West Africa, East Africa, southwestern India (Malabar), China, and in the Spice Islands. They controlled two strategic ports: Hormuz, at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, and Malacca, overseeing Indian Ocean—China Sea traffic in the narrow strait between Sumatra and the Malay peninsula. The sun set only briefly on the early Portuguese empire—and not at all on the greatest one, governed by the British.

Dispersal of holdings across latitude and longitude lines gave rise to the idea that each colony should specialize in certain commodities based on its comparative economic advantage. A territory might be valued because it possessed minerals or tropical agricultural products unavailable in Europe. The tendency for metropole and colony to specialize in disparate yet complementary activities, and pressures on colonized peoples to produce designated commodities for export, were much greater when imperial possessions were distant and overseas than when colonies expanded along land frontiers.

Geographic dispersal made for enormous diversity in the peoples assembled under one political authority. The differences, not only between colonizers and colonized but also among the colonized, were striking. Each European empire was the arena for an extraordinarily high level of interaction across territorial, racial, linguistic, and religious lines.

The physical space separating a metropole from its colonies meant that rulers and ruled grew up in distinct disease environments. Initial encounters between the two groups could therefore have profound demographic consequences. In the New

World and parts of humans from other invaders' diseases with the non-Eurp were genetically pr also neighbors.

The expansion constructed at above makes sense to com impact on other p other ways, howe numerous states, sev seas possessions. T which each unit w sometimes peaceful lived with a para state's power and th global dimension on knowledge of the system. As larg western Europe is and geographic ter fragmented, with r of western Europe components. 11

European legitimacy of other examples cited e North African ter offensives in the la Ottoman authority and French to bee lasions in portions century from the E but steady erosion nomic penetration Crown to assume than in the days of dynasty, which exist
World and parts of Oceania, where indigenous peoples had little or no contact with humans from other continents prior to the arrival of Europeans, exposure to the invaders' diseases produced precipitous population declines. This was not the case with the non-European empires mentioned, in which newly subject populations were genetically primed, so to speak, to fight off the diseases of conquerors who were also neighbors.

The expansion of Europe is distinctive in that not one but several empires were constructed at about the same time and administered in parallel. In many respects it makes sense to consider western Europe a single category, analyzing the cumulative impact on other peoples of what is appropriately termed European imperialism. In other ways, however, it is imperative to disaggregate western Europe into its numerous states, several of them busily expanding and administering their own overseas possessions. The politics of western Europe belonged to an interstate system in which each unit was intensely aware of other units and in continual competition—sometimes peaceful, often violent—with them. The rulers of each European state lived with a pervasive sense of insecurity: the fear that neighbors would challenge the state's power and threaten its existence. Competition among these polities assumed a global dimension once the precedent for establishing overseas colonies was set and once knowledge of the possibilities for empire building was dispersed throughout the system. As I argue in part 3, a key to understanding the expansionist dynamic of western Europe is precisely the dual character of the region. In cultural, economic, and geographic terms it has long been relatively unified. In political terms it has been fragmented, with recurring outbreaks of bitter internecine warfare. The imperialism of western Europe is also the multiple imperialisms of the region's autonomous components.1

European imperialism was marked by its capacity to undermine the power and legitimacy of other expanding political systems. To take several of the post-1495 examples cited earlier, the Ottoman Turks were unable to sustain their claims to North African territory in the face of European military, diplomatic, and economic offensives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The final collapse of Ottoman authority at the aftermath of World War I enabled the victorious British and French to become League of Nations mandatory powers, governing Arab populations in portions of the Near East formerly under Ottoman rule. In India, the century from the Battle of Plassey (1757) to the Great Mutiny (1857–58) saw gradual but steady erosion in Mughal power and a corresponding increase in British economic penetration and political influence. The mutiny in turn spurred the British Crown to assume more direct control of large portions of the old Mughal Empire than in the days of informal rule by British East India Company officials. The Qing dynasty, which extended China's territorial authority into the Central Asian interior
during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was humiliated in the nineteenth by European "barbarians" attacking from the sea. China lost Hong Kong to Britain in the Opium War of 1839–42, witnessed the destruction of the imperial summer palace in 1860 by a British–French punitive expedition to Beijing, and was forced to cede sovereign rights in key port cities to British, French, German (and Japanese) officials. The so-called treaty ports were foreign colonial enclaves that the Chinese were not able to reclaim until after World War I.

By the time European soldiers entered the savanna interior of West Africa the Songhai Empire had fallen. Songhai’s smaller successor states, despite putting up often fierce resistance, were subdued by technically superior weaponry within two decades of the Berlin Conference in 1884–85, which set guidelines for Europe’s scramble for Africa. Further south, Zulu warriors were decisively defeated by white Afrikaner (Boer) forces in the Battle of Blood River (1838). Although inflicting heavy losses on British forces at the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, the Zulus subsequently lost at Ulundi and could not stave off invasion of their territory by both the Afrikaners and the British. Military resistance collapsed after a brief uprising in 1906 was crushed. In the New World, the powerful Aztec and Inca empires were defeated by the cunning, tenacity, ruthlessness—and infectious diseases—of the Spanish conquistadors within a matter of months following the invaders’ arrival.

The arrogant attitude Europeans displayed toward other people was due in large measure to their success at directly challenging the power and prerogatives of non-European rulers. The principal exceptions to this pattern—Japan, Thailand, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia (Ethiopia)—are interesting because the ability of these polities to remain independent in the face of external challenge was so exceptional.

A distinctive feature of the empires I will discuss was the persistent effort of Europeans to undermine and reshape the modes of production, social institutions, cultural patterns, and value systems of indigenous peoples. This transformation agenda, which in many instances proved remarkably successful, was the outward projection of tumultuous changes in the way Europeans themselves lived during the half millennium of their global dominance. At issue here is not whether Europeans were particularly cruel to other peoples in the course of subduing them. The grim truth is that all expanding polities cause loss of life and societal disruption when incorporating others into their domains. Acts of pillage, rape, and mass murder have been committed by advancing armies in diverse times and places throughout history. The crucial difference lay rather in the rulers’ actions following conquest. The mechanisms non-European empires devised to extract surplus from newly conquered groups typically did little to alter what these groups already produced. Neither was there substantial change in how commodities sought by new rulers were mined, grown, or fashioned by human labor. In contrast, Europeans often revol-
tionized production in their colonies. New methods permitted extraction of minerals and metals not accessible to local people. In numerous instances animals and plants were introduced. Horses and pigs, for instance, accompanied early Spanish settlers to the New World. Settlers were responsible for "population explosions of burros in . . . the Canaries, rats in Virginia . . . and rabbits in Australia." Some plants, like citrus fruits and sugarcane, were grown in the Mediterranean region and were familiar to those who transplanted them. But many others—like cassava, cocoa, coffee, groundnuts, maize, quinine, rubber, and tobacco—were not accessible until Europeans reached other world regions. These crops were transferred from one non-European continent to another, frequently through officially sponsored botanical gardens expressly established for this purpose.15

Having transferred commercially valuable crops, Europeans employed novel methods of mass producing them for export to the metropole. Colonial plantations may be seen as outdoor factories applying principles of industrial organization and production to tropical and semitropical agriculture well before they were applied to the indoor factories of Europe. In this respect the Industrial Revolution was given a colonial trial run. Both types of factories required large amounts of rigidly controlled human labor. In plantation colonies this typically entailed importing of slaves or indentured servants, whose presence altered a territory's racial composition and social structure as well as economic activities. Novel technologies were deployed to transport mass-produced commodities long distances over land and sea. The structure of precolonial economic life, including the largely self-reliant character of local communities, was changed after contact with a persistently intrusive western Europe.16

Non-European empires did not reserve large tracts of land for conquerors who had come to settle. And the number of such settlers was not substantial compared to the subjugated population. In sharp contrast, land alienation on behalf of European settlers and their descendants—with its accompanying dislocation of indigenous ways of life—was a recurring feature in many overseas possessions.17 Colonies in the New World and the temperate zones of Africa and Oceania offered opportunities for millions of Europeans to migrate. These lands served as vents for expanding home-country populations in a way without parallel in the history of other empires.18

The ruling elites of non-European empires did not invariably consider themselves culturally superior to their subjects. In instances in which a group with a pastoral and nomadic tradition imposed itself upon an agricultural and urbanized population, rulers were more likely to assimilate to the culture of the ruled than the reverse. Such was the case when the Mongol Yuan dynasty ruled China (1268–1379); when the Mughals descended to the Indian plains from the mountains of Afghanistan; when the Turks progressed from Central Asia to Anatolia; and when the Aztecs
migrated south to the Valley of Mexico in the twelfth century. Quite different were European empire builders, nomads traveling by sea, who with few exceptions showed little or no interest in adjusting to the cultures of their subjects. Their challenge was rather to persuade or coerce indigenous leaders, if not the populace as a whole, to adopt what Europeans believed to be their own clearly superior religion, moral code, language, literature, artistic tradition, legal system, and technology. Adaptation was essentially a one-way process. Upon the shoulders of the colonized was placed the burden of making necessary adjustments.

Europeans were by no means the only rulers with a superiority complex vis-à-vis their subjects. But they displayed this complex in an exceptionally systematic, self-conscious way and in an unusually wide range of symbolic settings. They were ingenious in devising methods to humiliate non-Europeans and unusually skilled at encouraging those they ruled to internalize an inferiority complex. The results were often devastating for the individual and collective self-confidence of subordinate populations.

A major theme of this book is that Europeans were distinctive in mounting a triple assault on other societies: on indigenous institutions of governance, on long-standing patterns of generating and distributing economic assets, and on ideas and values that gave meaning to life. When all these aspects of the old order came under direct and at times simultaneous attack, non-European societies found their ways of life imperiled as never before.

Within the genius of imperialism in human history, the west European version from the fifteenth century onward thus qualifies as a distinctive species, one deserving of study in its own right. It should be neither equated with the larger genus nor too readily broken down into the specific empires—Portuguese, Spanish, British, Dutch, and so forth—comprising its several subspecies. The history of each metropole's empire has been exhaustively recounted. This book examines broader patterns of the rise, fall, character, and impact of the empires considered collectively.

**WHY STUDY EUROPE'S OVERSEAS EMPIRES?**

The overseas empires deserve careful study, first, because their spatial and temporal dimensions are quite extraordinary. Two-thirds of the United Nations' member states as of January 2000—125 of 188—consisted of territories outside of Europe which at one time were governed by Europeans. Three-fifths of the world's population live in countries whose entire territory has at one time been claimed by a European state. If one includes states portions of whose current territory were under the legal jurisdiction of Europeans—notably China, with its treaty ports—then in excess of 80 percent of human beings now living inhabit states that experienced some version of formal European member states and for.

Second, the study of empires calls for understanding the many forms that imperial rule took in the wide range of contexts they encountered. They were not limited to the areas people think of—sparsely inhabited lands, or those in which indigenous powers were judged too feeble to resist. Even those familiar with modern Europe had been engaged in the empire-making process. However, the study of overseas empires also calls us to understand the limited, even improbable, nature of European success. How did Europeans, with so little numerical, economic, and technological advantage, manage to exert so much control over peoples so very different from their own? Was the European metropole's strength in its size and its products, or in the way it forced a way of life on those it mastered?

History was not so much a gradual, unfolding process of development, so much as one on which occasional but critical events were followed by a chain of circumstances, and the nature of those circumstances was highly contingent. The collapse of one of these events, say, the collapse of an empire, poses its own questions. Why, when did it happen? Why was it peaceful in others? Or did it occur because the empire's external imperialists proved too strong? Was it helped to collapse by its own internal weaknesses, which it was able to conceal until the moment arrived? Were the European empires ever able to truly impose their will on the peoples they mastered? Why did they fail to do so?

Studying the development of empires is not only interesting but also important. It is a question of discovering how human societies have developed and why they have changed in the past. This knowledge will help us better understand the present and shape it for the future.