11.3: Overseas Expansion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The development of early capitalism was intimately connected with overseas expansion - Europe was an important node of a truly global economy by the seventeenth century, and it was that economy that fueled the development of capitalistic, commercial societies in places like the Netherlands and England. While the original impulse behind overseas expansion during this period was primarily commercial, focused on the search for commodities and profit, it was also a major political focus of all of the European powers by the eighteenth century. In other words, European elites actively sought not just to trade with, but to conquer and control, overseas territories both for profit and for their own political "glory" and aggrandizement. The result was a dramatic expansion of European influence or direct control in areas of the globe in which Europe had never before been an influence. The result: by 1800, roughly 35% of the globe was directly or indirectly controlled by European powers. How did that happen?

The first part of the answer is simple: military technology and organization. The early-modern military revolution (i.e. the evolution of gunpowder warfare during and after the Renaissance period) resulted in highly-trained soldiers with the most advanced military technology in the world by the late seventeenth centuries. As European powers expanded, they built fortresses in the modern style and defended them with cannons, muskets, and warships that often outmatched the military forces and technology they encountered. In the case of China, Japan, and the Philippines, for instance, local rulers learned that the easiest way to deal with European piracy was not to try to fight European ships, but instead to cut off trade with European merchants until restitution had been paid.

European states also benefited from the relative political fragmentation of parts of the non-European world. There were powerful kingdoms and empires in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that defied European attempts at hegemony, but much of the world was controlled by smaller states. A prime example is India, which was divided up into dozens of small kingdoms, along with a few larger ones (the Mughal Empire that ruled much of the subcontinent early in the period of British expansion was in decline by the early eighteenth century even before the British controlled much territory). When the British and French began taking control of Indian territory, it was against the resistance of small Indian kingdoms, not...
some kind of (nonexistent) overall Indian state.

An important note regarding European colonial power: this period saw the consolidation of European holdings in the New World and the beginning of empires in places like India, but it did not include major land-holdings in Africa, the Middle East, or East Asia. In places with powerful states like China, the Ottoman Empire, and Japan, even the relative superiority of European arms was not sufficient to seize territory. Likewise, not only were African states able to successfully fight off Europeans as well, but African diseases made it impossible for large numbers of Europeans to colonize or occupy much African territory. As the Slave Trade burgeoned, Europeans did launch slave raids, but most slaves had been captured by African slavers who enjoyed enormous profits from the exchange.

Likewise, European states and the corporations they supported worked diligently to establish monopolies on trade with various parts of the world. However, "monopolies" in this case only meant monopolies in trade going to and from Europe. There were enormous, established, and powerful networks of trade between Africa, India, South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and the Pacific, all of which were dominated by non-European merchants. To cite one example, the Indian Ocean had served as an oceanic crossroads of trade between Africa and Asia for thousands of years. Europeans broke into those markets primarily by securing control of goods that made their way back to Europe rather than seizing control of intra-Asian or African trade routes, although they did try to dominate those routes when they could, and Europeans were able to seize at least some territories directly in the process.