The making of the modern world

What factors shaped the world from 1750 to 1918?

The years from 1750 to 1918 are some of the most interesting and significant in human history. During the period, enormous changes took place that affected the way in which people all around the world lived, worked and thought. It was a period of empire building that saw the colonisation of new territories such as Australia. It was also a period of rapid industrialisation that saw the spread of new technologies and birth of many new ideas and social movements. Towards the end of the period, in 1914, World War I broke out. By the war’s end in 1918, the world was different. Once powerful empires were broken up and new nations were created in their place.

What is the modern world?

Most historians agree that the modern world (also known as the industrial world) developed from the 1750s onwards. They use the term ‘modern world’ to describe this period mainly because the developments that took place from this time onwards are familiar to people in Western societies today – for example, systems of law and government still followed in countries like Australia, Britain and the United States all took shape at this time. Other examples include:

- the mass production of goods in factories
- the mass movements of people to cities and towns
- the establishment of trade unions and workers’ rights
- mass migration of people from across Europe to colonies in the New World
- the start of rapid transport and mass communication
- organised public education and schools.

The expansion of European empires

From the late 16th century onwards, major European powers – such as Britain, France, Spain and Portugal – all competed to increase their control of new territories across the globe – a practice known as imperialism. Colonies were valued not only for the additional power and military advantages they could provide, but also because they delivered access to a range of raw materials like timber, cotton, coal and gold. These materials became the driving force behind the development of a range of industries in Europe. They also made imperial powers extremely wealthy.

Raw materials from colonies across the British Empire fuelled the Industrial Revolution. These materials included wool and gold from Australia; cotton, sugar and tobacco from the Americas; gold and diamonds from Africa; and spices, fabric and tea from India.

In addition to raw materials, the overseas colonies became valuable markets in which to sell the products manufactured from those raw materials for a profit (e.g. cloth made from cotton and cigarettes made from tobacco). In this way, European empires profited not once, but twice from their colonies around the world.
A comparison of world maps in 1750 and 1900 reveals how quickly European empires expanded their territories over a period of 150 years (see Sources O.1 and O.2).

Newly formed countries such as Italy and Germany aggressively looked for colonies at the end of the 19th century so that they could compete with the major powers in Europe such as Britain and France. This rivalry over colonies around the world was one of the key factors that contributed to the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

At the end of World War I in 1918, the British Empire reached its peak. By that time, it controlled approximately a quarter of the world’s population and land mass. Many of these colonies were vital during World War I, as they provided local support and supplies for the British war effort.

**Check your learning O.1**

**Remember and understand**

1. What is meant by the term ‘modern world’? When do most historians agree it began?
2. Why were distant colonies such important assets to European powers during the 19th century? In what ways did imperial powers profit from them?
3. What percentage of the world’s total population and land mass did Britain control by 1918?

**Apply and analyse**

4. Examine Sources O.1 and O.2.
   a. List the three European powers that controlled the most overseas colonies in 1750.
   b. List the three European powers that controlled the most overseas colonies in 1900.
   c. What changes in European empires and territories took place between 1750 and 1900?
How did technological developments contribute to change from 1750 to 1918?

In Depth Study 1 – Making a better world? you have the opportunity to learn about a number of key events and changes that took place between 1750 and 1918. These include:

• the Industrial Revolution (1750–1914)
• progressive ideas and movements (1750–1918)
• the movement of peoples (1750–1901).

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution first began in Britain around 1750 after a series of changes in farming practices paved the way for the country to increase its population and improve its production and manufacturing methods. These changes in farming methods – now referred to as the Agricultural Revolution – were gradual. They began in the middle of the 17th century and continued through the 19th century. Without them, the Industrial Revolution would not have taken place. One of the main features of the Agricultural Revolution was the fencing off of thousands of small areas of common land that had previously been used by local farmers to grow food. These smaller areas

Source O.3 Textiles industry: The Spinning Jenny, invented in 1764
Source O.4 Manufacturing industry: The steam hammer, invented in 1840
of land were joined to create larger farming areas. This process, known as the **enclosures**, benefited wealthy people who were granted rights to farm these larger areas of land for profit. The enclosures, together with innovations in farming machinery and animal breeding, meant that more crops could be grown and animals could be raised by far fewer people. Overall, farming became much more efficient but this took place at the expense of poor people who relied on common land for their daily needs.

During the Agricultural Revolution, farm workers and their families were forced from their homes, and people moved away from rural villages to towns and cities in search of work. They became a new class of workers that fuelled the spread of the Industrial Revolution. They provided a much-needed labour force to operate the new factories and mills in rapidly expanding cities.

**Key inventions and innovations of the Industrial Revolution**

The first industries that were transformed by innovations in the Industrial Revolution were related to the production of iron, coal, cotton and wool. Inventions and new practices in one industry tended to affect others. For example, the development of coal-powered steam engines led to an increased demand for coal. The expansion of new and deeper coal mines required better steam engines for the pumping machines that removed water from the bottom of mines. Improved steam engines could power hundreds of spinning and weaving machines and led to the spread of large factories and mills across England. As steam engines developed, they also powered new modes of transport, including steam-powered trains and ships, and were later used to generate electricity.

**Living and working conditions**

Working conditions for British factory and mine workers in particular were harsh and demanding during the Industrial Revolution. Men, women and children worked in unsafe conditions and for many hours – six days a week and up to 16 hours a day. Through the 19th century, demand for reforms to regulate working conditions grew louder in Britain, particularly for child labour. This led to a series of government inquiries and legislation that regulated the minimum employment age, wages and the length of the working week. By the 1870s, for example, no child under 10 could be employed in factories and education for children under 10 was compulsory.

Living conditions for factory workers were also appalling. Many workers lived in slum areas close to the factories where they were employed (see Source O.8). Families had no choice but to live in overcrowded conditions, often with no access to fresh water or proper sewerage. Consequences of these unhygienic living conditions included regular outbreaks of disease, a low life expectancy (just 29 years, in Liverpool in 1865) and a high infant mortality rate.
People living in a 19th-century London slum. Conditions were often crowded and unsanitary.

This illustration shows a girl employed as a ‘hurrier’ at a coal mine. Her job was to pull heavy coal carts along dark, narrow tunnels, using a harness and belt.

Many writers of the time were appalled by the plight of the working poor whose work seemed unrewarding and whose lives were cut short by poverty, disease and injury. This period led to calls for social reform and also saw the formation of workers’ groups, such as trade unions.

Towards the end of the period, conditions improved for many people. Slums were torn down to be replaced by new houses that provided heating, running water and sewerage systems. There were also a number of other benefits for workers in cities brought about by the Industrial Revolution. For example:

- mass produced goods such as clothing and furniture became more affordable
- improved public transport allowed workers to live away from factories in the newly developed suburbs
- street lighting transformed city life, encouraging people to enjoy entertainment at theatres and in music halls at night.

Long-term impacts of the Industrial Revolution in Britain

The Industrial Revolution had significant impacts for Britain and its people. It transformed Britain’s economy, which became (for a time) the world’s leading economic and industrial power. Britain’s population quadrupled from an estimated 6.5 million people in 1750 to more than 27.5 million in 1850 as living standards improved and death rates decreased.

Britain changed from an agricultural society to an urban society, with most people living in towns and cities where work could be found. In the growing towns and cities, a ‘middle class’ emerged: people who were neither landowners nor workers, such as bankers, shopkeepers, teachers and administrators. Suburbs surrounding the cities later developed.

Check your learning O.2

Remember and understand

1. Why was steam power so important to the Industrial Revolution?
2. Name the four industries that underwent great change during the Industrial Revolution.
3. What were the enclosures? What effect did they have on farmers using common land to grow food?

Apply and analyse

4. In a class discussion, share your knowledge of working conditions for children during the Industrial Revolution. How do they compare with working conditions around the world today?

Evaluate and create

5. Conduct some additional research and write a 250-word description of what life in a typical city in Britain would have been like for a factory worker during the Industrial Revolution.
How did new ideas contribute to change from 1750 to 1918?

Progressive ideas and movements

In most nations across Western Europe, the religious teachings of the Catholic Church had formed the foundation of law, government and daily life since medieval times. However, from around 1650 new ideas and theories began to emerge that challenged these views. This period became known as the Enlightenment – a time when thinkers questioned existing ideas about science, religion, education, government, the economy, and the ways in which societies should be organised.

At different times over the period, a number of theories, ideas and social movements developed that proposed new ways of looking at the world and organising aspects of society. From the 1750s onwards, three significant historical events resulted in a number of these ideas and movements becoming extremely popular. These events included:

• the Industrial Revolution (1750–1914)
• the American War of Independence (1775–1783)
• the French Revolution (1789–1799).

In many ways, these revolutionary events and particular progressive ideas are interconnected and supported each other. However, the cause and effect between the ideas and these events is not always clear for historians. In some cases, progressive ideas and movements contributed to these events. In other cases, these events led to the rise of new ideas and movements. What is clear is that in their own way, each of these progressive ideas and movements challenged many long-held traditions and rules for organising societies.

The most significant of these included capitalism, socialism, egalitarianism, nationalism, imperialism, Darwinism, and Chartism. Each one is briefly outlined here.

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system that relies on private ownership of industry and the means of production (for example, factories and machinery used to make products). As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the way goods were manufactured changed. Over time, private entrepreneurs and industrialists started to invest in new enterprises and industries – rather than governments. This meant that they took on more of the financial risks, but also made more profits if they were successful.

Capitalism was built on the idea that kings and government ministers should not have to control trade or business. Instead, competition between producers together with the laws of supply and demand in a ‘free market’ would result in the best outcomes for all. During the early years of the Industrial Revolution however, unregulated capitalism resulted in poor conditions for many factory workers (see Source O.9).
Socialism

Socialism is a political and economic system that emerged during the Industrial Revolution as a direct result of what some saw as the negative impacts of capitalism. Unlike capitalism, socialism is an economic system under which the government (referred to as ‘the state’) plays a crucial role in the allocation of resources and the distribution of wealth. Under socialism, the means of production is owned collectively by the people and administered by the state. The state manages all production and manufacturing and is responsible for distributing the profits equally among the population. In the mid-19th century, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx developed socialism as a way to counteract the unregulated capitalism that was exploiting many powerless and poorly-paid factory and mill workers at that time.

Source O.10  The biggest socialist revolution to happen during this time was the Russian Revolution in 1917. Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, is shown here addressing the workers.

Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism is the idea of equality among people. The word comes from the French égal, meaning ‘equal’. Egalitarians consider all people to have equal social status or worth as human beings and argue that they should be offered the same opportunities to succeed in society regardless of wealth or background. In 1783, at the end of the American War of Independence, the founding fathers of the United States wrote a Declaration of Independence based on the principles of egalitarianism. The United States of America had previously been ruled by the British, under the assumption that kings had a divine right to rule and were superior to the rest of the population. The Declaration of Independence rejected the divine right of kings in favour of an egalitarian society where ‘all men are created equal’ and had rights. At the time, however, these rights did not extend to African slaves or women.

When the French Revolution, started in 1789, championed ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’, it was also popularising the concept of egalitarianism. As a political philosophy, egalitarianism also helped to justify demands made by the working-class in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the vote and direct political representation.

Nationalism

In simple terms, nationalism is a strong identification with a nation or a particular national identity. Up until the 18th century, people in Europe usually only identified with the local ruler or other people in their local village or area. The concept of a nation as we think of it today did not really exist.

Source O.11  Uprisings across Europe in 1848 broke out in support of nationalist ideas and political representation for workers. This engraving shows the February Revolution of that year in France, when an uprising of students, workers and National Guard tried to force the abdication of the king and proclaim the Second Republic.
During the American Revolution in 1775 and French Revolution in 1789, theories about the rights of the people began to emerge and nationalism gained popularity. Many theories argued that a country should be defined by its people, belong to its people and be governed by its people, rather than a king, queen or ruler. As the United States and France re-emerged from war as strong and independent nations, people there united and the concept of nationalism spread even further. As a result of these events, people began to strongly identify themselves as united and loyal to a particular country or state, rather than to a local area, a religion or a particular monarch.

During the 19th century, as once-powerful empires around the world began to break apart, and the colonies and territories they had ruled began fighting for independence, the concept of nationalism spread further. European peoples started seeing themselves as members of independent nations rather than members of united empires. For example:

- In 1829, Greece freed itself from the Ottoman Empire.
- In 1831, Belgium won its independence from the Dutch.
- In 1848, revolutions broke out across Europe as different nations started demanding the right to exist independently. None of the 1848 revolutions were successful, but by 1871 both Italy and Germany had emerged as unified nations.
- From the 1880s, Irish nationalists demanded self-government or independence from Great Britain.

By 1914, nationalists protesting in the Balkans would be a key contributor to the outbreak of World War I.

Imperialism

In basic terms, imperialism is the control of countries or territories by foreign powers. From the 18th century to the early 20th century, European powers sought to take control of territories all over the world. They exercised economic, political and cultural control over these colonies and the Indigenous populations living there. Great Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Austria–Hungary and the Ottomans all ruled over vast empires. In the late 1800s, newly formed nations such as Italy and Germany were aggressive in acquiring new colonies around the world. They felt they had been left behind in the 19th-century race for colonies.

Darwinism

Darwinism is the theory of evolution brought to prominence by the publication of a book by Charles Darwin called *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin's scientific theories challenged literal interpretations of the Bible about the creation and development of plants and animals on Earth. His research presented scientific proof that species had descended over time from common ancestors and evolved to look and behave in certain ways based on their environments. Darwin argued that certain
genetic traits became more or less common in a population based on how successful members of the population were at passing on their genes through breeding. He named this process ‘natural selection’. This theory challenged the widely-held belief in Christian countries that all animals and plants were the work of a divine creator, God.

Shortly after the publication of his book, Darwin's biological theories about natural selection started being applied to everyday social situations and used to explain differences in power and authority among groups within human societies. These theories by people such as Herbert Spencer and Thomas Malthus became known as social Darwinism. The general principle behind social Darwinism was known as 'survival of the fittest'. It maintained that the strong in society should see their wealth and authority increase while the weak should see their wealth and authority decrease. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, social Darwinism was used to justify European imperialism, political conservatism, racism towards Indigenous peoples throughout the world, and the submission of lower classes of people. Social Darwinism has now largely been discredited.

Chartism
As industrialisation came to dominate British society, workers started to form groups known as trade unions. Trade unions were designed to protect workers from unsafe working conditions and lobby for basic rights in the workplace such as fair pay and working hours.

In 1838, a group of trade unionists also started to demand a range of additional rights for members of the working class. The members of this group proposed the Peoples’ Charter of 1838, a document calling for six basic reforms designed to make the political system in England more democratic. The primary goal of the charter was to give all men the vote and stop the wealthy from dominating political decision-making. At this time, the right to vote was only offered to men over 21 years who owned property and membership of the parliament was limited to wealthy landowners. Because of the charter, the movement became known as Chartism and its members became known as Chartists.

Source O.13 Four of the six ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’, early trade unionists in Britain who were sentenced to seven years’ transportation to New South Wales. They became popular heroes, and were pardoned and returned to England after serving two years of their sentence.

Check your learning O.3

Remember and understand
1. What is the key difference between capitalism and socialism?
2. Describe the term imperialism in your own words.
3. What was the primary goal of the Chartists?

Apply and analyse
4. What is nationalism? What events in the late 1700s led to a rise in nationalism around the world?

5. Conduct some additional research to learn more about the governments of the United States or France after the revolutions there.
   a. In what ways did the actions of the new government reflect the ideals of egalitarianism?
   b. Are there any ways in which the new government failed to uphold the ideals of egalitarianism?
What were the changing features of the movement of peoples from 1750 to 1901?

Movement of peoples

The period from 1750 to 1901 saw a huge increase in the world population, with the number of people more than doubling from 790 million to 1.65 billion. Over the same period there was an enormous increase in the numbers of people moving around the world. For the most part, these movements were directly linked to the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of European powers into new territories.

There were three main groups of people moving round the world over this period. Some were forced to move, while others moved voluntary. They included:

- **Slaves** – the practice of forcibly capturing and enslaving people in Africa and transporting them to the Americas as a source of free labour
- **Convicts** – the transportation of convicted prisoners to distant colonies by Britain and other European countries
- **Free settlers** – events such as the gold rushes in the Americas and Australia enticed free settlers to travel around the world in search of better opportunities and wealth.

As a consequence of these movements of people, North America’s population rose from 0.3 per cent of the world’s population in 1750 to 5 per cent in 1900. The population in the Pacific region grew from 2 million to 6 million over the same period as Britain’s colonies in Australia and New Zealand grew and prospered.

**Forced transportation of slaves**

Slavery has been a part of almost every human civilisation since ancient times. In many different societies around the world, including Africa, rival groups and enemies captured in battle were kept as slaves. As European empires expanded into Africa and the Americas, they used their military superiority to take control of the land and all of its resources – including human beings who were counted alongside supplies of gold and tobacco as resources to be bought and sold. By the end of the 17th century, a triangular trade was firmly established. The purpose of the slave trade was to provide a labour force in British and European colonies in the Americas that could produce the raw materials needed by the growing numbers of people and factories in Europe. It functioned in the following way:

- Europeans purchased slaves who had been captured in Africa, then transported them by ship to the Americas to be sold as labourers to work on sugar-cane, cotton and tobacco plantations.
- The raw materials from these plantations were then shipped back to Europe to be refined or sold in European markets.
- Some of the goods made from these raw materials (such as rum, textiles and manufactured goods) were then shipped to Africa to be sold in markets there. At this point, new slaves would be loaded and transported to the Americas again, continuing the cycle.

Historians estimate that over 12 million Africans were transported to the slave markets of Europe and the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries.
Forced transportation of convicts

Faced with overcrowded jails, British authorities starting housing convicted prisoners in rotting hulks (ships no longer considered seaworthy) that were kept moored in harbours and ports around England. Soon these hulks became so overcrowded that another solution was needed. This time, English authorities began transporting convicts to penal colonies on the other side of the world – first in North America and later in Australia.

The First Fleet of convict ships to Australia sailed from Portsmouth in England with 751 convicts and around 250 soldiers and their families on board. The ships landed in what became known as Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. This event marked the European settlement of Australia. In addition to the penal colony at Sydney Cove, the British government established many other convict settlements around Australia, including those in the Port Phillip District (Victoria), Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), Moreton Bay in Queensland and the Swan River Colony (Western Australia). Between 1788 and 1868, when the final shipment of convicts arrived in Western Australia, a total of 162,000 male and female convicts were transported to Australia.

Voluntary migration of free settlers

The brutality associated with the forced movement of slaves and convicts tends to overshadow the stories of the free settlers. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, large numbers of people left their homelands in search of safety and better opportunities for their families.

The prospect of cheap or free grants of land drew millions of immigrants away from overcrowded cities in Europe to the New World – North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Many left Europe to escape poverty, famine or political upheavals.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 and Australia in 1851 also brought a new wave of immigrants from Europe and, for the first time, large numbers also travelled from China.

Check your learning O.4

Remember and understand

1 What did the British use as prisons in the 18th and 19th centuries?
2 What were some of the factors that caused people from Europe to move voluntarily to the USA and Australia?
3 How much did the world’s population grow between 1750 and 1901?

Evaluate and create

4 Conduct some brief research on the Internet to find out about the treatment of slaves transported from Africa to the Americas during the period. Use the information and sources you find to create a visual diary from the viewpoint of an African slave.
5 Create a poster or graphic organiser that explains the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas.
Making a better world