

Lesson 4

Student Handout 4—Effects of Gunpowder Weapons in Different Societies

Use each vignette below to fill in the chart at the end of the lesson with the advantages and disadvantages of gunpowder weapons for each society. Your answer may go beyond the information in each vignette to make interpretations based on your own knowledge. Refer to a world map to locate these groups.

1. Russians under Ivan III

Grand Duke Ivan III (1462-1505) consolidated power over Muscovy. His Muscovite successor Ivan the Terrible (1533-1584) attacked the Mongol states along the Volga River and other rivers of Inner Eurasia to control vast new territories. Cannons were mounted on river barges and carried across frozen land on sleds. With his mobile guns, the new Russian leader, or tzar, dominated the territories without effective challenge from traditionally-armed groups.

2. Siberian fur traders

From the ninth-century Vikings to the eighteenth-century Russians, the Inner Eurasian fur trade offered a path to wealth and power. With Russian military expansion along the Inner Eurasian river system, the fur trade kept pace with imperial control. As fur-bearing animals in western Russia were depleted, musket-armed Cossacks pushed eastward into Siberia. These newcomers used firepower to require indigenous people to give them furs as tribute, with serious penalties for failure to do it. Reaching the Pacific Ocean in 1638, the hunt for sea otter pelts enriched the fur trade. Russian fur traders explored and colonized the islands and coastlands of today's Alaska, Canada, and the US, reaching as far south as Bodega Bay north of San Francisco.¹⁷

3. Portuguese ship captains in the Indian Ocean

Portuguese ships, which were suited for the rough Atlantic Ocean, were designed to carry cannons on decks close to the waterline, with special gun ports to keep out the seawater. Ships carried guns on both sides. These cannons could blast the hulls of lighter Indian Ocean trading vessels with ease. Although they were newcomers to the Indian Ocean in 1498, the Portuguese used shipboard cannons during the following decades to force coastal rulers to accept their goods in trade or risk having their ships sunk and their ports bombarded. The Portuguese gained access to Chinese and Japanese ports. They also tried to restrict the passage of other European ships through the Strait of Malacca between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, until other Europeans with similar weapons challenged them. While the Portuguese failed to dominate the Indian Ocean or control trade for long, their cannon-bearing ships as well as their aggressive policies altered long-standing trade patterns in the region and set the stage for eventual European domination.¹⁸

¹⁷ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 182-4.

¹⁸ "Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, <http://www.indianoceanhistory.org/>

4. The sultans of the Ottoman empire

Mehmet the Conqueror used expert gunners to build a huge cannon to help take the city of Constantinople in 1453, ending the Byzantine empire. The Ottoman sultans, already powerful, expanded their territory using a carefully-developed, loyal army. Using artillery and handguns in their annual campaigns, the Ottomans took lands in southern Europe, Southwest Asia, and North Africa. They built a navy on the Mediterranean to challenge the Venetians and others, and they used and protected the trade routes on the Red Sea and the Muslim holy cities of Makka (Mecca) and Madina (Medina). In the early sixteenth century, however, the Ottoman navy suffered defeat by the Portuguese navy at the Strait of Hormuz. Its armaments on light galleys were not a match for the cannons of the heavy Portuguese warships. The Ottoman navy did manage to protect the port of Aden and the entrance to the Red Sea, but they did not challenge the Portuguese on the open waters of the Indian Ocean again.¹⁹

5. European slave traders and African rulers

Tapping into trade networks in West Africa, European slave merchants made alliances to purchase captives of war from local African leaders. They offered Indian cloth, products of the Americas, and other goods to purchase slaves. A Dutch trader in 1700 wrote from the African Gold Coast, “The main military weapons are muskets or carbines, in the use of which these Africans are wonderfully skillful. ... We sell them very great quantities ... but we are forced to do this. For if we did not do it, they would easily get enough muskets from the English, or from the Danes, or from the Prussians. ...” By 1730 “the annual imports of guns into West Africa had reached the figure of 180,000. ... In meeting the heavy demand for arms, the flintlock proved crucial. It enhanced the military capability of its owners and furnished the means of violence for political organizations ...” that could make use of it. Trade and warfare went together in the formation of new African states that controlled land, labor, and resources such as gold.²⁰

6. North American fur traders

French and English fur traders, like their Siberian counterparts, enlisted the services of woodland American Indians to trap beavers and other fur-bearing animals for the rapidly-expanding hat trade in Europe. European forts on the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes were defended by artillery and soldiers bearing muskets. The Europeans spread the taste for metal, cloth, beads, and other goods, including guns, among the Indian peoples in the region. Relations among Indian groups changed because competition for fur-bearing territory provoked wars among them. And Europeans pushed farther and farther west as animal populations were depleted.²¹

7. North American Plains Indians

Apache, Shoshoni, Blackfoot, Comanche, and Dakota tribes were among the peoples that spread the use of horses and mounted warfare and hunting across the Great Plains. The Dakota received guns from the French, who armed them to compete with Indians who supported the English. The Dakota hunted buffalo on horseback using guns and came to dominate the northeastern plains, trading with European merchants on the Mississippi. Gradually, they gave up lives of cultivating

¹⁹ McNeill, *Age of Gunpowder Empires*, 14-15, 33-6.

²⁰ Wolf, *People without History*, 209-11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the soil. Plains tribes preserved buffalo meat as pemmican and sold it to fur traders as they moved westward in Canada.²²

8. Japanese Samurai

The case of Japanese adoption of gunpowder weapons is remarkable. In 1543, a few Portuguese went to Japan bearing arquebuses, a type of matchlock musket. A local aristocratic leader bought examples of the handguns and gave them to his sword-smiths. The Japanese tradition of metalwork was highly developed, so it was easy for them to reproduce the simple guns. Interest in the new weapons grew among some Japanese clans, and the guns became widely produced and sold among military elites. Elite clan leaders equipped and trained lower-class Japanese farmers to use matchlocks in battle. Although guns required training, it was much less than the training samurai, or noble warriors, needed for their military skills. Firearms training proved an effective way for commanders to gain battlefield advantage. In 1584, this arms race led to victory by a commoner, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Even though he tried to disarm the peasants and bring the samurai under central control, his death led to more warfare. The Tokugawa Shogunate was established in 1600. This long-lasting ruling group greatly limited the use of guns in Japan, restricting their manufacture and use, and giving the government control over them. The Shogun maintained peace and preserved the social status of the samurai. The tradition of the sword won out over the rule of gunpowder weapons. Although the Japanese became skilled in the manufacture and use of gunpowder weapons, Japan became the only country that rejected them following military success.²³

9. Ming and Qing emperors of China

The Chinese probably invented gunpowder and the earliest gunpowder weapons. However, the Ming emperors, after defeating the Mongols, were more interested in defense than offense. Moreover, early cannons were not reliable enough to be effective against nomadic warriors. Unlike their European counterparts, Chinese rulers would not benefit from besieging towns and fortresses. Instead, they needed to defend their northeastern frontier, and for this they had to deploy a large infantry equipped with crossbows. Gunpowder and incendiary weapons were a supplement to traditional methods of warfare. Ming commanders studied superior Turkish, Portuguese, and Dutch artillery designs and ordered Chinese metal founders to copy them. China's traditional defenses and the distaste Confucian government officials had for professional soldiers resulted in a growing lag between China and lands further west in developing firearms technology.²⁴

10. France in the reign of Louis XI (1423-83) and in the Mid-Sixteenth Century²⁵

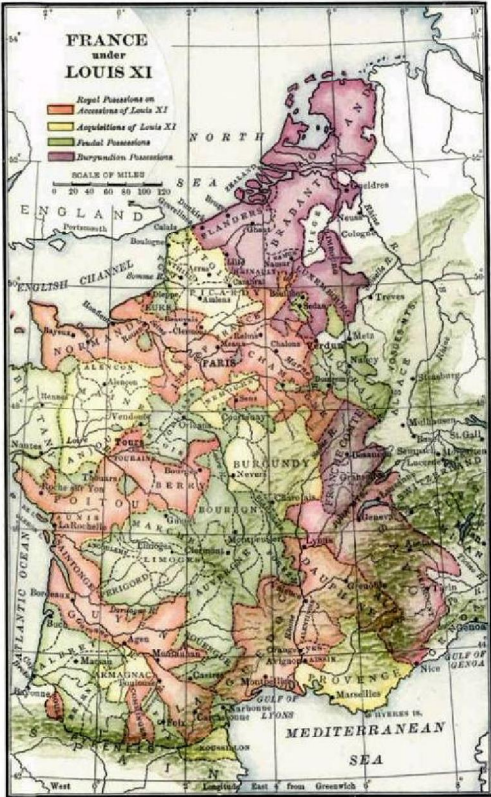
Compare the two maps of France and, using the text on gunpowder in the readings, infer and discuss the effects of gunpowder weapons on the French monarchy.

²² Wolf, *People without History*, 176-8.

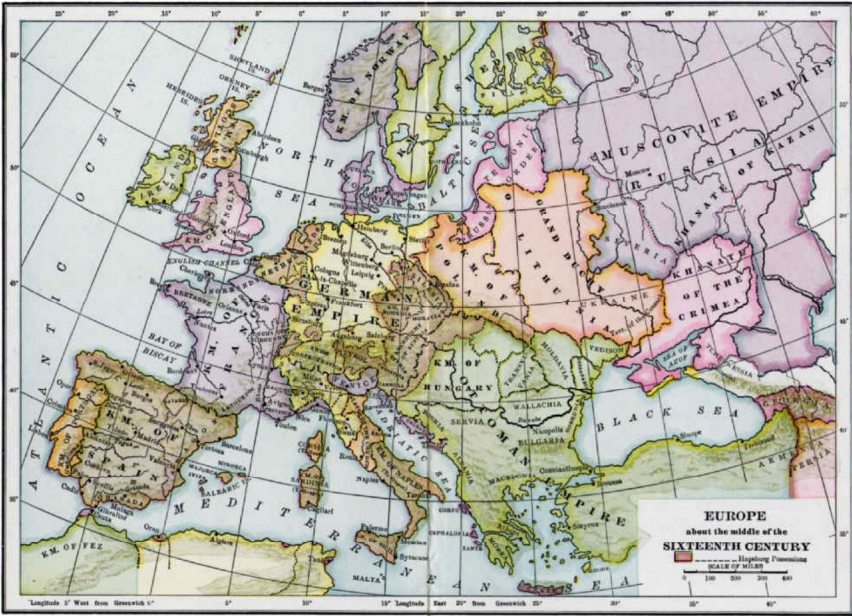
²³ Michael S. Neiberg, *Warfare in World History* (London: Routledge, 2001), 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The Project Gutenberg eBook of An Introduction to the History of Western Europe by James Harvey Robinson, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26042/26042-h/26042-h.htm>



France under Louis XI (1423-83) during the Hundred Years' War



Europe in the Mid-Sixteenth Century

Advantages of Gunpowder Weapons for this Group	Disadvantages of Gunpowder Weapons for this Group
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