

UNIT 7 - FROM MIDDLE AGE TO CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Unit 7. From the Modern Age to the Contemporary Age

1. Introduction: The Modern Age

The Modern Age is the historical period from the 15th to the 18th century. It started with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and ended with the French Revolution in 1789.

This period is usually divided into smaller parts:

- The 16th century: the Renaissance
- The 17th century: the Baroque period
- The 18th century: the Enlightenment and Absolutism

Changes in the 15th and 16th centuries:

- The fall of Constantinople increased the threat of the Muslim world to Christian Europe.
- New geographic discoveries by Portugal and Spain expanded the known world. These countries built large empires and boosted global trade.
- Feudalism declined. Modern states and powerful monarchies replaced feudal kingdoms. Trade and capitalism grew, and the middle class (bourgeoisie) became more important.
- The Protestant Reformation divided the Christian Church in Europe and caused religious wars.
- A new way of thinking called Humanism focused on humans instead of religion. It brought a new art style: the Renaissance.

2. Geographic Discoveries and International Trade

In the 16th century, Europe changed a lot:

- Trade in the Mediterranean became dangerous after 1453.
- Europeans searched for new resources and luxury items.
- New tools like the astrolabe and improved ships helped exploration.

Main discoveries:

- The Portuguese explored the coast of Africa and reached India (Vasco da Gama, 1498).
- Christopher Columbus, supported by Spain, reached America in 1492.
- Magellan and Elcano (Spanish sailors) made the first trip around the world.

These discoveries increased global trade. Cities like London, Seville, and Amsterdam grew rich. The “Triangular Trade” connected:

- America (raw materials)
- Africa (slaves)
- Europe (products)

3. Religious Crises

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had huge power. It owned lots of land and wealth.

In the 15th–16th centuries, some intellectuals criticized this. For example, Erasmus of Rotterdam wanted a simpler, more personal religion.

In 1517, Martin Luther wrote 95 Theses criticizing the Church’s corruption. He started the Protestant Reformation. Many people supported him and created national churches, especially in Germany and northern Europe.

Main ideas of Luther:

- Faith alone is enough to be saved.
- No need to worship saints or idols.
- People can read the Bible themselves (not only in Latin).

Many leaders supported the Reformation to stop paying money to the Pope.

The Catholic Church answered with the **Counter-Reformation** (Council of Trent, 1545). They:

- Kept Latin Bibles and strict rules.
- Trained priests better.
- Created catechisms and Inquisition courts.

4. Society in the Modern Age (16th–18th centuries)

Society had 3 classes (estates):

- **Nobles and clergy** were rich and powerful.
- **Common people** worked hard, mostly in farming, often in poverty.
- **The bourgeoisie** (middle class) grew in cities, thanks to trade and business.

Trade expanded with new products from America like tobacco, coffee, and wood. The Atlantic ports (Lisbon, Seville, Amsterdam) became more important than Mediterranean ones.

The **capitalist economy** started to grow:

- New banks and money systems.
- Commercial companies and trading societies.

Epidemics like the plague were common, especially in cities. Life expectancy was low (less than 50 years).

In some countries like Spain and Portugal, many people joined the Church to escape poverty. The Church was very powerful and persecuted minorities like Jews and Muslims through the **Inquisition**. You had to prove you had “pure Christian blood” to get important jobs.

5. From Humanism to the Enlightenment

Humanism (16th century):

It focused on studying ancient Greece and Rome. People started to value science, reason, and experience instead of only religion.

Scientific Revolution:

Modern science was born using the **scientific method**: observe, make hypotheses, test them, and create theories.

The Enlightenment (18th century):

Thinkers spread ideas of **freedom, equality, and civil rights**. These ideas challenged the Old Regime (monarchs, nobles, and Church).

Main Enlightenment ideas:

- Use of reason.
- Belief in progress and education.
- Sharing knowledge (e.g., the **Encyclopedia** by Diderot and D'Alembert).

Famous thinkers: Locke, Kant, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau. Women like Olympe de Gouges also demanded equal rights.

6. The Strengthening of Royal Power: From the Modern State to Enlightened Absolutism

Modern States had strong kings who:

- United their territories.
- Controlled taxes, armies, and administration.
- Reduced the power of nobles and towns.
- Created permanent armies and international diplomacy.

Absolutism (17th century): Kings had **total power**, justified by “divine right” (they ruled by God’s will). Versailles (Louis XIV) symbolized this system.

First challenge: English Parliamentarism England limited the king’s power after a revolution (1640–89). They created:

- A parliamentary monarchy
- Rule of law
- Separation of powers (executive, legislative, judicial)

Enlightened Despotism (18th century): Some monarchs liked Enlightenment ideas but kept absolute power. Their motto: “Everything for the people, but without the people.”

They built schools, hospitals, roads, and improved agriculture and industry. Examples: Frederick II of Prussia, Carlos III of Spain, Catherine the Great of Russia.

7. The Spanish Empire (16th–18th centuries)

Golden Age: The Great Habsburgs Under Charles I and Philip II, Spain became very powerful. But there were many problems: revolts, wars, and too many taxes.

Decline: The Minor Habsburgs Under Philip III, IV, and Charles II, the empire declined:

- Bad government (run by nobles called “validos”)
- Less population due to wars and emigration
- Financial problems and poor leadership

The Borbonic Reforms When Charles II died with no heir, the Borbonic dynasty (from France) took power. They made changes:

- Centralized the government (especially in former Aragon territories)
- Inspired by Enlightenment ideas, they reformed education, trade, agriculture, and more.

Thanks to these reforms, Spain recovered economically in the 18th century and its population grew