

**Lesson 6*****Student Handout 6.1—Interpreting Global Demographic Changes***

The chart below includes estimated population figures for Big Era Six, 1400-1800. (See the Big Era Six introductory essay, “This Big Era and the Three Essential Questions.”)

**Regional Populations in Big Era Six**  
(in millions)

	1400 CE	1600 CE	1800 CE
CHINA	70	110	330
INDIA	74	145	180
EUROPE	52	89	146
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	60	104	82
LATIN AMERICA	36	10	19

1. Based on the chart, which regional populations seem to have thrived best during Big Era Six?
2. Based on the chart, which regional populations seem to have been harmed by developments in Big Era Six?
3. At the beginning of Big Era Six, what was the population of China and India together? How many Chinese and Indians were there at the end of Big Era Six?
4. By what percentage did the population of Europe increase by the end of Big Era Six?
5. By what percentage did the population of Africa south of the Sahara decrease by the end of Big Era Six?
6. In which region was the decrease in population the greatest in proportion to its numbers?
7. Summarize what you have learned by examining this chart.

## Lesson 6

### *Student Handout 6.2—The Great Dying and the Plantation Complex*

#### The Great Dying

In his book *The Columbian Exchange*, Alfred W. Crosby discusses the many advantages the Spanish had over the Aztec populations they encountered in the valley of Mexico in 1519. The Spanish had:

- iron and steel weapons, not stone.
- cannon and firearms, bows, arrows, and slings.
- horses, which American Indians had never seen.
- military and political unity compared to different American Indian groups
- the opportunity to exploit Aztec myths that predicted the arrival of the “white gods”.

But even with these advantages, Crosby asks, how were only about 600 Spaniards able to conquer thousands of Aztecs so easily? With the advantages listed above, one would think that the highly organized and militarized Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in the Andean Highlands would have survived the initial contact with Europeans. Why would not thousands of Aztec warriors be able to overcome just a few hundred Spaniards?

Professor William McNeill asks the same question. He points out that, “If horses and gunpowder were amazing and terrible on the first encounter, armed clashes soon revealed the limitations of horse flesh and of the very primitive guns the Spaniards had at their disposal.”<sup>12</sup> Other questions about the conquest of Mexico occupied McNeill. He wondered why the religions of Mexico and Peru disappeared almost completely. Why did some Indians come to worship and accept the Christian faith so readily? The Aztecs quickly realized that the Spanish were not returning gods after all and that they meant to do harm. McNeill points out that the Indians who gave aid to the Spaniards and their Indian allies only did this when they were convinced that Cortez and his men would win.

Historians have come to understand that the key to the conquest of Mexico lies in basic biology. Our studies of Big Era Six have shown that the New World had been virtually unknown to Afroeurasia. The trade networks of Afroeurasia did not include the Americas, and the Indians were physically isolated from the lethal infections that had, over several millennia, become **endemic**, and less lethal, in the Old World. When a population has no antibodies to fight unfamiliar infections, it may suffer ecological disaster. Without immunities, diseases familiar in one setting are deadly in another. Diseases such as smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, malaria, diphtheria, amoebic dysentery, and influenza were unleashed on the Mexicans and Andeans. Historians have called this event “The Great Dying.” While

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<sup>12</sup> William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). 1.

estimates vary, it is believed that up to 90 percent of American Indians living in the valley of Mexico died as a result of the unseen invasion of microbes.

During “Noche Triste” (“Sad Night”), when the Spaniards were driven out of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, a Spaniard who was present remarked that many Aztec warriors were ill with what seemed to be smallpox. In 1699, a German missionary said, “The Indians die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Plantation Complex**

The Great Dying of the Amerindian population coincided with the growth of the **Plantation Complex**. This was the European economic and political enterprise to develop commercial agriculture in the tropical Americas. It arose in response to growing international market demand for sugar, tobacco, cotton, indigo, and other products.

American Indians who survived the Great Dying tended to resist working on European sugar or other plantations. They would sometimes starve themselves rather than be forced to provide the labor. A sugar plantation demanded a hardy and strong labor force. Europeans brought Africans to the Americas as slaves in order to meet the enormous labor requirements of the sugar and other industries in the Atlantic world. African slave traders aimed to capture and sell mainly young women and men because they were the age group best fit to work and reproduce. The African slave trade drained African societies of millions of productive people. The success of American plantations, however, came to depend absolutely on a steady supply of slave labor from Africa.

But the steady supply of slave labor from Africa ensured that European planters and merchants could make huge profits. The slave/sugar complex began early in the sixteenth century. At that time, African slaves were brought to America by the Portuguese, the first to begin sugar production in Brazil. By the end of the seventeenth century, sugar production was growing greatly in efficiency. New plantation societies emerged on Barbados, Jamaica, Haiti, and other islands of the Caribbean, as well as the lowland coasts of Mexico.

Though estimates vary, it is believed that between 1492 and about 1870, 12-14 million Africans were forced into slavery to work in the Americas on plantations, in mines, and in European households and shops. The brutal treatment they suffered has been well-documented in most textbooks. In the Caribbean islands, slaves were likely to survive only six or seven years. One fact not well known is that comparatively few slaves were sent to North America.

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<sup>13</sup> McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 211.

The chart below illustrates by percentage, where the 12-14 million slaves *arrived* in the Americas between 1450 and 1810:

Caribbean islands (Barbados, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Cuba, and others)	42%
Brazil	38%
North America	5%
Other	15%

As we have seen, the Columbian Exchange negatively affected the populations of both Native Americans and Africans. Exposed to European diseases and brutally taken from their homes and forced into plantations and mines, population figures can only suggest the extent of human suffering these men, women, and children experienced as a result of this aspect of global convergence.

## Lesson 6

### *Student Handout 6.3—The Great Dying and the Plantation Complex*

#### Directions

When studying history, it is important to understand the different views and motivations of specific groups as they interact with each other for the first time. Your teacher will divide the class into five groups, each one representing one of the following categories of people: Spanish conquistadors, Aztec warriors, Indian laborers, African slaves, and European plantation owners.

Part I: In your group, reread Student Handout 6.2, then discuss the following:

- How would the people from our group likely react to the reading?
- What are the most important economic and social needs and concerns of your group and how are they being met?
- What statements from the reading are most important to your viewpoint?
- Is there information missing from the reading that might be important to know?

When you believe that you understand your group's feelings and motivations, fill out the worksheet. Then compare responses within your group. Finally, be prepared to choose a spokesperson to present your perspective to the entire class.

**Your Perspective on the Great Dying and the Plantation Complex**

Circle which group you represent: Spanish conquistadors, Aztec warriors, Indian laborers, African slaves, plantation owners

Needs and concerns of your group	What you would like to see happen in the future that might benefit your group

**Read and React**

List Selected Statements From the Text	List Your Reaction to Them

## Lesson 6

### *Student Handout 6.4—Venn Diagram*

#### **Directions**

After carefully reading “The Great Dying and the Plantation Complex,” find those passages that present the experiences of the American Indians and the African slaves during this period in Big Era Six. Both groups experienced exploitation and brutality at the hands of the Spanish. Yet, in some aspects, their realities were different. In the center of the Venn diagram write the experiences that both shared. On the left of the Venn write the experiences that are unique to the American Indians, on the right of the Venn indicate the experiences of the African slaves that were different from the American Indians.



AMERICAN INDIANS

BOTH

AFRICAN SLAVES

