

## Changing Social Hierarchies

*We . . . order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back to them or to any of them.*

—Ferdinand and Isabella, Edict of the Expulsion of the Jews, 1492

**Essential Question:** How were social categories, roles, and practices maintained or changed from 1450 to 1750?

**A**s societies faced rebellions from outside and within, social hierarchies began to develop and transform. In Europe, the treatment of Jews showed that majorities treated non-majority ethnic groups in different ways. Jews had been expelled from England (1290), France (1394), and, as stated above, Spain (1492). The Ottoman Empire, however, provided a safe haven for Jews fleeing discrimination in Europe.

Throughout the world, civilizations developed distinctive social hierarchies. Different groups—including royalty, nobility, landowners, scholars, and soldiers—sought power and influence. In some societies, merchants and artisans began to form a middle class. And peasants, serfs, poor people, and slaves often struggled to stay alive.

Many states created policies that discriminated against some groups based on religion, ethnicity, or social class. For example, Huguenots—French Protestants in the predominantly Catholic country—suffered great persecution, and many fled to other European countries or to colonies. States also supported the formation of elite classes, including the boyars in Russia and the nobility in Europe. These elites both supported ruling power and challenged it.

### Social Classes and Minorities in Gunpowder Empires

Tension between the military elite and absolutist rulers existed in three Islamic empires: the Ottoman (Turkey), the Safavids (Iran), and the Mughals (India). They are called *gunpowder empires* because they succeeded militarily by using guns and cannons when they first became widely available. (See Topic 3.1.)

**Ottoman Society** The Ottoman social system was built around a warrior aristocracy that soon began to compete for positions in the bureaucracy with the *ulama*, who were scholars and experts in Islamic law. Within the military, the Janissaries gained power and prestige. (See Topic 3.2.) Ultimately, the Janissaries tried to mount coups against the sultans.

As sultans became increasingly ineffective and incapable, strong advisors called *viziers* gained influential positions in government, where they spoke for the sultan. However, the sultan still had considerable powers. These included **timar**, a system in which the sultan granted land or tax revenues to those he favored. The sultan also used timar to reward soldiers and keep them loyal.

**Treatment of Religious Minorities** One reason for the success of the Ottoman Empire was its relative tolerance toward Jews and Christians. After the Spanish monarch exiled Jews from his kingdom in 1492, Sultan **Mehmed II** invited them to settle in Istanbul. Many did. Some Jews became court physicians and diplomats. Others contributed to the literary community and might have brought the printing press to the Ottoman Empire. While they were allowed to worship, they did not have full equality:

- They were permitted to live only in specified areas of the cities.
- They paid a tax called a *jizya* that was required of all non-Muslims in the empire.
- They could not hold top positions in the empire, which were reserved for Muslims.

**Religious Toleration in the Mughal Empire** The Mughal Empire in what is now India began in 1526. Probably its greatest emperor was **Akbar the Great** (ruled 1556–1605), remembered for his military successes and his administrative achievements. To help keep his huge, fractious empire together, Akbar, like Ottoman rulers, was tolerant of all religions. He ended the *jizya* tax. He gave grants of land and money to Hindus and Muslims, provided funds to build a Catholic church, and supported Sikhism. (For more on Akbar’s religious toleration, see Topic 3.3.)

**Women in the Ottoman Empire** Women also played social and political roles at court. Many wives and concubines of the sultan tried to promote their own children as likely heirs to the throne. This practice led to “harem politics,” a reference to the **harem**, a residence where a powerful man’s wives and concubines lived.

One woman, **Roxelana**, became unusually powerful in the Ottoman Empire. When she was a young girl, Crimean raiders stole Roxelana from her home in Eastern Europe and sold her into slavery in the Ottoman Empire. She was forced to convert to Islam and entered the harem of Suleiman the Magnificent, sultan of the empire. Suleiman was notable for his military and administrative skill. Suleiman married Roxelana, which was highly unusual. She went from being a slave to commissioning ambitious public works projects.

Roxelana’s son succeeded Suleiman. During the son’s reign, viziers complained about a “sultanate of the women.” They believed members of the harem had too much influence on politics. Roxelana’s rise showed that it was possible—though rare—for people at this time to attain a different social class.



**Other Social Classes** Merchants and artisans formed a small middle class in the empire. Below the middle class were the peasants, who were usually poor—particularly because they had to pay tribute to the government to help support the Ottoman armies. Below the peasants were slaves. They came from many areas as the Ottoman armies penetrated Central and Eastern Europe, capturing prisoners of war in Ukraine and elsewhere. **Barbary pirates**, those who plied the seas near North Africa along the Barbary Coast (named for the Berbers who lived there) captured other European slaves in the Mediterranean and then sold them to the sultan or other high-ranking officials. Some people were **impressed**, or forced into service, in the navy as galley slaves. As many as one million people were impressed between the 16th and 19th centuries.



**Source:** Titian, *La Sultana Rossa*, c. 1550. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. Wikimedia Commons

Roxelana became famous for her power as an Ottoman leader.

## Manchu Power and Conflicts in the Qing Dynasty

China's **Qing Dynasty** lasted from 1644 until 1912. Under this dynasty, the **Manchu** people from Manchuria ruled over the majority Han Chinese and other ethnic groups. Like the Mongols some 400 years earlier, the Manchu were ethnically and culturally distinct from the people they ruled. However, they were less tolerant than the Mongol leaders, and they resolved to make their culture dominant in China.

Like the Mongols, the Qing put their own people in the top positions of government. Also like the Mongols, the Qing maintained continuity with some traditional Chinese practices. For example, they maintained the Chinese civil service exams and bureaucracy. They recruited Han Chinese to work under or alongside Manchus. In time, some—but not all—Chinese came to accept the Qing Dynasty as legitimate rulers of China.

**Conflicts with the Han** The Han ethnicity in China experienced Qing intolerance most severely. Although non-official Han civilians were allowed

to wear Hanfu, or traditional Han clothing, all men were required to wear their hair in **queues**, the braided pigtail style of the Manchu. This policy was a test of loyalty for the Manchu, but it was also a humiliating reminder of the way Qing authority challenged traditional Confucian values. A man who refused to wear his hair in a queue could be executed.

The Qing used Han Chinese defectors to carry out massacres against Han who refused to assimilate to Qing practices. These defectors played a massive role in the Qing conquest of China. Han Chinese General **Li Chengdong**, for example, orchestrated three separate massacres in the city of Jaiding within one month. By the end of those four weeks, there was hardly a person left alive in the city. Later, Han Chinese defector **Liu Liangzuo** massacred the entire population of Jiangyin, killing between 74,000 and 100,000 people.

## European Hierarchies

Like states in South and East Asia, European states also had a social hierarchy. In Europe the top level was royalty—members of a royal family. The aristocracy or **nobility** was the next highest level. Nobles were usually wealthy landowners. Nearly every state in Europe had laws that recognized a class of nobles and granted them special privileges. The nobility made up a small minority of the population but owned most of the land. They maintained their power through a system in which lands and titles passed down from one generation to the next through a system of inheritance.

**The Nobility Makes Gains** In the Netherlands and England, the nobility held power and took an active part in the government. Dutch landowners provided the stable support for local provincial government. In England, large landowners controlled Parliament. However, the landowners had to contend with radical religious sects and the middle class, which were two growing segments of the social order.

**The Nobility Faces Losses** Nobles struggled for power with royalty, the emerging middle class of merchants and skilled workers, the priestly class, and the common people. A failed uprising in France in the mid-1600s convinced **Louis XIV** that he must keep power from the common people and the nobility. The nobility also faced criticism from writers and thinkers of the time. The English statesman Thomas More wrote this about the nobility: “Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive evil.”

**Power of Royalty over Nobility** Gunpowder, cannons, and other technological advances allowed rulers to destroy nobles’ fortresses and seize their lands. Many rulers believed they deserved absolute power. Louis XIV is famous for saying, “I am the state.” However, Frederick of Prussia saw things differently. He declared, “I am the first servant of the state.” (Connect: Trace the changes in social hierarchy from feudal Europe to the 17th century. See Topic 1.6.)

**Growing Acceptance of Jews** Jews began to have a larger role in many countries starting in the 17th century. Their expulsion from Spain, by Ferdinand and Isabella, was particularly significant because so many Jews lived there. Many resettled in areas around the Mediterranean Sea, in northern Africa or the Middle East. Since the Hebrew word for Spain is *Sepharad*, Jews who trace their heritage back to Spain became known as **Sephardic Jews**. In contrast, Jews from central and eastern Europe became known as **Ashkenazi Jews**. Jewish scholars once used the term Ashkenazi to refer to Germany.

Under the influence of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, prejudices against Jews declined somewhat. Jews began to move more freely in Europe. They became particularly important in banking and commerce. The Netherlands was especially tolerant of religious dissent, and the Jewish minority faced less discrimination there than in most of Europe. Many Jews hoped the centuries of discrimination they had confronted were over.

## Russian Social Classes

Moscow's social hierarchy continued that of Kievan Rus in the 11th century. The noble landowning class, the **boyars**, topped the social pyramid. Below them were the merchants. Last and most numerous were the peasants, who gradually sank into debt and. They became **serfs**, peasants who received a plot of land and protection from a noble. In return, they were bound to that land and had little personal freedom. If the noble sold their land, control of the serfs went with it. Though not technically slaves, serf led very hard lives.

The boyar class experienced tensions with the rulers similar to the tensions between nobles and rulers in Western Europe. Boyars of Novgorod opposed the expansionist policies of **Ivan IV**, known as “Ivan the Terrible” for murdering his own son, among other crimes. After Ivan's forces defeated Novgorod, Ivan confiscated the lands of his boyar opponents. He forced them and their families to move to Moscow, where he could keep them under surveillance.

## Political and Economic Elites in the Americas

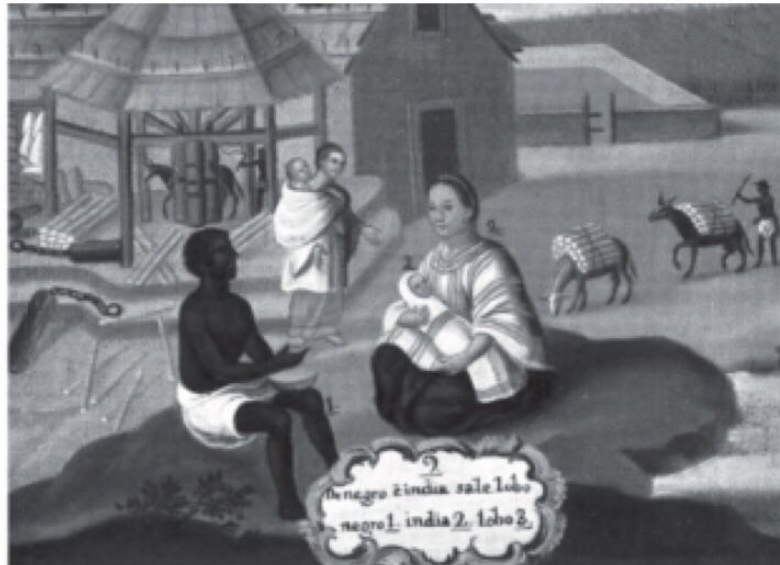
Social structures in the Americas changed drastically during this period because of the arrival of Europeans, the importation of African slave labor, and outbreaks of disease that killed tens of millions. The combination of European settlers, imported Africans, and the conquered indigenous populations led to the development of a new social hierarchy based on race and ancestry. Skin color became a signifier of power and status in many parts of the Americas and, in fact, in all European colonies. Racial and ethnic background defined social status in a formal way in the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Western Hemisphere for centuries following the Europeans' arrival.

**The Casta System in Latin America** At the top of the social pyramid in Latin America stood the **peninsulares**, those who were born on the Iberian peninsula. Next down the pyramid were the **criollos**, those of European



ancestry who were born in the Americas. Below these two groups were the **castas**, people of mixed-race ancestry. At the top of this group were **mestizos**, those of mixed European and indigenous ancestry, followed by **mulattoes**, those of mixed European and African ancestry, and **zambos**, those of mixed indigenous and African ancestry. Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans made up the bottom of the hierarchy.

People were assigned to their levels at baptism and could not move up except by intermarriage. People in the bottom layers of the hierarchy had to pay higher taxes and tributes, even though they could often least afford them.



Source: English Wikipedia

To show the importance of the casta system, the Spanish had paintings made delineating the groups within it. This painting shows a zambo, a person with one black parent and one indigenous parent.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p><b>GOVERNMENT: Power and Authority</b>            Mehmed II            Akbar the Great            Roxelana            Qing Dynasty            Manchu            Li Chengdong            Liu Liangzuo            Louis XIV            Ivan IV</p>	<p><b>SOCIETY: Ottoman Empire</b>            timar            harem</p> <p><b>SOCIETY: Russia</b>            boyar</p> <p><b>SOCIETY: Europe</b>            nobility            serf</p> <p><b>SOCIETY: Latin America</b>            peninsulares            criollo            castas            mestizos            mulattos            zambos</p>	<p><b>ECONOMY: Piracy</b>            Barbary pirates            impressed</p> <p><b>CULTURE: Religion and Ethnicity</b>            queues            Sephardic Jew            Ashkenazi Jew</p>