

Gunpowder Empires

From 1450 to 1800, “gunpowder empires” developed in some parts of the world. Historians have used this name to describe states that used firearms to expand their territories and control their own populations. In those 350 years, the largest land-based empires were:

- The Ottoman in the eastern Mediterranean region
- The Safavid in Persia
- The Mughal in India
- The Chinese under the Ming and Qing dynasties
- The Russian
- The Kanem-Bornu in West Africa
- The Austrian Hapsburg in Central Europe

Other, smaller states in Asia and Africa that used firearms technology were Japan, Siam (Thailand), Ethiopia, and Morocco.

In Western Europe, even with gunpowder weapons, no single, land-based empire was strong enough to take control of all Europe. Instead, intense rivalry in firearms technology and use led to the creation of numerous strong, centralized monarchies. These were closely-matched military competitors. Some of them turned their military power to building sea-based, that is, maritime, empires. Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Britain built the largest overseas empires.

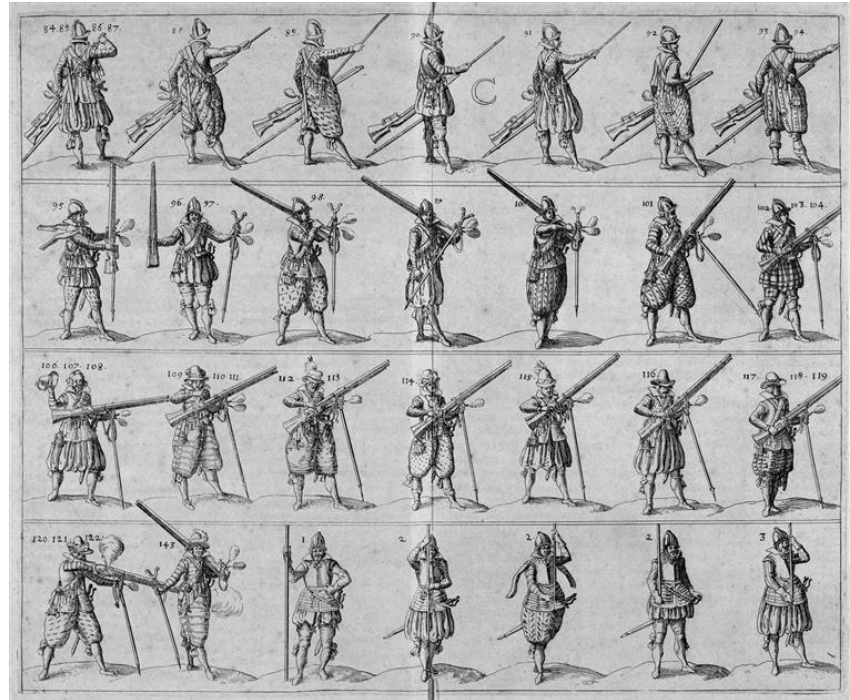
A strong, central government was necessary to bring together all the elements of modern warfare. Control over standing armies (rather than seasonal or temporary ones), artillery experts, access to supplies of metal, financial resources from taxation and lenders together reinforced the power of the state. Monarchs who gained power over local lords or seized new territory extracted taxes from farmers and from trade. These resources made them wealthier and therefore able to continue their military expansion. Supporting the rulers of these states were increasingly bureaucratic governments, that is, with officials who counted the population, gathered taxes, managed the state ministries (departments), and supplied the standing army. Power and riches, then, were the rewards of gunpowder warfare. The portraits of kings, queens, and emperors of these powerful states give an idea of their wealth and confidence.

Social changes in the military were an important part of the transformation. Before the coming of firearms, the fighting in most states was done by male members of the elite class, that is, nobles or aristocrats, for example, knights in medieval Europe. These noble warriors often fought on horseback. Soldiers of the lower classes, including peasant farmers, frequently provided support or went to war with simple weapons like pikes. Among pastoral nomadic peoples, warriors on horseback armed with bow and arrow or other weapons had great mobility and often overran defensive armies of foot soldiers.

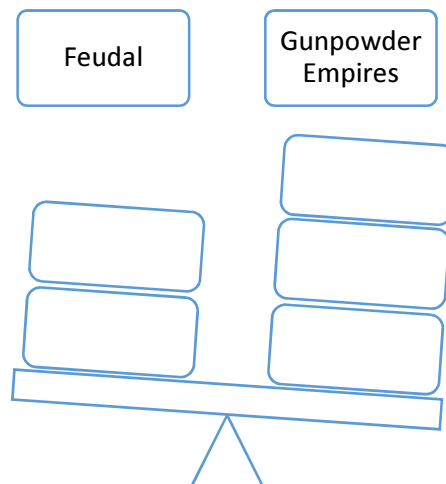
Gunpowder weaponry, however, tipped the balance in favor of centralized states that had enough financial resources to afford to equip large numbers of troops with cannons and handguns. These states conquered smaller ones that did not have these weapons, or not enough of them. Rulers of centralized states used guns to break the power of local aristocrats and nobles, ending their careers as professional fighters. The long era of the power of pastoral nomadic states, such as the Mongol empire, came to an

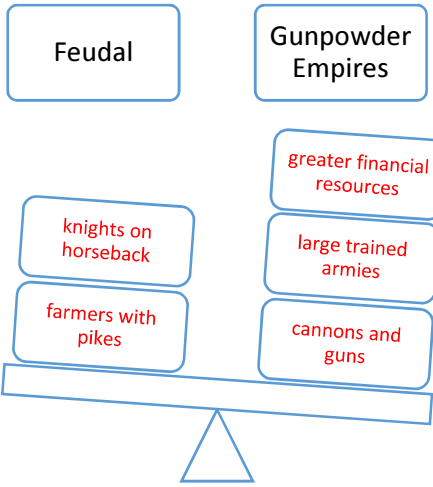
end. Cavalry warriors armed with bows and arrows could not stand up against the fire of rows of artillery. And as the costs of firearms went down, rulers recruited larger numbers of peasants to serve in standing armies.

In gunpowder states, foot soldiers were drawn from the common social classes, but modern methods of military drill made them into loyal armies able to march and maneuver in a unified body in response to commands of officers. Military leaders in Japan may have been the earliest to use these methods. In the Netherlands, Prince Maurice is recognized for his role in modern military organization and professional soldiering. He developed highly-organized drills carried out by groups of soldiers divided into battalions,



companies, platoons, and squads. In these drills, troops with muskets practiced over and over again the many steps of preparing and firing their guns. These drills were designed to make soldiers into cohesive fighting forces that would obey their officers automatically. The image above shows just twenty-eight out of the forty-eight steps in carrying, presenting, loading, and firing a musket. Soldiers were trained to carry out these steps with their weapons in sync with other soldiers in a massed group. Much like workers on an assembly line, soldiers memorized the exact position for marching, holding their feet and hands, and carrying out each muscle movement with precision. Soldiering was transformed.¹⁶ The new troops, called infantry, became the backbone of European armies. The drills made them professional soldiers who served growing states at home and abroad.





1. 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.

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

2. 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.

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3. *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.

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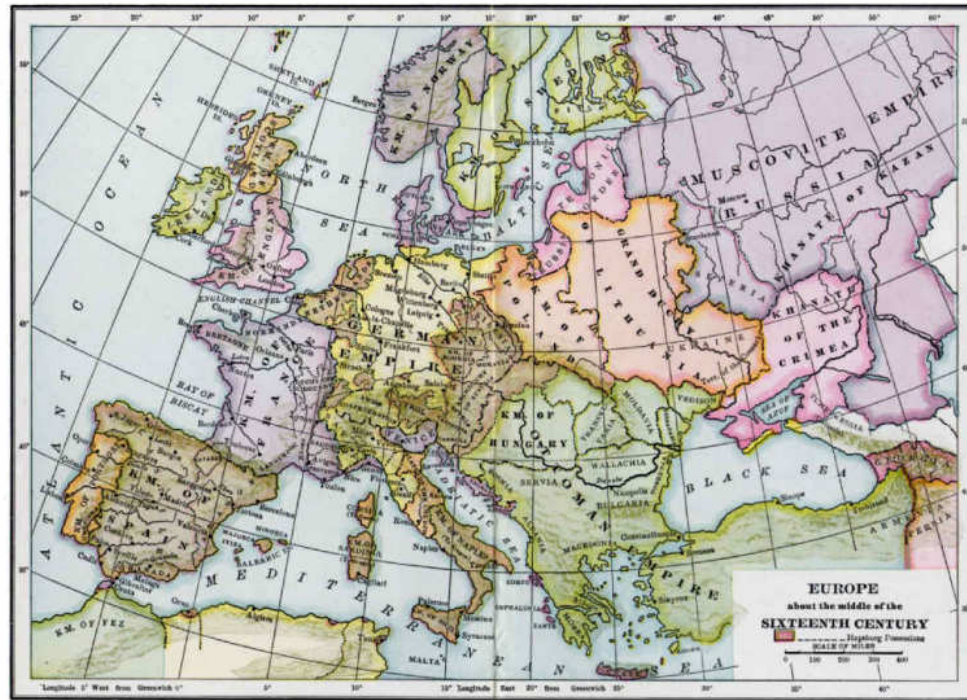
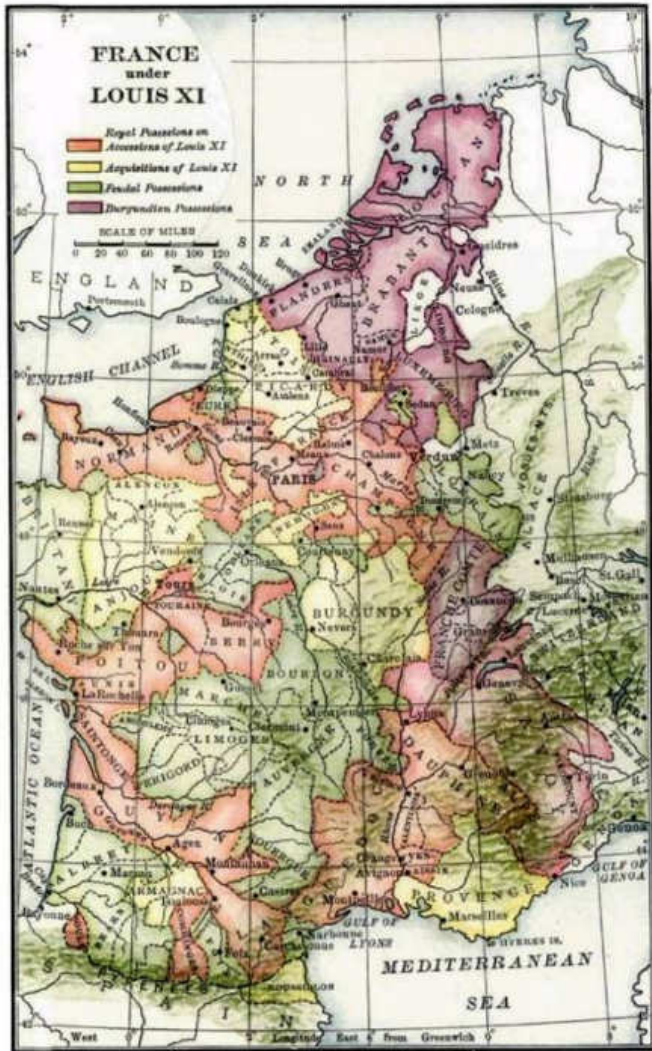
4. *Ming and Qing emperors of China*

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.

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

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.



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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.

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7. 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.

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8. *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.

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1. Ottoman Empire	They successfully expanded into Southern Europe, Southwest Asia and North Africa.	Despite a strong navy, they were defeated by the Portuguese and lost control of the Indian Ocean.
2. Portugal	Their cannon loaded ships were successful in opening trade in many ports.	Other European powers challenged them for domination of the Indian Ocean
3. Slave trade	Guns became an important commodity in the slave trade. It allowed African states to control land labor and resources.	It contributed to intense warfare between African states.
4. China	Despite having invented gunpowder, it was not as necessary a weapon because they were more interested in defense.	Their military situation and cultural context led them to take less interest in firearm technology
5. France	In comparing the two maps, gunpowder technology led to greater unification of France.	Despite greater centralization of power in France there was still intense competition for power.
6. North American fur traders	Guns provided an item of trade with Indians that fueled European demand for furs.	The trade armed Indians and sparked competition for land and furs.
7. Russians	Ivan the Terrible successfully expanded his control over vast new territories.	Other groups were dominated.
8. Siberian fur traders	Gunpowder enabled Russians to gather wealth through furs.	It depleted animal populations and exploited indigenous populations.