## Why did the Great Divergence Happen? Name:

From 1200-1600, Europe went from being not as advanced as its neighbors to being the most advanced region in the world. The following perspectives will each make an argument about why this might have happened.

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| **Perspective 1 - Mongols**The largest impact of the Mongol Empire was giving Europe a huge advantage over its competitors. The diffusion under the Mongols caught Europe up to China and the Caliphates, who had previously been more scientifically and technologically advanced. Additionally, the Mongols wreaked havoc across both the Middle East and China—causing considerable depopulation and disrupting local cultures. More importantly, the Mongols didn’t disappear after their empire faded. For centuries, both the Middle East and China had to contend with successor kingdoms of Mongol warriors. This led to the development of oppressive governments in both the Middle East and China—both of which turned away from trade in large parts because of their reactions against the Mongols. Europe on the other hand never really experienced Mongol invasion except in the most eastern parts of the continent. This allowed Europe to concentrate on other things like exploration and science. Additionally, once Europe had developed an advantage in science—both China and the Middle East had closed trade off enough that they did not receive this diffusion quickly, allowing Europe’s advantage to increase. This perspective, however, offers no explanation to why Europe developed over India. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |

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| **Perspective 2 – Discovery of the Americas**China may have discovered the Americas in the 1420s. However, if they did, they didn’t do anything with that knowledge. Upon discovering the Americas in the 1490s, Europe began a race to conquer as much of it as they possibly could. The natives were in no position to successfully resist this invasion and were slowly conquered, enslaved, forcibly assimilated, and killed. This gave Europe an enormous amount of cheap land, which allowed them to start an incredibly profitable slave economy which massively enriched Europe’s rulers, wealthy, and even some of the poor. It also made navies the focus of many European countries—rather than an afterthought to the army. We often talk about the developments of Europe’s armies during the Great Divergence but it was Europe’s navy, not it’s army, that conquered the world. China was probably the only other country that could have exploited America in this same way. However, for mostly cultural reasons, China did not. The China of the 15th and 16th centuries was looking inward—protecting its borders and its culture rather than extending its reach across the world. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |

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| **Perspective 3 – the Black Death**The Black Death hit Europe harder than anywhere else. Much of Eurasia saw 20-30% of their population killed. Europe, on the other hand, saw perhaps 50% or even greater. Ironically, this was an advantage for Europe. The Black Death did many beneficial things to Europe. It crippled the conservative landlords who had for centuries kept Europe tied to a inefficient feudal economy. It also made the average person far wealthier because there were so few common folk left that their labor was very in demand and they could suddenly afford things like land, machines, and luxuries. This meant that there was an enormous opportunity suddenly for entrepreneurs because of 3 things: 1) there were suddenly a lot of people with money to spend, 2) the common person had access to enough money to attempt a business if they came up with a good idea, and 3) the wealthy, conservative class was struggling too much to do a whole lot about it. This led to a period of rapid economic growth, the creation of new industries and machines, and the development of capitalism. Additionally, the Black Death caused people to question the conservative church. This led to an atmosphere of questioning, thought, and intellectual exploration. This all contributed to the eventual scientific revolution and later industrial revolution—and it was all possible because of the Black Death. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |
| **Perspective 4 – The Military Revolution:** Europe had some pretty bad wars from 1300-1650. The Hundred Years War 1327-1453, the Great Italian Wars 1494-1559, and Thirty Years War 1618-1648 were the most significant, each testing the armies who fought to the absolute limit of their abilities.The result was that Europe’s governments suddenly had to field larger and better armies than the old feudal systems could manage. This led to rapid changes in how Europe fought—including the development of the world’s most sophisticated gunpowder weapons. It also forced European governments to build bureaucracies and centralized governments, which took Europe from medieval to modern government in a relatively short time. It also demonstrated a very clear connection between technology and victory and thereby encouraged governments to support science—leading to the scientific revolution. Finally, it motivated Europe to pursue economic advantages in the Americas and elsewhere as a way of giving them an advantage over their rivals. This provided the motivation to conquer and enslave which would allow Europe to claim almost all of the Americas. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |

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| **Perspective 5 – The Dark Ages weren’t Dark**The story goes that Europe was a terrible, stupid place in the Middle Ages and then suddenly was the greatest in the world. This is just inaccurate. It is true that literacy, math, and science declined from 500-1500 in Europe. However, Europe was actually extremely successful in the Middle Ages. From 1100-1300, Europe saw a massive population boom during the Medieval Warm Period. This developed a sophisticated urban culture that was unique from anywhere else in the world—being based more on the development of industries, craftsmen, and money lenders than other areas, whose middle class were often made up of government bureaucrats. Additionally, Europe was actually the center of world engineering throughout the middle ages. Europe had a far greater number of mills than anywhere else in the world—a sort of medieval industrialization. Europe also had the tallest cranes, longest bridges, tallest towers. Europe developed the first true mechanical clock and was the world capital of both siege weapons and fortresses. European armor far exceeded any others in the world for protection and sophistication. European ships were the strongest and most seaworthy. It was not an accident that Europe had the world’s best gunpowder weapons within 150 years of learning about gunpowder (by which time China had possessed it for 500 years). Europe’s advantage was not that they suddenly had a boom in science, economy, and military. Europe’s advantage was that they were already the best at engineering and that’s more important than the other three. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |

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| **Perspective 6 – Geographic Luck**Europe had a number of unique geographic advantages. Firstly, there are very few important resources that do not exist in Europe in large and easily accessible quantities. Most importantly, Europe has a number of sources of excellent iron. Europe also had massive forests that provided cheap building material and fuel. When the trees started to run out in the 1500s, Europe learned from China that it could burn coal and just happened to have the world’s richest and most accessible coal reserves. Europe also has fantastic waterways. Very few parts of Europe are more than 200 miles from a coast and all of that area is accessible by the Rhine or Danube—Europe’s two great navigable rivers. This made trade, travel, and diffusion much easier in Europe and tended to make Europe focus on navies more than anywhere else in the world.Finally, Europe is the closest part of Eurasia to the Americas, which allowed it to exploit America in a way that no one else was situated to do. This provided Europe an even greater resource advantage as it now could access the resources of 3 continents. Even greater, the resources of these two American continents were concentrated into the empires of just 3 European countries—England, France, and Spain. This focused wealth into Western Europe and allowed one of these countries, England, to industrialize before any other country on Earth. |
| **Summarize this perspective:** |