

1492: HOW ONE YEAR CHANGED THE WORLD

Coordinator: Sophie Balcoff

Most Americans would say that 1492 was the year Columbus discovered America. Many Jews would say that it was the year of the Spanish inquisition. But much more was happening at that time, and this study group examines some key events of 1492 and delves into the reasons for their importance. We read background material and then discuss three salient questions: Why did Columbus go to America? Why did the Spanish monarchs expel the Jews? Why was it not the Americans who found Europe rather than the other way around?

Readings and Other Required Materials: There will be a course pack including, among other chapters and articles, excerpts from the following works:

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea
2. Hugh Thomas, Conquest
3. David Boyle, Toward the Setting Sun
4. Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs and Steel
5. Paul Johnson, The Birth of the Modern
6. William MacNeill, Plagues and Peoples
7. Jan Rogozinski, A Brief History of the Caribbean
8. Norman Roth, Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

Sophie Balkoff joined the IRP in Fall 2012. Since then, she has led seven study groups, including one ongoing on Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre. Her topics have been historical and literary. She is a former high school history teacher.

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1. The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Why did the “Catholic Monarchs” practice ethnic cleansing in 1492? How does this event connect to the Reconquista (Catholic “reconquest” of Spain from the Moors)?

2. Expulsion, continued. What were some of the short-term and long-term results of the Expulsion, both for the Jews themselves and for Spain?
3. Christopher Columbus and his mission. Who was he, what was his mission, how did he plan and execute it?
4. Columbus, continued. How did Columbus react to what he found on his voyages? To what extent is the lionization or demonization of Columbus justified?
5. The Conquest of Mexico. How and why was Cortes able to conquer the vast empire of the Mexica (Aztecs)? (Note that this conquest was a direct consequence of Columbus's voyages, but did not occur in 1492).
6. The Conquest of Mexico, continued. Last week we considered the actions of Cortes; this week we look at Montezuma, his motivations and action. Could Montezuma have avoided his own doom and that of his people?
7. Why Europe? What gave Europeans the edge over other cultures – why were they the ones to “discover America” rather than Americans being the ones to discover Europe? Diamond gives us the long view (way before 1492!).
8. Why Europe, continued. As we saw the origins of European advantage, we now see the culmination of that advantage in the 15th century.
9. Demographic collapse: why did (and why does) it happen? We read an explanation for laymen on the biological effect of disease on “virgin” populations.
10. Disease strikes the Americas. Europeans unquestionably brought plagues to America that killed an unknown – probably high – percentage of the population. Was this genocide?

11. Europe triumphant. How did Europeans react to the discoveries and conquests? We discuss the new knowledge, new foods and addictions, greater self-confidence, and the many consequences following on those. Were the later triumphs of Europe a consequence of 1492, or were both consequences of other, previous events?

12. Noble savages, vanishing wilderness. How did Europeans affect the people of the American continent in the long run? How did Europeans see the American Indian? What were some attitudes towards the beautiful, rich and desirable continents they had conquered?