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## **11. Explains the reasons for and the effect of, the increase in population in continental Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century.**

There is no single identifiable reason for the demographic surge which affected most of Western Europe from the middle of the fifteenth century until about 1560. Plague remained endemic, although the frequency and virulence of outbreaks declined. There were no noticeable improvements in either healthcare or hygiene. Infant mortality remained extremely high by modern standards and (as far as we can tell) there was no significant increase in life expectancy. Nevertheless couples were marrying younger, and having more children. The most obvious explanation is that this was an era of relative peace, and of clement weather which improved crop yields, and consequently nutrition. There were plenty of wars, particularly from about 1490 onward, but they were small scale and affected only limited areas. After 1450 the wars with England, which had periodically devastated parts of France for generations, came to an end. The natural agricultural prosperity of a rich country was quickly re-established, and the population rose from about 10 million in 1450 to about 16 million in 1510. There were no significant innovations in farming methods, but crop failures were few and far between. Over the same period most of Germany was also peaceful, and it was the rising numbers and prosperity of the peasantry which incited feudal landholders to seek to re-impose the dues and labour services which had been relaxed when labour was scarce. This was one of the main causes of the peasant wars of 1525, which caused heavy losses of life in some areas, and probably checked the momentum of demographic increase for about a generation. In Italy the period was one of commercial rather than agricultural prosperity, but the citizens of Florence, Genoa and Venice in particular were wealthy between about 1430 and 1480, when the Venetians began a disastrous cycle of wars with the Ottomans, which over about 30 years stripped them of most of their empire. The rest of northern Italy became a battlefield in the endemic wars which followed the French invasion of 1494, and there the population did not increase in the early sixteenth century. In England, the so-called 'Wars of the Roses', which were fought spasmodically between 1450 and 1487, were small scale and of short duration. No English city was sacked, and the disruption to farming was minimal. This period has been described as 'the golden age of the peasantry', and it was also a period of strong commercial growth, particularly in the cloth trade. In Spain the dynamics are less obvious, but in both Castile and Aragon long periods of domestic strife and instability were brought to an end about 1470, and the rule of the Catholic Kings (1474-1516) was secure and effective. The *reconquista* was brought to an end by the conquest of Granada in 1492, and there was no further fighting on Spanish soil. It was also a period in which the wool trade was prospering, and creating both wealth and employment.

The consequences of demographic increase are rather easier to ascertain, because they can be deduced from recorded developments. Most obviously, the labour shortage which had affected most of Europe in the early fifteenth century came to an end. In this respect the situation in England may be taken as typical. From about 1450 to 1480, although the population was growing, there was land to spare. The prosperity of the cloth trade induced landholders to enclose both former wasteland and also former farmland for sheep runs; but as long as displaced farmers could easily find new holdings, this caused little resentment. By about 1520 there was no longer land to spare, and resentment against 'depopulating enclosure' began to grow. Cardinal Wolsey set up a special commission to investigate, and the government began to pass anti-enclosure legislation. Meanwhile, increasing pressure on consumer markets was beginning to cause inflation. The reasons for this were not understood, and there was increasing anger against the

supposed exploitation of consumers by landlords, bankers, merchants, and anyone else who seemed a plausible scapegoat. Henry VIII's debasement of the currency, which began in 1545, aggravated this problem, and in 1548 and 1549 there were widespread riots against both enclosure and inflated prices. These rebellions were put down, and the demographic loss was small, but discontent remained, and real incomes continued to fall as inflation rose. In 1555 and 1556 the harvests failed for the first time in a generation, and malnutrition was followed by a severe influenza outbreak, which checked the population growth for about ten years.

In France the main consequence was a steep increase in the tax revenues, which strengthened the king's position, and gave him the means to fight his constant wars against the Habsburgs. Again, strong consumer markets boosted domestic consumption, and strengthened manufacturing industry. In Spain more men were available for the royal armies, which were constantly being recruited; and as long as the population continued to rise this did not cause any shortage of labour at home. In the intensified climate of religious devotion both the priesthood and the religious orders also recruited strongly, but a buoyant population could sustain a proportion of its people in professed celibacy without any problem. Spain in the early sixteenth century was a strong exporter of manpower, not only in her armies (which fought mainly in Germany and Italy) but also in the colonies which were springing up on the other side of the Atlantic. Thousands of young men were drawn out of the country for these reasons, and did not return. The position in the Holy Roman Empire varied from place to place, and is generally less clear. Population was increasing, but the main beneficiaries seem to have been the cities and the princes, rather than the peasantry or the Emperor. The religious strife which developed after 1525 did not in itself claim many lives, but it added to the peasant disorders, which did not end with the suppression of the major peasant revolts. By and large the German nobility seem to have succeeded in re-imposing their control over their tenants, and consequently became the main beneficiaries of such increase in prosperity as there was. From about 1529 the Eastern borders of the Empire were constantly menaced by the Ottomans, and as in Spain, the main benefit of demographic expansion was that it made it easier to recruit armies. Germany enjoyed more peace in the second half of the sixteenth century, when so much of Western Europe, particularly France, Spain and the Low Countries, were engaged in constant warfare, both civil and international. Demographic increase affected different countries in different specific ways, but the increase in consumer demand, and a consequent increase in trade, commercial prosperity and enterprise, were common to the whole of Western Europe.

#### Reading

P. Burke, *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe* (1972)

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