

Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Rise of Nations

(48 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 3940

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In 1347, a merchant ship traveling from Crimea in central Asia docked at Messina in Sicily with a crew of desperately sick sailors. As they were taken ashore, rats also left the vessel, carrying with them fleas infected with the bacterium for bubonic plague. The Black Death had arrived in Europe.

The plague in its several forms would eventually kill up to half the population of Europe, initiating a catastrophic economic depression, peasant revolts, and fierce power struggles among the nobility.

Yet from this near total disaster, a new spirit arose. The exhaustion of medieval society inspired intellectuals in northern Italy to make a new start—to create a new society through a search for revival and rebirth that would come to be called the Renaissance. And this radical break with the past was just the beginning.

In this course, you will explore the political, social, cultural, and economic revolutions that transformed Europe between the arrival of the Black Death in the 14th century and the onset of the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century.

An Award-Winning Teacher Probes the Ideas Behind Events

Your guide in these 48 lectures is Professor Andrew C. Fix, an award-winning teacher and scholar who specializes in the history of ideas in early modern Europe.

Dr. Fix does much more than recount the events of this intriguing era; he consistently puts things into a wider context, discussing the causes, implications, and ultimate effects of the unfolding drama that is taking place on the European stage. For example:

* *The Renaissance*: Why was the Renaissance born in northern Italy in the late 14th century and not, say, in France in the 15th century or Britain in the 16th century? Professor Fix examines the social and political factors that explain the time and place of this extraordinary explosion of creative energy.

* *The Protestant Reformation*: One of the key trends that prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century was the growth of popular piety. Unsanctioned by the church, this movement had its roots in the preoccupation of the medieval papacy with power politics, which hindered clergy from focusing on the spiritual needs of the people. Martin Luther himself was affected by this need, and his own solution showed the way for millions of others.

* *The Thirty Years War*: Fought from 1618 to 1648, this disastrous conflict had complex causes and far-reaching consequences. It not only pitted Catholics against Protestants, it was a civil war

between the emperor and German nobles, and also an international struggle to appropriate German lands. Germany would not recover as a nation until the arrival of Otto von Bismarck, 200 years later.

* *The Dutch Miracle*: Why was the Dutch Republic the most successful commercial nation in 17th-century Europe? “It’s almost a miracle how this little country turns out to be such an economic powerhouse,” observes Professor Fix, who proposes an explanation based on a clever Dutch innovation in ship design.

What You Will Learn

This course covers a remarkable breadth of subjects relating to European history in the period from 1348 to 1715. While religion, politics, wars, and economics dominate Professor Fix’s presentation, you will also learn about art, exploration, science, and technology.

The course is divided into four parts of 12 lectures each:

Part I (Lectures 1-12): Professor Fix begins with the growing series of crises in the 14th century that culminated in the Black Death, which set the stage for the profound changes in society that followed. He then makes an in-depth study of the origins and nature of the Italian Renaissance, focusing on its roots in the humanist movement, the key role played by the city of Florence, and the remarkable artistic output of the period. Also examined is Europe’s overseas expansion during the Age of Discovery, with special reference to the economic and political changes that these developments brought to Europe.

Part II (Lectures 13-24): Professor Fix highlights the problems within the Catholic Church and proceeds to an analysis of Martin Luther and the early Reformation, which started as a grassroots movement of ordinary people but was transformed by events into a highly politicized cause dominated by German princes. Next, Professor Fix covers the social, political, and economic contexts of the German Reformation, examining the political structure of the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg conflicts with France and the Ottoman Empire, the Knight’s Revolt of 1523, and the Peasant Revolt of 1525. Other branches of the Reformation are also examined, including the Swiss Reformation of Zwingli and Calvin, and the Radical Reformation, whose most notorious event was the creation of Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster.

Part III (Lectures 25-36): Completing his survey of Reformation movements, Professor Fix discusses the English Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. He then surveys the disastrous series of religious wars that struck Germany, France, and The Netherlands in the years 1546-1648. Beginning in Germany with the Schmalkaldic War, these conflicts ripped apart the continent. In France, noble families fought for control of the throne and the dominance of their religion; in The Netherlands, the Calvinist Dutch struggled for independence from Catholic Spain; and the terrible Thirty Years War left Germany devastated. This part of the course ends with a look at the problems in the European economy at the start of the 17th century.

Part IV (Lectures 37-48): Professor Fix begins his study of the 17th-century era of state building with the rise of royal absolutism in France, symbolized by Louis XIV’s dictum, “I am the state.” The German principalities took a slightly different approach to royal absolutism, while in Spain absolutism was attempted without success, signaling Spain’s decline as a leading power. The Dutch revolt against Spanish rule resulted in the first republic in any major nation in Europe, and

in England, a protracted conflict between the House of Commons and the king successively led to civil war, regicide, dictatorship, restoration, and finally a constitutional monarchy. The course comes to a close with a look at the epic intellectual change brought by the Scientific Revolution and the early Enlightenment, which ushered in the 18th century.

An Eventful Course: History in Context

Throughout this very eventful course, Professor Fix puts history into a context that makes it more immediate and understandable. For instance, the European discovery of the Americas in the late 15th and early 16th centuries is such a familiar story that it's difficult to appreciate it from the point of view of people living at that time.

“But imagine,” says Dr. Fix, “the excitement if, all of a sudden, we discovered another earth, right next to ours that hadn't been explored at all.” The impact on us would be analogous to that felt by Europeans who awoke to the existence of two previously unknown continents with all their potential riches.

When you listen to these lectures, you'll understand why Professor Fix has been lauded by his students as one of the most influential teachers of their college careers. He is a friendly and knowledgeable guide through a crucial stage of history—a period that is vastly different from our own but also recognizably the same, in which we see ourselves in what historian Barbara Tuchman called “a distant mirror,” that affords a glimpse of our own civilization in its nascent, budding phase.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Crisis of the 14th Century
2. The Hundred Years War and the Church in Crisis
3. The Origins of the Italian Renaissance
4. The Birth of Civic Humanism
5. Humanist Thought
6. Renaissance Florence
7. Florentine Politics and Society
8. The History of Florence
9. The Italian State System
10. The Age of Discovery
11. Inflation and New Monarchy
12. Renaissance Art

Part 2

13. The Church on the Eve of the Reformation
14. The Church on the Eve continued
15. Northern Humanism
16. Martin Luther
17. The Reformation Begins
18. The Progress of the Reformation in Germany
19. German Politics and Society
20. Imperial Politics and International War
21. The Reformation Beyond Germany—Zwingli
22. The Radical Reformation
23. The Radical Reformation continued
24. Calvin and Calvinism

Part 3

25. The English Reformation
26. The Birth of Anglicanism
27. The Catholic Counter-Reformation
28. Loyola and the Society of Jesus
29. Religious Politics and Religious War
30. Religious War in France 1562-98
31. The Dutch Revolt
32. The Course of the Revolt
33. The Thirty Years War
34. Climax of the War
35. The 17th Century—Crisis and Transition
36. Economic Change in the 17th Century

Part 4

37. The Rise of Absolutism in France
38. Louis XIV
39. Absolutism in Germany
40. The Spanish Monarchy
41. The Dutch Republic
42. Constitutional Monarchy in England
43. The English Civil War
44. Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution
45. The Scientific Revolution—The Old Science
46. Preparing for Change
47. The Revolution Under Way
48. The Early Enlightenment 1680-1715