

AP European History: Overview of Historical Periods and Key Concepts

The AP European History course is organized around four periods. For each period, we focus on a series of key concepts. While other important themes can certainly be identified in each period, these key concepts will help you make sense of the content we cover – they will also help you answer AP level questions on our tests and study guides. As we go along, ask yourself how the events of the period illustrate one or more of these concepts.

Period 1: c. 1450 – c. 1648 Renaissance to Peace of Westphalia/End of Thirty Years' War

Period 2: c. 1648 – c. 1815 Post-Religious Wars to the Fall of Napoleon

Period 3: c. 1815 – c. 1914 Fall of Napoleon to Outbreak of WWI

Period 4: c. 1914 – present Outbreak of WWI to Cold War and Beyond

Period 1: c. 1450 – c. 1648

Concept 1: The worldview of European intellectuals shifted from one based on ecclesiastical and classical authority to one based primarily on inquiry and observation of the natural world.

Concept 2: The struggle for sovereignty within and among states resulted in various degrees of political centralization.

Concept 3: Religious pluralism challenged the concept of a unified Europe

Concept 4: Europeans explored and settled overseas territories, encountering and interacting with indigenous populations.

Concept 5: European society and the experiences of everyday life were increasingly shaped by commercial and agricultural capitalism, notwithstanding the persistence of medieval social and economic structures.

Period 2: c. 1648 – c. 1815

Concept 1: Different models of political sovereignty affected the relationships among states and between states and individuals.

Concept 2: The expansion of European commerce accelerated the growth of a worldwide economic network.

Concept 3: The popularization and dissemination of the Scientific Revolution and the application of its methods to political, social and ethical issues led to an increased, although not unchallenged, emphasis on reason in European culture.

Concept 4: The experiences of everyday life were shaped by demographic, environmental, medical and technological changes.

Period 3: c. 1815 to c. 1914

Concept 1: The Industrial Revolution spread from Great Britain to the continent, where the state played a greater role in promoting industry.

Concept 2: The experiences of everyday life were shaped by industrialization, depending on the level of industrial development in a particular region.

Concept 3: The problems of industrialization provoked a range of ideological, governmental and collective responses.

Concept 4: European states struggled to maintain international stability in an age of nationalism and revolutions.

Concept 5: A variety of motives and methods led to the intensification of European global control and increased tensions among the Great Powers.

Concept 6: European ideas and culture expressed a tension between objectivity and scientific realism on the one hand, and subjectivity and individual expression on the other.

Period 4: c. 1914 to the Present

Concept 1: Total war and political instability in the first half of the 20th century gave way to a polarized state order during the Cold War, and eventually to efforts at transnational union.

Concept 2: The stresses of economic collapse and total war engendered internal conflicts within European states and created conflicting conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the state, as demonstrated in the ideological battle among liberal democracy, communism and fascism.

Concept 3: During the 20th century, diverse intellectual and cultural movements questioned the existence of objective knowledge, the ability of reason to arrive at the truth, and the role of religion in determining moral standards.

Concept 4: Demographic changes, economic growth, total war, disruption of traditional social patterns, and competing definitions of freedom and justice altered the experiences of everyday life.

Concept 5: The demise of the “bipolar” Cold War order led to resurgent nationalism, realignment of strategic alliances and economic institutions, and the emergence of new challenges to national and international order.