



### Critical Reading

## Dividing the New World: Tracing the Treaty of Tordesillas and Its Impact on Indigenous Civilizations

### Historical Context

In the late 1400s, European countries were racing to explore and claim new lands across the globe. After Christopher Columbus's first voyage in 1492, Spain and Portugal, two of the most powerful nations at the time, began competing over who had the right to control the newly "discovered" lands in the Americas. To avoid conflict, they turned to the Catholic Church for help. In 1494, the two countries signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, which drew an imaginary line down the Atlantic Ocean. Everything west of the line would belong to Spain, and everything east would belong to Portugal. At the time, Spain got most of the Americas, while Portugal gained control of parts of Africa, Asia, and later Brazil, which lay just east of the line. This agreement was made without consulting the Indigenous peoples who had lived in these lands for thousands of years. The Treaty of Tordesillas had a major impact on Indigenous civilizations. It gave European powers permission to take over vast areas of land, often by force. Spanish explorers and conquerors, like Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro, used this agreement to justify their invasions of powerful Indigenous empires like the Aztecs and Incas. As a result, millions of Indigenous people were killed by violence, disease, and forced labor. Their societies, cultures, and governments were disrupted or destroyed. Though the treaty was an agreement between European powers, its effects were felt most strongly by the Native peoples of the Americas in addition to regions of Africa and Asia. Understanding the Treaty of Tordesillas helps us see how European colonization began with not just exploration, but also division, conquest, and control, often at the expense of Indigenous lives and sovereignty.

### Connection to Habit

The Treaty of Tordesillas provides a powerful opportunity to practice critical reading, especially when examining who created the document, who it served, and who was left out. By analyzing this agreement through a critical lens, students can question the motives of Spain, Portugal, and the Catholic Church, and reflect on how the language of "discovery" and "division" concealed the violent realities of conquest. This habit of mind encourages students to interrogate primary and secondary sources, ask whose voices are missing, especially Indigenous perspectives, and explore how power, bias, and historical context shape the way events are recorded and remembered. In doing so, they begin to see history not as a neutral record, but as a narrative shaped by decisions, justifications, and consequences.

## Discussion Questions

- Who wrote or agreed to the Treaty of Tordesillas, and what were their goals? What assumptions did the treaty make about land ownership and sovereignty?
- How does the treaty reflect the values and worldview of 15th-century European powers?
- Whose voices and perspectives are missing from the treaty, and why might that be important?
- What language in the treaty (or its description) tries to justify colonization or control of Indigenous lands?
- How did the Treaty of Tordesillas shape the colonization of Latin America and the Caribbean?
- Why do you think Portugal was able to claim Brazil even though it's part of South America?
- In what ways did this treaty set the stage for the violence and destruction experienced by Indigenous peoples?
- How did this document influence language, religion, and culture in the Americas today?
- Can the Treaty of Tordesillas be seen as an early example of international law? Why or why not?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- World map (physical or projected)
- Ruler
- Colored pencils or markers
- Digital translated copy of the [Treaty of Tordesillas \(1494\)](#)
- Printed [Treaty of Tordesillas \(1494\) Critical Reading Guide](#)
- Sheet of Paper
- Index Card or half sheet of paper

Part 1: Warm-up: Mapping the Treaty for Context [5-10 mins]

1. Project or distribute a world map centered on the Atlantic Ocean.
  2. Have students use rulers and markers to draw the line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands (roughly near modern-day Brazil).
    - [Map reference link #1](#)
    - [Map reference link #2](#)
1. Color code:
    - Everything east of the line = Portugal (i.e. Brazil, parts of Africa and Asia)
    - Everything west of the line = Spain (i.e. most of the Americas)

Part 2: Critical Reading [15-20 mins]

Have students critically read the online translated copy of the Treaty of Tordesillas (linked in the guide) while using the [Treaty of Tordesillas \(1494\) Critical Reading Guide](#) as a support for the language that is used in the document.

Part 3: Guided Small Group Discussion [15-20 mins]

Have students break into small groups, discuss the following questions, and have one student record their responses on a sheet of paper :

1. Who was included in this treaty? Who was excluded? Why does that matter?
2. What problems do you think could happen because of this agreement?
3. If you were an Indigenous person living in the Americas in 1494, how might this treaty have affected your life?
4. What does this treaty tell us about how Spain and Portugal viewed the rest of the world?
5. What are the long-term impacts of this division of land?

Exit Ticket [5 mins]: Have students respond individually to this prompt on an index card or slip of paper: "Was the Treaty of Tordesillas more about peace or power? Defend your answer in 2-3 sentences."

# Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) Critical Reading Guide

The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed on June 7, 1494, between Spain and Portugal. This treaty was a pivotal agreement that divided newly discovered lands outside Europe between the two countries along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands (off the west coast of Africa). This division was intended to resolve disputes over newly explored lands by the two seafaring nations during the Age of Discovery. During the late 15th century, Spain and Portugal were leading maritime powers exploring new trade routes and territories. The Treaty of Tordesillas was significant because it attempted to peacefully divide the newly discovered lands of the Americas and other regions between the two nations, reducing the potential for conflict. This agreement had long lasting effects on global colonization patterns and the spread of European influence worldwide. Below this document has been broken down into its key sections:

**Introduction and Preamble:** The treaty begins by stating the parties involved King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, and King John II of Portugal. It notes that the treaty was ratified by Spain on July 2, 1494, and by Portugal on September 5, 1494. This section establishes the formal agreement between the two monarchies. The preamble invokes the name of God and sets a solemn tone for the agreement. It emphasizes the desire of both parties to maintain peace and friendship by clearly defining their respective rights over newly discovered lands. This section details the representatives authorized to negotiate and sign the treaty on behalf of each monarch. For Spain, the delegates included Don Enrique Enríquez, Don Gutierre de Cárdenas, and Dr. Rodrigo Maldonado. For Portugal, the delegates were Ruy de Sousa, João de Sousa, and Ayres d'Almada. The document outlines the full powers granted to these individuals to act on behalf of their sovereigns.

## [Section 1.] Establishing the Line of Division

What it says: Spain and Portugal agree to avoid fighting over newly discovered lands by drawing an imaginary north-south line in the Atlantic Ocean. This line is 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. Everything east of that line belongs to Portugal, and everything west belongs to Spain. This includes islands and mainlands already discovered or yet to be found.

Why it matters: This section created a legal basis for dividing up the “New World,” without consulting the Indigenous people who already lived there. It gave Spain and Portugal permission to take over entire regions.

## [Section 2.] Stay in Your Zone

What it says: Each country promises not to send ships into the other’s zone to explore, trade, or conquer. If a ship accidentally ends up in the other country’s area and discovers land, it must give that land up to its rightful owner (according to the treaty).

Why it matters: This was supposed to prevent conflict, but it also treated entire continents like property to be split between two European powers, ignoring the people who lived there.

## [Section 3.] How to Mark the Line

What it says: Spain and Portugal agree to send out joint expeditions of ships, with experts like sailors and astronomers, to measure and mark the dividing line. If the line crosses land, they’ll build physical markers or towers on the land to show the border.

Why it matters: They tried to make the border official and permanent. This shows how serious they were about dividing up the world and how methodically they went about it.

## [Section 4.] Travel Rights and Temporary Exceptions

What it says: Spain’s ships are allowed to pass through Portugal’s side of the ocean as long as they don’t claim anything on the way. Also, if Spain happens to discover something in Portugal’s area before June 20, 1494, the land gets split:

- If it’s within the first 250 leagues, it goes to Portugal.
- If it’s in the remaining 120 leagues, it goes to Spain.

Why it matters: This part gives Spain temporary permission to explore but limits what they can claim. It also shows how they were still racing to discover and claim lands even while finalizing the treaty.

**Ratification and Confirmation:** The treaty concludes with the formal ratification by both monarchs, affirming their acceptance and commitment to the terms outlined in the agreement. This section serves as the official endorsement of the treaty by the respective crowns.

Overall Takeaway: The Treaty of Tordesillas is a perfect example of how European powers used treaties to divide up the world for their own benefit during the Age of Exploration. It:

- Ignored Indigenous people and their sovereignty.
- Legitimized colonization by two nations over huge parts of the globe.
- Set the stage for European empires that would shape global politics, trade, and cultures for centuries.