[MUSIC PLAYING]

ROBERT STRAYER: Chapter 14 is about slavery and its consequences. If you're accustomed to thinking about economic globalization as a product of the late 20th century, chapter 14 offers something of a corrective, because it describes the beginnings of a genuinely global economy during the early modern era in the several centuries after 1500. Silver, spices, furs, sugar, tobacco, coffee, tea, chocolate, textiles, and, yes, slaves as well, all circulated internationally, as the Americas were joined to the Afro-Eurasian world in a single, global, economic network.

Now, among these many currents of global commerce, the Atlantic slave trade stands out in our memory because of the enormous suffering that it generated and because of the enduring legacy of racial hostility that it gave rise to. That slave trade represented a continuation of a long-established tradition of people owning people that goes back thousands of years to the earliest civilizations.

But this era of slavery and slave trading was different. Its numbers were huge. It concentrated on plantation agriculture. And it was focused wholly on Africa. Many of the global trade commodities of the time, like sugar, tobacco, and cotton, were all produced with slave labor. And although the demand for slaves came largely from Europeans, political authorities in Africa were more than willing to sell people into slavery, though usually not their own people. Morally speaking, there is blame enough to go around.

Of course, the costs of early modern global commerce were not limited to the slave trade. One Spanish priest described the conditions of Native Americans mining silver in colonial Bolivia as a portrait of hell. And in the forced labor of Siberian fur trappers, they were put utterly at the mercy of their Russian rulers.

So while we may be impressed with the extent of global trade in the early modern era and its undoubted benefits for some people, we might pause to contemplate the price in human suffering that was paid for those achievements.