Why Britain Led the Industrial Revolution
This lithograph, *The Triumph of Steam and Electricity*, celebrates the accomplishments of the Industrial Revolution in England.
Britain possessed several advantages that facilitated early industrialization. The first was its geography.
Britain has a damp climate. This was good for textile production, because it helped to keep the fibers in the material soft and easy to work with. In addition, Britain has many deposits of coal and iron, both of which fueled the machines.
In addition, Britain’s location also kept it isolated from European wars. This allowed the nation to focus on industry: factories and creating new types of transportation.
Notes:

Why Britain Led the Industrial Revolution

Geography:

- The English climate was good for textile production.
- There were plenty of natural resources, such as iron and coal.
- The separation from the European continent kept England out of wars.
Government:

Britain had the advantage of an absence of internal trade barriers. This means that products and goods could move from one area of Britain to another, without being taxed. This encouraged internal British trade. In addition, the British government allowed its population to relocate to different towns.
Travel and trade were also made easier by the early development of canals and rivers.
In addition, both private companies and the government contributed to transportation improvements, such as building railways.
Social Factors:

British society tended to be organized in a manner less rigid and hierarchical than was common in France and Germany. The most significant social groupings were occupational ones, such as merchants and artisans, as opposed to the traditional class groupings of nobility, aristocracy, and peasantry.

Why? Because Parliament is divided into two Houses, the House of Lords and the House of Commons.
Although the House of Lords are inherited positions, the House of Commons is based on elections – much like our Congress.
The British also took advantage of their access to international markets. A British law required merchants to use British ships for foreign trade. This promoted the British fleets. The heavy use of the fleet for trade increased the volume of imports and exports, which in turn gave Britain more purchasing power and increased the importance of the British fleet.
British Empire:

Britain also had a huge colonial empire (even with the loss of the United States). Britain enforced the economic system of mercantilism with its colonies. In addition, British-controlled colonies provided a ready-made, steady market for British goods.
British empire as of 1907
Notes:

Government:
- Internal trade was encouraged.
- The population was allowed to relocate.
- The government helped build canals, roads and railways.

Social Factors:
- British society was less rigid than other European countries.
- People could easily relocate to different areas in Britain.
Advantages of Industrializing First:
As early as 1820, only 30% of British labor remained in agriculture. At the same time, between 80% and 100% of the continental labor was still devoted to agriculture. Because so much of continental Europe was engaged in agriculture, Britain was able to specialize in industry and import agricultural products from Europe.
In addition, the British government prohibited industrial workers, inventors, or anyone familiar with the technology to leave England. This allowed Britain to have a monopoly on these inventions, keeping Britain ahead in the industrialization process.
So what was happening on Continental Europe at this time?

Napoleon was defeated in 1815. France was still trying to restore order after the Napoleonic Wars, and the result was that the Industrial Revolution did not spread to Continental Europe until nearly a century later.
France only began industrializing in the period 1830 – 1871, with a focus on luxury items and small-scale manufacturing. Agriculture was the basis of the French economy.
Germany industrialized even later, toward the latter part of the nineteenth century. Until 1871, Germany was not a separate country, but a number of small principalities, each with its own laws. Once Germany became unified, it created a more stable basis for an industrial economy.
Other countries, such as Belgium, Holland, Italy and Switzerland, industrialized even later.

Spain and Portugal, however, remained largely removed from the industrialization process until much later.
Colonial Empire:
• Britain’s colonial empire supplied the raw materials for manufactured goods (mercantilism).
• The colonies provided a market for the manufactured goods.

Advantages of Industrializing First:
• No other countries were competing in the manufacturing of the goods.
• Britain maintained a monopoly on the technology.
• Britain would not allow inventors or workers on the technology to leave Britain.