The first Europeans to use movable type were printers in Mainz, Germany, the most famous of whom was Johann Gutenberg. From Germany, printing spread quickly to other European cities. By 1500, presses in about 250 cities had printed between 9 and 10 million books. For the first time, books were affordable enough so that people could buy and read them.

The printing press made the Bible available to all Christians who could read. No longer did worshipers have to depend on their priests to read and interpret the Bible for them. Now they could read and find meaning on their own. And for some, like Martin Luther, their interpretations differed greatly from those of the Church. For others, religious books beautifully illustrated with woodcuts and engravings rekindled religious feelings and encouraged popular piety.

Printing prepared the way for a religious revolution. Books on religion publicized the corruption of the Renaissance popes and other problems in the Church. New ideas spread more quickly than ever before. Many of Luther’s ideas were drawn from the writings of John Wycliffe and John Huss, earlier critics of the Church. In turn, printing presses quickly spread Luther’s 95 theses throughout Europe, drawing many followers to his teachings. The pen was proving to be mightier than the sword.
For centuries Venice and other coastal Italian city-states had a monopoly on trade in their region, the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, around 1200, European merchants to the north began organizing far-ranging, controlled trade routes of their own.

Northern European cities formed a federation called the Hanseatic League. By the 1300s the League had incorporated most of the Baltic and North Sea ports, with German states serving as a go-between. Lübeck, built in the 1200s, was situated in a sheltered port and became the “mother town” of the League, which stretched from Russia to England. Merchants from the nearly 100-member cities—including such inland locations as Cologne and Novgorod—made up the League’s governing body.

Along with a great growth in ship traffic in the upper European region, land transport also increased. Cloth, metals, and other goods such as fish, timber, animal skins, tar, and turpentine were brought to ports and exchanged for the raw goods of Scandinavia and Russia. The League eventually set up branch offices in England and created monopolies to protect their commerce. However, in the early 1600s, the League was hit by internal strife and foreign attacks and was so weakened that it disbanded. At this time, English and Dutch merchants took over control of shipping in the region.