

Absolutism in Eastern Europe: c. 1600-1740

I. Overview of Eastern Europe (“HOP RAP”)

A. Three aging empires—Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire and Polish Kingdom—gave way to new empires of Russia, Austria and Prussia

1. **Holy Roman Empire** (HRE): religious divisions due to the Reformation and religious wars in 16th and 17th centuries split Germany among Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist princes
2. **Ottoman Empire**: could not maintain possessions in eastern Europe and the Balkans in the face of Austrian and Russian expansion
 - a. Ottoman Empire was built on expansion
 - The Sultan had absolute power in the empire
 - After 1560 the decline in western expansion resulted in the gradual disintegration of the empire
 - b. **Suleiman the Magnificent** (r. 1520-1566) was perhaps the most powerful ruler in the world during the 16th century
 - Nearly conquered Austria in 1529, captured Belgrade (Serbia), nearly 1/2 of eastern Europe including all Balkan territories, most of Hungary, and part of southern Russia.
 - c. Highly talented Christian children from the conquered provinces were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire’s bureaucracy
 - d. “**Janissary corps**”: those Christian slaves who were not selected for the Ottoman bureaucracy served loyally instead in the Turkish army
 - e. Ottoman Empire was fairly tolerant regarding religion in its conquered provinces
3. **Poland: liberum veto** – voting in Polish parliament had to be unanimous for changes to be made; thus, little could be done to systematically strengthen the kingdom
 - Russia and Prussia encouraged certain members to invoke the liberum veto to weaken Poland.
 - By 1800, Poland ceased to exist as a sovereign state; carved up by Russia, Austria and Prussia

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- B. Eastern European absolutism differed from French absolutism
1. Eastern absolutism was based on a powerful nobility, weak middle class, and an oppressed peasantry composed of serfs.
 2. In France, the nobility's power had been limited, the middle-class was relatively strong, and peasants were generally free from serfdom.
 - Louis XIV built French absolutism upon the foundations of a well-developed medieval monarchy and a strong royal bureaucracy.
- C. Threat of war with European and Asian invaders were important motivations for eastern European monarchs' drive to consolidate power.
1. Resulted in reduced political power of the nobility.
 - However, nobles gained much greater power over the peasantry.
 2. Three important methods of gaining absolute power:
 - a. Kings imposed and collected permanent taxes without the consent of their subjects.
 - b. States maintained permanent standing armies.
 - c. States conducted relations with other states as they pleased.
 3. Absolutism in eastern Europe reached its height with Peter the Great of Russia.
 - Absolutism in Prussia was stronger than in Austria.

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II. **Serfdom** in eastern Europe

- A. After 1300, lords in eastern Europe revived serfdom to combat increasing economic challenges.
1. Areas most affected included Bohemia, Silesia, Hungary, eastern Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.
 2. Drop in population in the 14th century (especially from the "Black Death") created tremendous labor shortages and hard times for nobles.
 3. Lords demanded that their kings and princes issue laws restricting or eliminating peasants' right of moving freely
 - a. By 1500 Prussian territories had laws requiring runaway peasants to be hunted down and returned to their lords
 - b. Laws were passed that froze peasants in their social class.
 4. Lords confiscated peasant lands and imposed heavier labor obligations.
 5. The legal system was monopolized by the local lord.

6. Non-serf peasants were also affected
 - **Robot:** In certain regions, peasants were required to work 3-4 days without pay per week for their local lord

- B. Serfdom consolidated between 1500 and 1650
 1. Hereditary serfdom was re-established in Poland, Russia, and Prussia by the mid-17th century.
 2. In Poland, nobles gained complete control over peasants in 1574 and could legally impose death penalties on serfs whenever they wished.
 3. 1694, the Russian tsar rescinded a 9-year term limit on recovery of runaway serfs.
 4. This period saw growth of estate agriculture, especially in Poland and eastern Germany.
 - a. Food prices increased due to influx of gold & silver from the Americas.
 - b. Surpluses in wheat and timber were sold to big foreign merchants who exported them to feed the wealthier west.

- C. Why serfdom in eastern Europe and not western Europe?
 1. Reasons were not necessarily economic.
 - West was also devastated by the Black Death and the resulting labor shortages *helped* labor.
 2. Political reasons more plausible – supremacy of noble landlords.
 - a. Most kings, in fact, were essentially “first among equals” in the noble class and directly benefited from serfdom.
 - b. Eastern lords had more political power than in the west; monarchs *needed* the nobles
 - c. Constant warfare in eastern Europe and political chaos resulted in noble landlord class increasing their political power at the expense of monarchs.
 - d. Weak eastern kings had little power to control landlord policies aimed at peasants.
 - Strong sovereign kings were not in place prior to 1650.
 - e. Peasants were weaker politically than in the west.
 - Uprisings did not succeed.
 - Peasant solidarity in the east was weaker than western communities.
 - f. Landlords undermined medieval privileges of towns and power of urban classes.
 - Population of towns and importance of urban middle classes declined significantly.

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III. The Hapsburg Empire (Austrian Empire)

A. Rise of Austria

1. Ruler of Austria was traditionally selected as Holy Roman Emperor
2. After War of Spanish Succession (1701-13) and the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), the Spanish throne was now occupied by the Bourbons; Habsburg power was concentrated in Austria.
3. Austrian Habsburg Empire included:
 - a. Naples, Sardinia, and Milan in Italy
 - b. Austrian Netherlands (Belgium)
 - c. Hungary and Transylvania (modern-day Romania)
4. Ineffective Habsburg rule in the HRE forced monarchs to turn their attention inward and eastward to consolidate their diverse holdings into a strong unified state.
 - a. Reorganization of **Bohemia** was a major step towards absolutism.
 - Czech (Bohemian) nobility was wiped out during the Bohemian phase of 30 Years' War
 - Ferdinand II (1619-1637) redistributed Czech lands to aristocratic soldiers from all over Europe.
 - Conditions for serfs declined.
 - b. Old hereditary provinces of **Austria proper** were centralized by Ferdinand III (1637-1657).
 - Ferdinand created a permanent standing army; unprecedented for the Habsburg empire
 - c. **Hungary** was the third and largest part of its dominion.
 - **Magyars** were the dominant cultural group
5. Serfdom intensified in Habsburg lands

B. Government of the Austrian Empire.

1. Austria was NOT a national state – its multinational empire included:
 - a. Austria proper: Germans, Italians
 - b. Bohemia: Czechs
 - c. Hungary: Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Romanians
2. No single constitutional system or administration existed in the empire as each region had a different legal relationship to the Emperor.

C. Important Hapsburg rulers

1. Ferdinand II (1619-1637) took control of Bohemia during the 30 Years' War
2. Ferdinand III (1637-1657): centralized gov't in the old hereditary provinces of Austria proper.

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3. **Leopold I** (1658-1705)
 - a. Severely restricted Protestant worship
 - b. **Siege of Vienna: Successfully repelled Turks from gates of Vienna in 1683**
 - Last attempt by the Ottoman Empire to take central Europe.
 - In 1697, Prince Eugene of Savoy led Austria's forces to a victory over the Ottomans at Zenta, thus securing Austria from future Ottoman attacks
4. **Emperor Charles VI** (1711-1740)
 - a. Austria was saved from French expansion during the War of Spanish Succession with its alliance with Britain and the military leadership of Prince Eugene.
 - b. Issued **Pragmatic Sanction** in 1713
 - Hapsburg possessions were never to be divided and henceforth to be passed intact to a single heir.
 - His daughter, Maria Theresa, inherited Charles' empire in 1740 and ruled for 40 years

IV. **Prussia: House of Hohenzollern**

- A. Brief background of Brandenburg
 1. Ruler of Brandenburg was designated as one of 7 electors in the Holy Roman Empire in 1417.
 2. Yet by the 17th century, Brandenburg was not significantly involved in HRE affairs
 3. Marriages increasingly gave the Hohenzollerns control of German principalities in central and western Germany.
 4. The prince had little power over the nobility
- B. **Frederick William, the "Great Elector"** (r. 1640-88)
 1. Background
 - a. Strict Calvinist but granted religious toleration to Catholics and Jews
 - b. Admired the Swedish system of government and the economic power of the Netherlands
 - c. **Ongoing struggle between Sweden and Poland for control of Baltic after 1648 and wars of Louis XIV created atmosphere of permanent crisis.**
 - Prussia was invaded in 1656-57 by Tartars of southern Russia who killed or carried off as slaves more than 50,000 people.
 - Invasion weakened the noble Estates and strengthened the urgency of the elector's demands for more money for a larger army.

- Prussian nobles refused to join representatives of towns in resisting royal power
- 2. The "Great Elector" established Prussia as a Great Power and laid the foundation for the future unification of Germany in the 19th century
 - a. Most significant: Oversaw Prussian militarism and created the most efficient army in Europe.
 - b. Employed military power and taxation to unify his Rhine holdings, Prussia, and Brandenburg into a strong state.
 - c. Increased military spending achieved through heavy taxes (twice that of Louis XIV in France)
 - Prussian nobility not exempted.
 - Soldiers also served as tax collectors and policemen, thus expanding the government's bureaucracy.
 - d. "Junkers" formed the backbone of the Prussian military officer corps; these nobles and landowners dominated the Estates of Brandenburg and Prussia.
 - 1653, hereditary subjugation of serfs established as a way of compensating the nobles for their support of the Crown
- 3. Encouraged industry and trade
 - a. Imported skilled craftsmen and Dutch farmers
 - b. New industries emerged: Woolens, cotton, linens, velvet, lace, silk, soap, paper and iron products
 - c. Efforts at overseas trade largely failed due to Prussia's lack of ports and naval experience
- C. Frederick I (Elector Frederick III) "The Ostentatious" (1688-1713); 1st "King of Prussia"
 - 1. Most popular of Hohenzollern kings
 - a. Sought to imitate the court of Louis XIV
 - b. Encouraged higher education
 - Founded a university and encouraged the founding of an academy of science
 - Welcomed immigrant scholars
 - 2. Fought in two wars against Louis XIV to preserve the European balance of power:
 - a. War of the League of Augsburg (1688-97) and the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713)
 - b. Allied with the Hapsburgs
 - c. Elector of Brandenburg/Prussia was now recognized internationally as the "King of Prussia" in return for aid to Habsburgs.
 - Thus, Frederick I was the first "king of Prussia"

D. **Frederick William I** (r. 1713-1740) "Soldiers' King"

1. Most important Hohenzollern regarding the development of Prussian absolutism
 - a. Calvinist, like his father
 - b. Obsessed with finding tall soldiers for his army
2. Infused militarism into all of Prussian society
 - a. Prussia became known as "Sparta of the North"
 - One notable diplomat said, "Prussia, is not a state with an army, but an army with a state."
 - Society became rigid and highly disciplined.
 - Unquestioning obedience was the highest virtue.
 - Most militaristic society of modern times.
 - b. Nearly doubled the size of the army
 - Best army in Europe
 - Became Europe's 4th largest army (next to France, Russia & Austria)
 - c. 80% of gov't revenues went towards the military
 - d. Prussian army was designed to avoid war through deterrence.
 - Only time Frederick William I fought a war was when Sweden occupied a city in northern Germany; the Swedes were subsequently forced out
3. Most efficient bureaucracy in Europe
 - a. Removed the last of the parliamentary estates and local self-government
 - b. Demanded absolute obedience and discipline from civil servants
 - Promotions based on merit
 - Some commoners were able to rise to positions of power
 - c. High levels of taxation
4. Junkers remained the officers' caste in the army in return for supporting the king's absolutism
5. Established approximately 1,000 schools for peasant children

E. Frederick II ("Frederick the Great") – (r. 1740-1786)
[see "Enlightened Despots" in Unit 4.1 notes]

1. Most powerful and famous of the Prussian kings
2. Considered to be an "Enlightened Despot" for his incorporation of Enlightenment ideas into his reign.
 - Instituted a number of important reforms
3. Increased Prussia's territory at the expense of the Austrian Hapsburgs

V. Russia

A. Historical background

1. During the Middle Ages the Greek Orthodox Church was significant in assimilating Scandinavian ancestors of the Vikings with the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe.
2. In the 13th century, the Mongols from Asia invaded eastern Europe and ruled the eastern Slavs for over two centuries
 - Authoritarian Mongol rule, led by the Mongol khan, left a legacy of ruthless leadership that would continue in Russia in future centuries.
3. Eventually, princes of Moscow, who served the khan, began to consolidate their own rule and replaced Mongol power. (Ivan I and Ivan III were the most important)
4. Muscovy began to emerge as the most significant principality that formed the nucleus of what later became Russia.
 - However, the Russian nobles (**boyars**) and the free peasantry made it difficult for Muscovite rulers to strengthen the state

B. Ivan III ("Ivan the Great") (1442-1505)

1. 1480, ended Mongol domination of Muscovy
2. Established himself as the hereditary ruler of Muscovy
 - a. This was in response to the fall of the Byzantine Empire and his desire to make Moscow the new center of the Orthodox Church: the "Third Rome"
 - The tsar became the head of the church
 - The "2nd Rome" had been Constantinople before it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1453
 - Many Greek scholars, craftsmen, architects and artists were brought into Muscovy
 - b. Tsar claimed his absolute power was derived from divine right as ruler
 - c. Ivan struggled with the Russian boyars for power.
 - Eventually, the boyars' political influence decreased but they began exerting more control of their peasants.

C. **Ivan IV (“Ivan the Terrible”)** (1533-1584)

1. Background
 - a. Grandson of Ivan III
 - b. First to take the title of “tsar” (Caesar)
 - c. Married a Romanov
2. Territorial expansion
 - a. Controlled the Black Sea region
 - b. Gained huge territories in the Far East
 - c. Gained territories in the Baltic region
3. Began westernizing Muscovy
 - Encouraged trade with England and the Netherlands
4. For 25 years, he fought unsuccessful wars against Poland-Lithuania
 - a. Military obligations deeply affected both nobles and peasants
 - b. These wars left much of central Europe depopulated
 - c. **Cossacks:** Many peasants fled the west to the newly-conquered Muscovite territories in the east and formed free groups and outlaw armies.
 - Gov’t responded by increasing serfdom
5. Reduced the power of the boyars
 - a. All nobles had to serve the tsar in order to keep their lands
 - b. Serfdom increased substantially to keep peasants tied to noble lands
 - c. Many nobles were executed
 - Ivan blamed the boyars for his wife’s death and thus became increasingly cruel and demented
6. Merchants and artisans were also bound to their towns so that the tsar could more efficiently tax them
 - This contrasts the emergence of capitalism in western Europe where merchants gained influence and more security over private property.
7. **“Time of Troubles”** followed Ivan IV’s death in 1584
 - a. Period of famine, power struggles and war
 - b. Cossack bands traveled north massacring nobles and officials
 - c. Sweden and Poland conquered Moscow
 - d. In response, nobles elected Ivan’s grand-nephew as new hereditary tsar and rallied around him to drive out the invaders

D. Romanov dynasty

1. Lasted from the ascent of Michael Romanov in 1613 to the Russian Revolution in 1917.
2. **Michael Romanov** (1613-1645)
 - a. Romanov favored the nobles in return for their support
 - Reduced military obligations significantly
 - b. Expanded Russian empire to the Pacific Ocean in the Far East.
 - c. Fought several unsuccessful wars against Sweden, Poland and the Ottoman Empire
3. Russian society continued to transform in the 17th century
 - a. Nobles gained more exemptions from military service.
 - b. Rights of peasants declined
 - Bloody Cossack revolts resulted in further restrictions on serfs
 - c. **"Old Believers"** of the Orthodox Church resisted influx of new religious sects from the west (e.g. Lutherans and Calvinists)
 - In protest, 20,000 burned themselves to death over 20 years
 - "Old Believers" were severely persecuted by the government
 - d. Western ideas gained ground
 - Western books translated into Russian, new skills and technology, clothing and customs (such as men trimming their beards)
 - First Russian translation of the Bible began in 1649
 - By 1700, 20,000 Europeans lived in Russia
 - e. By 1689, Russia was the world's largest country (3 times the size of Europe)

E. Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725)

1. Background
 - a. His sister, Sophia, ruled as his regent early on.
 - Her plot to kill him failed and Peter had her banished to a monastery; his mother Natalia took over as his regent
 - Peter began ruling in his own right at age 22
 - b. He was nearly 7 feet tall and so strong he could bend a horse shoe with his bare hands
2. Revolt of the **Strelski** was defeated by Peter in 1698
 - a. These Moscow guards had overthrown previous leaders
 - b. The security of Peter's reign was now intact

3. Military power was Peter's greatest concern
 - a. Each Russian village was required to send recruits for the Russian army; 25-year enlistments
 - b. 75% of the national budget was spent on the military by the end of Peter's reign
 - Royal army of over 200,000 men plus additional 100,000 special forces of Cossacks and foreigners
 - c. Established royal, military and artillery academies
 - d. All young male nobles required to leave home and serve 5 years of compulsory education
 - e. Large navy built on the Baltic (though it declined after Peter's death)
 - f. Non-nobles had opportunities to rise up the ranks
4. **Great Northern War (1700-1721)**
 - a. Russia (with Poland, Denmark and Saxony as allies) vs. Sweden (under Charles XII)
 - b. Battle of Poltava (1709) was the most decisive battle in Russia defeating Sweden.
 - c. Treaty of Nystad (1721): Russia gained Latvia and Estonia and thus gained its "**Window on the West**" in the Baltic Sea.
5. Modernization and westernization was one of Peter's major focuses
 - a. He traveled to the West as a young man to study its technology and culture
 - Military technology was his primary concern
 - b. He imported to Russia substantial numbers of western technicians and craftsmen to aid in the building of large factories
 - c. By the end of his reign, Russia out-produced England in iron production (though Sweden and Germany produced more)
 - Industrial form of serfdom existed in factories where workers could be bought and sold
 - d. State-regulated monopolies created (echoed mercantilist policies of western Europe)
 - Actually stifled economic growth
 - Industrial serfs created inferior products
6. Government became more efficient
 - a. Tsar ruled by decree (example of absolute power)
 - Tsar theoretically owned all land in the state; nobles and peasants served the state
 - No representative political bodies
 - All landowners owed lifetime service to the state (either in the military, civil service, or court); in return they gained greater control over their serfs

- b. **Table of Ranks**
 - Set educational standards for civil servants (most of whom were nobles)
 - Peter sought to replace old Boyar nobility with new service-based nobility loyal to the tsar
- c. Russian secret police ruthlessly and efficiently crushed opponents of the state
- d. Taxation
 - Heavy on trade sales and rent
 - Head tax on every male
- e. Turned the Orthodox Church into a government department in 1700
7. **St. Petersburg**
 - a. One of Peter's crowning achievements
 - Sought to create a city similar to Amsterdam and the **Winter Palace** with the grandeur of Versailles
 - By his death, the city was the largest in northern Europe (75,000 inhabitants)
 - b. St. Petersburg became the capital of Russia
 - Cosmopolitan in character
 - c. Construction began in 1703; labor was conscripted
 - d. Peter ordered many noble families to move to the city and build their homes according to Peter's plans
 - e. Merchants and artisans also ordered to live in the city and help build it
 - f. Peasants conscripted heavy labor in the city's construction (heavy death toll—perhaps 100,000)
8. Peter's reforms modernized Russia and brought it closer to the European mainstream
 - a. More modern military and state bureaucracy
 - b. Emerging concept of interest in the state, as separate from the tsars interest
 - c. Tsar began issuing explanations to his decrees to gain popular support

Terms to Know

Holy Roman Empire	Frederick William I
Ottoman Empire	"Sparta of the North"
Suleiman the Magnificent	Muscovy
Janissary Corps	boyars
Poland-Lithuania	Ivan III ("the Great")
liberum veto	"Third Rome"
serfdom	Ivan IV ("the Terrible")
robot	Cossacks
Hapsburg Empire (Austrian Empire)	"Time of Troubles"
Bohemia	Romanov dynasty
Austria proper	Michael Romanov
Hungary	"Old Believers"
Leopold I	Peter the Great
siege of Vienna, 1683	<i>Strelski</i>
Charles VI	Great Northern War
Pragmatic Sanction	"Window on the West"
Prussia	Table of Ranks
Hohenzollerns	St. Petersburg
Frederick William, the "Great Elector"	Winter Palace
Junkers	
"king of Prussia"	

Essay Questions

Note: This sub-unit is a high probability area for the AP exam. In the past 10 years, 5 questions have come wholly or in part from the material in this chapter. Below are some questions that will help you study the topics that have appeared on previous exams.

1. Analyze the causes for the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire and Poland-Lithuania in Europe during the 17th century.
2. Analyze the military, political and social factors for the rise of absolutism in Austria, Prussia and Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries.
3. Compare and contrast absolutism in eastern Europe with that of France in western Europe.

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