

## Chapter 17: Absolutism in Eastern Europe to 1740

1. Lords and peasants in eastern Europe
  - a. Overall, between 1400 and 1650 the princes and landed nobility of eastern Europe rolled back the gains made earlier by the peasantry; serfdom was reimposed. Unlike in Eastern Europe, the towns and middle class decreased in importance.
  - b. The medieval background (1400-1650)
    - i. Personal and economic freedom for peasants increased between 1050 and 1300.
      1. Serfdom nearly disappeared east of the Elbe river.
      2. Peasants bargained freely with their landlords and moved about as they pleased, because the nobles wanted to attract German settlers to sparsely populated lands.
    - ii. After 1300, powerful lords in eastern Europe revived serfdom to combat their economic problems and the decline in population from the Black Plague.
      1. Rather than using a carrot (better legal and economic opportunities,) the nobles used a stick (strict laws) to keep their remaining peasants where they were.
      2. Laws that restricted the peasants' right of free movement were passed.
        - a. The punishments were harsh: Runaway peasants were nailed to a post by an ear and given a knife to cut themselves loose.
        - b. Peasants were only allowed to move during a two-week period after the fall harvest.
      3. Lords took more and more of the peasants' land and imposed heavier labor obligations.
        - a. Peasants could no longer negotiate and pay reasonable rents; they became forced laborers.
    - iii. The consolidation of serfdom
      - i. In 1574, nobles were able to legally inflict the death penalty on their serfs whenever they wished.
      - ii. The reestablishment of hereditary serfdom (**hereditary subjugation**) took place in Poland, Prussia, and Russia between 1500 and 1650.
      - iii. The consolidation of serfdom was accompanied by the growth of estate agriculture.
        1. Lords seized peasant land for their own estates.
        2. They then demanded unpaid serf labor on those estates.
        3. The labor produced very profitable surpluses.
      - iv. Political reasons for changes in serfdom in eastern Europe were the most important.
        1. Serfdom increased because of political, not economic, reasons.
          - a. The same economic background in the west led to the freedom of peasants from serfdom.
        2. Weak monarchs could not resist the demands of the powerful noble landlords.
          - a. Disputed royal successions forced weak kings to grant political favors to win the support of the nobility.
        3. The absence of the western concept of sovereignty meant that the king did not think in terms of protecting the interests of all of his people. Rather, he thought in terms of himself.
        4. Overall, the peasants had less political power in eastern Europe and less solidarity.
        5. The landlords systematically undermined the medieval privileges of the

towns.

- a. The lords sold directly to foreign capitalists like the Dutch instead of to local merchants.
  - b. Eastern towns lost their medieval right of refuge; they were now forced to return runaways to their lords.
- v. Western Europeans began to regard eastern Europe as culturally and morally inferior.

## 2. The rise of Austria and Prussia

### a. Austria and the Ottoman Turks

- i. After the Thirty Years' War, the Austrian Habsburgs were weakened, especially after failing to root out Protestantism and failing to centralize the Holy Roman Empire.
- ii. They turned inward and eastward to unify their holdings.
  1. The Protestant Bohemian lesser Czech nobility dominated the **Bohemian Estates**, or the representative body of the different estates, or legal orders, in Bohemia.
  2. During the Thirty Years' War in the **Battle of White Mountain**, the Habsburgs replaced the Protestant Czech nobility with Catholic nobles.
  3. Serfdom increased, Protestantism was wiped out, and absolutism was achieved.
    - a. **Robot**- three unpaid days of work; became the norm. Also, a quarter of all serfs worked for everyday except for Sundays and religious holidays.
  4. **Ferdinand III** created a **standing army**, centralized the government in Austria, and turned toward Hungary for land.
- iii. This eastward turn led Austria to become absorbed in a war against the Ottoman-Turks over Hungary and Transylvania.
- iv. Under **Suleiman the Magnificent**, the Ottoman-Turks built the most powerful empire in the world, which included Hungary, part of southern Russia and the Balkans.
  1. The Turkish sultan was the absolute head of the state, yet defended peasant communities from greedy officials so peasants could afford to pay their taxes.
  2. There was little private property, preventing hereditary nobility and no security of landholding.
  3. Their bureaucracy was staffed by slaves.
    - a. These slaves came from a "tax" of children on the conquered Christian populations in the Balkans. These slaves were trained. The talented rose to the top and the less fortunate sunk to the bottom of the bureaucracy.
    - b. Loyal and effective servants were rewarded with a carefully defined income.
  4. The Ottoman Turks exploited Christian peasants less than the Christian nobles did; they were not economically mistreated, nor were they forced to convert to Islam.
  5. The empire fell apart, as the western advance slowed, as the temporary Muslim landholders became permanent oppressors, as sultans lost their enthusiasm for war, lagging behind in military advances.
- v. The Ottoman attack on Vienna, Austria in 1683 was turned back, and the Habsburgs conquered all of Hungary and Transylvania by 1699.
  1. The defeat of the Ottomans had support from Protestant nobles in Hungary and Louis XIV of France.

- vi. The Habsburg possessions consisted of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary, which were joined in a fragile union.
  - 1. The **Pragmatic Sanction (1713)** stated that the possessions should never be divided and were always to be passed intact to a single heir regardless of gender.
  - 2. The Hungarian nobility thwarted the full development of Habsburg absolutism.
    - a. Nobility's motives: 1) It's always nobles vs. King! 2) The Hungarians remained Protestants and resented the Habsburg's attempts to recatholicize them.
  - 3. After the rebellion led by **Rákóczy** in 1703 during the War of Spanish Succession, **Charles VI** had to restore many of the nobles' traditional privileges.
  - 4. Unlike Austria or Bohemia, Hungary never became fully integrated into a centralized, absolute Habsburg state.
- b. **Prussia** in the seventeenth century
  - i. The **Hohenzollern** family ruled the electorate of **Brandenburg** but had little real power.
    - 1. The seven electors chose the next Holy Roman Emperor.
    - 2. Their position, cut off from the sea, gave Brandenburg no defensible natural frontiers.
    - 3. Further, the agricultural land was poor: a combination of sand and swamp.
  - ii. The Thirty Years' War weakened the representative assemblies of the realm and allowed the Hohenzollerns to consolidate their absolutist rule
    - 1. Frederick William forced the Estates to accept the introduction of permanent taxation without consent, giving him financial independence and superior force..
  - iii. **Frederick William (the Great Elector)** used military force and taxation to unify his Rhine holdings, Prussia, and Brandenburg into a strong state.
    - 1. The traditional parliaments, or Estates, which were controlled by the **Junkers** (the nobles and the landowners), were weakened.
      - a. The Estates had power of the purse.
    - 2. War strengthened the Frederick William's push for absolutism, as did the Junkers' unwillingness to join with the towns to block absolutism.
      - a. The struggle between Sweden and Poland for control of the Baltic, the wars of Louis XIV and the wild Tartars of the Crimea in southern Russia all contributed to the atmosphere and urgency of war. This atmosphere allowed Frederick William to demand more money for more soldiers.
      - b. The nobility accepted a compromise in which the majority of the new taxes would fall on the towns and royal authority stopped at the landlords' gates.
      - c. McKay believes that if the Junkers had resisted successfully, they would have paved the way for constitutionalism.
- c. The consolidation of Prussian absolutism
  - i. **Electoral Frederick III**, "the Ostentatious," followed William Frederick in sequence, but French king Louis XIV in style, building an expensive palace and cultivating the arts.
  - ii. **Frederick William I**, "the Soldiers' King," encouraged Prussian militarism and created the best army in Europe plus an efficient bureaucracy.

1. "A formidable army and a war chest large enough to make this army mobile in times of need can create great respect for you in the world, so that you can speak a word like the other powers." These words showed his firm belief in a Machiavellian type world politics and show his political motives for developing such a strong military and military-like state.
  2. He was frugal with money and with his soldiers' lives, so paradoxically, he was the most peaceful, militaristic king.
  - iii. The parliamentary Estates and local self-government disappeared.
  - iv. The Junker class became the military elite and Prussia a militarist state.
3. The development of Russia
- a. Between the midthirteenth century and 1700, Russia and the West became strikingly different; after 1700, Russia's development was closer to that of the West.
  - b. The main difference between **Eastern Orthodoxy** and Roman Catholicism was that Eastern Orthodoxy rejected the authority of the pope.
  - c. **Boyar nobility**- powerful landowning nobles in Russia
  - d. The Mongol yoke and the rise of Moscow
    - i. The Mongols, also known as the Golden Horde, conquered the Kievan state in the thirteenth century and unified it under their harsh rule.
    - ii. The Mongols used Russian aristocrats as their servants and tax collectors.
      1. The princes of Moscow served the Mongols well and became the hereditary great princes.
      2. **Ivan I** served the Mongols while using his wealth and power to strengthen the principality of Moscow. He also put down the prince of Tver's revolt against Mongol oppression.
      3. **Ivan III** acquired territory around Moscow--including the rich republic of Novgorod.
        - a. He confiscated 80 percent of the land, executing the previous owners or resettling them nearer Moscow.
        - b. In exchange for some of the confiscated land, the service nobility agreed to serve in the tsar's army.
      4. Ivan III stopped acknowledging the Mongol khan as the supreme ruler and assumed the headship of Orthodox Christianity as a **tsar**, a European slavic monarch with absolute power.
  - e. Tsar and people to 1689
    - i. By 1505, the prince of Moscow--the tsar--had emerged as the single hereditary ruler of the eastern Slavs.
      1. Occurred as a result of Ivan III's marriage to the daughter of the last Byzantine emperor.
    - ii. The tsars and the boyars struggled over who would rule the state; the tsars won and created a new "**service nobility**," who held the tsar's land on the condition that they serve in his army.
    - iii. **Ivan the Terrible** (Ivan IV) was an autocratic tsar who expanded Muscovy and further reduced the power of the **boyars**, the Russian aristocrats.
      1. He murdered leading boyars and confiscated their estates.
      2. He defeated the Mongol khanates, adding vast new territories to Russia.
      3. In order to own any land, all nobles had to serve the tsar.
      4. Many peasants fled his endless wars and demonic purges to the newly conquered territories, forming outlaw armies called **Cossacks**.
      5. Since businessmen and artisans were bound to their towns and jobs so that

Ivan could tax them more, the middle class did not develop.

- iv. The **Time of Troubles** (1598-1613) was a period characterized by internal struggles and invasions.
  - 1. There was no heir, and relatives of the tsar fought against each other.
  - 2. Swedish and Polish armies invaded.
  - 3. Cossack bands, led by **Ivan Bolotnikov**, slaughtered many nobles and officials. They called for a “true tsar,” who would restore their freedom of movement, reduce their heavy taxes, and lighten the yoke imposed by the landlords. The nobles soon crushed the Cossack rebellion.
- v. **Michael Romanov** was elected tsar by the nobles in 1613, and he reestablished tsarist autocracy.
- vi. The Romanovs brought about the total enserfment of the people, while the military obligations on the nobility were relaxed considerably.
- vii. A split in the church over religious reforms led to mass protests by the peasants, and the church became dependent on the state for its authority.
  - 1. **Nikon**, a dogmatic purist, wanted to make Russian practices of worship more like Greek Orthodoxy.
  - 2. The church quickly went along, but the common people resisted, seeing Nikon as the Antichrist.
  - 3. Many people left the church, forming illegal communities of “Old Believers,” and were executed for trivial ceremony differences.
- viii. The Cossacks rebelled again, only leading the nobles to tighten the screws of serfdom further as they put down the rebellion.
- f. The reforms of **Peter the Great**
  - i. Peter conquered Poland and a large part of Ukraine.
  - ii. Peter faced a Russian army based on cavalry and not the sort of professional armies being formed in Europe.
  - iii. He conquered Azov, then went on a long tour of inspection of western Europe.
    - 1. He went to war, allied with Denmark and the elector of Saxony, who was also the elected king of Poland, against the absolutist king of Sweden (**Charles XII**)--eventually winning the **Great Northern War**.
    - 2. He reformed the army and forced the nobility to serve in his bureaucracy.
      - a. Army and government became more efficient and powerful as an interlocking military civilian bureaucracy was created and staffed by talented people.
      - b. Searched for talented foreigners.
    - 3. His new (mainly peasant) army numbered 200,000 plus another 100,000 special troops.
      - a. The taxes on the peasants also tripled, making five years of education compulsory for all noblemen.
    - 4. He created schools to train technicians for his army.
  - iv. Russian peasant life under Peter became more harsh.
    - 1. People replaced land as the primary unit of taxation.
    - 2. Serfs were arbitrarily assigned to work in the factories and mines.
  - v. Modest territorial expansion took place under Peter, and Russia became a European Great Power.
    - 1. Russia defeated Sweden in 1709 at **Poltava** to gain control of the Baltic Sea.
    - 2. Peter borrowed many Western ideas.
      - a. Educated Russians only widened the gap between the enserfed

peasantry and the educated nobility.

#### 4. Absolutism and baroque architecture

##### a. Palaces and power

- i. Baroque culture and art grew out of an effort by the Catholic church to attract followers.
- ii. Architecture played an important role in politics because it was used by kings to enhance their image and awe their subjects.
- iii. The royal palace was the favorite architectural expression of absolutist power.
- iv. The dominant artistic style of the age of absolutism was baroque--a dramatic and emotional style.

##### b. Royal cities and urban planning

- i. Karlsruhe is a good example of how cities were rebuilt along orderly lines, and with great avenues and imposing public buildings.
- ii. The new avenues brought speed to the city--as elegant carriages raced down the new broad and straight streets.

##### c. The growth of St. Petersburg

- i. The new St. Petersburg is an excellent example of the tie among architecture, politics, and urban development.

Also called the "window into the West."

1. Peter the Great wanted to create a modern, baroque city from which to rule Russia.
2. The city became a showplace for the tsar paid for by the Russian nobility and built by peasants.
  - a. Nobles were forced to build houses and live in St. Petersburg.
  - b. Peasants were drafted to work there; their households had to pay a special tax to pay for their food.
- ii. During the eighteenth century, St. Petersburg became one of the world's largest and most influential cities.
- iii. The new city was Western and baroque in its layout and design.
  1. It had broad, straight avenues.
  2. Houses were built in a uniform line.
  3. There were parks, canals, and streetlights.
  4. Each social group was to live in a specific section.
- iv. All social groups, especially the peasants, bore heavy burdens to construct the city.
- v. **Tsarina Elizabeth** and the architect **Rastrelli** crowned the city with great palaces.