1 Late Middle Ages, The Renaissance, and the Origins of Modern Nations

Royal Consolidation of Authority and Power

The monarchies of the Late Middle Ages divided powers of government between the kings and their noble vassals

The feudal nobility and the towns tried acted as a check on royal authority

The representative assemblies such as the English Parliament, the French Estate General, and the Spanish Cortes represented the nobility and the towns to temper the consolidation of royal authority

However, by 1450 the territorial nobility was being brought under the control of centralized monarchies

The towns played a crucial role in this transition

Kings began to appoint townspeople to royal offices, taking the place of the feudal nobility in the administration of society

These royal officials helped the kings stake a claim to powers of taxation, war, and law enforcement which had previously been the prerogatives of the king’s vassals

As vassals ceded these powers to the centralized government of under a king, those regions they had ruled were combined to form the beginnings of modern nations

Unlike the feudal nobility which were associated with certain territorial districts, the professional civil servants were involved in advancing general national, not specific regional fiefdom issues

In this manner kings were able to acquire the bureaucratic machinery needed to enforce their decrees, bypass the authority of feudal councils and representative assemblies

For example, in Spain Ferdinand and Isabella rarely called the Cortes into session, the French Estate General did not meet from 1485-1509, and the English Parliament was not summoned after 1485

Also, by the 15th century monarchies also began creating standing armies, thereby ending the feudal tradition of feudal nobles’ monopoly over military forces

New technologies such as gunpowder and firearms were beginning to emphasize the importance of an infantry of commoners, thereby diminishing the importance of the noble knight and cavalry

Professional soldiers fought more for pay than honor and were more efficient and thus successful on the battlefield

Monarchs sought large armies to project their authority and power, but armies for pay had to be maintained and paid, lest they mutiny

Thus, new sources of income were crucial to monarchs to maintain their power

Efforts to expand royal revenues were resisted by the nobles who considered taxation demeaning and unbecoming of the king who, like themselves, they felt should rely on the income of their personal estates

Because of this resistance, monarchs found it easier to impose taxes on those who were least able to resist and pay

Thus, monarchs sought as many sources of income as possible

They collected rents from the royal domain

They imposed taxes on clothing and food

They sold public offices

They issued bonds (loans)

The monarchs also turned to the nobility and bankers for loans

Nation Development in France

It was under Charles VII during the latter stages of the Hundred Years War (during the time of Joan of Arc) that the king’s ministers began to create a professional army

This consisted of regular companies of cavalry and archers, recruited, paid, and inspected by the state

Thus, Charles VII created the first permanent royal army

Other advisors, chosen from middle class professionals helped devise policies to strengthen France’s economy, develop a diplomatic corps of ministers, a national administration, and system of taxation on salt and land to provide the state its chief source of income

Charles VII also reformed the justice system

Charles VII also asserted dominance over the French church and affirmed the autonomy of the church in France from the Roman papacy via the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges

This asserted the superiority of a royal appointed general council over the appointment of bishops and deprived the pope French ecclesiastical revenues

Charles’ son Louis XI, known as the “Spider King” due to his treacherous nature, inherited these measures of consolidated power and proceeded to make France a great power

These developments had contributed to the French defeat of the English by 1453 and later under Louis XI to the defeat of the Burgundians in 1477 who had previously been allied to the English

When the Burgundian king Charles the Bold died in battle in 1477, his dream of a powerful middle kingdom between France and the German states also died

Louis XI and the Austrian Habsburg emperor, Maximilian I, divided up the Burgundian lands which allowed Louis to focus on internal affairs and the consolidation of domestic power

Louis restrained the influence of the French nobility, he initiated policies that promoted trade and industry, and he expanded his influence into territories that had been doubled since he had become king

Louis XI promoted new industries such as silk weaving at Lyon and Tours

He welcomed tradesmen and foreign craftsmen

He entered into commercial treaties with England, Portugal, and the Hanseatic League of northern Germany

The revenue generated by this economic activity along with severe taxation was used to improve the army which Louis XI used to stop aristocratic feuds and wars as well as to reduce urban independence

Some suggest that Louis XI established the foundations of French royal absolutism

Louis XI summoned only one meeting of the Estates General and the delegates requested that they not be summoned again in the future

Thereafter the king would make all the decisions of state

Louis XI relied on finances supplied by the merchant and urban middle class to fight and subdue his feudal rivals

Later in 1516 Francis I came to terms with the pope with the Concordat of Bologna which rescinded the Pragmatic Sanctions and allowed the pope to receive the first year’s income of new bishops and abbots and the pope agreed to allow the king to appoint bishops

Nation Development in Spain

A similar process was taking place in Spain during the 15th century

The marriage of Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon accelerated the process of creating a unified Spanish monarchy

Of the two regions, Castille was more populous and prosperous

Although the marriage of the two royals created the beginnings of a centralization of the Spanish state, the two regions continued to be managed by their own government agencies, laws, armies, coinage, taxation, and traditions like language

Together with combined authority Isabella and Ferdinand were able to subdue the nobility, secure the borders of their realm, continue wars of conquest, and enforce a uniform religious faith among their diverse subjects

In January of 1492 they conquered the last Muslim state on the Iberian Peninsula, they established Naples as a Spanish possession in 1504, and acquired the kingdom of Navarre (Basque country) in 1512

The Catholic Kings relied on a league of cities and towns called the *Hermandad* (Brotherhood) to help them subdue the powerful nobility who dominated the feudal estates of the countryside

The *Hermandad* acted as local police forces and judicial tribunals

The *Hermandad* was so successful in repressing violence and crime that they were able to be disbanded in 1498

Townspeople of middle-class background replaced the nobility within the royal council and the monarchy restricted the power of the nobility by extending royal authority over chivalric or knightly orders

The royal council was reorganized

Iberia had a long heritage of a coexistence of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

However, because of the process of the Reconquista and the completion of that process by Isabella and Ferdinand, Christianity was established as the official state-controlled religion under which modern Spain was established

This contributed greatly to the ability of crown to consolidate its influence over a developing nation and create a national church

Isabella and Ferdinand ran the church in their realm, and through a diplomatic alliance with the papacy, especially the Spanish pope Alexander IV, they secured the right to appoint bishops in Spain and in America

They also utilized the Inquisition to promote national unity

In 1492 Isabella and Ferdinand issued an edict expelling all practicing Muslims and Jews from Spain

However, in the years prior to this edict, antisemitic sentiment and riots encouraged many Jews to convert to Christianity

In 1497 the Inquisition was assigned the task of monitoring the activities of the converted Jews or *conversos*, and it was assigned the same duty on the conquered Muslims in 1502

Revenues from the ecclesiastical estates provided a means to raise an army with which they continued the Reconquista and asserted the dominance of the centralized monarchy

Isabella and Ferdinand also arranged the marriages of their children to enhance the power of Spain in Europe and to contain the growing power of the French

In 1496, Joanna, the second eldest daughter, was married to the Archduke Philip of Austria and the son of the Habsburg emperor Maximilian I

Later in the 16th century, their son Charles would inherit a unified Spain and a European kingdom almost as large as the Carolingian Empire of the 9th century

Their fourth daughter, Catherine, was married to an English prince, Arthur, the son of King Henry VII in 1501

When Arthur died, Catherine was betrothed to Arthur’s younger brother Henry in 1509

The eldest daughter, Isabella of Aragon, was married to Alfonso, prince of Portugal in 1490 and then, after Alfonso died in 1491, she was married to Manuel I of Portugal in 1497

After their daughter Isabella died in 1498, Isabella and Ferdinand married their third-born daughter Maria of Aragon to King Manuel I

Of course, Spain’s power was greatly enhanced by the overseas discoveries, explorations, and conquests in the Western Hemisphere

Nation Development in England

England was torn apart by a civil war in the aftermath of their defeat in the Hundred Years War in the last half of the 15th century

For 30 years (1455-1485) conflict between two branches of the royal family consumed and prevented the development of England

The War of the Roses, so-called because each of the warring branches of the royal family was represented by the totem of a rose

The House of York was represented by a white rose, and the House of Lancaster was represented by a red rose

Henry VI was a weak king of the Lancaster branch of the family

He was challenged by his cousin, the duke of York who had support in the southern towns

In 1461, the duke of York’s son seized power and became Edward IV

Edward IV greatly increased the power and wealth of the monarchy

He began to undermine the independent power of the nobility and to establish law and order at the local level

Edward IV also diminished the influence of the Parliament which was an institution where the nobility exerted its power in the influential House of Lords

Edward IV revived the idea that the king would live of his own financial resources, thereby undercutting his dependence on the Parliament for his source of revenue

One effect of this was that Edward IV and the successive kings conducted foreign policy based on diplomacy rather than expensive wars

In 1483, Edward’s brother, Richard III took the throne away from Edward’s young son

Richard III, was in turn overthrown by Henry Tudor, a distant royal relative who had inherited the leadership of the Lancaster faction

Thus, Henry VII established the Tudor dynasty

Henry VII’s marriage to Edward IV’s daughter Elizabeth of York united the rival factions of the royal family and created a solid unified claim to the throne

The center of Henry VII’s authority was the royal council which governed at the national level

Henry VII distrusted the nobility and very few lords were among the king’s advisors

The main advisors were of lesser middle caste rank and landowning classe, and many were educated in the law

The royal council handled the business of executive, legislative, and judicial matters

Prepared laws for parliamentary ratification and dealt with aristocratic threats through the Star Chamber

Henry VII’s creation of the Court of the Star Chamber helped bring the English nobility under tight royal control

This court had jurisdiction over cases having to do with the nobility

Of course, the crown had the advantage in this court as it was staffed by the king’s councilors

Henry VII also confiscated a large amount of the property and estates of the nobility

So much so that Henry VII did not have to convene Parliament to raise the money he needed to govern

Unlike France or Spain, the English kings did not create a professional standing army or a professional civil service bureaucracy

Unpaid local officials made up of influential landowners made up the justices of the peace to handle the work of the local government

The Tudor crown won the support of the middle classes because the interests of the crown and the middle classes were linked as the Tudors promoted peace and stability as opposed to the anarchy associated with the War of the Roses

Henry VII encouraged the development of the cloth industry and the English merchant marine to engage in trade with continental Europe

He established peace with Scotland through the marriage of his daughter Margaret to the Scottish king

By the time of Henry VII’s death, England was domestically and internationally at peace, the nation’s treasury was full, and centralized royal authority was dominant

The Holy Roman Empire, or Germany and Italy

Germany and Italy were the exceptions to the trend of political consolidation and centralization that led to the beginnings of modern nation states

The traditional German noble practice of partitioning their lands among all their sons prevented centralization

As a result, Germany was divided into 300 autonomous entities and authority was severely fragmented

The German princes and cities worked together to maintain law and order

The Holy Roman Emperor was a figurehead that reigned more than ruled

There had been a system created in the 14th century to encourage cooperation among the regions of the empire

And in the 15th century an effort was made to create some unity in purpose through the establishment of a regular national meeting called the *Reichstag* which was composed of representatives of the church, the nobility, and the cities

In 1495 the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I made concessions to the Reichstag that promoted greater order in the Empire

Private warfare was banned

A court was established to enforce internal peace

And an imperial council was established to coordinate the development of policy

Although these reforms were moves in the direction of political centralization, the territorial princes remained sovereign rulers in their domains

Italy

During the 13th and 14th centuries the cities in Italy began to extend their influence into the countryside and they began to develop into great city-states

The growth of Italy’s cities and urban society was promoted by the endemic warfare between the Guelf (Welf or pro-papal) factions and the Ghibelline (Hohenstaufen or pro-imperial) factions of nobility

The fighting between these factions each weakened the other, and left the merchant oligarchies free of dominance by kings or territorial princes

This allowed the influence of the Italian cities to expand into the surrounding countryside and assimilate the rural nobility

Through intermarriage?

The five greatest city-states were

The Duchy of Milan

The republic of Florence

The republic of Venice

The Papal States

The kingdom of Naples

Competition for power was intense within the city-states

By the 15th century most had concluded that they could preserve order by allowing despots to rule

Venice was an exception in that it remained an oligarchic republic dominated by a small number of merchant families

Florence exhibited the basic model of early renaissance Italian government

The social ranks were

The old guard (the *grandi*)

The noble and established merchant families

The emergent merchant and investor rank known as the *popolo grosso* (fat people)

The middle-burgher rank of the guildmasters (skilled labor), shop owners, and professionals

The lowest rank was called the popolo minuto (little people)

In 1457 about one-third of the population of Florence were listed as paupers

Earlier in 1378 the dislocation associated with the Black Death prompted a revolt called the Ciompi Revolt among the poor in Florence

Stability was not restored until Cosimo de Medici took control in 1434

Medici was a very wealthy merchant and an astute statesman

He controlled Florence from behind the scenes by manipulating the constitution and the elections in his favor

Florence was governed by a council of six to eight men, the *Signoria*, elected from the most powerful guilds

Through his relationship with the electoral committee, Medici could make sure that the Signoria was made up of loyalists

Medici’s grandson Lorenzo established absolute control over Florence by 1478

Elsewhere, when internal fighting and foreign intrigue paralyzed the management of city-states, warring factions agreed to the appointment of a podesta

A neutral outsider, but a strongman who was empowered to do whatever was necessary to maintain law and order and establish a good environment for business

The podesta could be dismissed by the oligarchy that hired him or could be assassinated by those whom he offended

However, a podesta might establish a dynasty such as the Visconti family in Milan in 1278 and the Sforza family that followed them in 1450

However Italian city-states were governed, Italian despots ultimately provided an environment for intellectual and artistic pursuits

Italy’s Political Decline

The protection of the Italian city-states from foreign invasion depended on their ability to cooperate

During the last half of the 15th century the Treaty of Lodi brought Milan and Naples into an alliance with Florence against Venice and the Papal States (1454-1455)

The peace ended when Naples, Florence, and Pope Alexander VI prepared to attack Milan in 1494

The despot of Milan asked France for help

He urged the French to revive their claim to Naples, but he failed to consider that France also had an earlier claim to Milan

The French king Charles VIII responded eagerly to Milan’s call for help

Charles VIII quickly took control over Italy

Ferdinand of Aragon called upon an alliance of Aragon, Venice, the Papal States, and the German Emperor Maximilian I against the French

Charles VIII was forced to retreat when Milan joined with Ferdinand and the Papal States

Pope Alexander VI sought to create a hereditary dutchy for his children in an area near Venice

Venice objected and the pope broke from his alliance with the Venetians and he allied himself with the French

This development allowed the French to reconquer Milan and for the pope to establish his desired dutchy

In 1500 Louis XII and Ferdinand divided up Naples

Pope Julius II became pope in 1503 and he solidified his control over the Papal States and proceeded to drive the French out of Italy

He formed the Holy League with Ferdinand, Venice, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Swiss to oppose the French

The French retreated from Italy again

Louis XII’s successor Francis I led another assault on Italy

The Holy League weakened after a French massacre of Swiss forces in 1515

After this debacle the Habsburg emperor took up the cause against the French and after four Habsburg-Valois wars the French were finally defeated by the Spanish led Habsburgs

Although France was eventually defeated in Italy by the Habsburgs, Francis I was successful in his dealings with the pope and the church

The Concordat of Bologna gave the French king Francis I control over the French clergy in exchange for the French recognition of the pope’s supremacy over church councils and his right to collect certain fees from clergy in France

This agreement virtually nationalized the French Catholic church, thereby undercutting any appeal the Reformation might have had for France’s kings

The armies of France, Spain, and Germany made shambles of Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries

Niccolo Machiavelli a Florentine scholar sought to make sense of this tragedy

The lesson he learned from these wars was that political ends, the maintenance of peace and order, are justified by any means

Machiavelli had been impressed by the ability of the Romans to act decisively and heroically for the good of their country, and he lamented the absence of those traits in contemporary Italy

Machiavelli was devoted to republican ideals, but he was convinced that only a strongman could rescue Italy from the calamity of the ongoing wars

Machiavelli saw that the situation required a cunning dictator willing to use manipulative techniques in order to influence his people

This was the inspiration of Machiavelli’s work *The Prince*

In the book he advised rulers to consider fraud and brutality in order to achieve the higher ends of unifying Italy

Machiavelli hoped that the Medici family would be the salvation of Italy and he dedicated his book to Lorenzo di Piero de Medici, the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent and ruler of Florence from 1513 to 1519

The Medicis failed to rise to the challenge

When Machiavelli died in 1527, Pope Clement II, the second member of the Medici family to become pope, watched helplessly as Rome was sacked by the army of the Habsburg Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, Charles V