11 Mercantile Empires Abroad and Enlightened Absolutism in Europe during the 18th century

European expansion overseas has gone through four stages

The age of exploration, conquest, and settlement

Colonial trade rivalry between Spain, France, and Great Britain

Contact with Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century

Twentieth century dismantling of European colonial empires

The eighteenth century was the time of the second stage that saw the colonial trade rivalry between Spain, France, and Britain

The European empires established by the 18th century were set up for trade and not for the resettlement of their people

In 1713 at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, the Treaty of Utrecht established the boundaries of the European empires

The European powers managed those economic empires based on mercantilist theories that advocated trade activity that encouraged the accumulation of gold and silver by the mother countries

Thus, a favorable trade balance that enabled a nation to acquire gold and silver rather than to expend it was promoted

The economic well-being of the home country was the main goal of the mercantilist system

It was assumed that the colonies were the inferior partner and that they were established to provide natural resources and markets to support the growth of the economy and industry of the home country

Laws, regulations, and tariffs were established to guarantee the home country’s monopolistic control over its colonies and the exclusive relationship between the home country and its colonies

Despite the theory of mercantilism, the economic reality of the colonies and human nature which sought trade wherever it was to be found mostly predominated

For example, the English colonists in America could buy sugar more cheaply in a direct trade with the French and Spanish colonies of the Caribbean than from English suppliers as commanded by the rules and laws of mercantilism

French and British colonists in North America quarreled endlessly, primarily over access to the markets of the Caribbean

There were quarrels in the St Lawrence River Valley and the Ohio River Valley

The French and British also competed in India as the British East India Company tangled with the French Company of the Indies as each company gained control over parts of India and sought to check their competitors

The primary purpose of the Spanish Empire was to supply Spain with precious metals and other valuable items from the Western Hemisphere

The authority of the Spanish crown was the connection between the Spanish Empire in the New World and Spain

All authority in Spanish America flowed from the top down from the crown to the Council of the Indies, to the viceroys of New Spain and Peru, and down from there

This system provided the monarchy with vast opportunities of patronage which was bestowed on persons from Spain

Spanish colonial government served the commercial interests of Spain and colonial citizens were prohibited from establishing direct trade with outsiders

However, a crucial change occurred in the early 18th century after the War of the Spanish Succession which brought a French successor to the Spanish throne

Philip V and his successors tried to improve Spain’s economy and prestige by reforming the trade system based on shipping convoys across the Atlantic

As the Spanish sent patrol vessels to the Americas to suppress smuggling, conflicts with English ships led to war in 1739

Successive wars between England and Spain between 1746 and 1759 led to Spain’s defeat and the acceptance by the Spanish crown that significant reforms needed to be enacted

Carlos III abolished the Spanish trade monopolies and opened more ports to trade and authorized greater trade between colonial ports

While relaxing regulations over trade, Carlos III compensated for the falling revenue by raising taxes on the colonists

These reforms increased trade in the Spanish colonies, but it brought the Spanish colonies under more direct control of Spain, thereby making the colonial subject feel even more like second class subjects of the crown

By the early 19th century, Spanish colonists began to rise up against their imperial overlords

One of the features of the American colonies established by the Portuguese and Spanish was the African slave trade and plantation slavery

Labor in the Americas became scarce as Native American sources of labor disappeared due to declining populations resulting from overwork, abuse, and disease

African slaves were used to make up for this labor shortage

Europeans profited from the African custom=m of enslaving their defeated enemies

The Portuguese started the modern African slave trade as they acquired African slaves for their sugar plantations on islands off the coast of Africa and later in Brazil in South America

The Spanish copied the Portuguese practice and employed African Slaves in their Caribbean colonies as the American Indian population declined

By the end of the 17th century, the Caribbean was the world center of a growing demand for sugar, and during the 18th century, the development of other cash crops in North and South America increased the volume of trade on the slave market

Demand remained high in the 18th century due to overwork, disease, and malnutrition of the slave population leading to high mortality rates

Different nations dominated the African slave trade at different times

Portuguese from the 15th into the 16th century

Spanish from the 16th to the early 18th century

The Dutch in the 17th century

The English/British and the French in the 18th century

The slaves that supplied this trade in the 18th century were the biproducts of the tribal civil wars and political turmoil that plagued Africa at this time

The slave trade was as inhumane as it was profitable

Far more African slaves came to the Americas than did free European colonists

The trade thrived because it was cheaper to import new slaves rather than create living conditions that would allow them to live relative long lives

The transport of slaves from Africa was inhuman since it broke up traditional family structures and shipped slaves in harrowing conditions aboard trading ships

The plantations were situated in rural settings, but slaves on neighboring plantations could have contact with one another and sustain some elements of African and tribal culture

Although conditions varied from plantation to plantation, life was generally difficult for slaves as they suffered from a lack of legal protection, could be separated from their families, and were often punished harshly for relatively slight offenses

Although African slaves brought to the Americas were converted to Christianity, they suffered from racism rooted in the European prejudices against their skin color and so-called primitive behavior

The Wars of the Mid-18th Century

Europe tended toward instability in the mid-18th century due to the general assumption that warfare was the accepted means for building nations

Since wars were primarily fought by professional military men and civilians were rarely drawn into them, wars were not associated with domestic, political, or social upheaval

The great power rivalries of the age played out in two arenas

The overseas empires

Central and eastern Europe

The challenges of English smugglers, shippers, and pirates posed to the Spanish empire in the in the early 18th century led to war between England and Spain in 1739

The War of Jenkins Ear, so-called because of the Spanish practice of seizing unauthorized vessels attempting to trade with the Spanish colonies

Jenkins was a ship captain whose ear was cut off in a conflict with the Spanish

When Jenkins bought his severed ear back to Britain as evidence for the attack, the British officials were infuriated and declared war on Spain

This incident led to a series of wars in Europe and the Americas that lasted until 1815

The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) began when Frederick II of Prussia took advantage of the death of Habsburg emperor Charles VI to annex the Austrian territory of Silesia

This move upset the balance of power that had been set by the Treaty of Utrecht

Maria Theresa, the successor of Charles VI, fought not to regain Silesia, but to retain her empire

She was able to keep her empire together by devolving her power when she granted the nobility greater privileges and sacrificed the power of her central government when she gave Hungary considerable local autonomy

When France got involved in the war on behalf of Prussia in order to weaken its traditional Habsburg foe, Britain was forced to enter the war to prevent France from taking the Habsburg Netherlands

France then backed Spain against Britain in the New World, thus expanding the war across the Atlantic

When the Treaty of Aix la Chappelle brough peace to Europe, clashes between the French and English colonists in the Ohio Valley and New England-Canadian border led to the French and Indian War in 1754

A dramatic shift of alliances took place before war broke out again in Europe in 1756

Frederick II of Prussia, fearing invasion from Russia and France opened negotiations with Great Britain

They signed a treaty designed to prevent foreign troops from entering the German states

The Austrians were shocked that their long-time ally switched sides

Maria Theresa then struck a deal with her former French enemies which was aimed at maintaining Austrian supremacy in central Europe

The Seven Years’ War (1756-1763)

The war opened when Frederick II invaded Saxony to prevent it from joining the French-Austrian alliance against Prussia

This attack persuaded Sweden, Russia, and other smaller German states to oppose Prussia

Frederick II was able to defend Prussia, but it was with significant financial help from Britain

The war ended in 1762 without any significant changes in the prewar status quo

The British strategy devised by William Pitt to provide Prussia with financial assistance to fight the war was designed to force the French to expend resources in Europe while the British won colonial territory from the French in North America

At the end of the French and Indian War, the British took all of the eastern half of North America from the French

The British also won control over French colonies in the Caribbean and replaced the French in the slave trade

French colonial trade fell by 80%

In India, British interests and forces defeated the French and paved the way for the British conquest of all of India

The French and Indian War along with the Seven Years’ War launched Britain to become a global power

However, the financial burden of the wars, and the search to find ways to pay off war debts, to rebuild forces, and to manage a global empire had far-ranging consequences for the British and their North American colonies

The American Revolution was sparked by taxes that were to pay for the Seven Years’ War

In the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, The Treaty of Paris, 1763, ratified the existence of a British Empire that had yet to be organized

During the war the citizens of Britain had accepted a high rate of taxation and a huge national debt to pay for the war

Since the American colonies had been the chief beneficiaries of the war, the British felt that they should bear a greater share of its cost

The British government passed the Sugar Act in 1764 to increase revenue by more rigorously collecting what was a lower tax

From the British point of view these taxes were legal because they were approved by Parliament and were to be spent in the colonies

Americans, however, argued that since they were not represented in Parliament, only colonial legislatures had the right to tax themselves

They also objected to British control of colonial finances as a threat to the freedom of colonial governments

In 1765 with the passage of a Stamp Act on the colonies, the colonists organized active resistance with organizations like the Sons of Liberty

When the colonists threatened to boycott British imports, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766 but passed the Declaratory Act affirming its power to legislate for the colonies

The Stamp Act crisis set the pattern for the next ten years

Parliament would approve legislation

Americans would resist it by reasoned argument, economic pressure, and violence

The British would repeal the legislation and the process would begin again

Each time the situation became more irreconcilable

In 1767 when the British finance minister Charles Townshend persuaded Parliament to pass a series of revenue acts relating to colonial imports, the colonists resisted

In a reaction to this resistance, the British government sent customs agents to collect the taxes and British troops to protect the agents

Tensions escalated, eventually resulting in British troops firing on a mob of protestors in 1770

In response to this Boston Massacre, Parliament repealed all but one of the duties on tea

In 1773, when Parliament permitted the direct importation of tea into America by the East India Company, it included a tax imposed without the colonist’s consent

In Boston a shipload of tea was vandalized

The British government then embarked on a program to establish Parliamentary authority over the colonies once and for all

Parliament passed the Coercive Acts (Intolerable Acts, 1774) which closed the port of Boston, reorganized the colonial government of Massachusetts, quartered soldiers in private homes, and transferred trials of royal customs officials to England

The Quebec Act (1774) was also a provocation as it extended the boundaries of Quebec to the west in an effort to stop the spread of the concepts of American liberty beyond the Appalachian Mountains

In the colonies, citizens critical of British policies formed committees and lines of communication throughout the colonies

In September 1774, the first Continental Congress was convened

It hoped to persuade Parliament to abandon attempts at direct supervision of the colonies, but failed

By April 1775 the battles of Lexington and Concord had been fought, and in May a Second Continental Congress met and organized a government

In August 1775, King George III declared the colonies in rebellion, and with the help of Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense*, the colonists reached a consensus on the issue of separation from Britain

Thus, a colonial army and navy were set up, and all American ports were declared for open trade with all nations in April 1776, and independence declared in July

Benjamin Franklin persuaded the French to support the rebellion in 1778, and in 1779, the Spanish lent their support

The American Revolution had now widened into a European conflict and continued until 1781 when the British were defeated at Yorktown and the Treaty of Paris concluded the war in 1783 creating the United States of America

The ideological roots of the American Revolution were found in the arguments of 17th century English aristocrats used to oppose the absolutism of the Stuart monarchs

The colonists argued that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had established fundamental liberties to all English peoples everywhere

The writings of John Locke played a large role in the ideological heritage of the American Revolution, but a series of writings in the 18th century by writers called Commonwealthmen championed radical republican concepts such as taxation being used to fun corruption and standing armies as instruments of tyranny

These writings had little impact in Britain, but they were influential in the colonies

George III, believed that his predecessors had been led by powerful families in Parliament

He sought to create a Parliament led by the king and not the aristocracy

George III used patronage to buy influence with the House of Commons and went through several first ministers before he found one that could handle the reins of government

George III’s efforts to curb the power of the aristocrats was denounced by some as tyranny

A radical politician and member of Parliament, John Wilkes, attacked the British government in his newspaper the *North Briton* in 1763

Wilkes was arrested and eventually forced out of the House of Commons and he fled the country

Many saw Wilkes as a victim of political persecution

In 1768 Wilkes returned to Britain and was reelected to Parliament but the House refused to seat him following the orders of the king

People demonstrated in the streets for Wilkes

Aristocrats who sought to weaken the king also gave Wilkes their support

Wilkes contended that his was a cause of English liberty and the opponents took as their slogan, “Wilkes and Liberty”

The American colonists followed Wilkes’ case closely, since they seemed to confirm that the British government were conspiring against English liberty

The British government was aware that its troubles in America were related to political problems at home

John Wilkes proved that many in Britain were ready to challenge the king and the power of a largely self-selected aristocratic Parliament

Wilkes’ use of popular demonstrations and his appeal to public opinion showed how a popular reform movement might be organized

The American colonists demonstrated to Europe how a politically restive people could fight tyranny

The American Revolution led to calls for parliamentary reform in Britain and the strategy used for trying to change the system was the American one of working through extralegal associations

In 1778, the Yorkshire Association Movement demanded changes in the corrupt system of parliamentary elections

Similar organizations appeared elsewhere proposing additional reforms that affected the government

These movements faded by the early 1780s, but Parliament was affected by the Association movement

In 1780 the Commons advocated a reduction of the power of the crown

In 1782 Parliament abolished some sources of royal patronage

The king fought back in 1783 when he appointed William Pitt the Younger to create a more submissive House of Commons

Although Pitt brought the Commons under control by the mid-1780s, these efforts were short-lived

George III succumbed to mental illness and the regency that ruled in his stead could not assert royal power effectively

Although the American colonists were fighting to preserve traditions, they developed a new concept of liberty in the end

The state constitutions and the federal Constitution drafted in America showed Europe that there could be government without kings and nobles

Americans created a nation where popular consent rather than divine law, natural law, tradition, or the will of kings was the highest legal authority

The American Revolution was a radical movement which created a society freer than any the world had seen, and it influenced Europeans to question their traditional modes of government

The philosophes were not opposed to aristocratic and royal power if they could guide that power

The enlightened absolutism of Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, and Catherine II of Russia was declared by many philosophes to be the ideal form of government

These rulers centralized their governments in order to enact reforms with maximum efficiency

Frederick II, the Great, rationalized his government no matter the human cost in order to make Prussia a leading European power

Frederick II’s description of himself as the “first servant of the state” suggested that the medieval concept of personal monarchy was fading, leading to the modern understanding of the state as an impersonal governmental apparatus separate from the monarch

The impetus for Prussia’s economic development came from the state, for the state enjoyed most of the benefits in the form of taxation

High taxes helped the Prussian state to lead regions in the development of manufacturing districts and improved agricultural production

Swamps were drained, new crops introduced, and areas resettled under state supervision

The need for manpower and immigration compelled Frederick II to practice religious toleration

Although Frederick II was a Lutheran, Catholics and Jews were protected under Prussian law

By eliminating regional peculiarities, and by reducing aristocratic influence, Frederick II extended the power of the throne

Joseph II of Austria embodied rational, impersonal force

Joseph prided himself on a rational approach to life

He sought to improve the lot of his people through rational reforms

Although his intentions were good, his reforms spawned rebellions by aristocrats and peasants throughout his domain

Revolution from above

The empire led by the Austrian Habsburgs was the most diverse of the great European states of the 18th century

Subjects spoke many languages and had few ties in common

The throne could not count on the aristocracy for much support since Maria Theresa had to grant the aristocrats extensive freedom to preserve the monarchy during the War of the Austrian Succession

Maria Theresa strengthened the power of the crown outside of Hungary by increasing the size of the administrative bureaucracy

She established central councils to handle various problems

She also used the bureaucracy to protect peasants and serfs, enforcing the limits on the amount of labor the nobility could demand

Joseph II followed the path of his mother, but he was more determined to have his reforms more far-ranging

He sought to increase his authority over his various domains

His strategy was to reduce the pluralism of the Habsburg holdings by imposing central authority in places ignored by his mother

Particularly, Joseph sought to rein in the Hungarian nobility

He refused to have himself crowned king of Hungary in an effort to avoid guaranteeing the existing privileges or to promise new ones to the Hungarian nobility

He reorganized local governments in Hungary and increased the authority of his bureaucratic officials and required the use of German in all transactions

The Hungarian nobility protested in 1790 and Joseph II backed down

Joseph II also targeted the church for establishing royal absolutism

Joseph II was a Catholic but enlightenment and pragmatic politics urged him to pursue a policy of toleration

In 1781 he issued a Toleration Patent that extended toleration to Lutherans, Calvinists, and Eastern Orthodox

Later Joseph II relieved the Jews of certain taxes and extended them the right to private worship

He also brought various Catholic institutions under royal control

He dissolved religious orders and confiscated their properties

He used the funds from these properties to create new parishes where there was a shortage of priests

Josephinism, the emperor’s ecclesiastical policy subjected the Roman Church to state control and mode its priests state employees

Like Frederick II, Joseph II tried to expand the economy by using the powers of government

He abolished many internal tariffs and encouraged road construction and river transport

He reconstructed the judicial system to make laws uniform and rational

National courts were given power over landlords

All of these things were meant to unify the state and increase the taxed paid to the treasury

Joseph II introduced reforms that altered the structure of rural society

He lessened the authority of the landlords and made their authority accountable to royal officials

He ended serfdom and granted peasants a wide range of freedoms

He reformed the manorial courts and created avenues for appeal to royal officials

The intent of these reforms was to make the peasantry more productive and industrious

By the end of his reign in 1789, Joseph II proposed a new system of land taxation

He ended aristocratic immunity to taxation and decreed that all lands be taxed despite the status of the owner

The forced labor of the peasantry (the *robot*) was changed to a monetary tax which went to the landlord and the state

These tax reforms created turmoil throughout the Habsburg realms by Joseph II’s death in 1790

When Joseph II’s brother Leopold II inherited the throne, he had to repeal most of his brother’s decrees

Although he tried to retain Joseph II’s religious policies and maintained political centralization as much as possible, he was driven to return much political and administrative authority to local nobles

Catherine II, a German princess who became empress of Russia understood the fragility of her Romanov dynasty’s base of power

She became empress of Russia when she acquiesced to the murder of her husband, Tsar Peter III

Catherine’s study of the Enlightenment and the philosophes taught her how backward Russia was, and it suggested to her that reforms were needed to sustain Russia as a great power

However, she understood that reform would not succeed unless it had widespread support

She also realized that since she was a foreigner and had acquired the throne in a palace coup, she was not secure enough to act unilaterally

In 1767, Catherine charged a legislative commission representing all sectors of Russian society with responsibility for proposing changes in Russia’s laws and government with a set of instructions drawn from the works of the philosophes

When the commission saw no other alternative to an autocratic monarchy, it lent Catherine a consensus of support for her exercise of enlightened absolutism

Catherine knew that the Moscow nobility and military officers who had given her the throne could take it away

She also knew that she had few educated subjects with which she could staff an independent bureaucracy

And her treasury could not sustain an army

Thus, she had no choice but to rely on nobles for running her empire

In 1777 she reorganized local government and appointed nobles to offices responsible for local affairs

In 1785 she issued a Charter of the Nobility that secured many of the rights and privileges of the aristocracy

In economics Catherine II removed internal barriers to trade

Exports were increased

And Catherine II communicated with philosophes to promote Russia’s image in the west as a progressive nation

Catherine II’s program for development called for the acquisition of warm-water ports through which Russia could maintain contact with Europe

When the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia gained access to the Black Sea and free access to the Mediterranean in 1774

Russia’s victories over the Ottomans along the Danube River were not welcomed by Austria since they also coveted that region

The Ottomans were also alarmed at the expansion of Russia and called on Prussia for help

Frederick II of Prussia suggested to Russia to abandon the Danube provinces in exchange for a large part of Poland

Prussia would take other parts of Poland to link its territories together

And Austria would receive other parts of Poland

Since the Polish aristocracy had prevented the development of a strong centralized monarchy, they lacked the leadership necessary to defend themselves

In September 1772, the Polish aristocracy ratified the loss of a third of their territory

Prussia and Russia partitioned Poland again in 1793 and in 1795

After 1795 Poland ceased to be for more than a century

Each time Poland was partitioned, it was argued that it was done to prevent the outbreak of war in Europe since squabbles among the Poles could spread to neighboring states

In reality, Poland’s political weakness made it an irresistible target for its neighbors

As the 18th century came to an end, enlightened absolutism became increasingly conservative

As Frederick II of Prussia aged, he allowed the aristocracy the freedom to abuse their offices for their benefit

As we have seen, the Habsburg government ended Joseph II’s innovations

The Habsburg government resorted increasingly to censorship and intimidation by secret police

In Russia, peasant rebellions raised fears of social upheaval

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Catherine II censored books on the Enlightenment and sent offensive authors into exile in Siberia

By the end of the century, hostility to change permeated the ruling ranks of central and eastern Europe, and the monarchs who pursued enlightened absolutism increasingly repudiated the humanity and liberalism of the Enlightenment

The drive toward royal absolutism was met by aristocratic resistance in France also, but there the monarchy and aristocracy lost control of the situation and opened the way for revolution