9 Europe in the 18th Century

The Netherlands

First asserted their independence in a revolt against Spain in 1572

In the 1580s they won recognition from other European powers

Spain recognized Netherlands autonomy in 1609 and their formal independence in 1648

While England and France were developing strongly centralized power and government, the Netherlands opted for a republic in which each province retained considerable autonomy

The States General, the central government located at The Hague was dominated by the most populous and prosperous province of Holland

In times of crisis such as war, the Dutch would permit a member of the noble House of Orange to assume leadership

For example, William III, the stadtholder of Holland, led a European coalition against Louis XIV and ultimately shared the throne of England with his wife Mary

After his death in 1702 and the conclusion of peace with France in 1714 (after the War of Spanish Succession) the Dutch returned to a republican government

The official church of the Netherlands stood in the Calvinist Reform tradition, but allegiance to the religion was not enforced

The population remained religiously mixed, and the Netherlands enjoyed religious tolerance which made it a haven for Jews and other Protestant nonconformists driven out of other countries

Tolerance spared the Netherlands the internal strife that plagued other European states

While other states squandered resources on religious wars, the Dutch concentrated on economic development

They transformed agriculture, promoted trade and finance, and built an overseas commercial empire

The Netherlands became the most urbanized region of Europe

The level of urbanization of the Netherlands by the seventeenth century was of a level that wasn’t reached in other countries until the industrial era

This urbanization was made possible by innovations in agriculture that were eventually copied throughout Europe

During the 17th century farmers drained and reclaimed a great deal of land from the sea

Since Dutch shipping dominated trade with the Baltic, the Netherlands was able to feed itself with cheap grain from that region

This enabled Dutch farmers to devote their land to more profitable cash crops

Dairy products, meat, and tulip bulbs

Dutch fishing fleets supplied much of the herring consumed in Europe

Dutch mills provided textiles to much of Europe

Dutch ships were found in every European port transporting all kinds of goods, and ship building was also a profitable industry

Profits from all these enterprises provided capital for banks, and the most advanced financial system in Europe was found in the Netherlands

Shareholders funded ventures like the Dutch East Indies Company, which won the eastern spice trade from the Portuguese

The Netherlands retained a colonial presence in Indonesia until after World War II

The Dutch economy began to weaken in the 18th century

After the death of William III in 1702, the provinces of the Netherlands prevented the rise of a powerful stadtholder who could provide unified political leadership

Naval supremacy began to pass to England

The fishing industry declined

And the Dutch lost the technological lead in shipbuilding

Countries developed their own fleets to carry their own goods rather than relying on Dutch shipping, and Dutch manufacturing began to stagnate

This absence of leadership handicapped efforts to confront these various challenges, but the Netherlands managed to retain its influence in banking and finance

France after Louis XIV

Although France was less strong in 1715 after the War of the Spanish Succession, it was still a powerful country

It had a large population

An advanced economy

And a highly developed administrative structure

Although the wars of Louis XIV drained the resources of France, they also drained the resources of other major European countries

All that France needed to recover economically was intelligent leadership and a less ambitious foreign policy

France did begin to recover, but not because of the quality of leadership

The prestige of the monarchy was faltering by the death of Louis XIV when the crown passed to his five-year-old great-grandson Louis XV

The young king’s regent, the duke of Orleans, contributed significantly to the deterioration of the monarchy

The duke was a gambler and turned over the financial management of the government to a Scottish speculator, John Law

Law believed that an increase of the money supply would stimulate postwar economic recovery, so he established a bank to issue paper money

Law transferred responsibility for managing the national debt to a corporation that had a monopoly on trading privileges with France’s Louisiana colony in North America

The company issued shares of its stock in exchange for government bonds and relied on profits from stock speculation to redeem those bonds

Initially the stock rose, but investors took their profits and exchanged the paper currency from Law’s bank for gold

Since the bank lacked sufficient gold to back up the money it printed, the government had to halt gold trading in France

Law fled the country, and the economic fiasco brought disgrace on the government and cast a shadow over economic activity in France for the rest of the century

The duke of Orleans also weakened the monarchy by trying to recreate a role for the French nobility in the decision-making process of the government

Louis XIV had filled the government with commoners and kept the nobility competing for meaningless honors at Versailles

The nobility pressured the duke to restore their influence

The duke set up a system of administrative councils on which nobles served with bureaucrats

This experiment failed as the nobility proved that they were not prepared to govern since they lacked talent and the will for government

The great French families were not prepared to yield ground in their ancient fight to limit the power of the monarchy over their landed domains

The most effective weapon in this struggle was the *parlements*, the courts that were dominated by the aristocracy

The French *parlements* did not have the power to legislate

They were courts that enforced the law, and they exercised power by granting formal approval and validity for royal law

Louis XIV had limited the authority of the *parlements*

The duke of Orleans restored their right to register laws

For the rest of the 18th century until the revolution, the aristocracy used the *parlements* to resist royal authority

After 1726 things briefly improved thanks to Cardinal Fleury who had become the king’s (Louis XV) chief minister

Like Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, Fleury understood that the nobility was politically ambitious and irresponsible

He took steps to help France to recover economically

He avoided expensive military ventures

He repudiated part of the national debt

He encouraged the building of roads and bridges

He encouraged the growth of new industries

However, he was never able to impose sufficient taxes on the nobility or the church to put the state on sound economic footing

Following Fleury’s death in 1743, his work was undone

Despite his attempt to train Louis XV for the responsibilities of office, the king possessed all the vices and none of the virtues of his great-grandfather

He wanted absolute power, but was not willing to work to obtain it

He became a pawn of the intrigues of his court, and his personal life was scandalous

Despite the lack of able leadership, France remained a major power

In the mi-18th century, the French army was the largest and the strongest on the continent

Its commerce and production were growing

Its colonies were producing wealth and encouraging the growth of domestic industries

Great Britain

The British monarchy was not as degraded as the French, but it was not entirely stable

In 1701 the Act of Settlement positioned the German House of Hanover to inherit the throne

However, a challenge was mounted to the ascension of George I

In 1715 James II’s son, James Edward, the Stuart Pretender, landed in Scotland and began to rally an army in his support

His army was soon dispersed, but the experience taught the new dynasty that it needed to consolidate its power

At the end of Queen Anne’s reign, there were sharp clashes between political factions called Whigs and Tories

They were not organized like modern political parties

They were a network of like-minded local politicians whose points of views were articulated by national spokesmen

The Tories favored a strong monarchy, low taxes for landowners, and the Anglican Church

The Whigs argued that the monarchy should acknowledge the sovereignty of the Parliament

They defended urban commercial interests, rural landowners, and religious toleration for Protestant nonconformists

Both Tories and Whigs were conservatives in that they defended the status quo

Tories wanted peace with France, but George I believed it was in Hanover’s interest to remain at war

The Whigs sought the support of the new king, and when some Tories opened communications with James Edward, the Whigs won the confidence of the king

For the following 40 years, the chief difference between the Whigs and Tories was that the Whigs were given public offices and patronage, and the Tories were not

English politics remained in a state of flux until Robert Walpole persuaded the king to redesign the national government

Walpole had been active in Parliament and had served as a cabinet minister

A financial scandal, like that which had happened in France, brought Walpole to the king’s attention

Management of Britain’s national debt had been assigned to the South Seas Company

The company exchanged government bonds for its stock and like in France, its stock rose until speculators began to sell their holdings

Parliament intervened in 1720 to prevent an economic crash, and under Walpole’s leadership Parliament adopted measures to honor the national debt

Walpole was credited with saving the financial integrity of the nation

Walpole has been described as the first prime minister of Great Britain

He originated Britain’s system of administration by a cabinet of ministers, each who had responsibility for a separate branch of government

His power depended on his ability to manipulate the House of Commons while retaining the favor of kings George I and George II

Walpole’s slogan, “let sleeping dogs lie,” summarized his policy of maintaining peace abroad while promoting the status quo at home

Corruption was used to hold his government together

Politicians learned that if they opposed Walpole, they risked the loss of government patronage for self, family, and friends

The British Parliament of the 18th century was neither a democratic nor representative body

Members of Parliament were chosen by property owners and were expected to protect their interests

Each county elected two members, but there was no contest if the powerful landowners agreed on the candidates

Other members were chosen by boroughs

Parliament didn’t pretend to represent the people at large, but they provided Britain with a unified government

Property owners were suspicious of the bureaucrats who worked for the crown and preferred to bear the burdens of local administration themselves

Thus, Britain’s nobility and substantial landowners governed the nation

Since Parliament represented their interests, they acknowledged its sovereignty as a central political authority

Parliament provided Britain with the kind of unity that was possible elsewhere in Europe only under an absolutist monarchy

Parliament also provided the British government with a sound financial base

The British crown could only impose taxes with the consent of the Parliament

Since property owners represented in Parliament levied taxes on themselves, there were virtually no exemptions from taxation

Consequently, vast sums could be raised to fight the wars endorsed by Parliament

This reality along with the Bank of England that was set up to regulate credit, helped set the stage for Britain to become a great power

The British people enjoyed more political freedom than citizens of Continental Europe

Patronage did not stifle competing points of view among members of the government

Newspapers and public debate flourished

Free speech and freedom of association were possible

There was no standing army to intimidate the population

Rights that the English regarded as traditional raised a barrier to the government’s arbitrary use of power

If public outcry was loud enough, Parliament would rescind unpopular measures or allow itself to be persuaded to begin or end wars

Despite the corruption that existed within the government, 18th century Britain became a European power of the first order with a form of government and an economy that inspired others across Europe

Central and Eastern Europe

The political organization of eastern Europe was characterized by being relatively loosely organized

The economies were largely agricultural

Serfdom persisted

Cities were few

No states had overseas empires or much overseas trade

Wars were fought at home rather than abroad

People were accustomed to frequent shifting of political loyalties

The rulers of the numerous small states and principalities resisted the development of any centralized monarchy

Following the Peace of Westphalia, the Austrian Habsburgs resigned themselves to the weakness of the Holy Roman Empire and turned their attention to developing a power base in the east

At the same time, Prussia emerged as a challenger to Habsburg domination

By the start of the 18th century, Russia was also becoming a major military power

As Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire faded, Austria, Prussia, and Russia began to flourish

Sweden

Sweden had made a bid for empire during the 30 Year’s War

It won control of the Baltic and permitted Russia and Germany access to the sea only on its terms

However, Sweden’s economy was not strong enough to sustain this political success

In 1700 King Charles XII fought against the Russians in the Great Northern War (1700-1721)

Unfortunately for Sweden, Charles XII mismanaged the war and his army bogged down in Russia as brutal winter weather, a series of defeats, and diminishing resources contributed to defeat for the Swedes

Russia occupied a large section of the eastern Baltic and broke Sweden’s monopoly of the region

After Charles XII’s death, the Swedish nobility limited the power of the monarchy and Sweden abandoned foreign adventures

The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was the chief barrier to Austrian Habsburg and Russian expansion

In the late 17th century, the Ottomans still controlled the Balkans and the Black Sea

Although officially Islamic, the Ottoman Empire was ethnically and religiously diverse

Laws and regulations made non-Muslims second-class citizens who could not rise in rank in the service of the empire

This limited interaction among and integration of people of different faiths in the empire

From the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire had been an aggressive power pressing westward into Europe

By 1683 it was besieging Vienna and forcing Christians in the Balkans to convert to Islam

Many of those peoples had previously been compelled by Venetians to accept Roman Catholicism, and they welcomed the Turks as liberators

By the end of the 17th century, the Ottomans had become overextended

The Ottomans had resisted attempts to strengthen the central government and rivalries weakened the empire’s administration

Control of distant provinces depended on the goodwill of native rulers, and commercial agents representing foreign nations dominated the empire’s trade and economy

By the early 18th century, the weakness of the Ottoman Empire created a political vacuum in southeastern Europe

For the next two centuries, European powers probed and appropriated parts of the empire

In 1699, the Turks surrendered Hungary, Transylvania, Croatia, and Slovenia to the Habsburgs

Russia also moved into Ottoman territory, and later in the early 19th century many peoples who lived in the Balkans and around the Black Sea launched campaigns to establish independent states

Poland

The success of the Polish nobility to defeat all attempts to establish an effective central government led to the failure of Poland to maintain a competitive political position in eastern Europe

The Polish monarchy was elective, and divisions among the noble families prevented them from choosing one of their own to be king

Most of Poland’s monarchs, thus, were outsiders and puppets of foreign powers

The Polish nobles belonged to a central legislative body that excluded any representation from the towns

However, the legislative diet was virtually powerless as any one of its members could unilaterally disband the legislative meetings for any reason

Also, the need to achieve unanimity on every issue made it impossible to govern

Consequently, due to the weakness of authority in Poland, any political organization of Poland disappeared by the end of the 18th century

The Habsburg Empire

The 30 Year’s War was a major turning point for the Austrian Habsburgs

It ended their dream of winning control over Germany and returning it to Roman Catholicism

The decline of the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs allowed the Austrian branch to strike out on its own

The Treaty of Westphalia legalized Protestantism and recognized the autonomy of more than 300 entities within the Holy Roman Empire

The Habsburgs retained its hold on the imperial title, but the effectiveness depended on the emperor’s ability to elicit cooperation from the members of the imperial diet

Although the Holy Roman Empire had been weakened significantly, it maintained some coordination of political and economic interest

The Habsburgs and emerging Prussia helped stabilize Germany

The Habsburgs began in the 17th century by consolidating some of their possessions such as Bohemia, Croatia, and Transylvania

In the 18th century, they acquired the Spanish Netherlands, Lombardy in Northern Italy, and the Kingdom of Naples

For most of the 18th and 19th centuries the Habsburg’s power derived from lands outside of Germany

However, these possessions were extremely difficult to rule

The Habsburgs could only govern with the cooperation of the local nobility

Ethnic diversity prevented the development of a common identity

Religious differences proved problematic

The Austrians were Catholics, and the Hungarians were Calvinists

Despite these difficulties, Leopold I was able to keep the Turks and Louis XIV at bay in the 17th century

In 1699 the Ottomans recognized Leopold I’s sovereignty over Hungary

This increased strength in the east enhanced his political leverage in Germany

Through Hungary, Leopold I extended his reach into the Balkans and western Romania

He was able to establish the port of Trieste into a base for Habsburg power in the Mediterranean

Leopold I was succeeded by Joseph I and then Charles VI, who had no heir

It was feared that after the death of Charles VI, the empire would be dismantled

To prevent this and to provide the realm with legal unity, he dedicated most of his reign to establishing an agreement called the Pragmatic Succession

The Pragmatic Succession would recognize a single line of inheritance for the Habsburg dynasty through Charles VI’s daughter Maria Theresa

When Charles VI died in 1740, Maria Theresa was forced to defend her inheritance from Frederick II of Prussia

Prussia

Like the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns of Prussia held scattered lands by a variety of different titles

But the Hohenzollerns were much more successful in forging their properties into a centralized state

They constructed a bureaucratic machine to mobilize every social class and economic pursuit in support of the institution upon which the state was founded: the army

As a result, Prussia has become synonymous with administrative rigor and military discipline

The Hohenzollern family rose to prominence in 1417 as rulers of the German province of Brandenburg

Over the course of the 17th century they expanded their power over a number of territories within the Holy Roman Empire second in size only to that of the Habsburgs

Despite its size, the Hohenzollern conglomeration of provinces was weak

All but one of the territories was not contiguous with Brandenburg

All were under the threat of foreign aggression

All were poor in natural resources

Most had been devastated in the 30 Year’s War

Each was dominated by an aristocracy that limited the power of the Hohenzollern ruler

They shared no single concern that encouraged their unification

It was Frederick William, the Great Elector, who transformed these possessions into a powerful modern state

His instruments were a tightly centralized bureaucracy and a disciplined army

The threat of invasion by Sweden or Poland helped persuade his subjects to cooperate in the creation of these institutions

Initially, the army was too small to intimidate his neighbors

In 1655, when certain Brandenburg estates refused to pax taxes to help pay for an army, he used the soldiers that he had to collect what he needed to hire more soldiers

He coopted his potential noble opponents by allowing them complete control over their serfs on their estates

He also used the nobility to collect taxes from the peasants and urban populations

Also, the privilege of joining the officer corps became an honor reserved to men of aristocratic lineage

Since the army was the one institution that drew members from all Hohenzollern territories, all members took an oath of loyalty to the elector

Thus, the army defined the state

Total mobilization of the state’s resources enabled Frederick William to build a military machine much larger than what was usually sustained by a small country

The acquisition of a royal title was assumed by the Great Elector’s son, Frederick I

When the War of the Spanish Succession broke out, Frederick I made a deal with the Holy Roman emperor

In exchange for the use of the Prussian army, the emperor permitted Frederick to assume the title King in Prussia

Frederick I’s heir, Frederick William (1713-1740) was an effective monarch

He imposed policies of strict austerity and increased the size of the army and consolidated an obedient bureaucracy

He ruled alone, without the assistance of ministers

His civilian bureaucrats worked under military discipline

All departments were centrally managed

The nobility was subject to taxation

Service to the state and monarch became automatic in that subjects recognized an unquestioned responsibility of a duty to public office

Frederick William was fanatical about his army

Each district had to provide a certain number of men

They were trained with rigorous discipline

There were different laws and privileges for soldiers

Royal patronage made the military officer’s corps the highest rank in society

Frederick William merged the army, the nobility, and the monarchy into a single political entity

In 1725, Frederick William began the practice of always appearing in military uniform to communicate his concept of the state

By 1740, even though Prussia was the 13th populous nation in Europe, it fielded Europe’s third or fourth largest army

Military priorities dominated Prussian government, society, and daily life

Although Frederick William built the best army in Europe, he avoided using it

The army was a symbol of power and unity, not an instrument used for foreign adventures

Frederick II, “the Great,” inherited his father’s military machine in 1740, but he broke from his father’s self-restraint when he used the army to invade Silesia to challenge Austria for control over Germany

Russia

Russia had long been considered a part of Europe only by courtesy

Russia was hemmed in by Sweden on the Baltic, and by the Ottoman Empire on the Black Sea

It was a vast continental empire stretching east to Asia with no outlet to a warm-water port

Archangel, a port on the White Sea in the arctic was its chief outlet to the West, but it was closed by ice for part of the year

Russia was an isolated land of vast but unfocused potential

Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible (1533-1584) was the first Muscovite prince to use the title Tsar of Russia

His reign was followed by a period of anarchy and civil war

In 1613 an assembly of nobles tried to end these “Time of Troubles” by recognizing 17-year-old Michael Romanov (r. 1613-1654) as their tsar

Michael Romanov and his successors, Alexis I and Theodore III stabilized Russia’s government, but Russia remained weak and poor

The administrative bureaucracy was dominated by the old nobility and was barely capable of maintaining order

The chief sources of instability were peasant revolts, raids by nomadic Cossack horsemen who lived on the steppes, and the potentially mutinous garrison of Moscow

In 1682 two boys claimed Russia’s throne

Peter I, “the Great” and Ivan V

The succession was bloodily disputed and was decided by the garrison at Moscow

The boy’s elder sister served as regent until Peter’s supporters overthrew her in 1689

Peter ruled personally, although in theory he shared power with his sickly brother Ivan V until his death in 1696

Peter then sought to establish a strong monarchy and for ideas about how to do this he turned to the West

Products and workers from the West had filtered into Russia, and Europe’s culture interested Peter

In 1697 Peter made an incognito tour of Western Europe

When Peter returned to Russia, he was determined to Westernize Russia

He set himself four objectives that he pursued with great dedication

Tame the nobility and the Moscow garrison

Extend royal authority over the church

Reorganize the governmental administration

Develop the economy

The policies set in each of these areas was intended to strengthen the military power of the nation and the authority of the monarchy

Peter tamed the nobility by forcing them to shave their beards and to cut off the dangling sleeves of their shirts and coats

These were Russian peculiarities that Western Europeans mocked as uncivilized

He also forced the nobility into government service and pegged a person’s social status to their position in the state bureaucracy or army

This induced the Russian nobility to submit to service of the state

The Moscow garrison suffered a greater fate

The garrison revolted while Peter was on his western tour

When he returned, he brutally suppressed the revolt and executed 1,200 of the rebels

Their corpses were publicly displayed to demonstrate the consequences of disloyalty to the tsar

Peter was also ruthless in his dealings with the Russian Orthodox Church which was adamantly opposed to westernization

Since the Russian church had always claimed to be the protector of the most ancient and the most authentic Christian rituals, Peter’s reforms met with a great deal of resistance

A number of church members known as the Old Believers refused to accept Peter’s mandates and thousands of them committed suicide rather than to submit to the new reforms

To ensure that the church didn’t oppose his mandates for modernization and reform, Peter abolished the office of the patriarch in 1721 and gave the power over the church to a layman who had the title of Procurator General

This was a radical break with tradition

Peter modeled his domestic administration on Sweden’s government

Rather than setting up departments under a single minister to handle things a tax collection, foreign affairs, wars, and the economy, he established colleges with numerous members

In 1711, Peter created a central state of nine members who were to run the government when the tsar was away with the army

The purpose of Peter’s administrative reforms was to construct a bureaucracy that would support an efficient army

Peter sponsored economic projects that served the military

Young Russians were sent to the west for training and western European craftsmen were invited to immigrate to Russia

Although Peter’s enterprises didn’t meet with much economic success, the iron industry he established became the largest iron producer in Europe by the middle of the 18th century

Peter believed that Russia’s economic development ultimately depended on the acquisition of war-water ports that would allow Russia to communicate with the West

To acquire these, Peter built Russia’s first navy and went to war with the Ottoman Empire in the Black Sea and with Sweden in the Baltic

He drove the Turks from the norther coast of the Black Sea in 1696, but only held onto that territory until 1711

He was far more successful against the Swedes

In 1700 Russia invaded Swedish territory on the Baltic coast

And by 1721 Russia had conquered Estonia, Livonia, and part of Finland along the Baltic

The newly won ports gave Russia access to the markets and capitals of western Europe

By that time Peter had amassed an army of 300,000 men and established a College of War to maintain westernized military discipline

Peter then moved the capital of Russia to St Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland

Here he constructed a kind of Versailles, and the Russian nobility was compelled to move to St Petersburg so that the tsar could keep an eye on them

St Petersburg was intended to stake Russia’s claim to a place among Western nations

Many Russians however, looked upon St Petersburg as a western intrusion and an assault on Russian traditions

Peter had quarreled with his son and heir Alexis

When Alexis died mysteriously in his father’s prison, the line of succession was weakened

Peter claimed that he had the right to name another successor, but he died in 1725 without naming anyone to succeed him

For the next 30 years soldiers and nobles struggled over the claim to the throne

Peter had made Russia into a modern state modeled after western European states, but he failed to create a stable state