

Western Civilization II, Fall 2005:

Lecture 9: The Eighteenth Century Political Situation

Chapter 19

Absolutism, reinforced with the philosophy of the divine right of kings, ruled in most of Europe through the 18th century. England/Great Britain was the exception.

In Britain, the combination of a German-speaking absentee king and a powerful Parliament led to the development of a ministerial form of government. George's Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, really ruled the country.

Parliament was composed of 2 houses: the House of Lords — the aristocracy and the bishops of the Church of England — and the House of Commons, where representatives of the rest of society served. To vote required a 40 shillings per year property tax; non-landowning British subjects were refused the right to vote. Women, criminals, Catholics, Jews, unbelievers, and some Protestants were also refused voting rights.

Parliamentary lines were last drawn years before, and some districts no longer had enough population to justify the seat. However, reform would not come until after 1800.

Parliament split into 2 factions:

1. Tories: conservative, supported royal authority
2. Whigs: monarchists, but supported parliamentary authority

William Pitt: prime minister during the Seven Years' War: "I know that I can save this country, and that no one else can." Pitt was a commoner who attained the title of Earl of Chatham.

George III: First Hanoverian king to be born and educated in England; first of the lot to speak English. Ruled 1760-1820; cared deeply about Britain. George was determined to rule Britain, leading to fights with Parliament. Main claim to fame: 4 July 1776, George wrote in his diary, "nothing important happened today."

British/European Wars

1. Both George I and George II used the British military to defend Hanover. As a result, George III inherited a huge debt; led to the first income tax in 1798.
2. Seven Years' War: 1756-1763: Britain and Prussia (Frederick the Great) vs. Austria (the Hapsburgs), France, Russia, Sweden, and most of the German states. Pitt managed to raise more support for Frederick; the British army defeated the French army in several engagements, both in Europe and in the American colonies. War ended when Empress Elizabeth of Russia died and was succeeded by Peter III, an admirer of Frederick. No boundaries changed in Europe, but France lost all her American colonies east of the Mississippi River, including Canada.
3. American Revolution: 1776-1783: Aided by the French, the American colonists defeated the British and formed the United States of America. Started in part by taxes to pay for the Seven Years' War (French and Indian Wars in America).

Bourbon France

Louis XIV outlived his son, grandson, and eldest great-grandson. Louis' great-grandson, the 5-year-old Louis

XV, succeeded him and ruled from 1715-1774.

Louis XV began to rule in 1723, but he inherited entrenched opposition from the aristocracy.. Problem: Louis also inherited a huge debt from Louis XIV's wars. 10 percent of the French budget went toward maintaining life at Versailles.

Seven Years' War caused a major financial crisis, almost bankrupting France. The national debt rose to 62 percent of the national budget in 1763. When Louis tried to order a wartime tax on all classes, the aristocracy maneuvered the Parlement of Paris to rule the tax illegal. The 15 Parlements of France were dominated by the aristocracy and refused to enforce the tax. Louis' new minister, Rene de Maupeou, abolished the local Parlements in 1771.

1774: Louis XV died and was succeeded by Louis XVI. The policy of financing the American Revolution led to more financial problems.

1789: Estates-General was called into session in Paris to deal with a debt that reached 100 percent of the national budget.

Hapsburgs

1740: Charles VI, Holy Roman Emperor and king of the Hapsburg empire, died, leaving his daughter, Maria Theresa, as his heir. Maria could not inherit the Holy Roman crown because the law forbade a woman ruler. Maria inherited the Hapsburg lands instead. Charles tried to form treaties (Pragmatic Sanction) that would insure Maria would not face opposition in the Hapsburg lands, including Austria, Belgium Hungary, and Lombardy (north Italy).

War of Austrian Succession: Maria Theresa reigned from 1740-1780. Prussian king, Frederick the Great, invaded Silesia. At the end of the war, Frederick gained Silesia, but Maria's husband became Emperor Francis I of the Holy Roman Empire.

Maria's son, Joseph, was not given a military training but a classical liberal arts education. Joseph had urged his mother to abolish serfdom, but she had refused. Joseph abolished serfdom in Austria in 1781 and completed the process in 1785.

Joseph passed the Edict of Toleration that gave full citizenship to Protestants and Jews. He abolished torture and the death penalty, permitted religious intermarriage,, and abolished primogeniture in the aristocracy. Joseph died in 1790.

Hohenzollerns

The Hohenzollern monarchs ruled the small German state of Prussia, sandwiched between Russia and Poland. Frederick I, who ruled at the turn of the century, tried to emulate Paris and Versailles in Berlin. His son, Frederick William I (reigned 1713-1740), despised his father's programs as weak. However, Frederick William was a great military planner and left his son an efficient bureaucracy and a modern army.

Prussian military: built on aristocratic officer corps and soldiers from the criminal and debtor prisons.

Frederick II, the Great: ruled 1740-1786.

Frederick introduced exams for bureaucratic positions, improved agriculture (demanded the peasants grow potatoes or have their ears and noses cut off), established freedom of religion, abolished torture in criminal cases, and founded the Berlin Academy of Science.

Frederick wrote flute music (he was an excellent flutist himself), enjoyed visits from Johann Sebastian Bach, and poetry, but he was a Hohenzollern. Frederick fought Austria 15 of his first 23 years on the throne. The Seven Years' War killed more than 10 percent of the population; the Russians burned Berlin in 1760.

Romanovs: Catherine the Great

Peter the Great left a succession mess when he died in 1725. Not until 1762 did Russia recover.

Catherine II: daughter of a German duke who was married off to Peter, the grandson of Peter the Great. Peter was not a Peter the Great; he was impotent, surly, and enjoyed playing soldier more than governing. When Peter could not consummate the marriage, Catherine was encouraged to take a lover who could produce children; she merrily complied.

1762: Peter inherited the throne. One of Catherine's lovers, Grigori Orlov of the royal guards, led a coup against Peter when Peter tried to form an alliance with Frederick the Great during the Seven Years' War. Catherine inherited the throne after Peter died in prison and reigned until 1796.

Catherine became Orthodox. Catherine struck a deal with the aristocracy, exempting them from many of her reforms. Although Catherine attempted to abolish serfdom at first, she gradually extended the rights of the aristocracy over the serfs.

Catherine attempted reforms, but Russia was in no condition to respond. Result: Pugachev's Rebellion, 1773-1775. Pugachev, a Cossack, led a revolt in southern Russia and proclaimed the emancipation of the serfs in his area. The revolt was brutally suppressed.

Catherine reorganized the Russian government after the rebellion; led to elected district councils. All town dwellers were given the right to vote in municipal elections.