Absolutism in Eastern Europe, c. 1600-1740

Spielvogel p 369 – 370 (Background: "The Struggle for Strong Monarchy in Eastern Europe")
Spielvogel p 462 – 466, 468 – 470 (thru "Poland"), 547 – 549 (The Development of Absolutism in Central and Eastern Europe)
Kagan p 438 – 447 (Central and Eastern Europe)

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I. Overview of eastern Europe ("HOP RAP")
A. Three aging empires—Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire and Polish Kingdom—gave way to new empires of Russia, Austria and Prussia
   1. Holy Roman Empire (HRE): Religious divisions due to the Reformation and religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries split Germany among Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist princes.
   2. Ottoman Empire: could not maintain possessions in eastern Europe and the Balkans in face of Austrian and Russian expansion.
      a. The Ottoman Empire had been built on expansion.
         • The Sultan had absolute power in the empire.
         • After 1560 the decline in its European expansion resulted in the gradual disintegration of the empire.
      b. Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) perhaps the most powerful ruler in the world during the 16th century.
         • He nearly conquered Austria in 1529, and captured Belgrade (Serbia), nearly 1/2 of eastern Europe including all Balkan territories, most of Hungary, and part of southern Russia.
      c. It failed to conquer Vienna in 1683 and saw its decline in eastern Europe accelerate thereafter.
   3. Polish Kingdom: liberum veto – voting in the Polish parliament had to be unanimous for changes to be made; thus, little could be done to systematically strengthen the kingdom
      a. The inability of the Polish monarchy to consolidate its power over the nobility led to Poland’s partition.
      b. Russia and Prussia encouraged members of the Polish nobility to invoke the liberum veto to weaken the country.
      c. By 1800, Poland ceased to exist as a sovereign state; it was carved up by Russia, Austria and Prussia.
B. Threat of war with European and Asian invaders were important motivations for eastern European monarchs’ to consolidate power.
   1. Resulted in reduced political power of the nobility.
      a. In exchange, nobles gained greater power over the peasantry.
   2. Three important methods of gaining absolute power:
      a. Kings imposed and collected permanent taxes without the consent of their subjects.
      b. States maintained permanent standing armies.
      c. States conducted relations with other states as they pleased.
   3. Absolutism in eastern Europe reached its height with Peter the Great of Russia.
   4. Absolutism in Prussia was stronger than in Austria.
II. **Serfdom** in eastern Europe  
   A. After 1300, lords in eastern Europe **revived** serfdom to combat increasing economic challenges.  
      1. The drop in pop. in the 14th century (especially due to the “Black Death”) created huge labor shortages and hard times for nobles.  
      2. As opposed to Western European lords who granted freedom to serfs in response to the labor need, **lords in Eastern Europe demanded that their kings and princes issue laws restricting or eliminating peasants’ right of moving freely.**  
         a. By 1500 Prussian territories had laws requiring runaway peasants to be hunted down and returned to their lords.  
         b. Laws were passed that froze peasants in their social class.  
   3. Lords confiscated peasant lands and demanded heavier labor obligations.  
      a. **Robot:** In certain regions, peasants were required to work 3-4 days without pay per week for their local lord.  
   4. The legal system was monopolized by the local lord.  
   5. Serfdom was consolidated between 1500 and 1650.  
      a. Hereditary serfdom was re-established in Poland, Russia, and Prussia by the mid-17th century.  
         • In Poland, nobles gained complete control over peasants in 1574 and could legally impose death penalties on serfs whenever they wished.  
         • In 1694, the Russian tsar (Peter the Great) rescinded a 9-year term limit on the recovery of runaway serfs.  
      b. This period saw the growth of estate agriculture, especially in Poland and eastern Germany.  
         • Food prices increased due to influx of gold and silver from the Americas.  
         • Surpluses in wheat and timber were sold to big foreign merchants who exported them to feed the wealthier west.  
   6. Why serfdom in eastern Europe and not western Europe?  
      a. The reasons were not necessarily economic as the west was also devastated by the Black Death but the resulting labor shortages helped labor.  
      b. Political reasons are more plausible – the power of noble landlords in Eastern Europe  
         • Most kings, in fact, were essentially “first among equals” in the noble class and directly benefited from serfdom.  
         • Eastern lords had more political power than in the west; monarchs **needed** the nobles  
         • Constant warfare in eastern Europe and political chaos resulted in noble landlord class increasing their political power at the expense of monarchs.  
         • Weak eastern kings had little power to control landlord policies aimed at peasants.  
            o Strong kings were not in place prior to 1650.  
         • Peasants were weaker politically than in the west.  
            o Uprisings did not succeed.  
         • Landlords undermined medieval privileges of towns and the power of urban classes.  
            o The population of towns and the importance of urban middle classes declined significantly.
III. The **Austrian Empire (Habsburg Empire)**

A. **Rise of Austria**

1. The ruler of Austria was traditionally selected as the Holy Roman Emperor.
2. After the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13) and the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), the Spanish throne was now occupied by the Bourbons; **Habsburg power was concentrated in Austria.**
3. Besides Austria proper, the Austrian Habsburg Empire incl.:
   a. Naples, Sardinia, and Milan in Italy
   b. Austrian Netherlands (Belgium)
   c. Hungary and Transylvania (modern-day Romania)
4. Ineffective Habsburg rule in the HRE forced monarchs to turn their attention inward (to Austria as opposed to Germany as a whole) and eastward to consolidate their diverse holdings into a strong unified state.
   a. The reorganization of **Bohemia** was a major step towards absolutism.
   b. **Hungary** was the third and largest part of its dominion.
      • The **Magyars** = dominant cultural group of Hungary.
5. Serfdom intensified in Habsburg lands.

B. **Government of the Austrian Empire**

1. Austria was NOT a national state – its multinational empire
   a. Austria proper: Germans, Italians
   b. Bohemia: Czechs, Germans
   c. Hungary: Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Romanians
2. No single constitutional system existed in the empire as each region had a different legal relationship to the Emperor.

C. **Emperor Charles VI** (1711-1740)

1. Austria was saved from French expansion during the War of Spanish Succession due to its alliance with Britain
2. Charles issued the **Pragmatic Sanction** in 1713.
   a. Habsburg possessions were never to be divided and henceforth to be passed intact to a single heir.
      • While he concentrated on these negotiations he failed to prepare for rule or to bolster her army to defend herself
   b. His daughter, **Maria Theresa**, inherited Charles’ empire in 1740 and ruled for 40 years.
      • But first she must secure her standing in the War of Austrian Succession (1740 – 1748)

IV. **Prussia**: House of **Hohenzollern**

A. Brief background of Brandenburg

1. The ruler of Brandenburg was designated as one of 7 electors in the Holy Roman Empire in 1417.
2. Yet by the 17th century, Brandenburg was not significantly involved in HRE affairs.
3. Marriages increasingly gave the Hohenzollerns control of German principalities in central and western Germany.
4. The prince had little power over the nobility.
B. Frederick William, the “Great Elector” (r. 1640-88)

1. Background
   a. strict Calvinist granted toleration to Catholics and Jews.
   b. The ongoing struggle between Sweden and Poland for control of the Baltic after 1648 and the wars of Louis XIV created an atmosphere of permanent crisis.
      - Prussia was invaded in 1656-57 by Tartars of southern Russia who killed or carried off as slaves more than 50,000 people.
      - The invasion weakened the noble estates and strengthened the urgency of the elector’s demands for more money for a larger army.
      - Prussian nobles refused to join representatives of towns in resisting royal power.

2. The “Great Elector” established Prussia as a Great Power and laid the foundation for the future unification of Germany in the 19th century.
   a. Most significantly, he oversaw Prussian militarism and created the most efficient army in Europe.
   b. He employed military power and taxation to unify his holdings into a strong state.
   c. Increased military spending was achieved through heavy taxes (twice that of Louis XIV in France).
      - The Prussian nobility was not exempted.
      - Soldiers also served as tax collectors and policemen, thus expanding the government’s bureaucracy.
   d. “Junkers” formed the backbone of the Prussian military officer corps
      - These nobles and landowners dominated the Estates of Brandenburg and Prussia.
      - In 1653, the hereditary subjugation of serfs was established as a way of compensating the nobles for their support of the crown.

C. Frederick William I (r. 1713-1740) “Soldiers’ King”

1. most important Hohenzollern king regarding the development of Prussian absolutism.
   a. Prussia became known as “Sparta of the North”
      - One notable diplomat said, “Prussia, is not a state with an army, but an army with a state.”
      - Society became rigid and highly disciplined.
      - Unquestioning obedience was the highest virtue.
      - It was the most militaristic society of modern times.
   b. He nearly doubled the size of the army.
      - Prussia had the best army in Europe.
      - 4th largest army (after France, Russia and Austria).
   c. 80% of gov’t revenues went towards the military.
   d. The Prussian army was designed to avoid war through deterrence.
      - The only time Frederick William I fought a war was after Sweden occupied a city in northern Germany; the Swedes were subsequently forced out.
3. He oversaw the most efficient bureaucracy in Europe.
   a. removed the last of the parliamentary estates and local self-government.
   b. demanded absolute obedience and discipline from civil servants.
      • Promotions were based on merit.
      • Some commoners were able to rise to positions of power.
   c. High levels of taxation
4. The Junkers remained the officers’ caste in the army in return for supporting the king’s absolutism.
5. The gov’t established compulsory elementary education in 1717.
   • Est. approximately 1,000 schools for peasant children.

D. Frederick II (“Frederick the Great”) – (r. 1740-1786) [see “Enlightened Despots” notes]
1. Most powerful and famous of the Prussian kings
2. Considered to be an “Enlightened Despot” for his incorporation of Enlightenment ideas into his reign.
   • Instituted a number of important reforms
3. Incr. Prussia’s territory at expense of the Austrian Hapsburgs

V. Russia
A. Romanov dynasty
1. Lasted from 1613 to the Russian Revolution in 1917.
2. Russian society continued to transform in the 17th century.
   a. Nobles gained more exemptions from military service.
   b. The rights of peasants declined.
      • Cossack revolts resulted in further restrictions on serfs.
   c. “Old Believers” of the Orthodox Church resisted the influx of religious sects from the west (e.g. Lutherans and Calvinists).
      • In protest, 20k burned themselves to death over 20 years.
      • “Old Believers” were severely persecuted by the government.
   d. Western ideas gained ground.
      • Western books were translated into Russian, new skills and technology developed, and changes in clothing and customs occurred
      • First Russian translation of the Bible began in 1649
      • By 1700, 20,000 Europeans lived in Russia
   e. By 1689, Russia was the world’s largest country (3 times the size of the rest of Europe)
B. **Peter the Great** (r. 1682-1725)

1. **Background**
   a. Peter was nearly 7 feet tall and very strong.

2. The revolt of the Strelski was defeated by Peter in 1698.
   a. These Moscow guards had overthrown previous leaders.
   b. Peter’s reign was now secure.

3. **Military power was Peter's greatest concern**
   a. Each Russian village was required to send recruits for the army; 25-year enlistments.
   b. 75% of the national budget was spent on the military.
   c. He established royal, military and artillery academies.
      - All male nobles were required to leave home and serve 5 years of compulsory military education.
   d. Built a large navy built on the Baltic.
   e. Non-nobles had opportunities to rise up the ranks.

4. **The Great Northern War** (1700-1721)
   a. Russia vs. Sweden (under Charles XII)

5. **Modernization and westernization were Peter’s major focuses**
   a. traveled to the West as a young man to study its tech. & culture.
      - Military technology was his primary concern.
   b. He imported to Russia substantial numbers of western technicians and craftsmen to aid in the building of large factories.
   c. State-regulated monopolies were created (echoed mercantilist policies of western Europe).
      - However, this actually stifled economic growth.
      - Industrial serfs created inferior products.

6. **Government became more efficient**
   a. Peter ruled by decree (example of absolute power).
      - No representative political bodies existed.
      - All landowners owed lifetime service to the state (either in the military, civil service, or court); in return they gained greater control over their serfs.

   b. **Table of Ranks**
      - It set educational standards for civil servants (mostly nobles).
      - Peter sought to replace the old Boyar nobility with a new service-based nobility loyal to the tsar.
   c. secret police ruthlessly crushed opponents of the state.
   d. **Taxation**
      - Heavy rates were placed on trade sales and rent.
      - A head tax was placed on every male.
   e. Peter turned the Orthodox Church into a government department.

7. **St. Petersburg**
   a. The city was one of Peter’s crowning achievements.
      - He sought to create a city similar to Amsterdam and his palace, the Peterhof, with the grandeur of Versailles.
   b. became the cosmopolitan capital of Russia.
   c. Peter ordered noble families to move to the city and build homes according to Peter’s plans.
   d. Merchants/artisans were also ordered to live in the city.
   e. Peasants provided heavy labor in the city’s construction.

8. **Reforms brought Russia closer to the European mainstream.**
   a. A more modern military and state bureaucracy were created.
   b. An emerging concept of interest in the state, as separate from the tsar’s interest, developed.