

18 – Political and Social Dynamics in the 1700s

As Enlightenment ideals spread across Europe, monarchs became interested in implementing aspects of some of them, specifically religious toleration and the abolition of serfdom. In particular, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, three rulers in Eastern Europe – Joseph II of Austria, Catherine II of Russia, and Frederick II of Prussia – came to power eager to reform their respective countries.

At the same time, war persisted. Most wars were fought primarily for territorial expansion and economic gain rather than for religious or ideological reasons. The century also saw the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, during which the upper classes grew in wealth and the divide between rich and poor widened.

KEY TERMS

Agricultural Revolution	estates	mercantilism	Seven Years' War
balance of power	Grand Tour	primogeniture	slave labor system
cottage industry	Junkers	putting-out system	War of Austrian Succession
enlightened absolutism	market economy	reason of state	War of Spanish Succession

KEY CONCEPTS

- Politically, there were some changes during the eighteenth century. Although absolutism remained the predominant form of government across all of Europe except England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, several monarchs in Eastern and Central Europe experimented with enlightened despotism by offering some rights to their people. The inability of the Polish monarchy to consolidate its power over the nobles led to the Partitions of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, effectively erasing Poland from existence.
- Eighteenth-century monarchs also waged larger, more encompassing wars in an attempt to build bigger, stronger states. Commercial rivalries influenced diplomacy and warfare as European sea powers vied for control of trade routes and colonies.
- Mercantilism remained the preferred economic system of the absolutists. However, revolutions in agriculture and industry had a substantial impact on Europe, especially in the west, leading to the growth of capitalism. These economic changes directly affected the highly structured levels in society, opening up opportunities for the lower classes to improve their economic condition. The rising demand for raw materials and products from the New World led to an expansion of the slave trade.
- During the latter half of the eighteenth century, rulers in Russia, Prussia, and Austria put in place policies that reflected the ideals of the enlightened *philosophes*, but they did not enact any policies that in any way endangered their own power.

For a full discussion of Europe in the 1700s, see *Western Civilization*, 8th and 9th editions, Chapter 18.

Eighteenth-Century Politics

Over the course of the eighteenth century, five major powers arose. In Western Europe, France and England grew to have great political and economic might. Their main rivals, Spain and the Netherlands, no longer had the strength to hold them at bay. In Eastern Europe, Prussia and Russia set out to rival the still-great Austria, mostly through the conquest of strategic tracts of land.

In the west, France began the century under the reign of Louis XIV, marking the height of European absolutism. At Louis XIV's death in 1715, his great-grandson, Louis XV, became king. Although he reigned until 1774, Louis XV never gained the same level of control as his grandfather. That was in part due to the fact that he began his reign as a five-year-old and in part because of France's enormous economic problems, a result of its tax policies and almost constant wars under Louis XIV. After Louis XV's death, his grandson came to power. He, too, was unable to exercise the same centralized power as had Louis XIV. Although still a major European power, France was weaker by the end of the century and ripe for revolution.

England, on the other hand, had seen great gains in representative government during the seventeenth century and began the new century with Parliament working side by side with the Stuart monarchy. When Queen Anne died childless in 1714, England looked for leadership from Stuart cousins in Hanover, a German state. The Hanoverians, especially George I and George II, had little feel for the British political system. As a consequence, they depended heavily on their chief ministers, giving Parliament even more influence than it had gained with such difficulty during the 1600s. Eighteenth-century prime ministers – especially Robert Walpole, the first to have that title, and William Pitt the Elder – helped craft major policies during the reign of George II, including many English economic and military policies.

To the east of England and France, absolutism characterized the eighteenth century. Three monarchs in Eastern Europe are generally referred to as enlightened absolutists, or enlightened despots: Frederick II of Prussia, Catherine II of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria. Although other monarchs had tried various enlightened reforms in their countries, Catherine, Frederick, and Joseph justified their

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absolutism by encouraging reforms. In the end, however, they did not succeed in creating much long-term change.

In Prussia, the Hohenzollerns encouraged the growth of a highly structured society and the building of a strong, militaristic state. Continuing a policy begun by Frederick William the Great Elector, Frederick William I gave the Junkers, the Prussian noble class, the highest positions in the military. This maintained the strong link between military virtue, based on loyalty, and the role of nobles in his state, and was key to the efficient bureaucracy he created to run the Prussian government.

Despite his father's disapproval of his intellectual interests, Frederick II (the Great) was interested in Enlightenment ideals, and he implemented several political reforms, including the establishment of a single law code, religious toleration, and equal legal treatment for his people. Frederick also made social and cultural improvements in the areas of religious freedom, education, literature, music, science, and agriculture. To improve agriculture, Frederick ordered the cultivation of potatoes as a hedge against rising bread prices and possible famine and ordered that they be made a part of his soldiers' diet.

Catherine II (the Great), wife of Tsar Peter III, took over as autocrat of Russia after the murder of her husband in 1762. German by birth, she never remarried, and ruled alone for over thirty years. She corresponded with several *philosophes*, most notably Voltaire. Through this long-term exchange of letters, Catherine came to believe in many of the ideals of the Enlightenment and subsequently attempted to introduce them to her countrymen. She offered greater local self-government and legal reforms and encouraged the expansion of education, the arts, and science. However, in time, Catherine was forced to choose between providing Enlightenment policies for her people and strengthening her state. To maintain and build Russia, Catherine set out to conquer lands to the south and west. Further, in quelling Pugachev's Rebellion, an anti-government revolt that included peasants, Catherine wound up extending serfdom. In attempting to strengthen Russia, she put herself at odds with the very enlightenment ideals she had espoused and weakened her ability to effect change because of her indebtedness to the nobles who had helped her.

In the Austrian Empire, Joseph II, son of Maria Theresa, continued the long history of Austrian Habsburg rule. Like Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great, he sought to put in place enlightened policies. A man of deep convictions, Joseph introduced religious toleration, tax reform, and educational improvements. To reform the Austrian legal system, he offered equal legal treatment for all people, and ended torture and the death penalty. Although he was considered by many historians the most enlightened of the enlightened despots, most of Joseph's reforms did not last beyond his death in 1790.

AP Tip

The response to Enlightenment ideals by absolute monarchs such as Frederick II, Catherine II, and Joseph II is a frequent theme on the AP European History exam. Focus your study on several policies for each ruler and how those policies reflected the Enlightenment. Think about the extent to which they truly embodied enlightened ideals – did they enact any policies that lessened their own power?

Eighteenth-Century Wars

Dabblers in Enlightenment ideals, these enlightened despots and other leaders across Europe were deeply engaged in devastating wars during the eighteenth century. Religion was displaced by concerns over the continental balance of power as the major cause of European wars.

Rulers during this period also began to shift from making decisions aimed at extending their dynasty to making decisions based on reason of state – the strength of their country considered in a longer timeframe. As a consequence, European countries began competing to become major powers as leaders put the longevity of their own states over virtually all else.

War of the Spanish Succession

A good example of this is the War of the Spanish Succession, the last of the many wars Louis XIV waged over the course of his long reign. When the last Habsburg ruler of Spain died in 1700, Louis was eager to see his grandson Philip become king. Concerned about the continued growth of France, several countries, including England, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Netherlands, went to war to stop Louis. The Treaty of Utrecht, ending a war that had dragged on for more than a decade, allowed Philip to take the Spanish throne but guaranteed that the French and Spanish monarchies would never unite. This war began a century of warfare in which nations attempted to achieve balance of power (allowing no one country to dominate others) as they strove to become major European powers.

War of the Austrian Succession

The War of the Austrian Succession, beginning in 1740, was led by Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia. His goal was to seize Austrian Silesia and thwart the rise of Maria Theresa, whom he assumed would be weak. England joined in support of Austria, thus leading France, England's traditional enemy, to join with Prussia. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which returned Europe to its status quo with one exception: Prussia refused to give up Silesia and had begun its climb to become a major European power.

The Seven Years' War

Austria's loss of Silesia set the stage for another war, which broke out in 1756. The Seven Years' War grew out of two major conflicts. The first was a clash between England and France in the New World, beginning in North America and what is now known as the French and Indian War. The

second was the attack on Saxony by Frederick II of Prussia, part of his plan to build a greater Prussia. But there was a drastic changing of alliances. As the war progressed, England joined its old enemy, Prussia, and some small German states against Austria, which allied with its old enemy, France, and Russia. This so-called Diplomatic Revolution demonstrated the growing desire for balance of power in Europe.

The victory of Prussia and England, both in Europe and in colonies around the world, led to dramatic changes in that balance of power. With the Treaty of Hubertusburg and the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Prussia became a truly major European state, England solidified its position as a major colonial power, and France and Austria were greatly weakened.

Eighteenth-Century Society

As the eighteenth century progressed, life expectancy increased for many reasons, including better foods and fewer devastating diseases. Also, the general structure of the family began to change. Although the father was still the head of the household, families tended to build stronger bonds, with the upper and middle classes tending to focus more on the development of their children.

Additionally, as society changed and the ideals of the Enlightenment spread, the laws and customs of primogeniture began to change. The eldest son was still considered by many to be the prime inheritor of family estates, but this was no longer automatically presumed; in England in particular, the upper classes began to look at all of their children as deserving of equal attention.

Society continued to be divided into classes – an upper class, a middle class, a working class (including small farmers), and the poor. In Western Europe these classes – or estates, as they were called in France – had been entrenched for hundreds of years, so the upper class was solidly in power. The wealthy continued to own large tracts of land on which multitudes of peasants worked. As towns grew and the expanding middle class developed trade and, especially in Britain, number. The gap between the lives of the upper and middle classes in the cities and the peasants in the countryside was tremendous.

An important custom of the upper class – especially the English was the Grand Tour. Reflecting the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Grand Tour gave young, prosperous European men the opportunity to learn about life as they traveled across the continent. They frequently went to France to learn about refined culture and to Italy to learn about ancient Rome and art, spending some time along the way on less than educational pursuits.

At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, peasants lived hard lives. In England, because of the continued enclosure of land and agricultural methods that made more efficient use of the land, many who had owned and worked small plots were forced out. Working others' land, they could survive only at the subsistence level. This pushed them toward

the growing towns for work, where they might end up as beggars – before the development of the factory system, there was little for them in the towns. Although in earlier centuries beggars had been aided by charity, by the eighteenth century town authorities looked to other options, such as incarceration and public works projects, in dealing with the poor.

Eighteenth-Century Economics

During the eighteenth century, there were several economic changes. For more than a century, rulers had relied on mercantilism to build empires. An empire provides economic gain by requiring its colonies to trade only with the mother country. Mercantilism was the economic system preferred by many seventeenth-century absolutists, such as Louis XIV, but as absolutism waned, so did mercantilism, especially with the growth of the more economically productive cottage industries and early factories. The physiocrats, led by François Quesnay, also spoke out against mercantilism, encouraging governments to allow the development of free enterprise. By the end of the century, capitalism was on the rise in Europe.

With the growth of industry, beginning in England, the more static agrarian and mercantilistic economies gave way to dynamic profit-oriented ones. Early manufacturers were unable to meet the growing demand for goods, so cottage industry, free of guild restrictions and done in homes, offered greater productivity and, therefore, increased profits. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the cottage industry system was supplanted by the early factory system. Bringing workers together in one building and using machines powered by water, the latter proved much more profitable than the former. Aiding this economic growth were the Agricultural Revolution and the expansion of banking, which provided the loans and letters of credit underlying it. Agriculture's transition from primitive to modern production methods – for example, the replacement of the wooden plow by the iron plow – increased the production capacity of land. Improved farming methods led to greater productivity, and as a result of this greater access to food, the population grew. Further, fewer farm workers were needed to produce that food. At the same time, there was a rising need for industrial workers. All in all, increased agricultural productivity fueled industrial growth by providing the food supplies needed by the growing urban populations.

These economic changes, especially dramatic in England, led to greater international trade and, in turn, to Europe's growing economic presence in the world. Colonies, essential to mercantilism, were just as important to the growth of capitalism in Europe. The factory system depended on increasing quantities of raw materials and markets, both of which could be supplied by colonies. The increased demand for raw materials and New World products led to an expansion of the slave labor system.

AP Tip

Socioeconomic history is an important component of the AP exam. Look for ways to connect economic trends to contemporaneous social developments. This type of synthesis is one of your Historical Thinking Skills.

Beyond Enlightened Despots

During the eighteenth century, while rulers fought to build their states into major European powers, Enlightenment thought was leading many to hope for a better world. But as the social gaps between the classes widened, the desire of enlightened despots to bring progress to their countries was insufficient to the task. Thus, in 1789, this widening socioeconomic division, along with impending bankruptcy in France, exploded into revolution.