Absolutism in Eastern Europe, c. 1600-1740

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: It could not maintain possessions in eastern Europe and the Balkans in the face of Austrian and Russian expansion.
   a. The Ottoman Empire was built on expansion.
      • The Sultan had absolute power in the empire.
      • After 1560 the decline in its western expansion resulted in the gradual disintegration of the empire.
   b. Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) was 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. Highly talented Christian children from the conquered provinces were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire’s bureaucracy or became professionals.
   d. “Janissary corps”: Those Christian slaves who were not selected for the Ottoman bureaucracy served loyally instead in the Turkish army.
   e. The Ottoman Empire was fairly tolerant regarding religion in its conquered provinces.
   f. 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 certain 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. **Eastern European absolutism differed from French absolutism.** 
   1. Eastern absolutism was based on a powerful nobility, weak middle class, and an oppressed peasantry composed of serfs. 
   2. In France, the nobility’s power had been limited, the middle-class was relatively strong, and peasants were generally free from serfdom. 
      • Louis XIV built French absolutism upon the foundations of a well-developed medieval monarchy and a strong royal bureaucracy.

C. **Threat of war with European and Asian invaders were important motivations for eastern European monarchs’ drive to consolidate power.** 
   1. Resulted in reduced political power of the nobility. 
      • However, nobles gained much 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. 
      • 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. Areas most affected included Bohemia, Silesia, Hungary, eastern Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. 
   2. The drop in population in the 14th century (especially from the “Black Death”) created tremendous labor shortages and hard times for nobles. 
   3. Lords 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.
4. Lords confiscated peasant lands and imposed heavier labor obligations.
5. The legal system was monopolized by the local lord.
6. Non-serf peasants were also affected.
   • **Robot:** In certain regions, peasants were required to work 3-4 days without pay per week for their local lord.

B. Serfdom was consolidated between 1500 and 1650.
   1. **Hereditary serfdom was re-established in Poland, Russia, and Prussia by the mid-17th century.**
      a. In Poland, nobles gained complete control over peasants in 1574 and could legally impose death penalties on serfs whenever they wished.
      b. In 1694, the Russian tsar rescinded a 9-year term limit on the recovery of runaway serfs.
   2. **This period saw the growth of estate agriculture, especially in Poland and eastern Germany.**
      a. Food prices increased due to influx of gold and silver from the Americas.
      b. Surpluses in wheat and timber were sold to big foreign merchants who exported them to feed the wealthier west.

C. Why serfdom in eastern Europe and not western Europe?
   1. The reasons were not necessarily economic as the west was also devastated by the Black Death and the resulting labor shortages helped labor.
   2. Political reasons are more plausible – the supremacy of noble landlords.
      a. Most kings, in fact, were essentially “first among equals” in the noble class and directly benefited from serfdom.
      b. Eastern lords had more political power than in the west; monarchs needed the nobles
      c. Constant warfare in eastern Europe and political chaos resulted in noble landlord class increasing their political power at the expense of monarchs.
      d. Weak eastern kings had little power to control landlord policies aimed at peasants.
         • Strong sovereign kings were not in place prior to 1650.
      e. Peasants were weaker politically than in the west.
         • Uprisings did not succeed.
         • Peasant solidarity in the east was weaker than western communities.
      f. Landlords undermined medieval privileges of towns and the power of urban classes.
         • 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. The Austrian Habsburg Empire included:
   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 and eastward to consolidate their diverse holdings into a strong unified state.
   a. The reorganization of **Bohemia** was a major step towards absolutism.
      - The Czech (Bohemian) nobility was wiped out during the Bohemian phase of Thirty Years’ War.
      - Ferdinand II (1619-1637) redistributed Czech lands to aristocratic soldiers from all over Europe.
      - Conditions for serfs declined.
   b. The old hereditary provinces of **Austria proper** were centralized by Ferdinand III (1637-1657).
      - Ferdinand created a permanent standing army which was unprecedented for the Habsburg empire
   c. **Hungary** was the third and largest part of its dominion.
      - The **Magyars** were the dominant cultural group.
5. Serfdom intensified in Habsburg lands.

B. **Government of the Austrian Empire**

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

C. **Important Habsburg rulers**

1. Ferdinand II took control of Bohemia during the Thirty Years’ War.
2. Ferdinand III centralized gov’t in the old hereditary provinces of Austria proper.
3. **Leopold I** (1658-1705)
   a. He severely restricted Protestant worship.
   b. **Battle of Vienna (Siege of Vienna):** He successfully repelled the Turks from the gates of Vienna in 1683.
      - This was the last attempt by the Ottoman Empire to take central Europe.
      - In 1697, Prince Eugene of Savoy led Austria’s forces to a victory over the Ottomans at Zenta, thus
securing Austria from future Ottoman attacks

4. **Emperor Charles VI** (1711-1740)
   a. Austria was saved from French expansion during the War of Spanish Succession due to its alliance with Britain and the military leadership of Prince Eugene.
   b. Charles issued the **Pragmatic Sanction** in 1713.
      - Habsburg possessions were never to be divided and henceforth to be passed intact to a single heir.
      - His daughter, Maria Theresa, inherited Charles’ empire in 1740 and ruled for 40 years.

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. Though a strict Calvinist, he granted religious toleration to Catholics and Jews.
         b. He admired the Swedish system of government and the economic power of the Netherlands.
         c. **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 Rhine holdings, Prussia, and Brandenburg 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.

3. He encouraged industry and trade.
   a. Skilled craftsmen and Dutch farmers were imported.
   b. New industries emerged: woolens, cotton, linens, velvet, lace, silk, soap, paper and iron products.
   c. Efforts at overseas trade largely failed due to Prussia’s lack of ports and naval experience.

C. Frederick I “The Ostentatious” (1688-1713); first “King of Prussia”
   1. Most popular of Hohenzollern kings
      a. He sought to imitate the court of Louis XIV.
      b. He encouraged higher education.
         - Founded a university and encouraged the founding of an academy of science
         - Welcomed immigrant scholars
   2. He fought two wars against Louis XIV to preserve the European balance of power:
      a. Nine Years’ War (1688-97) and the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713)
      b. He allied with the Habsburgs.
      c. Treaty of Utrecht (1713): The elector of Brandenburg/Prussia was now recognized internationally as the “King of Prussia” in return for aid to Habsburgs.
         - Thus, Frederick I was the first “king of Prussia”

D. Frederick William I (r. 1713-1740) “Soldiers’ King”
   1. He was the most important Hohenzollern king regarding the development of Prussian absolutism.
      a. He was a Calvinist, like his father.
      b. He obsessed with finding tall soldiers for his army.
   2. He infused militarism into all of Prussian society.
      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.
         - It was Europe’s 4th largest army (next to 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. He removed the last of the parliamentary estates and local self-government.
   b. He 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.
   • It established approximately 1,000 schools for peasant children.

E. Frederick II (“Frederick the Great”) – (r. 1740-1786) [see "Enlightened Despots“ in Period 2.4 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. Increased Prussia’s territory at the expense of the Austrian Hapsburgs

V. Russia
   A. Romanov dynasty
1. Lasted from the ascent of Michael Romanov in 1613 to the Russian Revolution in 1917.
2. Michael Romanov (1613-1645)
   a. Romanov came to power in Muscovy after the horrific “Time of Troubles” (civil war).
   b. Romanov favored the boyars (Russian nobles) in return for their support.
      • He reduced military obligations significantly.
   c. The Russian empire was expanded to the Pacific Ocean in the Far East.
   d. He fought several unsuccessful wars against Sweden, Poland and the Ottoman Empire.
3. Russian society continued to transform in the 17th century.
   a. Nobles gained more exemptions from military service.
   b. The rights of peasants declined.
      • Bloody Cossack revolts resulted in further restrictions on serfs.
   c. “Old Believers” of the Orthodox Church resisted the influx of new religious sects from the west (e.g. Lutherans and Calvinists).
      • In protest, 20,000 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 (such as men trimming their beards).

- First Russian translation of the Bible began in 1649
- By 1700, 20,000 Europeans lived in Russia
- By 1689, Russia was the world’s largest country (3 times the size of Europe)

B. Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725)

1. Background
   a. His sister, Sophia, ruled as his and his half-brother’s regent early on.
      - Her plot to kill him failed and Peter had her banished to a monastery; his mother, Natalia, took over as his regent.
      - Peter and his half-brother, Ivan, began ruling in their own right when Peter was 22.
   b. Peter was nearly 7 feet tall and so strong he could bend a horse shoe with his bare hands.

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

3. Military power was Peter’s greatest concern
   a. Each Russian village was required to send recruits for the Russian army; 25-year enlistments.
   b. 75% of the national budget was spent on the military by the end of Peter’s reign.
      - The royal army consisted of over 200,000 men plus an additional 100,000 special forces of Cossacks and foreigners.
   c. He established royal, military and artillery academies.
   d. All young male nobles were required to leave home and serve 5 years of compulsory education.
   e. A large navy built on the Baltic (though it declined after Peter’s death).
   f. Non-nobles had opportunities to rise up the ranks

4. The Great Northern War (1700-1721)
   a. Russia (with Poland, Denmark and Saxony as allies) vs. Sweden (under Charles XII)
   b. Treaty of Nystad (1721): Russia gained Latvia and Estonia and thus gained its “Window on the West” in the Baltic Sea.

5. Modernization and westernization were Peter’s major focuses
   a. He traveled to the West as a young man to study its technology and 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. By the end of his reign, Russia out-produced England in iron production (though Sweden and Germany produced more).
      - An industrial form of serfdom existed in factories
where workers could be bought and sold.

d. 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).
      • The tsar theoretically owned all land in the state; nobles and peasants served the state.
      • 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 (most of whom were nobles).
      • Peter sought to replace the old Boyar nobility with a new service-based nobility loyal to the tsar.

   c. The Russian secret police ruthlessly and efficiently 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 in 1700.

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.
      • By his death, the city was the largest in northern Europe (75,000 inhabitants).

   b. St. Petersburg became the capital of Russia.
      • Cosmopolitan in character

   c. Construction began in 1703; labor was conscripted.

   d. Peter ordered many noble families to move to the city and build their homes according to Peter’s plans.

   e. Merchants and artisans were also ordered to live in the city and help build it.

   f. Peasants were conscripted for heavy labor in the city’s construction (heavy death toll—perhaps 100,000).

8. Peter’s reforms modernized Russia and brought it 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.

   c. Peter began issuing explanations to his decrees to gain popular support.
Terms to Know

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy Roman Empire</th>
<th>Junkers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ottoman Empire</td>
<td>“king of Prussia”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suleiman the Magnificent</td>
<td>Frederick William I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janissary Corps</td>
<td>“Sparta of the North”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish Kingdom</td>
<td>Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberum veto</td>
<td>Romanov dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serfdom</td>
<td>Muscovy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>robot</td>
<td>boyars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hapsburg Empire (Austrian Empire)</td>
<td>“Old Believers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohemia</td>
<td>Peter the Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria proper</td>
<td>Strelski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Cossacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leopold I</td>
<td>Great Northern War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siege of Vienna, 1683</td>
<td>“Window on the West”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles VI</td>
<td>Table of Ranks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Sanction</td>
<td>St. Petersburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia</td>
<td>Peterhof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hohenzollerns</td>
<td>Winter Palace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick William, the “Great Elector”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Essay Questions

Note: This sub-unit is a high probability area for the AP exam. In the past 10 years, 6 questions have come wholly or in part from the material in this chapter. Below are some questions that will help you study the topics that have appeared on previous exams.

1. Analyze the causes for the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman Empire and Poland-Lithuania in Europe during the 17th century.

2. Analyze the military, political and social factors for the rise of absolutism in Austria, Prussia and Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries.

3. Compare and contrast absolutism in eastern Europe with that of France in western Europe.
Bibliography:

**Principle Sources:**
College Board, *AP European History Course and Exam Description (Including the Curriculum Framework)*, New York: College Board, 2017

**Other Sources:**