



1958

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "2. The European Balance of Power, 1500-1789. Pt IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 8-17.

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2. The European Balance of Power, 1500-1789

Abstract

The years between 1500 and 1789 were characterized by keen rivalries, at first primarily dynastic but later national in nature, as one state after another sought to establish its hegemony on the continent of Europe. Some powers, such as Spain and Sweden, declined. Others, such as Prussia and Russia, appeared for the first time as states to be reckoned with. Especially after about 1600 European diplomats, jealous of the relative position and security of their own countries, thought in terms of maintaining a balance of power, to prevent any one state or bloc of states from dominating the Continent. This idea, like the practice of diplomacy, has been traced to the Italian city-states, whose leaders in the fifteenth century strove to prevent any one of their number from achieving a position from which it could control Italy. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, European History, Balance of Power, Domination, Diplomacy

Disciplines

European History | History | International Relations | Political Science

Comments

This is a part of [Section IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. The European Balance of Power, 1500-1789

The years between 1500 and 1789 were characterized by keen rivalries, at first primarily dynastic but later national in nature, as one state after another sought to establish its hegemony on the continent of Europe. Some powers, such as Spain and Sweden, declined. Others, such as Prussia and Russia, appeared for the first time as states to be reckoned with. Especially after about 1600 European diplomats, jealous of the relative position and security of their own countries, thought in terms of maintaining a balance of power, to prevent any one state or bloc of states from dominating the Continent. This idea, like the practice of diplomacy, has been traced to the Italian city-states, whose leaders in the fifteenth century strove to prevent any one of their number from achieving a position from which it could control Italy.

The balance of power would come into operation if a Charles V threatened to dominate Europe or if the king of Spain died without issue, willing his crown to a French prince. Alliances would then be formed against the ambitious state. These would sometimes join Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Turk, or large power and small. If diplomacy failed, war might ensue. English statesmen frequently invoked the principle by keeping somewhat aloof from the affairs of the Continent, until by joining the weaker side they could restore something of an equilibrium. The idea of the balance of power as a guide to diplomacy has been a dominant factor in modern European politics, and has persisted into this century. There are still those who believe that it offers the best hope for a relatively stable world. Without a doubt, it is one of the strongest forces preserving the modern state system.

In 1500 Spain was on the way to becoming Europe's most powerful state, thanks to the successes of the foreign and domestic policies initiated by Ferdinand and Isabella. Their grandson and successor, Charles I (1516-1556), son of a Hapsburg father, ruled Europe's largest empire since Charlemagne. He inherited Spain, much of Italy, part of Burgundy, the Low Countries, Austria, and extensive territory in the New World. He was also elected Holy Roman emperor and as such reigned as Charles V from 1519 to 1556. The vast area under his control was never centralized and, upon abdicating in 1556, he separated Austria and the imperial crown from the Spanish inheritance. His son, Philip II (1556-1598), was a strong supporter of Spanish and Hapsburg interests in Europe and an ardent champion of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. He fought France and tried with only partial success to quell revolt in the Low Countries. Motivated by both religious and political considerations, he sent an invasion armada against England, only to meet ignominious defeat (1588).

connected with concept of sovereignty

Already by the end of Philip's reign, it was evident that Spain's predominance in Europe was waning. Although it had the greatest overseas empire, Spain never developed a strong native middle class, thanks to her gloomy piety and the aversion of her nobles to commercial and industrial activity. Such a class might have turned to Spain's lasting benefit the wealth in silver and other commodities then flowing into the country from the New World. Instead, bullion flowed out to more ambitious neighbors almost as rapidly as it was received, to pay for armies and for goods that had to be sent to America. Moreover, the government tended to stifle economic activity by heavy taxes made necessary by its own inefficiency and financial irresponsibility. In the seventeenth century, as the influx of silver slowed down, and as the population declined markedly, the government of Spain was in the hands of a succession of weak kings, who failed to pursue those imaginative policies which might have halted the decline. In addition, their ambitious policy of upholding Hapsburg and Catholic interests involved almost constant warfare, which was simply beyond Spain's human and financial resources to support indefinitely. By the middle of the seventeenth century, defeated in battle, Spain was forced to yield preeminence to the rising power of France.

What are now the Netherlands and Belgium were known as the Low Countries in medieval times, a collection of provinces which were part of the Holy Roman Empire and France. They were included in the inheritance of Charles I of Spain and his successors. In 1500 they were the scene of thriving economic activity and one of the centers of the Northern Renaissance. Revolt against Spanish rule broke out in the Low Countries in 1568, largely because Philip II was increasing his financial and political control there, and because he was trying to stamp out Dutch Protestantism. The ten southern and Catholic provinces were soon reconciled to Spain, but the seven northern provinces, closely identifying their Calvinism with patriotism, declared their independence in 1581. Because the Spaniards were occupied elsewhere, the Dutch, with some English and French aid, were able to fight on until the mother country granted a truce in 1609. The full independence of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, as they were known by then, was recognized by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

During much of the seventeenth century the United Provinces was by far the leading commercial and financial power of Europe. About 1670 it was estimated that the Dutch had four times as many ships as the British and thirty times as many as the French. They carried fish, whale oil, spices, and textiles to parts of Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. They were the leading shipbuilders of the seventeenth century and had other important industries. Amsterdam was then the financial capital of Europe. The Netherlands was one of the very few places in Europe which approached religious toleration and which did not have rigid censorship. Books which could not be printed elsewhere were published there. Several excellent universities were in operation. The government which the Dutch established

provided for a loose confederation not unlike that which prevailed in the United States immediately after the American Revolution. The executive was not called a king until 1815.

The Dutch were to enjoy their brief but spectacular moment of preeminence only because of the decline of Spain and only until the French and English were in a position to challenge them. This took place after about 1650. In spite of their fighting qualities, the Dutch lacked the power to withstand the concerted efforts of these larger nations. During the eighteenth century Dutch involvement in European politics and wars helped contribute further to the political and commercial decline, although until about 1725 they still dominated the carrying trade.

The Dutch had never attempted to play a predominant political role on the Continent. The successors of the Spanish in that respect were the French. During the sixteenth century France and the Spanish Hapsburgs fought each other in many places. The French were determined to weaken the Hapsburg power which threatened them on three sides and which threatened also to dominate the Continent. For more than half a century (1494-1559) the two battled for possession of Italy. Finally the French admitted defeat and the Spanish influence already established there remained. Then French energies were diverted by the destructive wars of religion (1562-1598), which seriously weakened royal power. When Henry IV (1589-1610), the first of the Bourbons, became king, he found many local privileges standing in his way, and was forced to take up about where Louis XI had left off more than a century before.

One of France's most popular kings, Henry devoted most of his attention to restoring internal peace. In 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes, which granted French Protestants the right to worship publicly in 200 towns and, as a guarantee of royal good faith, the right to garrison 100 fortified towns for a period of time. Finding an empty treasury when he became king, Henry took steps to increase the productivity of the potentially rich French economy. Canals and roads were built, the production of silk was encouraged, and the amount of farmland was increased. But before he could advance to other objectives, Henry was assassinated.

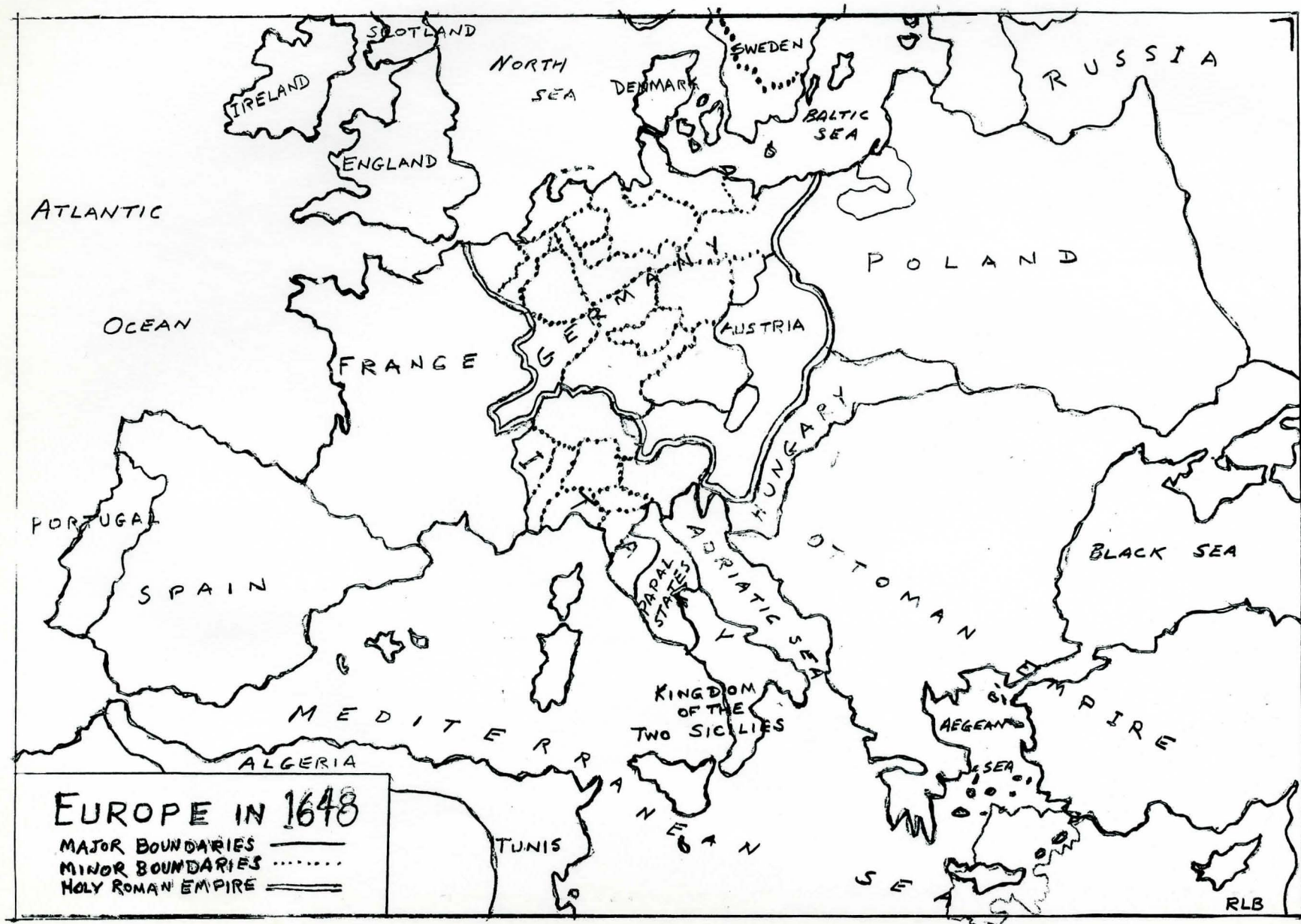
His successor was Louis XIII (1610-1643), whose chief minister from 1624 to 1642 was Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), one of France's greatest statesmen. The policies which he pursued with boundless energy and unswerving devotion met with a high degree of success. By executing some French noblemen and demolishing the castles of others he eliminated the political power of the nobility and subjected them to the crown. By making use of royal officials called intendants drawn from the ranks of nonnobles, he placed the provinces at the king's service. By the use of force he eliminated many of the special political privileges of the Huguenots, who after the Edict of

Nantes constituted what was in some respects a state within a state. By alliances, subsidies, and finally, warfare, he resumed the French struggle with the Hapsburgs. Shortly after the death of Richelieu the nobles rose in an unsuccessful revolt against the government. It was their last such attempt. Richelieu's work stood the test.

Absolutism reached its zenith in France during the long reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), the "Sun King." France became the model for Europe in language, literature, architecture, dress, courtly behavior, and political forms. In short, the French style, from the palace at Versailles to the procedures of diplomacy, set the pace. Significantly, upon assuming personal control of the government in 1661, Louis challenged Spanish precedence at the papal and English courts, as if to proclaim that the day of French preeminence had arrived. Louis had no national parliament to curb his power or control the French purse. Although the nobles retained great social privileges and fiscal exemptions and represented a large drain on the treasury, they were scarcely more than courtiers who added glitter to the royal entourage. The church in France was under royal control. The people in general were not inclined to dispute Louis' divine right to rule, subject only to God. With some truth the Sun King could have said: "I am the state."

Louis XIV was the supreme embodiment of that stage in European political development which followed the New Monarchy in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Preserving the work of Richelieu, he governed France as an absolute dynastic state. Religious considerations and the sensibilities of the nobles had given way as primary concerns in determining national policies to what is sometimes called reason of state, an ethic which places the secular interests of the state above everything else. But a word of warning is necessary. Louis' absolutism, like that of his contemporaries, was much less thoroughgoing than could exist in the twentieth century, and that did in fact exist in Hitler's Germany. The means of communication were still very limited in Louis' day, so that it was physically impossible to do many of the things that can be done now. There were many long-standing customs and traditions which Louis never seriously questioned or successfully challenged. For all his vaunted despotic power, Louis was to a certain extent the prisoner of his own court. He never forced the nobility to pay taxes. Nor did he ever inspire the intense, almost religious, devotion which has often characterized absolutism in more recent times.

In his finance minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), Louis XIV had a faithful servant who continued and expanded Henry IV's program to increase the productivity and wealth of France. Louis, however, dominated by a desire to exalt French prestige in Europe, frittered away many of Colbert's gains. In 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes, on the incorrect assumption that most Huguenots had returned to the Catholic fold and therefore toleration was no longer necessary. More than 200,000



Protestants fled the country, including much skilled manpower which France could ill afford to lose.

Louis created what was France's first real standing army, an army which now wore uniforms, was carefully trained, regularly supplied, and provided with the best equipment of the day. For a time, France was the supreme military power on the Continent and, as such, it threatened the European balance of power. Louis' attempt to reach the Rhine River, which he regarded as one of France's natural frontiers, drew vast, though loose, coalitions against him in a series of wars. When he died in 1715 the relative position of France had already begun to weaken noticeably. There were now other strong armies on the Continent, England had started nibbling away at the French empire in the New World, and the financial difficulties which plagued France in the eighteenth century were already pressing. Many in the streets of Paris cursed the Sun King as his body was borne to its grave.

Royal absolutism depends for its effectiveness upon the able and dedicated hand of the monarch himself, constantly engaged in what Louis XIV called the trade of a king. His successors, Louis XV (1715-1774) and Louis XVI (1774-1792), either could not or would not provide such leadership. There are few bright spots in eighteenth century French political life. Year after year there was a budgetary deficit. No real attempts were made to distribute the tax burden equitably. There were times when it appeared that the government was operating without any direction from the supposedly absolute monarch. A series of long and costly wars had by 1783 deprived France of much of her empire and contributed measurably to impending bankruptcy. French preeminence was ending. Had it not been for the fact that France was the richest and most productive country on the Continent, it would have ended sooner.

In 1500 England, with a population of about 4,000,000 people, was not yet a first-rate power. Her monarch, Henry VII (1485-1509), had established order after the War of the Roses, but -- in contrast with the French experience -- without at the same time creating an extensive bureaucracy or destroying Parliament, which still clung to the potentially significant right to approve new taxes. The more important Tudors -- Henry VII (1485-1509), Henry VIII (1509-1547), and Elizabeth (1558-1603) -- ruled with a minimum of interference by Parliament. Because that body was in the habit of demanding privileges in return for granting new taxes, they called it into session as seldom as possible. But Parliament remained a working part of the English system of government. As we shall see in a later section, in the late seventeenth century it seized control of the state and ended absolutist government in England.

The later Tudors realized the importance of a navy to their island country, if it was to defend itself and play a larger rôle in Europe's affairs. At the same time, they avoided becoming deeply involved in expensive wars on the Continent.

During the long reign of Elizabeth several commercial companies were chartered and English privateers (of whom Sir John Hawkins (1532-1595) and Sir Francis Drake (c. 1540-1596) were the most famous) preyed upon Spanish commerce with the New World. Although these endeavors had the royal blessing and sometimes royal assistance, there were still no English overseas colonies when Elizabeth died in 1603. Her pro-Dutch and anti-Spanish foreign policy helped bring a great Spanish armada toward England in 1588, bent on invasion. Its defeat was something of a climax to her reign and provided a considerable quickening of English patriotism.

Although the later Elizabethan era was marked by internal economic dislocations, increasing dissatisfaction with the Tudor religious settlement, and growing opposition to absolutist royal power, the English still look back upon the reign of Elizabeth as a glorious age. One of her contemporaries, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), undoubtedly expressed what many Englishmen at the close of the sixteenth century felt about their country. The following words are from King Richard II:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise;
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war;
 This happy breed of men, this little world;
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall,
 Or as a moat defensive to a house,
 Against the envy of less happier lands;
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

In the first half of the seventeenth century the Dutch replaced the Spanish as England's chief rivals. Warfare between the two countries ended in Dutch defeat. Then, when Louis XIV began his drive to the Rhine, England became concerned, not relishing the prospect of such a powerful state at her doorstep. The English entered the power coalition formed against France, and war began in 1689. Hostilities were carried on overseas as well as on the Continent, and what began as a purely European controversy settled down into a long contest, with the English and French empires at stake. This struggle lasted intermittently until 1815, and for that reason has often been called the Second Hundred Years' War. But already by 1763 England had deprived France of virtually all her holdings in India and North America, at an amazingly low cost in men and money. It is difficult to say whether England was more or less powerful than France after 1763. The two states had organized their strength in different ways. France, like Spain, had spent huge sums in trying to dominate the Continent. England, on the other hand, emphasized her navy, her commerce, and her overseas empire. As she measured power, England had no peer after 1763.

Eighteenth century England was a country busily preparing for greatness. The same small size and compactness which help explain strong royal power in the Middle Ages now fostered the high degree of national unity and patriotic feeling which had been achieved. As we shall see, England had experienced a political revolution after which the aristocracy ran the government in a way which generally took the interests of the middle class into account. Economically, the country was prospering. After 1750 a series of developments which have come to be known as the Industrial Revolution began, slowly at first, transforming England into the world's first industrial nation.

One of the most significant diplomatic developments of the eighteenth century was the shift in power in eastern Europe: the decline of Sweden and Poland and the rise of Prussia and Russia. In 1648 Sweden was a leading European power, the strongest Protestant state on the Continent. It dominated the eastern and southern, as well as the northern, coasts of the Baltic, and aspired to even greater power. But Sweden, like the Netherlands, was a small country with limited resources, and it failed to stand before its rising neighbors to the south and east. Poland, in the middle of the seventeenth century, was a vast land stretching from the Baltic almost to the Black Sea, and from east of the Oder River deep into what is now Russia. It was a country without any real unity, with an elective kingship and a legislature in which one negative vote could defeat a measure or dissolve the session. However, Poland remained an important political entity until her neighbors, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, partitioned the country among themselves, so that in 1795 the Polish state disappeared completely from the map of Europe, not to be restored until 1919.

Brandenburg-Prussia had been one of the less important states of the Holy Roman Empire. Its ruler belonged to the Hohenzollern family, which had been invested with Brandenburg in the fifteenth century and which later inherited East Prussia. He was an imperial elector and a Protestant. In 1640 there came to the throne of Brandenburg-Prussia Frederick William, known as the Great Elector (1640-1688). Realizing that he was monarch of several scattered and diverse areas, with not much more power in any one of them than that of a weak feudal king, the "beggar on horseback," as a recent biographer calls him, set out to unify and strengthen his state. Frederick William began by building a standing army, creating an administration, curtailing the power of the nobles, and increasing the economic strength of what was a poor and backward country. He was especially interested in a larger population. At his invitation many of the Huguenots who left France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes located in Prussia.

When Frederick William became elector, Germany was already nearing the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a long struggle whose origins can be traced to political and religious issues often impossible to separate. Many of the princes, both Catholic and Protestant, had looked with concern upon

Hapsburg efforts to curtail their "German liberties," by which they meant their autonomy, in revitalizing the moribund imperial power. As the Counter Reformation succeeded in reviving Catholic strength in parts of Germany, there was increased dissatisfaction with the compromise Augsburg settlement (1555), especially as it applied to the disposition of church lands. Moreover, the Calvinists resented the fact that their faith, which was in its infancy in 1555, was still denied legal recognition. Fighting at last broke out in 1618. Before it ended, there were Protestants and Catholics fighting on both sides. Political issues, if they were not predominant at the beginning, surely were long before 1648. The Peace of Westphalia recognized the sovereignty of the German states while at the same time maintaining an empire in which imperial power was all but nonexistent.)

It was once widely believed that the Thirty Years' War caused such widespread destruction of life and property in Germany that her entire life was blighted thereby for more than a century. While the destruction was indeed great, decline in German life actually had begun before 1618. Decentralization was a political fact long before then. As the center of economic activity shifted from old centers in the Mediterranean and Baltic to new ones on the Atlantic, German prosperity suffered. Especially after their unsuccessful revolts in the sixteenth century, many peasants found themselves reduced to serfdom. The war had the effect of accelerating these tendencies. French influence in German affairs was strengthened, and for two centuries was exerted to keep a weak, divided Germany across the Rhine. Austria, left with nominal imperial hegemony, had a large population and fertile soil, but her rulers failed to unify their polyglot peoples. Nor could they exploit either commerce or colonies as western European rulers were doing.

Meanwhile, the policies initiated by the Great Elector were continued by his successors, one of whom won recognition by the other European states as king of Prussia (1713). By the time of King Frederick the Great (1740-1786) Prussia, with fewer than 3,000,000 people, had what was at the moment the most effective army in Europe, a capable and efficient bureaucracy, a hard-working population, and in Berlin the most rapidly growing capital on the Continent. A Machiavellian at heart, Frederick pursued an aggressive foreign policy which greatly increased the size of Prussia and which brought him, in the first year of his reign, into conflict with Austria. This was the initial campaign in the long struggle during which Prussia wrested leadership in German affairs from Austria, culminating in 1871 in the creation of a united Germany around the Prussian core.

As the reign of the Great Elector drew to a close in Prussia, there came to the throne in Moscow a man who is often called the father of modern Russia: Peter the Great (1682-1725). As the Dark Ages ended in the West the Russian people stood between the rest of Europe and a series of Asian invaders who

otherwise might well have repeated the earlier feat of the Huns and the Magyars. The Russians paid tribute to the last of these invaders, the Tatars, for about two centuries, until 1480. The ruler who threw off the Tatar yoke was Ivan the Great (1462-1505), duke of Muscovy and a contemporary of the New Monarchs of western Europe. Muscovy was only one of many Russian principalities, but it was favorably situated for the task of unifying the country because of its location near the north-south and east-west trade routes and because it had persuaded the Tatars to allow it to collect their tribute from all the Russian princes. Ivan married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor, and called himself "the ruler and autocrat of all Russia, the new Tsar Constantine in the new city of Constantine, Moscow."

Ivan extended his rule over adjacent areas, tripling the size of the territory under his control. Succeeding rulers continued this policy of expansion, which by 1789 had made Russia the largest state in the world. As early as 1650 the penetration of Siberia was completed and a Russian fort had been built on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Expansion was more difficult in the west, where Russian desires clashed with the Poles, Swedes, and the Turks. The goal of Peter the Great was to acquire "windows to the west." By this he meant warm-water ports through which trade in goods and ideas could flow all year around. His war with Sweden, which marks the swift decline of that country from its brief position as a great power, yielded a long stretch of Baltic coast. (One of Peter's successors, Catherine the Great (1762-1796), gained a large slice of Poland and permanent possession of the northern coast of the Black Sea. But the acquisition of what Russia considers a satisfactory window to the Mediterranean even today remains to be completed.)

Russian political development, like that in the West, was in the direction of absolutism. An institution which might have become a parliament faded into insignificance after the seventeenth century, leaving the power of the tsar unchallenged. Absolutism in Russia was scarcely accompanied and modified, as it was in the West, by trade and commerce, town life, and by the ideas associated with these developments. The nobility stood by the crown because it left them in control of local government, because it exempted them from taxation, and also because it made no real attempt to end serfdom, an institution which had appeared in Russia only as the serfs in most of Western Europe were being freed. The reduction of the free Russian peasant to serfdom was the price which the tsar had been willing to pay in order to gain the support of the Russian nobility. Of a population in 1800 approximating 36,000,000, which was almost one fifth of the population of Europe, all but about 2,000,000 were serfs.

Peter the Great realized the backwardness of his people, especially their lack of technical skill. In order to remedy this, he wanted to multiply the few contacts which Russia already had with the West through the presence of foreign merchants and

artisans. Historically, Russian cultural ties had been with Byzantium, from which it had adapted its religion, law, art, architecture, and techniques of government. Also, during the centuries when Mongols occupied part of the country, an Asian influence was introduced. (Russia had not participated in the various stages of an unfolding Western Civilization: the revival of trade and commerce, the Crusades, the Renaissance, or the Reformation. It scarcely knew the printing press.)

In 1697 Peter took 50 young Russians on a western tour, seeking (unsuccessfully, it turned out) military aid against the Turks. He used the opportunity to learn everything he could about Western ways, particularly science and technology in such advanced commercial countries as the Netherlands and England. This trip was a lasting influence on Peter's subsequent domestic policy, providing the inspiration for such things as the Western calendar (but the one which the West was then discarding), a simplified alphabet, Western dress, an end to the seclusion of noblewomen, an academy of science, Western bureaucracy, embassies at the principal courts of Europe, and a new capital at St. Petersburg. Later in the eighteenth century his successors became deeply involved in the European balance of power and participated in its alliances and wars.)

An evaluation of the reign of Peter the Great depends upon whether one believes it is ever wise to attempt, with sometimes violent and ruthless means, forced change in a culturally distinct country. Peter made the effort, and in so doing he brought Russia within the influence of Western Civilization as it had never been before. However, he was primarily interested in the military and governmental aspects of that civilization, and did little to change the culture of the great mass of his people. When he died, Russia was still far from being Westernized. Perhaps the sharpest criticism of his reign is that by introducing a fairly rapid change at the top of Russian society, Peter separated the rulers and the ruled without at the same time providing any means eventually to close the gap thus created. As a result, the division between the upper and lower classes persisted into the twentieth century. Beyond that, not even the upper classes could agree on whether to accept or reject further Westernization of their country. Those who were opposed held tenaciously to the belief that Russian culture was far superior to any other in the world. They believed that Moscow -- not Rome and certainly not Geneva -- was the exclusive center of the true faith, the rightful successor of Constantinople after that city fell to the Ottoman Turks. These opponents of Westernization detested St. Petersburg and wanted to continue the practice of segregating foreigners in Russia. (It may be that even those Russians who favored Westernization scarcely understood the values which Westerners professed to hold.)