

Royal Absolutism
and the
Development of the Nation-State
in Europe in the 1600s

We're going to look at how kings in three nations (England, France, and Russia) developed their own power bases to (try to) become absolute monarchs in the 1600s.

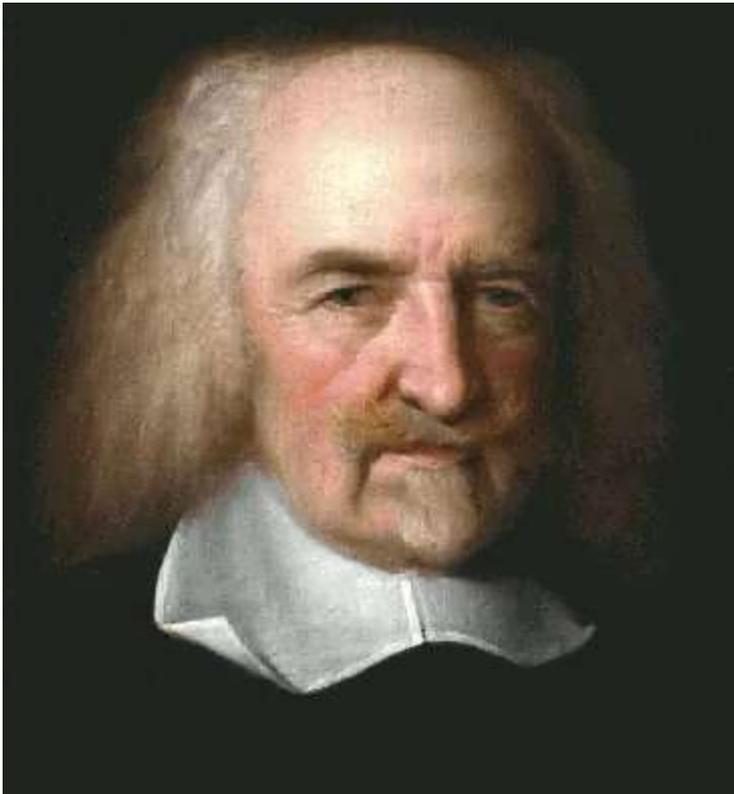
First, it would be helpful to understand the differences in the political structures of feudal society, as well as what was forming in the 1600s.

- Feudal society had kings of the entire nation, of course, but these kings rarely had the power to tax the entire nation.
- Instead, the feudal kings would only get money from their own lands, the Crown lands.
- They would deed the rest of the lands to other nobles who would hold it as a grant from the king
- Those other nobles would exercise the power of a king, on their own lands—they would administer justice and collect taxes.
- In exchange for these land grants, the aristocrats would owe a certain amount of military service each year to the king.

Although there were different circumstances among the various nations we will be looking at, there are some similar patterns in play in the 1600s:

- The power of the kings themselves tended to increase (over the aristocrats and the people)
- Governments typically enacted mercantilist policies, intending to increase revenues from exports to other countries.
- Of course there were wars fought to extend the territory that the king governed

The thinker that is most readily associated with royal absolutism is Thomas Hobbes, in his work *Leviathon*.



(I really want to use the term, *philosopher*, but if I call Hobbes that, it might turn you off, so I'll just call him a *thinker*)

Hobbes used some of the ideas we identify with the *social contract*, but did it in a way that justified royal absolutist governments.

- Hobbes started by explaining exactly what he thought life was all about:

solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short; it was a war of all against all.

In other words, it is every man for himself, and it really is a dog-eat-dog world.



Well, not that cute and cuddly, but you get the picture.

Hobbes' point was that to escape this dog-eat-dog world, we contract with a government, to make life a little bit more manageable.

- Now Hobbes, if anything, was a realist. He held that if any government was going to be able to enforce law and order, it would have to be ruthless in its enforcement (to get everyone to toe the line).

He went on to say that such a government would appear to be a *leviathan* (which was a ferocious sea monster from the biblical book of Job).

- It was only from within the confines of society, with its absolutist government, that we could then speak of the rights of people.
- Before the government arose, there were no rights, only individuals treating each other brutally.

And so Hobbes never saw rights as anything that you could demand that the government protect—for Hobbes, rights were what the government created, and gave to you as it saw fit; for example, the right to drive into an intersection when the light was green, the right to live in a home after you have bought it, etc.

- He thought that the notion that people could reject their government, because it was not respecting their rights, was ridiculous—an impossible scenario.
- Hobbes insisted that apart from government, rights didn't exist.

You can perhaps see why Hobbes is taken as the philo..., uh, thinker who proclaimed the rights of absolutist kings to do whatever they wanted—very much in the spirit of his age.

- John Locke had a few things to say about government that were rather different from Hobbes.
- We'll come back to Hobbes (and Locke) later on.

And now, on to the nation-states...

The first example of the emergence of royal absolutism, and the development of the nation-state, is that of France.

France in the medieval era was less centralized and more feudal than modern France is.

- Aristocrats (dukes, counts, earls, etc.) ruled various tracts of land around France, and ruled it as their private domains.
 - They would collect taxes for various activities
 - They would administer justice (and collect a fee for that, too)

The only lands that the king of France could count on (both to provide revenue, as well as to man his army) would be his own family estates (kings would come from aristocratic family lines and of course their families would already own much land).

- All this wasn't necessarily bad, because few people really want a powerful central government—they have more power to do more wrong.
- But a few things that definitely hurt nations that were more feudal in their political structure was that (a) their armies tended to be smaller, and (b) goods moving out of one province into another province (of the same country) would be taxed just as if the goods were being imported from another country.

There were a few other problems peculiar to France...

- Most of the wealthy people (the Catholic church and the aristocracy) were exempt from the land tax, one of the ways that the king got money
- French kings were in the habit of giving pensions (annuities) to their supporters, which had the effect of exhausting the treasury.

Each of these situations was problematic.

(A) If you were attacked, you wanted to have as large an army defending your country as possible. You didn't want some of your soldiers, in the middle of a campaign, taking up their stuff and going home because their time of duty had elapsed.

(B) think about how expensive things in America would be if every state taxed movies made in California; if we taxed products made in Oregon, Nevada, Arizona, etc.

- It would make everything more expensive and hinder trade. The only folks who would benefit from that would be the local governments that would administer those taxes.

(3) And if you want to raise money to fund a government, it made no sense to have the wealthiest individuals exempt from taxation, whether because of their status as aristocrats, or privileges granted a very powerful church structure.

The development of the French nation-state is most closely associated with King Louis XIV, who reigned from 1643 to 1715.



Louis XIV came up with a few interesting quotes:

- I am the state.
- Whatever side I take, I know well that I will be blamed.
- Every time I appoint someone to a vacant position, I make a hundred unhappy and one ungrateful.
- (on his deathbed) Has God forgotten all I have done for him?

Yeah, life must stink when you live in a house like this...



*Louis's
palace at
Versailles*

Louis, and his treasurer Jean Colbert, did a few things as king, to develop France into a unified nation-state:

1. Tried to develop French industries through subsidies, creating monopolistic overseas trading companies, and tariffs on imported goods.

2. Use Roman Catholicism to unify the French nation religiously

- Unfortunately, this meant persecuting French Calvinists, called Huguenots.
- Some 200,000 of them fled France when Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had promised toleration to them.
- As they were leading factory owners (working in cloth and glass), French industry declined with their flight.

Louis fought the Pope for control over the Roman Catholic church in France.

- He insisted on the right of the king, to appoint bishops after the current one would die
- An assembly in 1682 promoted the Four Articles:
 - King had full authority in temporal affairs in France
 - Church councils had authority over decrees of the pope
 - Ancient traditions of church authority (limiting that of the Pope) in France should be observed
 - Papal statements can be modified with consent of the entire church
- And so Louis worked with the French bishops to maximize his control over the Catholic church in France, against that of the Pope in Rome

The Pope, of course, didn't like this at all.

- The Pope refused to appoint as bishop, anyone who had been at that assembly
- Louis, of course, wouldn't agree that anyone be appointed bishop *unless* they had been at that assembly.
- By 1688, 35 Catholic dioceses were without a bishop (as the Pope and Louis could not agree on the appointees)
- The standoff was eventually resolved by the face-saving gesture of having the French clergy write a letter to the Pope expressing their “unspeakable grief” of their activity at that assembly; but the letter wasn't ever published in France

Another way that Louis attempted to unify France under one religion was by revoking the Edict of Nantes (1598)

- This Edict had provided some measure of toleration for French Huguenots (Calvinists)
 - They were allowed to maintain their own churches
 - The king promised to maintain (at his expense) three fortified cities in France
 - They were allowed to maintain universities
 - They were allowed freedom of public worship (but not in Paris), and freedom to print and sell religious material in the cities where they had their churches

Estimates vary of how many Huguenots fled France upon the revocation—most say 200,000, some put it as high as 400,000.

- Frederick William I, Duke of Prussia (known as the Great Elector) issued an open invitation for the Huguenots to settle there; many others moved to England and other places as well.

Louis, always distrustful of the French aristocracy, would only hire the *bourgeois* (businessmen), such as Colbert, as his close advisors.

(3) France, unfortunately, was constantly involved in wars during the reign of Louis, which left the country almost bankrupt by the time of his death, and which also served to unite much of Europe against the French, the strongest single nation by far, at the time.

- Louis was constantly trying to find natural borders to defend his kingdom—the Pyrenees mountains next to Spain, the Alps and Rhine with German and Italy. His northern borders, however, had no natural boundary, just the lowland areas in the Benelux region (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxemburg).
- Another of his wars was over his right to have his grand-son on the throne of Spain.

(4) Louis also used the institution of *intendants* to go through France and enforce his policies.

- These *intendants* would do a variety of jobs:
- Hunt down criminals
- Reform courts
- Survey rivers
- Inspect militia units
- Preside at tribunals
- Insure that provincial officials were doing their jobs

As a result of his policies of war and subsidies to his aristocrats if they played along with him, Louis left France almost bankrupt:

- France's debt rose from 60 million livres in 1661, to 3 billion in 1715, when Louis died (by that time, the *livre* was a sixth of an ounce of silver).

Another interesting example of the development of the nation-state, which came **without** the accompanying royal absolutism, is that of Great Britain.

- Britain developed as a very strong nation-state, yet without an absolute monarchy.
- It was primarily the religious conflicts between the Calvinists and the Anglicans (the Calvinists were fighting for their right to not have to worship in Anglican churches), which drove England along this path away from an absolutist king, towards a government based more on Parliament, with a recognition of legal rights.
- These religious conflicts flared up when the British kings wanted to impose the Anglican religion on Scotland, and British forces into Ireland.

Although England's Reformation began with Henry VIII, after a few decades of squabbling between Roman Catholics and Anglicans, Elizabeth I (the Virgin Queen) came to the throne and during a long and illustrious reign (she rallied the country when the Spanish Armada sailed against it in 1588), she elevated the Anglican Church to its position of primacy in the country.

- In 1559 came the Elizabethan Settlement, whereby all had to worship in Anglican churches on Sunday.
- Non-conformists or Dissenters still insisted on worshipping in their own (Calvinist) churches.

Fast forward to the 1600s, when the Stuarts (from Scotland), staunch supporters of the Anglican church, are now on the throne.

- James I of Great Britain was constantly telling Parliament how it should heed his wishes for taxes. This *might* not have been that much of a problem, but many in Parliament were sympathetic to the Calvinists, if not outright Calvinist themselves.
- And what did James want the tax money for?

Well, let's tell James' side of the story first.

- James was actually a visionary at the time, wanting to merge Scotland, Wales, and England, into one nation, with a common language, currency, citizenship, and, yes, religion. He also wanted to eliminate trade barriers (tariffs and bans) on goods moving from one region to the other.
- He didn't want to be known as the king of England and Scotland, but of Great Britain (a combination of the two).
- He even designed the Union Jack, which is a combination of the flags of England (red cross with white background) and of Scotland (white cross with blue background).
- Had he succeeded in this project, it might have spared the British Isles much bloodshed over the centuries.
- But let's see how James and his descendants tried to accomplish this lofty goal.

To suppress dissent in Scotland, where he was trying to impose Anglican bishops on its largely Calvinist population. He also wanted the Scottish to use the Anglican prayerbook in their services.

- James (d. 1625) and his son, Charles I (d. 1649), never got Parliament to support their wars of religious oppression against the Scottish and eventually the Irish (strongly Roman Catholic) as well.

Finally, Charles sent his own private army against the Scottish, which was defeated, and in 1640, he was forced to sign a humiliating treaty which allowed the Scottish a fortified garrison on English soil—at Newcastle (with England paying 850 pounds sterling a day for its upkeep).

- After trying to get Parliament to fund subsequent wars against the Irish, Charles lost his patience and sent an army he had armed (again at his own expense)—marching not against the Irish, but against Parliament.
- Parliament at this point started to raise its own armies to defend itself, and the English Civil War was on.

The tide of victory went back and forth for a few years, until the Parliamentarians decided to raise a new army, which they called the New Model Army.

- They took special care to train and arm it properly
- It was united under a single command structure
- It was given strict orders not to plunder the cities that supported the king
- The Parliamentarian forces often marched into battle singing songs from their Puritan hymnbooks.

And they were victorious.

- Eventually, they saw a pattern: they would defeat Charles in battle, he would surrender, and then plot to bring in foreign forces to regain control.
- After a while, the Parliamentarians decided to find a permanent solution to that problem.



In 1649, Charles I was executed.

- Oliver Cromwell, with the support of the army, proceeded to rule England himself for the next ten years, but after doing to others what had been done unto him (including the Irish and Scottish, against whom English armies were sent), England was ready for a king again.

And so after Cromwell died, the English sent out feelers to Charles' son, Charles II.

- Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Charles II issued the Declaration of Breda (the city in the Netherlands he was staying in), which committed himself to the following policy:

1. He would grant a general pardon for all crimes against his father, if any were to apply within 40 days, with the exception of any whom Parliament wanted to go after.
2. He would not kick the new landowners off the royalists' lands that had been seized (or "purchased") during the fighting (if Parliament wanted to do this, it would be their doing, not his).
3. He committed to religious toleration for all.

Charles II was brought home to rule England, in what is termed the Restoration.

- By anyone's standards, his reign was actually pretty smooth. He insisted upon religious toleration, not only for Catholics but for Calvinist Dissenters (from the Church of England).
- Eventually, however, he did something that all kings end up doing.
- He died.
- And his brother James II took over.

James had two protestant daughters, but married a Catholic Italian Catholic princess, Mary of Modena (after his first wife, also a Catholic convert, died). He also converted to Catholicism in the late 1660s, before he became king.

- Protestant England wondered if their Crown was going to move back to the persecution of Bloody Mary, which sent several hundred into exile and a couple hundred to their deaths.
- Of course, England would now be in league with the French, in its wars with the Protestant Dutch.

James ringed London with 10 thousand foreign mercenary soldiers, and sent his agents throughout England to disarm the local militias.

- Finally, when James announced his Catholic wife had given birth to a son, who would be raised a Catholic, Parliament said enough was enough, and asked one of his Protestant daughters, married to Prince William of Orange (in the Netherlands) to come over and rule Great Britain.

After William and Mary landed, many of James' Protestant soldiers switched sides, and with only a little fighting, James was captured and then allowed to escape (to avoid the inconvenience of having to imprison or kill a king).

William committed to rejecting the absolutist character of much of the Stuart kings.

- He consented to a bill known as the English Bill of Rights...

which provided a long list of legal rights to Englishmen, some of which can be seen in the Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments to the US Constitution). The king would not

- (1) suspend Parliament's laws
- (2) tax without consent of Parliament
- (3) Keep a standing army in time of peace, without consent of Parliament
- (4) Violate the principle "that excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted"

And so Britain, by the end of the 1600s, even though they had established a unified nation-state (England, and a union with Wales and Scotland, to form Great Britain), they managed to do it without having an absolutist king on the throne.

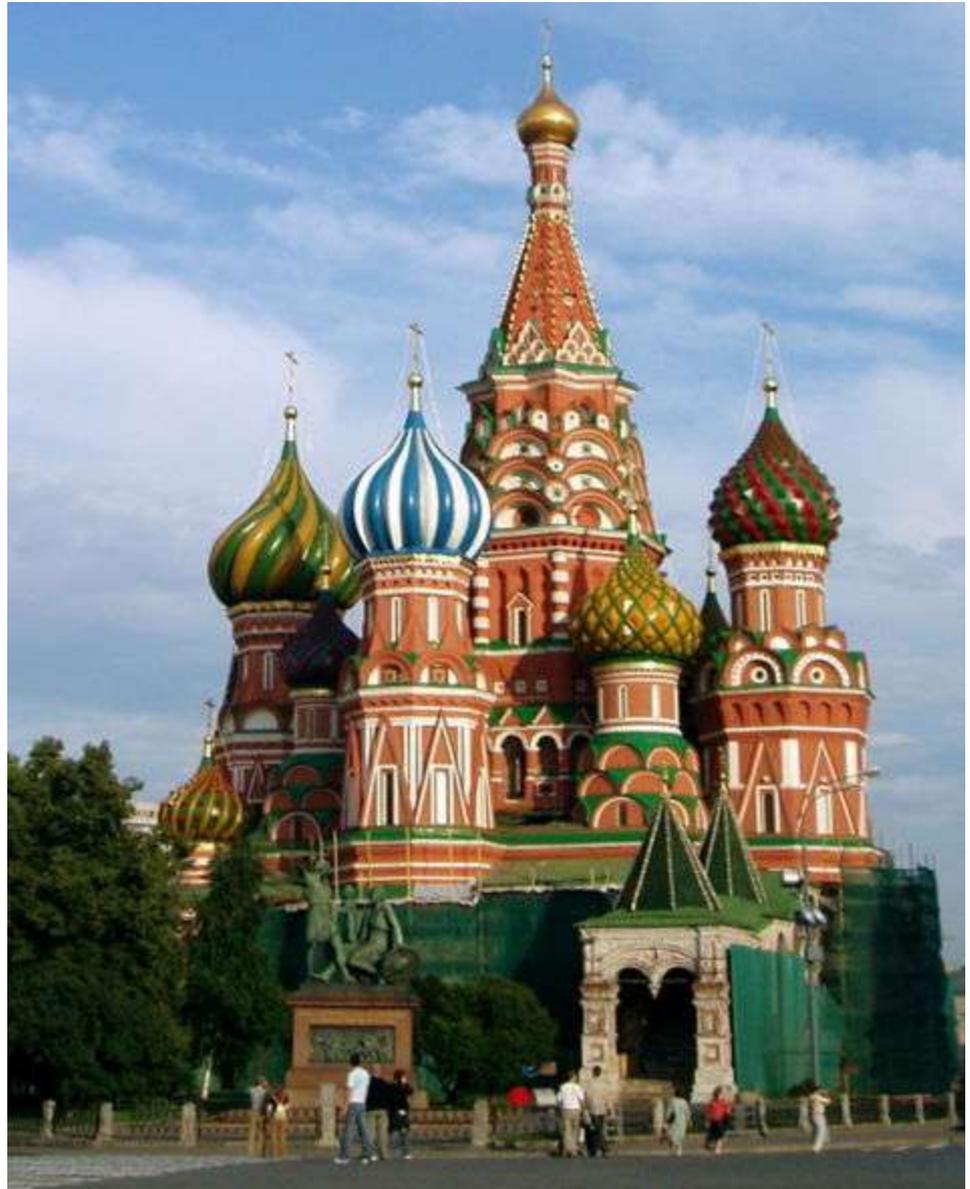
- Parliament managed to maintain itself as an annual body of representatives, and the kings had pledged to respect certain legal rights, as embodied in the English Bill of Rights.

And so we see that through the religious infighting in 1600s England, by the end of that century, England established a firm tradition of a king that strongly respected the legal rights of his people. This has been called a “constitutional monarchy,” a monarchy that in fact is not absolute, but governs within the confines of established law.

- This is seen as a major reason why Britain never had an incredibly bloody revolution like the French had (the French Revolution from 1789 onward)—the power of the British king was already limited.

Another example
of a nation-state
developing,
alongside royal
absolutism, is that
of the Tsars of
Russia.

St. Basil's Cathedral, in Red
Square, Moscow



The Tsars came from an absolutist tradition. In the Middle Ages, as Russia served as a buffer against the Mongol invasions, the Russian leaders became the go-betweens the Mongols and their Russian conquests.

- These leaders would make sure that tribute and soldiers would be sent to the Mongol armies, and the Mongols allowed these Russian leaders to rule in pretty much any way they wanted.

The Russian leadership essentially played for time, until the Mongols were weak enough, and then they overthrew the Mongol yoke and established their own rule.

The Tsars consistently expanded the territory they governed from what was termed the Muscovite Duchy (that is, the duchy centered around Moscow) to become the largest country on the planet.

- This was done after the collapse of the Tatar regime in southern Russia. In the Middle Ages, the majority of the Russian people stayed in the forest regions in the northern half of Russia, where they would have protection from the Mongol cavalry.
- After the Khanate regime was destroyed, the Russians migrated south and west.

The tsars used this expansion very adroitly to increase their own power as well.

To poorer farmers, they assigned new farmlands, with the obligation that they become serfs, paying rent to the Tsar.

- They also used this territorial expansion to bend the Russian aristocracy to their will.
- Russian aristocrats who were not allied with the Romanov dynasty (the family of the Tsars) were told to move to new domains farther south and west, which they held on condition of good behavior towards the Tsars.
- The new lands around Moscow that opened up of course were given to aristocrats who had proven loyal.

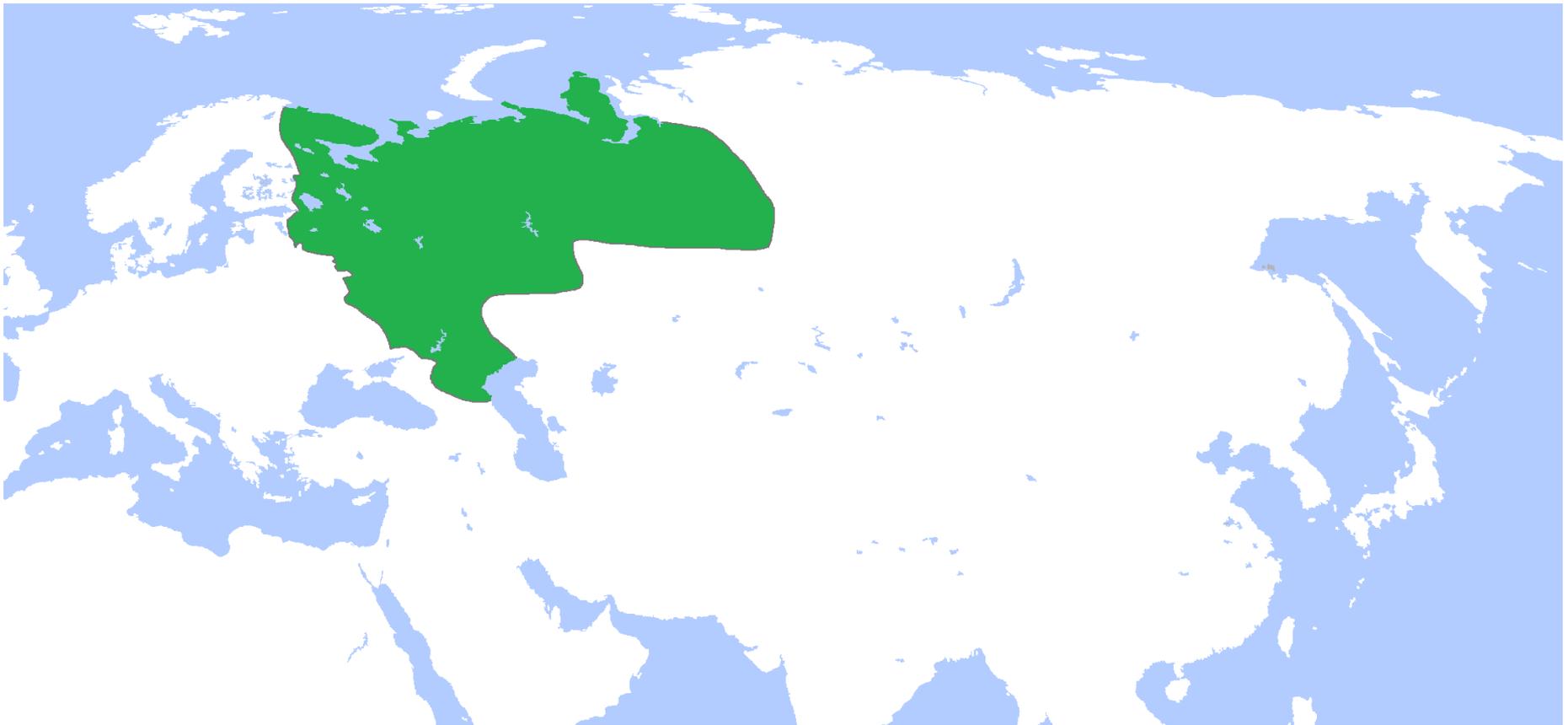
More movement of people (including aristocrats) was done in Russia than any other European nation.

- As Russian troops ventured eastward, entire peasant villages were moved with them, to farm the surrounding land and provide the troops with food and other supplies.

The Tsars of Moscow greatly increased the territory they controlled.

- In 1300, the Grand Duchy of Moscow covered some 8 thousand square miles; by 1462, the accession of Ivan III the Great (d. 1505), this territory covered over 160 thousand square miles.
- By the death of Ivan's son Basil III in 1533, Russia now held 1 million square miles of territory (the US contains 3.8 million sq mi).

And by the end of the reign of Ivan IV the
Terrible (d. 1584), Russia now controlled over
1.5 million sq mi.



During the 1600s, Russian fur trappers then expanded into Siberia, and the Russian tsar claimed that land as well, increasing Russia by another 3.8 million sq mi



In the 1500s and 1600s, laws were passed forcing serfs to stay on their current lands (instead of moving to get more pay or better terms somewhere else).

- In a similar fashion, the Russian aristocracy became obsessed with their ancestry, and it became SOP to never give a lower-ranking job as an official or military officer, to an aristocrat whose ancestors had enjoyed higher office.
- This practice went so far as officers sending petitions to the Tsar on the eve of battle, objecting to being put under the command of officers whose families were ranked “lower” than their own!
- The Tsars came up with an ingenious solution—they declared certain battles “outside the *mesta*” or caste system, and these campaigns would not be entered on the official records (so nobody would know about service under an “inferior” officer).

One long-term result of this expansion of territory (much of which was fertile land south of Moscow) was an increase of the Russian population.

- At the end of the 1500s, it ranged from 8 to 12 million (compared to France with 19 million, and Spain with 11 million; even Poland had 11 million).
- By 1750, its population was around 18 million; and by the mid-1800s, it was at 68 million.
- By 1914, it was up to 170 million.

Any lessons to learn from these three nations?

- **Russia** was able to expand its borders incredibly, as well as solidify the rule by the Tsars from Moscow over the entire nation, but did so at a steep price—the vast majority of its population had no political or even economic freedom, and all were subjugated to the Tsar.
- As the price for co-operation with the Tsar's schemes, the aristocracy was converted into a caste system, in which positions were not given to the most worthy, but to the “well-bred.”
- Labor became mostly unfree, and as a result, nobody had much incentive to innovate and produce too much.
- The retention of the peasants on the farms hindered the lack of large cities, which gave the landowners no incentive to greatly expand production (who would the extra grain be sold to?); the serfs surely had no incentive to increase production on their own.

France was able to unite and fend off the rest of Europe's major powers. But at what price?

- The country was deeply in debt in 1715, the end of the reign of its Sun King, Louis XIV.
- Louis' constant warfare (to expand France's borders to natural boundaries) had put much of Europe into a league against it
- His desire to solidify control and unite all of France led to his persecution of Protestants, and the eventual emigration of 200,000 of them.
- The concessions he made to the nobles (tax exemption and expensive pensions) kept the French government in continual financial problems until the French Revolution removed these privileges

England's more democratic /equitable version of the nation-state allowed it to expand its power greatly around the globe.

- Its monarchy accepted a lesser role, giving its people no reason to undergo a bloody revolution.
- Without a tyrannical king who could seize any land and wealth he wanted, people were allowed to keep what they earned, and eventually, the lion's share of innovation in the Industrial Revolution took place in England, which reaped the financial rewards of this.
- Its model of a government that has contracted to respect the rights of the people helped create the same desire in its American colonies, who went even further along the path to self-government than the English themselves did.
- For long-term success as a nation, de-centralized power goes a long way, however much a ruler might benefit in the short run with having absolute control.

Review Questions:

Hobbes

1. What did Hobbes say life was like before governments came into being?
2. What type of government, in Hobbes' view, would be required to get everyone to obey the law and respect others' rights?
3. Why did Hobbes say that it didn't make any sense to accuse the government of violating citizens' rights?

France

1. What strategies did Louis XIV employ, to unite his nation under him?
2. Why have many historians regarded his projects as ultimately, unsuccessful?

Russia

1. The Tsars got their start as the imperial go-betweens for the Russians and what other group?
2. What techniques did the Russian Tsars use, to unify their nation under them?
3. What was one effect of those techniques, upon Russian society?