**CHAPTER 5 – EUROPEAN STATE CONSOLIDATION IN THE**

**SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES**

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The seventeenth century witnessed monumental, but very different, developments in England and France. In England, there was a limited monarchy, Parliamentary government, and measured religious toleration; in France, absolute monarchy and closed Catholicism prevailed.

James I set the tone of English politics in his troubled reign (1603–1625). Beset by a large royal debt, a fiercely divided church, and a Parliament restive over his predecessor’s claims to royal authority, James worsened his own situation by lack of tact and strong advocacy of the divine right of kings. The scandalous corruption of his court and an unpopular pro-Spanish foreign policy further alienated James’ subjects.

His son, Charles I (1625–1649) fought even more openly with Parliament and the Puritans. He made war on Spain and financed it with extra-Parliamentary taxes and forced loans. Continued conflict with Parliament led to its dismissal, and for eleven years, Charles tried to rule as an absolute monarch, exploiting neglected laws and extending existing taxes to raise money. In the 1640s, however, an invasion from Scotland forced Charles to recall Parliament and the resulting quarrels over taxation and conflict with the Puritan opposition led to civil war.

Two factors led to Parliament’s final victory: alliance with Scotland and the reorganization of the Parliamentary army under Oliver Cromwell. In 1649, Charles I was executed. For the next eleven years, England was officially a Puritan republic under Cromwell’s leadership. In reality, it was a military dictatorship, made unpopular by its harsh rule, expensive foreign policy, inattention to trade and commerce, and stern regulation of moral life. In 1660, after Cromwell’s death, Charles’s son was restored as King Charles II (1660–1685). Politically and religiously, he returned England to the status quo of 1642.

Charles favored religious toleration, but the strict Anglican Parliament excluded Catholics and Puritans from English religious and political life. Charles launched a bold new foreign policy, challenging the Dutch for the commercial leadership of Europe. Charles was succeeded in 1685 by his brother James II

(1685–1688), who quickly became unpopular because of his open Catholicism and absolute rule. In 1688, Parliament invited James’s Protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband, William of Orange, leader of the Netherlands, to take over the government. James fled and the coup, known as the Glorious Revolution, succeeded without bloodshed. The new rulers cooperated with Parliament and recognized a Bill of Rights that limited the monarchy’s powers and guaranteed the civil liberties of the English privileged classes. It also banned Roman Catholics from the English throne. Unlike future movements, the Glorious Revolution was not a popular revolution, but provided a model for them.

France set out on the opposite path—to absolutism and religious persecution. Henry IV (1589–1610) began to curtail the privileges of the French nobility, and his finance minister, Sully, began the creation of a government-controlled economy. The trend continued under Henry’s successor, Louis XIII (1616–1643), whose chief minister was the talented and Machiavellian Cardinal Richelieu. In pursuit of Catholic religious unity, he sent royal armies against Huguenot cities and restricted their political and legal rights. Abroad, however, Richelieu’s main goal was to oppose the Habsburgs. He therefore committed France to the Protestant side in the Thirty Years’ War.

After the deaths of Richelieu and Louis in 1643, the French nobility revolted, and in a series of rebellions called the Fronde (1649–1652), aristocrats and townsmen opposed the drift toward absolute monarchy in favor of local autonomy. After initial successes, their rule became chaotic and Louis XIV (1643–1715) and his chief minister Mazarin returned to rule. After the experience of the Fronde, Louis was determined to be a strong and absolute ruler. The palace of Versailles proclaimed the glory of the “Sun King.” Aristocrats were barred from high government positions: Louis reserved these for hand-picked townsmen—who thus owed their success to him, which in turn assured their loyalty. Louis believed that political unity required religious conformity, and he suppressed the Catholic sect of Jansenists, an anti-Jesuit group declared heretical by the pope. Louis then persecuted France’s Protestant minority and revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Louis’s later wars are chronicled, including conflicts against the League of Augsburg and the War of Spanish Succession, which enveloped Europe and taxed France’s ill-equipped and under-financed army. After the death of Louis XIV in 1715, a war-weary France required a period of economic recovery and wise political leadership. But the regency of the Duke of Orleans proved to be rather disastrous. A plan of investment in French North America in order to stimulate the economy (called the “Mississippi Bubble”) failed dismally—as did a plan to draw the French nobility into the government. Although the nobility seemed to lack either the talent or the interest to govern, they continued to challenge the monarchy’s power through local courts (*parliaments*). Financial conditions improved under the more realistic Cardinal Fleury, but at his death in 1743, power passed to Louis XV, whose mediocre rule weakened France internally. It remained a great military power, however, and it experienced economic prosperity.

The chapter then examines the states of central and eastern Europe (Sweden, the Ottoman Empire and Poland) and their reasons for failing to compete with the strength of the western European monarchies. Factors include overextension of resources, domestic disunity and poor leadership.

Austria under the Habsburg dynasty was more successful. The Habsburgs possessed a great amount of territory that was separated by long distances and controlled to a great extent by the local nobility. Consequently, in order to control their lands, Leopold I (1657–1705) and Charles VI (1711–1740) had to make great concessions to this nobility. By an agreement known as the Pragmatic Sanction, Charles got the nobles of his realm and the kings of Europe to recognize his daughter, Maria Theresa (1740–1780) as his heir.

Another German dynasty, the Hohenzollerns of Prussia, succeeded where the Habsburgs failed. They turned a collection of separate feudal domains into a strong, central monarchy. The main instrument of their success was the Prussian army, to which they subordinated every social class and most economic pursuits. The most important personalities in this transformation include Frederick I (1688–1713) and Frederick William I (1713–1740).

The most consequential power shift in the east, however, was the rise of Russia as a great power. Tsar Peter the Great (1682–1725), an admirer of the West, organized a four-fold drive to westernize Russia. In large measure, he succeeded in breaking the power of the nobles (*boyars*) and the Moscow guard (*streltsy*) who had long disrupted the country. He also took control of the church, reorganized Russia’s internal administration and promoted economic development (most successfully, the iron industry). These measures aimed at preparing Russia for war, and in 1721, Russia obtained large territories on the Baltic from Sweden. On the Gulf of Finland, Peter built his new capital city of St. Petersburg, a construction on an even vaster scale than Versailles.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

What was the Dutch Golden Age and what led to its decline?

What factors led to the different political paths taken by England and France in the seventeenth century?

How did conflicts over taxation and religion lead to civil war in Stuart England?

Why were efforts to establish absolute monarchy successful in France but unsuccessful in England?

What were the main characteristics that defined the Polish, Austrian, and Prussian states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?