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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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3.1.1 State-building and Nationalism in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

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Introduction

This chapter discusses states and nations, and we must be alert from the start that in historical texts these terms still very much carry the imprint of their origins in the nineteenth century. Similar terms were used during the early modern period, but they carried different meanings, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes radically differently. Borders between countries were blurred where today we find clear demarcations. We still have European countries cobbled together from distinct units—think of the United Kingdom—but these are coherent states compared to many of their early modern predecessors. Few early modern states had proper governments as we know them today. Patriotism may have been in evidence, though nationalism was not. And all of this—borders, institutions, and identities—was contested.

The political history of the European states as we know them today is, almost by definition, told by the victors, that is, those states that emerged out of this cauldron of early modern political history. It is therefore important to ask whose history we are telling, and how we know what we think we know. A wide range of sources is available for many parts of central and western Europe, including official certificates, records, and charters. Such sources are much rarer in the east; the history of early modern Russia, for example, is more based on the study of chronicles. Chronicles were diverse and could be centralised or local, secular or ecclesiastical; but above all, they were stories told from the perspective of those who had commissioned them. Thus, the rise of the principality of Moscow under Ivan III (ruled 1462–1505) is usually described as the 'gathering of Russian lands' in the literature; it is studied in terms of centralisation and unification, and not told from the perspective of the princely and republican states and confederations that it absorbed.

Institutions and the Law

In most of Europe, rulers, and in some cases their local and regional appointees, also made laws and administered justice. In other words, there was no clear distinction between executives, legislatures, and judiciaries. That said, early modern states engaged in the centralisation, standardisation, and professionalisation of administrative practice from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Early forms of central authorities and state departments count among them, as do regional and local administrative offices, each with a wide range of military, administrative, legal, and economic responsibilities. They included both the secular and religious spheres. It was at this time, for example, that representatives of the territorially dispersed Russian Orthodox Church agreed on a unified church calendar and saints, and thus helped to accelerate the integration of the early modern state.

While royal councils had existed before as advisory boards for European rulers, from the sixteenth century their work became more systematic, differentiated, and professionalised, developing into early forms of ministries during the early modern period. In many countries, the logic behind the differentiation and division of labour was both functional and territorial. In Spain, which soon developed one of the most elaborate conciliar systems, separate councils not only emerged for matters of state, finance, and war, among others, but also for the government of Castile, Aragon, Italy, Flanders, Portugal, and the Western Indies. In England, special councils for regions considered unruly, such as Wales and 'the North', were formed while an array of councils and courts divided matters of government and finance among them. These councils also had judicial functions in both Spain and England, while in France such functions were reserved for the most important one, the *Grand Conseil*. In Muscovy, Tsar Ivan IV established central authorities in Moscow in the 1550s. Over the next decades, the number of these *prikazy* would rise from four to seventy, and they would regularly send instructions to provincial governors. As in Spain and England, some of these central authorities were responsible for territories—for example, the newly acquired lands of Kazan—while others were specialised in fields of governance. There were conflicts of jurisdiction that followed, partly because the process of expansion and differentiation was never systematic.

The growth of state institutions also involved their gradual spread into the provinces. Though it remained haphazard and erratic in some parts of Europe until the nineteenth century, state penetration into the countryside did make headway in other parts during the early modern period. Provincial heads were increasingly supplied not only with troops, but also with administrative staff and offices. Crucially, they came to receive regular salaries from the state. Particularly where the distances between the provinces and the capital were

vast, provincial offices often combined administrative and judicial functions. To make matters more complicated, not only the state but also the church maintained local representation, resulting in many questions being negotiated by at least four key actors, namely ecclesiastical and secular authorities at the local and central levels. Recent research into early modern governance has also shown that much of this negotiation and everyday interaction on the ground was marked less by repression and resistance than it was by pragmatic accommodation.

'The law' was a crucial part of early modern state-building, though it could mean several different things at the same time. It included the decrees imposed by rulers, legislatures (where they existed), or councils in towns and cities. To make justice more reliable and responsive to local demands, some European states, including Poland-Lithuania (1588) and Russia (1649), proceeded to collect, codify, and thus also clarify these partly contradictory laws. Denmark and Norway (1683 and 1687) were the first north-western European states to follow this example. Yet, while these early legal codes were extensive, they were very different from modern iterations: they were volumes of long, only partially systematic lists that lacked any sense of legal abstraction. Women and different categories of unfree people—including serfs and slaves, which still existed in many European societies—had very limited rights. The same went for the native populations of the growing imperial and colonial possessions held by European states. In addition, 'the law' could also mean the growing body of legal decisions within common law systems such as the one found in England. Or, it could mean the statutes of Roman and Canon law that, from the Renaissance onward, came to be studied and integrated into local legal understandings and practice in most of western and southern Europe, although not so much in northern and eastern Europe.

Finance and Personnel

The 'business' of the state expanded dramatically in early modern Europe. This business was warfare, and its expansion was directly related to the military revolution of the early-modern period. From around 1500, the number of troops increased rapidly, and those troops were taken gradually into permanent pay. Something similar happened from the mid-seventeenth century with Europe's naval forces. Thus emerged the so-called fiscal-military state. Medieval states had been financed primarily from the royal domains, supplemented with incidental contributions from the public negotiated in parliamentary sessions, but as time went on, taxation became as permanent as the troops they were paying for. In the process, states developed new forms of taxation and new ways of collecting taxes, but also started borrowing large sums on the domestic and international capital markets to cover their increased

spending. In Holland, the most heavily taxed region in Europe at the time, taxation claimed five to seven percent of a worker's wage or a guild master's income in the late sixteenth century, and over twice as much by the end of the seventeenth century. Over the same period, Holland's debts had increased from below ten million guilders to over 200 million. They would double again during the eighteenth century.

Organising and coordinating this expanding state demanded more personnel, almost always male. Traditionally, most of the state's business had been done by men who were not employed by the state itself, an arrangement that continued even while the number of state employees was rising. This applied everywhere, and on all levels of society. Military officers were recruiting and paying their own soldiers, which meant that provisioning the army was a private business. Locally, offices like poor relief, policing, or the fire service were part-time and went unpaid. It is therefore impossible to compare present-day numbers of civil servants with those of the early modern era. Still, we do know that in the early sixteenth century the French state had 7,000–8,000 royal officers alongside their administrative staff, or around one for every 2,000 inhabitants. By the end of the seventeenth century there were 60,000 officers and another 20,000 collecting taxes, which again was technically a private business in much of France. Together, they numbered one for every 200 inhabitants, a very steep increase that cannot be explained by changing definitions alone.

Officeholders and staff were also better trained. This period saw the rise of academics and other professionals in the service of the state. In multinational Spain, the new court councils and *juntas* (temporary or specialised committees), along with their respective secretariats, were made up of a large group of lawyers, aristocrats, and military personnel. Among the thirty-two members who joined the Amsterdam city council between 1600 and 1619, six held an academic degree, mostly in law; by 1700 it was exceptional for a councillor not to have one. With the professionalisation of bureaucracies came written job descriptions and printed forms to collect standardised information about population sizes, poor relief and, inevitably, taxes. The situation was rather different in Russia, however, where the lack of universities (the first one opened in 1755) and other training institutions meant that the expanding class of bureaucrats would learn on the job. Professional training emerged there only in the mid-eighteenth century and remained rudimentary until the 1830s.

This professionalisation should not be confused with the 'rise of the bourgeoisie'. It is true that, increasingly, the nobility was unable to occupy all positions of influence, not least because their numbers fell short. But we can't be as sure as previous generations of historians that this was part of a deliberate process to sideline the nobles. In many monarchies, successful administrators

were ennobled as a reward for their services and in some territories the offices were offered for sale with a noble title attached to them.

Representation and Citizenship

Modern democracy, which entitles the majority of adult citizens the right to vote in national elections, only emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century. It would however be wrong to think of early modern citizens as mere 'subjects', mercilessly at the whims of princes and their aristocracies. It is true that several European countries limited the scope of parliamentary representation, most famously in France, where from 1614 the States-General was no longer summoned, until that fateful summer of 1789. Parliaments like the States-General were usually meetings of representatives from corporate bodies, such as the church, the nobility, and towns and cities. England was one of the very few countries to have proper parliamentary elections, where an estimated 5–10 percent of the adult male population was entitled to vote. There, the number of urban representatives increased steadily after the Reformation, through the incorporation of an increasing number of urban settlements. By the time of the Glorious Revolution (1689) more than half of parliamentary seats were in fact controlled by urban citizens, even if their occupants were usually gentry or noblemen. In the Iberian and Italian kingdoms of the Spanish monarchy, the three social strata (nobility, clergy, cities) were represented in distinct parliaments (*Cortes*, *Corts*, *Parlamenti*); there was no central parliament. At the centre of power in Castile, progressively aristocratised, urban elites would become the exclusive voice of the kingdom after 1538, when Charles V stopped inviting the high aristocrats (*Grandes* and *Títulos de Castilla*) and the Catholic hierarchy to the meetings of the Castilian Cortes—not long after Castilian cities had risen up against the emperor during the war of the *Comuneros* (1520–1522).

As in Spain, the participation of early modern European citizens was much more extensive in regional assemblies and local institutions. And this made sense, because most public services were delivered regionally and locally, rather than nationally. Very few early modern states offered more than token contributions in the realms of education, health care and social support, or even infrastructure, justice and economic policy. Overwhelmingly, these lay within the remit of regional and local authorities, a fact overlooked by much of the historical literature.

Urban privileges sometimes included the right to be consulted about important decisions for those with formal citizenship. Perhaps half of all heads of households across Europe held this status, but with substantial geographical variations. In many German towns, guilds were formally

represented on the council. Guild members, who were citizens by definition, elected the Court of Aldermen that ruled the City of London. Petitioning was another generally accepted way to alert authorities to not only private, but also collective concerns. In seventeenth-century Amsterdam, much local legislation was copied verbatim from guild petitions. The early stages of the Civil War in England were accompanied by mass petitions in London, some collecting as many as 15,000 signatures. In many Italian cities, neighbourhood organisations provided social cohesion, and thus political influence, to the civic community. Civic militias, another common feature of urban life of the period, provided additional muscle to the community of citizens. During the Reformation, the Dutch Revolt and the English Civil War, these organisations helped 'revolutionary regimes' to power. Such institutions are not so well-documented in the countryside, but villages too seem to have had significant scope to regulate their own affairs, and this involved the participation of substantial numbers of villagers participating in their own governance. Women did participate in some of these local corporate institutions, but only to a limited extent; their participation in the political realm would remain very circumscribed until well into the twentieth century (though some European monarchies allowed women to succeed to the throne, under certain conditions), and even in the twenty-first century, many European countries are yet to have their first female prime minister or head of state.

Fig. 1: Reginald Lane Poole, "Europe in 1740", from *Historical atlas of modern Europe* (1903), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Historical_atlas_of_modern_ Europe_1903_(135895389).jpg.

Nations without Nationalism?

In an early modern world characterised by some as one of 'nations without nationalism', the case of the Spanish monarchy deserves particular attention. It was the result of a late-medieval dynastic union and other aggregations—some peaceful, some violent—during the second half of the sixteenth century; a composite of heterogeneous territories in Europe (the Iberian Peninsula, the largest islands of the central and western Mediterranean, Lombardy and Naples in Italy, the Franche-Comté of Burgundy and the Southern Netherlands), Africa, America, and even far-east Asia. Various forms of identity articulation within the Spanish monarchy converged to what some defined as a 'New Rome'. Despite the use of various languages, currencies, and legal systems, territories possessed by the King of Spain converged around shared political, religious, and cultural identity markers. An example of this was the conception of the nation as a sum of people beyond merely ethnic or linguistic components. Thus, the use of the Spanish nation to identify the natives of ancient Roman Hispania could be articulated side-by-side with ideas of other nations which, since the Middle Ages, had spread over the Iberian Peninsula and its adjacent islands: Castilian, Aragonese, Catalan, Portuguese, Valencian, or Galician, for example. These nations were territorially based but socially or culturally ambiguous. They themselves were the sum of certain homelands or republics, urban or rural, linked to each other on the basis of the right or privilege that they would receive from their sovereigns.

In the Russian Empire, by contrast, it makes little sense to talk of nations and nationalism before 1800. When the rulers of early modern Russia, expansionist as they were, spoke of the *narod* (people), they usually meant everyone inhabiting their lands. Loyalty to the tsar was the common ground, rather than religious, linguistic, or ethnic traits. Russian imperial rule came with plenty of hierarchies and discriminations based on socio-economic status, religion, and gender—while ethnicity and 'nationality' were rarely even recorded before the late nineteenth century. Early modern Russian leaders would frame the Russian Orthodox Church as the only legitimate successor to the Byzantine Church and hail Moscow as the 'Third Rome', reflecting a broader penchant for aggressive Christian rhetoric. And yet, this rhetoric neither precluded pragmatic accommodation on the ground, nor did it mean that the tsars wanted their subjects to be more Russian. As Moscow and later St Petersburg appropriated ever more neighbouring territories, the diversity of the population grew, which turned the selective promotion of difference into a pillar of imperial policy.

Still, proto-nationalisms were in evidence around Europe during the early modern period. There was an acknowledgement of cultural differences

attached to the various dress codes, languages, and cultural characteristics of different 'nations'. In the newly founded Dutch Republic, literary authors, but also the official committee providing a new translation of the Bible, made conscious efforts to develop a Dutch language, distinct from the Low-German that had so far dominated in the region. Likewise, after the United Kingdom was formed in the 1707 Union, the Church of England, the monarchy, and the army were instrumentalised in the creation of a British national identity.

Conclusion

The history of states during the early modern period was shaped by two major developments. In the first place, states became more powerful. Their institutions expanded, they had more money to spend and more personnel (mainly soldiers) in 1800 than they did in 1500. Secondly, the number of independent states declined as smaller units were absorbed by their neighbours or decided to collaborate in voluntary unions. Exact numbers depend on the definition of what a state was, but the trend was unmistakable. In the process, states became more concerned about their *identity*, which they framed around the concept of nationhood. These developments reached their apogee in the nineteenth century but were already underway during the centuries discussed in this chapter. These processes took different shapes in different regions of Europe, however, and their pace could be equally diverse. There was no single European path to state and nationhood.

Discussion questions

1. Describe how the idea of the 'nation' developed in early modern Europe. What were the most important factors that drove this development?

2. How did this development differ between Eastern and Western Europe, and why?

3. How do state-building efforts differ in the early modern and modern periods?

4. How does the way early modern Europeans thought about the nation differ from today?

Suggested reading

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Yun Casalilla, Bartolomé, and Patrick O'Brien, eds, *The Rise of Fiscal States: A Global History, 1500–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).