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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

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



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6.3.1 Centres and Peripheries in Early Modern Europe (c. 1500–1800)

Stefan B. Kirmse (with Marie-Laure Legay)

Introduction

This chapter discusses centre-periphery relations in early modern Europe, focusing on practical policy and its repercussions, while taking the evolution of discourse into account where appropriate. In so doing, it takes a sensitive view of power asymmetries and violence in early modern state-building; rather than reproducing the rhetoric of different centres, it tries to complement and challenge these narratives with more ‘peripheral’ perspectives. In addition, the chapter delves into the idiosyncrasies of the early modern period. How did centre-periphery relations during this period differ from earlier times and later developments? As this chapter alone cannot do justice to the variety of European experiences, it will zoom in on two specific contexts—France and Russia—and reveal instructive similarities and differences between these cases.

The notions of centre and periphery are laden with challenges. For most European contexts, the coexistence of central and peripheral institutions characterised both state and religious authorities. Many states had multiple centres, while peripheries were fluid and transient insofar as they became integrated into the heartlands over time. For some larger early modern powers, such as the British, Russian, and Ottoman Empires, the distinction between interior and exterior peripheries is helpful: the former often differed from both central regions and distant frontiers in that they retained the cultural heterogeneity characteristic of peripheries while gradually merging with the core in popular imagination and administrative practice (Scotland and Wales, for example, have been analysed as ‘internal peripheries’). Furthermore, new spatial thinking has led historians to see early modern states less as bounded territories and more as relatively open spaces in which historically developed communication routes and the natural environment (rivers, seas, plains, valleys, etc.) facilitated and increased connectivity far beyond state and

provincial borders. There is an open debate on whether the very categories of 'centre' and 'periphery' obscure more than they illuminate.

Either way, each case had its own concerns and peculiarities. For historians of France, territorial privilege and autonomy, along with representation and the social organisation of society, are crucial to understanding the dynamics of centre-periphery relations. Historians of Russia tend to trace these changing relations differently: given the vastness of Russian territory and continuing territorial expansion, the focus is more on the challenges of communication and administration, shifting frontiers, and ever-growing cultural diversity. At the same time, the two cases reveal a degree of contested centralisation that is less evident in cases such as early modern Germany, where the central power was often in no position to impose its will.

France: Territorial Privilege, Royal Power, and Changing Ideas of Representation

In late medieval and early modern France, many territories had privileges. Endowed with assemblies dominated by the nobility, these territories also produced discourses reflecting and reinforcing the ideal of noble governance. However, the social organisation of these privileged territories cannot be reduced to the rule of the nobility and its political identity since, over time, local assemblies that included members of the clergy, nobility, and the third estate evolved as ideological receptacles capable of absorbing and reworking new ideas of representation.

The monarchy had a contractual character: on many occasions, the kings of France conferred privileges, freedoms, charters, and other conventions that would form the basis of the political and fiscal claims put forward by the social and territorial bodies that benefitted from them. The rulers respected this long-standing principle, according to which the lord represented the common good but also had to maintain good customary practice. It was the provincial Estates—assemblies representing the tripartite structure of early modern society—that carefully recorded these kinds of promises. The Estates of Normandy, Dauphiné, Brittany, Béarn and Artois all had such precious charters defining their relations with the King. Provence was proud of its 'constitution', made up of fifty-three requests drawn up by the Estates of Aix in 1482 and presented to King Louis XI at the time of its unification with France. Similarly, Francis I (1515–1547) pronounced a declaration that recognised the privileges of Languedoc in fourteen articles.

The value of such provincial 'constitutions' partly depended on how the lands had been united with the Crown. Some seventeenth and eighteenth-century jurists distinguished between two types of union. The main type (*l'union*

principale) applied to those cases in which territory was given voluntarily to the new sovereign, on the basis of an agreement that enshrined the legal equality of the two 'states' concerned, as in the case of Provence. The other form was an ancillary union (*l'union accessoire*), which subjected the conquered territory to the laws of the centre. The ancillary union fully incorporated the new lands, turning them in a sense into mere provinces, subject only to the conditions of their capitulations. With acquisition by conquest becoming the most common route of territorial expansion in the seventeenth century, the legal integration of the territories took on a more absolute character. At the same time, the *capitulations*—in legal terms, a treaty of surrender and a provincial constitution in the form of notebooks—would set more precise rules for the political game.

The assertion of absolutism in the seventeenth century was a powerful challenge to the regional constitutional claims. Initially only in theory, central law soon imposed itself in practice on the territories that had become 'provinces' of France. According to Cardin Le Bret (1558–1655), a French statesman and jurist, it was for the sovereigns alone to change the ancient laws and ordinances of their Estates, which meant both general and municipal laws as well as the customs of particular provinces. In practice, even if the sovereign respected local privileges such as communal charters, he did not want them to do harm to the kingdom's financial performance. Louis XIII (1610–1643) stopped convening the assemblies of Dauphiné and Normandy, for example, to impose tax reforms. Over a period of five years (1635–1639), the administrative structure of Normandy was shaken to the core, which angered local authorities. Gathered again in 1638, the provincial Estates expressed their profound discontent with the reforms, yet the central authority was not overly concerned. More worried about salt fraud (*faux-saunage*) in these regions, it decided to establish a salt tax, which caused a revolt in 1639. The subsequent clampdown targeted the *parlement* of Rouen—one of about a dozen courts of law spread out across France—more than the provincial Estates, because the *parlement* was suspected of complacency towards the rebels.

It was not until the period of conflict known as the *Fronde* (1648–1653), when the nobility sought to weaken central power and take control over the provincial Estates, that Louis XIV (1643–1715) effectively terminated the latter's existence. The Estates-General had last been convened in 1614 by his predecessor. The King acted comparably in Franche-Comté: after conquering this territory on the kingdom's eastern border, he took the oath of the counts of Burgundy but otherwise reserved the right to legislate for himself. In the capitulation of 1674, he vowed to maintain the provincial estates, but never convened them. The local nobility protested vehemently. Yet the King was all the more determined, since he was faced with a conspiracy that same year,

which called for the reestablishment of the Estates of Normandy with all their prerogatives.

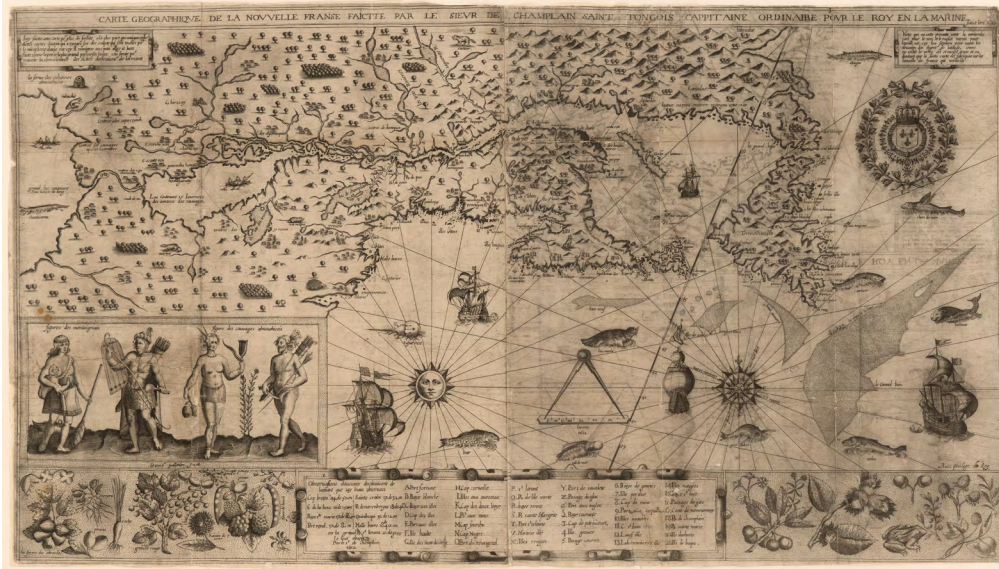


Fig. 1: Samuel de Champlain, *Map of New France* (1612), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Samuel_de_Champlain_Carte_geographique_de_la_Nouvelle_France.jpg.

The growing geopolitical power of the French absolutist monarchy encouraged geographical expansion and, ultimately, the establishment of overseas colonies that added a new dimension to core-periphery relations (and complicated the question of what constituted the ‘periphery’). ‘New France’, as the vast territorial acquisitions in North America came to be known, was initially run by a chartered company before being turned into an ordinary royal province in 1663. Matters of governance, criminal, and civil law were soon organised in accordance with models adopted from mainland France. However, specific offices also emerged and became a hallmark of French colonial possessions: these included the Governor-General, with a mixture of military and diplomatic functions, and the Sovereign or Supreme Council (*Conseil souverain* or *supérieur*), an institution serving as *parlement* in conquered territories and overseeing matters such as justice, police, and finance. These councils were established beyond the Atlantic—in ‘New France’, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and on Saint-Domingue (today’s Haiti), among others—but also in territories that had been incorporated into European France from around the mid-seventeenth century, such as Roussillon in the south and Alsace in the east.

Following the annexation of Corsica in 1768, a *conseil supérieur* was introduced on the island, which had been part of the Republic of Genoa for centuries until it developed a quasi-independence from 1730. Even after 1768,

the island legally remained in Genoese possession but came to be occupied and administered by France. The new authorities, however, found powerful local institutions, with Tuscan Italian as the dominant language. Following a long history of central assemblies with delegates from every part of the island (known as *consulte*), the period of independence turned these gatherings into a veritable national assembly. In 1755, this assembly adopted the Corsican Constitution, which, before the American and French Revolutions, unambiguously declared the sovereignty of the people, introduced the separation of powers, and extended full voting rights for the new parliament, the *Dietà Generale*, to all men over twenty-five years of age. After 1768, the new French authorities would not tolerate such a system on its periphery. A governor was installed on Corsica, along with other agents of the King, and the same system of social distinction and political representation used elsewhere in France was introduced. Notably, the Estates of Corsica were established with sixty-nine deputies, the first twenty-three of whom had to prove their 'nobility', the second twenty-three of whom were members of the clergy, and the third twenty-three of whom represented the 'Third Estate'. Some degree of Corsican 'otherness' was maintained though, as the courts, for example, could draw on French law but also on local customs and the Genoese Statute of 1694. French was prescribed for verdicts, but the use of Italian was permitted in legal proceedings. During the French Revolution, the Constituent Assembly in Paris finally declared Corsica to be an integral part of France. It also abolished the old regime's judicial and administrative institutions and replaced them with new republican ones.

The process of centralisation that drove the transformation of acquired territories into provinces did not only have political consequences. New forms of elite participation in the state apparatus accompanied the development of a uniform administrative frame. The evolution of centre-periphery relations in France also saw the renewal of services and service proposals by traditional social organisations, no longer as expressions of submission to the sovereign but as reflections of the political and administrative roles taken up by the elites. Provincial constitutional rhetoric continued to be expressed until the end of the *ancien régime*. More than that, the traditional elites would mythologise the past, confront the King's agents with the idea of a spurned tradition, and take refuge in the illusion of original freedom. While they became fixated on the specificities of their local privileges, the King's agents would continue to conclude administrative and financial agreements with local assemblies. Provincial law thus emerged from a discourse that the centre took seriously under specific circumstances. At the same time, a general questioning of the essence of government became prominent. Stirred by philosophers like John Locke (1632–1704) and Montesquieu (1689–1755), and more humble thinkers

such as Victor Riqueti de Mirabeau (1715–1789), the constitutional question began to interest wider circles.

Russia: Shifting ‘Peripheries’, Representation, and Cultural Diversity

The rapidly expanding Grand Principality of Moscow formally adopted the title of the Tsardom of Russia (*Russkoe tsarstvo*) in 1547, before declaring itself an ‘empire’ (*imperiia*) in 1721. There, centre-periphery relations were also contested and negotiated but, in comparison to France, they were less subject to formal contracts, let alone constitutions. Notably, in various Russian principalities during the Middle Ages, local populations had enjoyed greater autonomy and more influential bodies of representation than they would for most of the early modern era. In the medieval republics of Novgorod (1136–1478) and Pskov (1348–1510), and in many parts of the neighbouring union of Poland-Lithuania prior to 1500, the ruling ‘princes’ were appointed by, and answered to, popular assemblies known as *vecha* (singular: *veche*), which included nobles as well as poor townfolk. These forums would not hesitate to reject the decisions of their princes, or even chase them out of office. By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, however, Moscow had absorbed most rival principalities. Given Russia’s developing identity as a great power, Ivan IV (the ‘Terrible’, 1530–1584), who reigned as the first ‘Tsar’ from 1547–1584, pushed for ever more centralised rule. First, governors aided by troops and administrative staff were established throughout the expanding Muscovite state. They would receive state salaries while enjoying considerable local discretion. By 1625, the realm counted 146 such governors. Second, dozens of central administrative organs known as *prikazy* emerged in Moscow, with some of them devoted to specific functions, such as foreign affairs, and others to territories, such as the Kazan and Siberian *prikazy*. These proto-ministries would maintain growing numbers of staff in both the capital and the regions, especially for the purposes of taxation, paying salaries, and for meting out justice.

Centralisation, however, remained patchy and contested. The early modern periphery was an open, diverse, and transient space. As the tsardom’s border was extended further and further to the east and south, it was secured by ever more fortification lines and (mainly local) military servitors. Still, beyond garrison towns, central rule remained elusive. During rebellions by the fiercely autonomous Cossacks (1667–1671 and 1773–1775), who otherwise offered military service to the tsars, central troops fought for years to re-establish control. Even after such revolts, on the ‘Russian’ side of the border, most issues concerning justice, finances, military service, and land use had to be negotiated

between various state, religious, and local elites, usually without any written charters or representative bodies. Beyond the open border, by contrast, formal agreements played a role in defining relationships with adjacent allies, including Ukrainian Cossacks. The latter's allegiance to the Tsar, in return for autonomy, was enshrined in the 'March Articles' of 1654 (also known in Russian as the Treaty of Pereyaslav). Written agreements known by the Turkic word *sherty* also formalised relations with Muslim Tatar and Kalmyk nomadic leaders, defining, among other things, reciprocal monetary obligations. Muslim chieftains would receive regular payments from the Muscovite state for their services in securing the border. Ivan IV thus wrote to one of these Muslim leaders in July 1559:

Come to us with all the people that are now with you. And we will give space to all of you on the frontier [na Ukraine] in Meshchera, where you may wander as nomads as you wish. We will owe you a great salary. ("Posol'skaia kniga: po sviaziam Rossii s Nogaiskoi ordoi, 1557-1561", in *Prodolzhenie drevnei rossiiskoi vivliofiki*, vol. X, St. Petersburg, 1795, pp. 48-49)

Admittedly, the borderland allies did not always feel bound by such agreements, which they saw more as temporary alliances, and continued to raid Russian settlements.



Fig. 2: Portrait of Catherine II of Russia. Wikimedia, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Empress_Catherine_II.jpg.

It was only under Catherine II (1762–1796) that the central grip became more tangible, after a series of reforms and territorial reorganisations which also defined the responsibilities and rights of towns, provinces, and districts. By the late eighteenth century, the empire had abolished or violently displaced most formerly autonomous formations on the frontier, including the Cossack settlements. Still, central rule remained territorialised in that many central laws were made applicable only to specific regions, such as the ‘western provinces’, the ‘Volga region’, and so on. As a result, the situation of a particular group of subjects (for example, Muslims, merchants of the first guild, or peasants on state lands) could be vastly different depending on where they lived. Administrative centralisation did not deliver legal uniformity.

Territorial expansion and organisation were key to centre-periphery relations in Russia. Assemblies and popular representation were less central to the development of these relations than in France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe. The Duma, an advisory organ with no formal powers that included between one and two dozen nobles (‘boyars’) from the most important families in Muscovite society, was regularly summoned to consolidate the legitimacy of, and popular support for, the Tsar’s decisions. It coexisted with a larger central institution called *zemskii sobor* (assembly of the land), which the tsars convened every few years between 1549 and 1684 for the same reasons. Historians differ on the question of the assembly’s composition but, at different times, it included boyars, provincial governors, lower gentry, Russian Orthodox clergy, townsfolk, and peasants. This central institution, however, did not systematically channel regional interests. With few exceptions (such as the Baltic provinces, which were allowed to retain their German-speaking *Landtage* after the Russian conquest in 1710), there were no regional assemblies or parliaments recognised by the centre. It was only in 1766 that Catherine II introduced ‘noble assemblies’ at the provincial and district levels and allowed them to look into local matters. In 1767–1768, she convened a Legislative Commission in Moscow and St Petersburg to produce a new legal code, with delegates representing many social groups and regions bearing instructions from those who had locally selected them. Yet, this advisory commission never produced any substantive laws or codes; it was significant mainly in that it provided the Empress with information on local concerns.

The idea of three distinct ‘estates’ in a Western European sense (clergy, nobility, common people) fails to capture the real-life hierarchies of early modern Russia. Other categories had greater legal impact: poll-tax payers, for example, a category from which not only clergymen and higher nobility were exempted but also rich merchants and many non-Russian rural residents; lesser nobles and bureaucrats, by contrast, often had to pay this tax along with most commoners. Among the clergy and nobility, it also mattered whether someone

was (Orthodox) Christian. Muslim and Buddhist nobles and ‘clergy’, for example, had more limited privileges while others, including the (Protestant) Baltic Germans, actually enjoyed more privileges than most Russians. As for the rural population, there were so many legal differences between Russian Orthodox and non-Orthodox peasants and between state-owned peasants and privately-owned serfs that the category of ‘peasant’ meant little. Cossacks and *inorodtsy* (literally, ‘those of other descent’), a term that captured some but not all non-Russians, formed separate legal categories altogether. Footnotes in legal texts made sure that many rights were withheld from the Jewish population. Ethno-religious differences were thus just as important as social distinctions in imperial society. Unlike many Western monarchies, the Russian Empire took pride in its cultural diversity and flaunted it wherever possible—while privileging the Russian Orthodox. Since some Russian regions had large percentages, even majorities, of non-Russians, the legal status of these communities would also shape the relationship between Moscow, St Petersburg and their various ‘peripheries’. Moreover, the reality of large indigenous communities and predominantly Russian-staffed local administrations would raise the question of which ‘peripheries’ were also Russian ‘colonies’.

Eventually, the centre’s advance across Eurasia along with improvements in cartography led the geographer and statesman Vasily Tatishchev (1686–1750) to give impetus in the 1730s to an intellectual debate about Russia’s true centre and periphery. By selecting the Ural Mountains as the natural border between Europe and Asia, he not only divided Russia into a ‘European’ and an ‘Asiatic’ part—thereby confirming the European identity of St Petersburg’s elites—but he also turned the land beyond the mountains into the empire’s ultimate periphery. Talk of Russia’s ‘interior provinces’ inside its European half would soon become commonplace. The debate on ‘Russianness’, however, along with extensive discussions of Russia’s geographical core and peripheries, would not gather full pace until the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In early modern Europe, with few exceptions, the development of core-periphery relations was shaped by centralisation, which gradually supplanted earlier forms of local autonomy. The cases of France and Russia, however, also show that this process was neither completed nor uncontested. Local institutions, demands, and thinking had to be accommodated, to a degree, and left strong legacies, from territorial privilege and constitutional thought to the realisation that the centre’s power was sometimes elusive and often negotiable. Early modern states were more open than their modern successors, and less

penetrated and controlled by the centre. Still, this did not stop the centre from meeting resistance with force.

France and Russia both pursued policies of colonial expansion, with new 'peripheries' serving a mixture of geopolitical and economic interests. While both moved into adjacent territories (which in the Russian case extended as far as Siberia), France also engaged in overseas colonialism. These different forms of expansion led to an increase and diversification of peripheries and peripheral societies. At the same time, France tended to reproduce its own, tripartite social structure in newly acquired territories (some of which were not so different in social terms) while early modern Russia had too diverse a society (with many different religions, languages, etc.) and too tenuous a central grip to be able, or even aspire, to impose its social structure on borderlands. This would change dramatically in the modern period.

Discussion questions

1. To what extent did centralisation succeed or fail in early modern Europe?
2. What are the main similarities and differences between France and Russia in terms of centre-periphery relations?
3. Which different notions of representation played a role in early modern rule over 'peripheries'?
4. To what extent is the study of colonies and colonialism relevant for 'core-periphery relations'?
5. How useful is it to apply the spatial logic of 'centre' and 'periphery' to early modern states?

Suggested reading

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