

## **PART FOUR**

### **LATE MONARCHISM**

The period of European history for which I have, for convenience, labelled 'late monarchism', begins and ends with wars fought between the great powers of their time which engulfed most of Western Europe. During the period in between there were economic developments, scientific advances, technical inventions, and philosophical movements which transformed the political mentality, cultural environment and the power structure first of Europe and eventually of the whole world. Monarchism itself underwent a change, though of a less momentous kind, in England, France and Germany.

To begin with, there was even a quite striking resemblance in the situation of England, France and Germany. Charles I of England faced an increasingly stubborn opposition from a Parliament which finally resorted to military opposition, dethroned him and executed him. France had a new king, Louis XIV, in 1643; he was four years old. The Queen Mother, as regent, and Cardinal Mazarin, as chief minister, had a dissident and eventually rebellious nobility, headed by a prince of the royal family, to contend with, together with a hostile and critical *parlement* of Paris; in 1648, civil war broke out, far more destructive and demoralising than the one fought in England. Germany was far worse off than France or England. The Thirty Years War turned it into a disaster area. By the end, Frankfurt-am-Oder had been reduced from 13,000 to 2,000 inhabitants, Magdeburg from about 25,000 to 2,400 odd. Even then, the famines and epidemics which prolonged the miseries of the war until the last years of the seventeenth century killed off a large proportion of those who survived it.

But any resemblance between the situation of the three countries proved to be temporary. The wars which split France and England were essentially civil wars, involving Frenchmen and Englishmen only - although Scots joined in the English Civil War at times, first on one side and then the other. The Thirty Years War, though also a civil war in principle, soon became international, with Sweden, the Netherlands, France and Spain joining in. Germany itself ceased to exist as a political unit. Such rule as there was over German territory - and its inhabitants - was a matter of separate kingdoms, dukedoms, abbeys, archbishoprics, fifty-one imperial cities, and over one thousand imperial counts and knights. Brandenburg, which grew to become Prussia, and a 'great power', in the next hundred years, had lost half its inhabitants. Frederick William, when he became Elector in 1640, inherited "a realm which seemed on the point of dissolution... with his Rhineland holdings ringed around by Dutch and Spanish armies, the province of East Prussia in open disaffection, and even Brandenburg itself, with the exception of Berlin and a few

fortresses, under foreign occupation."<sup>1</sup>

In most respects, society in Western Europe had hardly changed from what it had been in the previous hundred and fifty years. The hierarchic order of groups ranked by status remained unchallenged. The nobility, still based on the possession of large estates of land, were even more solidly entrenched as the first order of society (the upper clergy being in large part drawn from them), though their influence in the west came from their wealth and easier access to monarchy. Resort by them to armed force was a thing of the past. Rulers in Eastern Europe either, as in Brandenburg/Prussia and Russia, enlarged the powers of the great landowners by drawing them into their service as administrators, or, as in Hungary, surrendered to their demand for exemption from any kind of service - including taxation. In Western Europe, the acceleration in the growth of industry and trade meant that merchants and financiers, and those who provided financial and legal services for them, grew in numbers and became both more visible as a section of society and a little more significant politically.

As for the lowest ranks of society (more than half the population of most countries, western as well as eastern), living conditions remained much the same in most places, and worsened in some. By the end of the eighteenth century, serfdom had been almost eliminated in the west. Slavery still existed, even in England, where advertisements for the sale of slaves could still be found in newspapers late in the eighteenth century; Bristol and Liverpool grew prosperous on the slave trade, although the movement for the abolition of slavery and for putting a stop to the trade had already begun.

Owing to the much greater freedom of travel and the spread of literacy, fashion, among the aristocracy and wealthier classes - in dress and social manners, but also in styles of painting, music, drama and theatrical entertainment - was much more uniform, largely because most countries followed the lead given by the French. The incidence of famine and plague fell, and populations grew, though at very different rates. Agricultural production improved in the Netherlands and the neighbouring countries, especially England; industrial production, mostly domestic, grew rather faster, and domestic and international trade faster still.

Things were altogether different when it comes to the international situation. Spain, especially, and Austria, the 'Great Powers' of the earlier monarchist period, lost their pre-eminence after the Thirty Years War, to be succeeded by France and, in the eighteenth century, Prussia, Russia, and Britain. Rulers in Prussia and Russia either enlarged their powers by drawing the nobility and the wealthier landowners into their service as administrators or surrendered to their demand for exemption from any kind of service - including taxation. The number of serfs grew enormously in Russia.

Politically, there was much more diversity than one might expect from what had gone before. Monarchy, still the characteristic form of government in the eighteenth century, meant hereditary monarchy, for the most part, although in Poland, the monarch was elected by the nobility, but was often a foreigner, and in Germany, the Holy Roman

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<sup>1</sup> G.A.Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945*, O.U.P., 1955, p. 2.

Emperor was elected by nine electors: six rulers of German states and three archbishops (although for centuries they had chosen the Hapsburg ruler of Austria). In Sweden, the disastrous end to the campaigns waged by Charles XII led to a violent reaction against his despotism and actually, in 1720, to a new constitution - guaranteed by Russia - which put strict limits to royal powers and put legislation and administrative control in the hands of a Council and the Estates - virtually an aristocratic oligarchy. In England, claims to absolute monarchy were challenged before 1689, and abandoned thereafter; ministers and executive officials remained royal appointments, but their actions were strictly monitored by the House of Commons, which retained control over all legislative powers, including taxation.

Even apart from these exceptions, the monarchic constitutions of European states did not conform to any single pattern. There were also republics, which seem to display greater uniformity, but largely because they are best described as plutocracies; they were ruled by the rich. Republics were certainly no more democratically inclined than the monarchies. In Italy, Venice, the great republic of medieval times, still survived, but was politically negligible, and what commercial significance it still had lay in its attractions as a tourist centre; the other republics, Genoa and Lucca were of even less consequence, especially after Genoa lost Corsica to France. The Dutch United Provinces was a federated republic, but there was what could be regarded as a monarchist tendency, in that the elected *Stadtholder*, who headed the administration in all or most of them was the same descendant of William the Silent, who had led the Dutch Revolt at the end of the sixteenth century. Republican opposition to the *Stadtholder* was centred in Holland, by far the richest and most powerful of the seven provinces. Switzerland was also a federal republic, but here the situation was reversed. Any democratic tendencies were confined to the more rural cantons. Zurich and Bern were essentially city-states governed by an upper class of rich merchants and financiers; so was Geneva, until 1768, when a revolt staged by the middle-ranking category of burghers won recognition for their right to a voice in the General Council - hitherto subject to veto by the 'Two Hundred', the richer citizens who monopolized seats in the Small Council, the governing body. (Significantly, the attempt to claim similar recognition made soon after by the lowest category of citizens, who had no political rights at all, was suppressed by the two upper classes in combination.)

Hardly any country had a written constitution, and few had one that was recognised and accepted by all those who were nominally the ruler's subjects. In the larger countries of eastern Europe - Russia, Poland, Austria and Brandenburg-Prussia - government and administration (by ministers and officials appointed by and responsible to the monarch) were one and the same, although the significance of the tie varied enormously. Under Frederick William I, men who were not of noble birth played an exceptionally large part in the administration, but under his son, Frederick the Great, the proportion of nobles increased considerably. In Russia, orders of nobility were created out of the richer, and privileged, landowners by Peter the Great in order to man the administrative system he devised (largely along the lines of Frederick William of Prussia). Their powers were greatly enlarged by Catherine the Great.

The extent to which individuals or groups could influence or at least gain access to its monarch was centrally important in the political concerns of every country, even in England, although this became of less and less significance as political cliques, cabals and, eventually, parties became more important in Parliament. In those countries - Hungary, Milan, the Netherlands, as well as Upper and Lower Austria - ruled by the Austrian Emperor, there were provincial and local institutions with a deeply entrenched and powerful political tradition of their own. Until the accession of Maria Theresa, these traditional rights and privileges were at their most influential, and 'the hereditary dominions of the Hapsburgs were in some ways rather an aristocratic republic, a federation of great noble families, than a genuine monarchy.'<sup>2</sup>

Administration was either by officials appointed by the monarch or in the hands of the 'intermediate bodies' that Montesquieu regarded as proper - even essential - components of a constitution, as in the Netherlands, or it was split, more or less uneasily, between them. Most of the intermediate bodies were rooted in tradition, regarded ministries as their natural enemies, and looked to popular support in their frequent challenges to ministerial power.

Apart from Prussia, where Frederick William I inaugurated 'cameral studies' at two universities and made provision for young recruits to receive practical training, senior administrators were in general untrained and were either paid not at all or rather badly; in most cases they collected fees for any judicial services they performed, and were usually well provided for by sinecures. Officials were at best poorly paid, but they too looked to fees from private individuals or corporations for specific services; in England, for example, Parliamentary officials collected fees for the numerous private bills and petitions which were the mainstay of ordinary parliamentary business.

The two principal concerns of the state were - properly speaking - to provide, and to provide for, administrative services and armed forces. The central purpose of administration was the settlement of disputes according to law together with the maintenance of public order. While law was an arm of the administration, nowhere outside Britain was there any comprehensive system of state courts. The higher judiciary was a department of the royal administration, but the settlement of disputes was largely handled by large networks of subsidiary courts. For the most part these were *seigneurial* courts dating back to medieval times. First-hand knowledge and experience of law and legal process was gained for people in most countries of Europe in courts of this kind and, for the great part, it was a costly and bitter experience. In 1789, there were up to 80,000 full and part-time judges of this kind in France. *Seigneurial* rights of jurisdiction could be bought by well-to-do merchants or professional men as a status symbol or purely as an investment, for justice had to be paid for. A very large proportion of the lawyers and court officials who lived off them, levying fees and dues of different sorts on the commoners who came before them, were poorly qualified or not qualified at all.

England was different. The independence of its judiciary was unique, like its Parliament. Justices of the peace, who exercised jurisdiction in the lower courts, were local notables,

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<sup>2</sup> M.S. Anderson, *Europe in the Eighteenth Century*, Longmans, 3rd edn., 1987, p.152.

untrained in the law, usually squires or clergymen. They carried the main responsibility for public order, especially when they were convened in Quarter Sessions to act together, usually under a legally qualified chairman, as a court of law for the whole county, or borough.

There was, however, little difference between countries when it came to public order. Robbery, often violent, was a perpetual affliction in town and country. Increased prices for food and new or higher taxes often provoked riots and demonstrations, and government administration had in the last resort to deal with them by calling out the army. No country, apart from France, had any police force worth mentioning, and even there it was chiefly a matter of highway patrols outside Paris, where it was faced with a multiplicity of tasks, the supervision of markets being chief among them. Judicial authority everywhere had resort to the deterrent effect of condign punishment; England was not alone in multiplying the number of crimes punishable by death. And paid informers were used extensively. Prisons were used mostly for debtors and for those awaiting trial, deportation, or execution, but conditions in them, which had always been bad, did begin to attract some attention from reformers towards the end of the monarchic period, although what little was eventually done in the nineteenth century contributed to improvements in management and surveillance rather than in the living conditions of prisoners.

The contingencies facing almost every country in Europe, eastern as well as western, after the traumatic experiences of the mid-century and of the demonstrated impotence of established governmental authority in the face of powerful dissident interests all needed money. For the appeal to rulers of having a powerful, permanent, military force at their disposal was overwhelming, and far more important than the maintenance of public order

There were wide differences in the form of tax, in its yield, in the way it was collected, and also a good deal of guesswork involved. Most countries levied a land tax. In England, the Treasury assumed that land tax at four shillings in the pound would yield a constant £2 million a year in revenue (in fact the yield was much less). It was collected by receivers-general, who were paid for their services by commissions on the sums collected; after 1698, commissioners were appointed by local MP's instead of the Crown. There were other forms of direct tax. Capitation (a kind of poll-tax, usually graduated) was a form of taxation much favoured in France; it was for example levied on the corporations who were authorised to control the trade they were engaged in. The *dixiemes* or *vingtiemes* (levied on the estimated year's value of produce) occasionally imposed on French landowners, were fiercely resented, but the resentment was directed towards the tax-farmers who collected it (and made fortunes out of it) rather than the King.

The greatest difficulty, however, was that taxation systems were so irrational and inflexible. In general taxation was neither equitably assessed nor efficiently collected. .... Over much of Catholic Europe the Church paid less than its share ... In most countries the nobility and the landowners were favoured: in some, such as Hungary and Poland, outrageously so. In many others, the towns were favoured at the expense of the countryside. Moreover fiscal systems, even when good in theory, often had their

effectiveness reduced by the existence of a complex of rights and exemptions.<sup>13</sup>

Big discrepancies occurred in the amounts collected not only between provinces but even among neighbouring local communities. 'There was a fairly general tendency for areas near the capital, where the government's hand lay relatively heavy, to pay considerably more than remote frontier ones.' Again, there might be some political leverage available: 'the south-western counties of England were under-assessed during this period mainly, it seems, because they were over-represented in the House of Commons.'<sup>14</sup>

Because they were levied on expenditure rather than income, so that any resentment against them was also indirect (an assumption so enduring as to amount nowadays to a cherished conviction of all governments) indirect taxes were favoured, especially in England, where taxation was in general much heavier (or, rather, yielded much more) than elsewhere. They came mostly by way of customs and excise duties collected by officials appointed by the Crown; there were also sales taxes, and state monopolies: the notorious *gabelle* on salt dates from the middle ages, but France's tobacco monopoly was imposed in the monarchic period, as was the monopoly on sales of alcohol in Sweden.

A good deal of guesswork was involved in all forms of taxation, both direct and indirect; in England, for example, the Treasury assumed that excise on malt would yield a constant £750,000. Elsewhere, there were innumerable customs duties because of the continued existence of the customs barriers at the entry of towns and at the frontier of provinces; in Germany, with its hundreds of small states, they were a nightmare.

Whatever similarity there was between the situation of the major countries of Western Europe at the outset of the period I have labelled 'Late Monarchism', it was obliterated during the eighteenth century. The only feature they had in common seems to be the wars which involved almost all of them much of the time. The impact of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and of the 'Great Transformation', (which is dealt with in summary fashion in Part Five) drove them even farther apart.

On the other hand, the slow build-up of commercial and financial capitalism and the simultaneous growth of essentially craft-based technology and natural science on which the industrialisation, first, of Britain, and then, two generations later, of Europe, was founded are manifest (mostly, but by no means entirely, in Britain) during this self same period of 'late monarchism'.

Yet again, the flagrant corruption which prevailed in the public life of Britain and France throughout the eighteenth century, and the sheer incompetence of French administration in economic and social affairs, which led to the emergence and (all-too-slow) growth of reformism in Britain and contributed to the explosion of the French Revolution, are features which may be said to be characteristic of the late monarchist period.

It is almost as if a kind of fundamental incoherence - intellectual, institutional, moral,

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<sup>3</sup> M.S. Anderson, *Europe in the Eighteenth Century*, pp.130-1.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

economic - had taken over after the religious divisions of the earlier monarchist period had slackened into indifference or tolerance.