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Final Paper

1. Old Regime

Until the latter half of the eighteenth century, Europe’s economic and social organization was considered to be under the “Old Regime.” The Old Regime is characterized traditional family structures and economies, aristocratic political and legal elites, limited rights for lower working classes, and pre-revolution agriculture and industry. Additionally, the Old Regime precedes the eras of intellectual thought and technological advancements. This way of life existed until European advancement prompted revolution after revolution that would abolish the Old Regime. However, the existence of this economic and social organization would have a lasting effect on Europe for centuries to come and is thus a critical foundation for understanding modern western civilizations.

In eighteenth century European households, “there were two basic models, one characterizing northwestern Europe and the other eastern Europe” (456). In northwestern Europe, households typical consisted of a married couple with their children and servant(s) with little to no extended family. Once a child had reached their early teens, they would typically leave home to look for work and a spouse to create a life of their own, a practice known as neolocalism. Marriage in northwestern Europe usually occurred while the couple was in their mid-twenties and children followed soon thereafter. In eastern Europe, a household could contain three to four generations and extended family lived under the same roof. For most, marriage occurred before the age of twenty and thus children were born to young parents who received help from other family members to raise their children. “In Russia, marrying involved not starting a new household, but remaining in and expanding one already established” (457).

The family economy was a critical dynamic of both social and economic organization in the Old Regime. “Throughput Europe, most people worked within the family economy. That is the say, the household was the basic unit of production and consumption” (457). Everyone in the family worked as soon as they became able to do so. Rarely did a family own enough land to fully support themselves and so some members of the household held jobs as artisans, fisherman, or harvesters so they could provide an extra source of income. Many children in western Europe took jobs as servants or apprentices in order to earn money for their families. Additionally, a widow would quickly remarry after the death of her husband in order to keep the family economy going as women were typically not as skilled in the work force or frequently hired as men. “In eastern Europe, the family economy functioned in the context of serfdom and landlord domination” (457). Multigenerational families remained on the land and worked as cultivators practically their entire lives. Very little artisan and merchant households existed and mobility was much more limited than that of western Europe.

The aristocracy of the Old Regime was an extremely powerful social, economic, and political class in Europe during the eighteenth century. In most European states, the aristocracy only accounted for a very insignificant percent of the population, “yet in every country, it was the single wealthiest sector of the population; had the widest degree of social, political, and economic power; and set the tone for polite society” (451). Aristocracy derived from one’s birth right and awarded various exclusive legal privileges; however, each state had its own specific definition of what it meant to be a member of the aristocracy.

In Great Britain, “the smallest, wealthiest, best defined, and most socially responsible aristocracy” (451) exerted their control by obtaining seats in the House of Lords and House of Commons as well as owning about twenty-five percent of the state’s farmable land. Because only the eldest son of a noble British family could sit in the House of Lords, the other nobles involved themselves in other professions such as commerce, business, the military, and the church. In France, the nobility was divided into various subgroups: nobles “of the sword” (noble because of military service), nobles “of the robe” (noble because of bureaucratic service), nobles in favor of the royal court, and nobles opposed to the royal court. These distinct groups sometimes caused a clash between members of the French aristocracy; however, all nobles could enjoy certain privileges such as exemption from the land tax and corvee service, a reduced income tax, the right to collect feudal dues, and exclusive hunting and fishing rights.

“East of the Elbe River, the character of nobility became even more complicated and repressive” (451). In Poland, the *szlachta* nobility paid no taxes after 1741 and only a few nobles were wealthy enough to own large amounts of land and exercise political power. In Austria and Hungary, the nobles had totally judicial power over the peasants and enjoyed various tax privileges. The power of the Prussian nobles grew with the reign of Frederick the Great in 1740, who chose Junker nobility to hold positions as officers and governmental elites. Junkers also exercised total control over the peasantry. The Russian nobility was established during the eighteenth century and became more well defined with each new ruler beginning with Peter the Great’s creation of the Table of Ranks. In every state during the eighteenth century, the aristocracy played a large role in the politics and economy of their country and took advantage of the working class to increase their wealth and power.

In contrast to the powerful European aristocracy, the peasantry was typical poor and totally reliant on the land for survival. In Great Britain and France, the peasants were usually free, bound only by feudal dues and heavy taxation. In eastern Europe, peasants possessed far fewer rights and were completely dominated by the aristocracy by taxation and manorial courts. “On the Continent, the burden of taxation fell on the tillers of the land” (453). In France, many peasants were subject to forced labor, or corvee, by the land lord and, similarly, in Habsburgs lands, peasants were legally required to serve the lords, which was known as *robot*. Russian serfs were by far the most mistreated and repressed of all European peasantry. “Nobles reckoned their wealth by the number of ‘souls,’ or male serfs, they owned rather than the size of their acreage” (453). Russian land lords dictated the lives of their workers by forcing them to work as often as needed (which often meant six days a week) and by the ability to punish their serfs however they wished, which could include exile to Siberia. The situation for peasants was better in southeastern Europe. Due to a small labor force, many land lords treated their workers with protection and provided them with all the material needed to live a sustainable life on their land. However, peasants were still often economically dependent on their land lords, who still held considerable power over their serfs.

Agriculture and industry were limited during the Old Regime. Agriculture relied on traditional tools and manual labor to produce goods and profit. However, with an increase in population and a rise in the price of food, land lords soon sought methods to improve their lands productivity. This prompted the Agricultural Revolution of the eighteenth century. These advancements included crop rotation methods, selective animal breeding, development of new crops, and enclosure field methods. This revolution did not spread into eastern Europe with much success. “In Prussia, Austria, Poland, and Russia, agricultural improvement was limited” (461). A majority of the labor forces worked on the land, leaving industry relatively under developed until the agricultural revolution called for the production of more farm equipment and manufacture of other goods. However, the biggest increase in industry would occur during the Industrial Revolution, which originated in Britain but spread across the world. This would prompt the biggest urbanization experienced in Europe to date as many families and worked flocked to the cities in order to work in newly developed factories. This extreme population growth in cities created terrible living conditions and caused numerous health crisis for developing European cities.

With the rise of new schools of thoughts, development of various machines, and a growing separation from traditional family life and economy, Europe would soon leave lifestyles of the Old Regime behind, although its influence can still be seen throughout Europe today.

5. World War I

World War I was the most drastic turning point in western civilization. It was the first total war Europe had experienced and it laid the foundation for a century of global conflict. Although the official start of the war was prompted by an assassination, preexisting alliance systems and political entities made the war possible in the first place. Additionally, the technological development, shift of power, and emergence of new states had a lasting impact on the world that is still felt today.

World War I was ignited by the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 which sent Austria and Serbia to war with each other. This conflict could have remained localized had there not already been a complex alliance system in Europe. Germany, a growing power under Otto van Bismarck, had originally made an alliance with Austria and Russia, known as the Three Emperors League, and together they planned on dominating eastern Europe. However, dispute soon caused the alliance to become the Dual Alliance between Austria and Germany. Later, Italy joined the pair and this alliance became known as the Triple Alliance. England and France joined with Russia to create the Triple Entente. The combination of this alliance system and unrest in southeastern Europe proved the perfect environment for breeding war. “Bismarck had built his alliance system to maintain peace, but the new alliance system increased the risk of war and made the Balkans a likely spot for it to break out” (832). Therefore, Archduke Francis Ferdinand’s assassination sparked the war between Austria and Serbia, but these two nations were backed by Germany and Russia, respectively. Russia, as member of the Triple Entente was also aided by France and Britain. Italy also joined the war in alliance with Germany and Austria as the Triple Alliance. Thus, Europe was engulfed in a continental war, and because Japan and the U.S, as well as various colonial territories, became involved later in the war, one small political attacked became a global crisis.

The war became a battle between the Allies and the Central Powers. “The Allies… held superiority in numbers and financial resources, as well of command of the seas… the Central Powers had the advantages of possessing internal communication and having launched their attack first” (837). This was the first modern war Europe had experienced and they neglected to learn from the misery of the American Civil War, a war of advanced weaponry and little mobility. These two factors created trench warfare which is the style of warfare that dictated World War I. The war took a huge toll on both military and civilians for both sides. “The heavy cost in lives and wounds of the fighting forces was terrible, but the burden on the civilian population was also enormous” (841). Civilians were expected to “man the home front” which meant to direct all their attention to benefitting the war. Women filled the roles left behind by men joining the military, children entered the work force earlier, and agriculture and heavy industry dominated the economy in order to provide for the needs of the war. The government also intervened in the economy in order to increase production needed for the war.

Several important events and significant figures had huge impacts on the course of the war. A majority of the war was fought on the western front, but other battles such as the 1916 Battles of Verdun 9longest single battle of the war) and Somme (British attempt to save French Verdun) were also critical. In 1917, the Russian Revolution occurred, taking away much of Russia’s focus from the war. After a German attack on a British liner, *the Lusitania*, the U.S entered the war alongside the Allies. President Woodrow Wilson issued the Fourteen Points in 1918, which outlined the necessary changes that needed to be in place in order to peace and progress to ensue in Europe. In 1918, the Armistice on the Western Front ended war. William II of Germany abdicated the throne on November 9, 1918 and “two days later… the government signed the armistice that ended the war by accepting German defeat” (852). The 1919 Treaty of Versailles was extremely harsh on Germany and forced them to pay immense war reparation, give up territory for the creation of new states, cut down their military, and installed the mandate system. This left Germany in a crippling economic and political state until the rise of Hitler’s Nazi Germany.

World War I proved to be a huge turning point for Europe and the rest of the World’s powers. The new technology developed during this time lead to tens of millions of casualties and proved important for developing new laws for wars in the future. Also, the shift in power during this war gave the Allies, particularly the U.S., an advantage in in the world economy and political scene. The war also laid the foundation for two other deadly and influential wars in the century to come: World War II and the Cold War.

7. Cold War

In the first half of the twentieth century, World War I and World War II transformed the political, economic, and social dynamic of Europe and the rest of the world. However, left over tension and the emergence of two powerful nations with opposing ideologies created a third war that would last decades. These two main powers of the Cold War were the United States, and the Soviet Union, and both were equipped with nuclear weapons, making the war especially threatening. The War was a long struggle to install either democracy (U.S.) or communism (Soviet Union) into other governments all over the world. These two political and economic ideologies are total opposites and thus conflict ensues between these two states and their allies. These conflicting systems created a European schism as countries felt obligated to join either the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (U.S.) or the Warsaw Pact (Soviet Union). Once again, the west was divided and war persisted.

The causes of the Cold War are difficult to directly identity as complex political and social relations between western countries were present following World war II. “Some scholars attribute the hardening of the atmosphere between the two countries to Harry Truman’s assumption of presidency in April 1945, after the death of the more sympathetic Franklin Roosevelt, and to the American possession of an effective atomic bomb” (937). Other historians feel that the Soviet Union’s meddling in eastern European politics and economy after the establishment of peace following the previous wars increased tension with NATO nations. Nonetheless, the power and race for world dominance between the U.S and Soviet Union made conflict inevitable.

The Americans employed a policy of “containment” against the Soviets, which sought to contain the spread of communism instead of abolishing it through direct war. The hope was that containment would persist until the pressure of foreign opposition caused the Soviet Union to collapse in on itself. The Truman Doctrine, was issued in order to promote democracy among the Greeks and Turks, and this also conflicted with the Soviet Union’s attempts at spreading communism in eastern Europe. In another push for a democratic Europe, the U.S. offered economic aid following the destruction of World War II, known as the Marshall Plan. “The Soviet Union and its satellites were invited to participate … The Soviets, however, forbade them to take part” (939). This division between western and eastern Europe was a major turning point that further promoted the tensions between a democratic United States and a communistic Soviet Union. “The Cold War had taken firm shape in Europe” (941). Furthermore, the creation of NATO and the implementation of the Warsaw Pact solidified this European, which later would become a world division as well.

There were several major events/turning points that occurred during the Cold War that had a huge impact on the war itself and a lasting influence on the world. The creation of the state of Israel via the Balfour Declaration and U.N. intervention help ease conflict in the middle east. The Korean War was also a major satellite war established a North (communism) and South (democratic) Korea and was one of the first biggest “battles” of opposing western and eastern forces. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was as strong symbol of the schism between the east and west and remained so until its destruction in 1989. Another major turning point in the war was the Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest threat the U.S had experienced during the Cold War. Cuba, a communist country, allowing Soviets to use their territory to place nuclear weapons against the U.S. Later in the war, the United States became heavily involved in the Middle East for mostly economic reasons, who were mostly allies of the Soviets, and were major forces in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In the 1980s, the Soviets were at war with Afghanistan which was “a strategic decision of enormous long-range consequences for the future of the Soviet Union as well as the United States.” (951). The Soviets and Americans never met directly in a military battle, but instead fought each other through a series of costly satellite wars and constant threat of nuclear annihilation. The Cold War consisted of decades of this tension and indirect war.

Both sides were equally at fault for the war. The beginning of the war saw leaders of these two countries who were overly confident from success in the second world war and ready for world dominance. They did little to diplomatically ease tensions and instead engaged in a mutual arms and power race that resulted in the Cold War. I think the crisis could have been diminished if most diplomatic measure were taken from the beginning. Nevertheless, the Cold War had a huge influence on world politics and the global economy and its influence still persists today.