

HISTORY OF
CONTEMPORARY
CIVILIZATION

BY
CHARLES SEIGNOBOS

DOCTOR OF LETTERS OF THE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER I

THE NEW EUROPEAN POWERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The Commencement of Contemporary Civilization.—

It has been the custom to have contemporary civilization begin with the year 1789, and, in fact, the great changes which characterize contemporary civilization appear with the French Revolution. But a preparation for these changes was made through a less apparent transformation, which goes back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was, in fact, at the close of the reign of Louis XIV. that those new political doctrines were formed, throughout all Europe, which were to cause the destruction of the ancient institutions and to bring about reforms and then a revolution.

At the same time the relations of the different governments were transformed. In America, an English colonial empire had been founded, which prepared the way for the appearance of a new and great nation—the United States. In Europe, three great powers of the seventeenth century—Spain, Sweden, and Holland—were reduced to the rank of secondary powers. By the side of France, which had lost the supremacy, appeared the four other nations which were to be the great powers of the nineteenth century—England, victorious over Louis XIV.,

Austria strengthened by the expulsion of the Turks, and the two new states, the kingdom of Prussia and the empire of Russia.

Prussia.—The kingdom of Prussia,¹ created in 1701, like almost all the German states, was composed of domains gathered together, one by one, through the efforts of the reigning family. It was not a country but only an assemblage of territories scattered throughout Germany, in every direction, and having no communication with each other; some were far to the west, even on the left bank of the river Rhine; the province of Prussia was to the east, outside of the limits of the empire; in the centre was Brandenburg. All these provinces were poor, and with a small population (in all about 2,000,000 souls). Prussia was nothing but a small state. The Hohenzollerns have made of it a great power. They had no ideas concerning the nature of government which were different from those of the princes of their time. They, also, exercised the "family policy," seeking, above all, to augment the power of their house by the increase of their domains, and their power; they, too, determined upon a "state policy," employing every means in their power for the accomplishment of the purpose in view. But they differed from the other princes in their manner of living, and that is the reason for their success. Instead of squandering their revenues for the purpose of keeping up a court and in giving extravagant spectacles and feasts, they devoted them entirely to the expenses of the state, and especially to the support of an army.

¹ The emperor, who had sold this title of king to the elector of Brandenburg, did not want to attach it to any German province. Prussia was chosen because it was not a part of the empire, and to the new king was given the title of King of Prussia.

The Court.—Frederick I., who was the first to bear the title of king, had a large court after the style of Louis XIV. His successor, Frederick William, dismissed it and kept only four chamberlains, four gentlemen in waiting, eighteen pages, six lackeys, five valets de chambre. He wore a blue uniform and white pantaloons; he always had a sword at his side, and carried a cane in his hand; he had only benches and chairs made of wood—no arm-chairs nor carpets; his table was so badly served that his children seasoned their food with hunger. He spent his evenings in the company of his generals and his ministers, all smoking tobacco in long Dutch pipes and drinking beer. This gross manner of living, which shocked the other princes, gave him the surname of the “Sergeant-King.”

His successor, Frederick II., was, on the contrary, very well educated. He loved music, wrote French easily—composing French verses—and read the works of the philosophers. However, he lived almost as simply as did his father. He dwelt at Potsdam, only frequenting the society of his officers, his functionaries, and of several philosophers. He had no court (he was separated from the queen, and received no ladies). He wore patched garments, and his furniture was torn by the dogs who were his constant companions. After his death his entire wardrobe was sold for 1,500 francs. His sole luxury was his collection of snuff-boxes; he left 130 of them.

The Budget of the Kings of Prussia.—The money which the kings of Prussia saved from their personal expenses they devoted to the use of their army. Frederick William spent upon himself and his court only 52,000 thaler (less than 40,000 dollars) per annum. The receipts of the kingdom, at that time, amounted to 6,900,000 thalers

(5,200,000 dollars). They should have been almost equally divided between the military expenses and the ordinary expenses, but in reality the king took 1,400,000 thalers (1,050,000 dollars) from the ordinary expense account and added it to the amount for the army. So there was only 960,000 thalers (750,000 dollars) for the ordinary expenses of the kingdom. The remainder was used to support the army or to create a revenue fund. The king had succeeded in maintaining on a war-footing 80,000 men, and at his death he left in hard money a treasure of 8,700,000 thalers (6,500,000 dollars). Frederick II., like his father, saved his money for the army and for the reserve fund; he was able to keep a standing army of 200,000 men, in spite of the "Seven Years' War," which devastated his kingdom, and at his death the treasury contained 55,000,000 thalers (more than 40,000,000 dollars).

The Army.—The Prussian army, like all the armies of those times, was composed of volunteers. Recruiting-officers were sent through all Germany seeking for men; they opened their offices in the inns, and there received any who wanted to enlist in the service of the king of Prussia. These recruits were for the most part adventurers, or deserters from the army of some German prince. Often the recruiting-officers secured men through a ruse, or by violence—making them drunk, and then forcing them to take the money of the king—or often they carried off the men while they were intoxicated. One of these officers, wanting to enroll a cabinet-maker, who had such a fine figure that the officer wished to make a grenadier of him, ordered him to make a case large enough to hold himself. The workman brought the case, and the officer declared that it was too small; the cabinet-maker, to prove

the contrary, lay down in it; immediately the cover was shut down and the case was sent off. When it was opened the cabinet-maker was found to be asphyxiated.

These enrolments did not suffice to recruit a sufficiently large army. In 1733 the king resolved to complete his regiments with his own subjects. He established a sort of obligatory military service. All the provinces of the kingdom were divided into cantons, each canton was to furnish the recruits necessary to fill out a regiment. All the inhabitants could be enrolled except the nobles, the sons of pastors, and the sons of the bourgeois families who had a fortune of at least 6,000 thalers (4,500 dollars). (There were hardly any families in Prussia that could count more wealth.) During the wars of Frederick II. men became so rare that they enrolled school-boys. When a child was growing fast, the parents used to say: "Don't grow so fast or the recruiting-officer will catch you!"

The Prussian soldiers were subject to a very severe discipline. The officers, with cane in hand, watched the drilling, and beat whoever did not exactly execute the movements ordered. Every regiment had to manoeuvre as one man, with the precision of a machine. The soldiers were taught to load their guns in twelve movements (this was the load in twelve). When a battalion fired, one ought to see but one flash and hear but one report. No country had an infantry so well trained. The Prussian drill was celebrated throughout all Europe. But this life was so laborious that it was necessary to keep the barracks under a strict surveillance in order to prevent the soldiers from escaping, and Frederick II. in time of war placed a cordon of cavalry around the regiments on the march so as to be able to arrest the deserters.

In this army there was no chance of promotion for the soldier; the officers were taken from among the young nobles; for all the Prussian nobility were in the service of the king. But, while in other countries the places for the officers were given as favors and even sold, in Prussia one could not become an officer until he had passed through a military school (the school for cadets), and one could not secure an office of rank until he had passed through the inferior grades. Even the princes of the royal family were obliged to serve and to win all their grades one by one.

No government in Europe had, at that time, so large an army in proportion to the number of its subjects—80,000 men for a country of 2,500,000 souls. This was six times greater than Austria, and four times greater than France possessed. Now, in the seventeenth century, as all difficulties between nations were decided by war, the importance of a power was measured by the strength of its army. The King of Prussia, with his little state and large army, became one of the three great powers in Europe. The Sergeant-King had prepared that army. Frederick the Great made use of it. He added two provinces to his kingdom (Silesia and Polish Prussia); he had received 2,240,000 subjects, and he left 6,000,000 to his successor.

The Administration.—The kings of Prussia carried out the system of absolute authority in their kingdom. They were more absolute even than the other princes of their time. No other sovereign exacted as much from his people. The nobles, who had hitherto been exempt, were made to pay taxes by order of Frederick William. They protested and presented a petition, which ended in these words: "The whole country will be ruined." "I do not believe it," answered the king; "it is authority of

the nobles only that will be ruined. My kingdom is founded on a rock of bronze." He looked upon himself as the master of his subjects, and wanted to regulate their costume even; he forbade them to wear cotton stuffs, and whoever kept any in his house was to be condemned to pay a fine and to wear an iron collar as a punishment. He pretended even that he had the right to be loved. One day he seized by the collar a young Jew who was trying to run away from him, and giving him a beating with his cane, said: "You ought not to fear me, do you hear? You should love me." Frederick II. established a monopoly for beverages and gave it to the French farmers, in spite of the complaints of his subjects. He did not permit any resistance to his orders. "Argue as much as you like," said he, "but obey and pay."

The distinguishing feature of this monarchy was that the king himself made it his business to be a king. He watched over his employees, and demanded that everything should be done with regularity. "The prince," said Frederick, "far from being the absolute master of the state, is only its chief domestic." An order of Frederick II., dated 1749, gives an example of this kind of surveillance. "As different employees have maltreated certain peasants, beating them with their canes, and as His Majesty is fully determined not to endure such tyranny over his subjects, he ordains that when an employee has been convicted for having beaten a peasant, he shall immediately, without mercy, be incarcerated in a fortress for the term of six years, even though said employee should pay better than all the others." All business of the government was brought before the king, who read the papers, and set notes on the margin with his own hand.

Thanks to this régime of frugality and regularity, the house of Prussia has created, in the midst of the other absolute monarchies, a new form, the military monarchy, more durable than the others, because it is better regulated. Therefore the kings of Prussia have been able to preserve their absolute authority down to our day and have also been able to conquer all the other states of Germany.

Origin of the Russian Empire.—The great plains of Eastern Europe, extending from the Oder River to the Ural Mountains, have been inhabited, from the beginning of the Middle Ages, by peoples of Slavic origin. The Slavs are a white race, from the same stock as the other peoples of Europe; their language, like the Latin, the Greek, and the German, is from the Aryan. This Slav race, the most numerous of all the Western races, is divided into several nationalities; to the west are the Poles and the Czechs of Bohemia; to the south the Croats, the Servians, and the Bulgarians, established in the Byzantine empire.

The Slavs of the east had remained divided into tribes down to the ninth century. They cultivated the land, and lived in villages composed of houses made of wood; their towns were only enclosures surrounded by a wall of earth and a ditch. Here they took refuge in time of war. It was the warlike Northmen, coming from Sweden, who gathered these tribes into one nation; it was called the Russian nation, as that was the name of the country from which came their chiefs. The Russian princes organized an army, were converted to the Greek religion, and ordered their subjects to be baptized. Thus in the eleventh century Russia became an orthodox Christian country, joined to the church at Constantinople. This old Russia included the country of the lakes and the region of the Dnieper;

that is, the western part of modern Russia, known as Little Russia. It had two capitals: Novgorod the Great, the city of the merchants, on the shore of Lake Ilmen; and Kiev the Holy, a city with four hundred churches, on the banks of the Dnieper, where arose the cathedral of "Saint Sophia," ornamented with Greek frescoes on a gold ground, and with Greek inscriptions.

This Russia did not succeed in forming a permanent state; at the death of each prince, the country was divided among his sons; in the thirteenth century there were seventy-two principalities. An army of 300,000 Tartar horsemen came from Asia and destroyed all these small states, and from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century the whole of Russia was subject to a Mongol prince, the Great Khan of the Horde d'Or, who dwelt in a village on the shores of the Volga. The native Russian princes were nothing but servants of the khan; they were obliged, on their accession, to go to his court, prostrate themselves before him, and receive from him the titles of investiture. When the khan sent to them any message, they were obliged to spread down rare carpets for the bearers of the message, offer them a cup full of gold pieces and on their knees they must listen to the reading of the letter.

During this time, the Russians of the west had colonized gradually the desert-like forests in the east and had created a new Russian nation. The princes of Moscow, in assuming the burden of collecting the tribute paid to the Tartar khans, had become the most powerful sovereigns of the country. For two centuries they, aided by the Tartar armies, labored to subdue the principalities; they were called the "Russian land-gatherers." In the sixteenth century the great princes of Moscow became free

from the Tartar dominion, and Ivan IV. took the title of czar, that is, king (1547). The true Russia henceforth is at the east, the country of the Volga River, Greater Russia. The village of Moscow, built at the foot of the citadel of the Kremlin, became the capital of the new empire.

The Czar.—The czar, who governs the most widely extended empire in Europe, has an absolute power of a very peculiar nature. All his subjects call themselves his slaves; following the oriental fashion, they present themselves before him, striking the ground with the forehead (in Russian a petition is still called “a beating of the forehead”). All that is in his empire belongs to him, men as well as things; he has the right to take away the property of his subjects, or to put them to death without any other formality than a mere order. There is no law but his will, the only Russian laws are the “ukases,” that is, the orders of the czars. At the same time the people regard the czar as a sacred personage in whom Holy Russia is incarnate, and as a father whom their religion orders them to love. The peasant even calls him father, and addresses him by thee and thou. The inhabitants of Pskov had for many centuries the right to meet and adjust their own affairs, without interference. When Vasili ordered them to take away the bell which used to call the assembly together, they answered him: “We, thy orphaned children, we are bound to thee until the end of all things. To God and to thee all things are permitted in this thy patrimony.”

The Russians obey their czar with fear and love as a master, a father, and a representative of God himself. There is in all Russia no counterpoise to this omnipotent authority. Russia has neither institutions nor ancient customs which the czar is obliged to respect; the Russian