The Rise of Russia and Prussia: Crash Course European History #17

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course: European History. So, in our last episode, we saw the Habsburgs, with the help of Romanians and some others, drive the Ottomans out of large swaths of Eastern Europe, which started the Habsburg expansion eastward, but there were some other important states making some big moves during the 17th century. Today, we're gonna focus on two of them: Russia, which sought stability after a time of troubles, and the House of Brandenburg-Prussia, a small state that within two centuries would grow to become extraordinarily powerful.

(Crash Course EH intro)

In the huge Russian empire, Tsar Peter I became an outsized monarch, literally. He was 6'9" tall, which is like, uh, three meters? Yeah, just say it with authority, Green, he was three meters tall. Don't write that on your tests. Now, early in Peter's life, his future didn't look particularly promising. He was born in 1672 and he was not first in line to the Russian throne. His half-sister Sophia was ruling Russia at the time as regent for the young Romanov brothers of whom Peter was the youngest.

Sophia wanted to become the permanent ruler, but Peter and his supporters had other ideas. At the time, many interest groups in Russia helped shape who ended up with political power, including the Orthodox Church, the army, the aristocracy, and wealthy traders, and as Peter and his brothers came of age, these groups negotiated to arrive at a consensus candidate for Tsar, and then the Russian people had to seal the deal, so to speak, via public demonstrations of acclaim and approval, which developed the "sacred trust" between the ruler and the ruled. In short, political power in this monarchy was not as simple as the Tsar has all of it, and Peter only became Tsar with the help of his advisors and the support of powerful interest groups in Russia.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

He became an autocratic ruler, but the autocracy was intertwined with widespread, if certainly not universal public support from the Russian people. What I'm getting at is that the relationship between the government and the governed is always complex, and the example of the Russian monarchy is important partly because it helps us to see that even absolutist governments could only retain their power by having support from outside institutions and individuals.

Now, Peter tackled every facet of state-building. He re-organized both the military and the nobility and, in doing so, also re-organized who had political power and how they could wield it. For the nobility, he created a precise table of ranks with each promotion to a higher rank depending on the aristocrat performing service to the state. This reform aimed to end older political practices based on networking and nepotism and favoritism, and instead make the aristocracy more of a meritocracy. Peter also eliminated the power of the patriarch of the Russian orthodox church by leaving the post vacant and setting up a counsel or synod of laypeople as overseers, headed, of course, by the czar.

Peter was also curious and adventurous. He liked to tinker and build, focusing on clocks and military machinery and the deployment of his toy soldiers and he was fascinated by Western Europe. In fact, he set off in 1697 to see what Western rulers were up to. The Dutch, in particular, attracted him. You may remember that they were advanced in canal building and fire control and architecture and urban lighting and also had lots of money from trading and having seen all these enterprises in action, Peter returned from Western Europe full of determination to modernize and Westernize Russia.

While Peter was still in Western Europe in the spring of 1698, the streltsy, a band of infantrymen first initiated by Ivan the Terrible/Awesome, rose up against the bad conditions that they faced. They had hopes of reviving the administration of the regent Sophia, who, at the time, was imprisoned.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Peter ordered them crushed and when he returned to Russia in August of 1698, he had hundreds of the stretlsy tortured, exiled, or executed. The purge of the streltsy actually helped clear the way for the modern fighting force that Peter envisioned. A major innovation was giving Russia a standing army that ultimately included some 200,000 recruits, which was a massive number for Europe at the time, and serious training of that army, as well as modernization of weaponry, ultimately paid off when it came to battling Sweden.

At first, during an early battle of the Great Northern War, the ambitious and land-hungry ruler of Sweden, Charles XII, defeated Russian forces at Narva in 1700. Hold on a second, Sweden had 12 kings named Charles?! History never ceases to surprise, my friends.

Right, so Swedish Charles XII also defeated Poland in the war, but then, Peter fortified his army even more and formed an important alliance. He built a coalition of Denmark and Poland that ultimately conquered Sweden in 1721 and ended its continental influence. As a result of this victory, Russia obtained Sweden's continental territory, including Estonia and Latvia. Sweden had gone from being a rescuer in the 30 Years War to being almost entirely stuck in Scandinavia, where they would go on to engage in fewer wars and instead build a state with among the world's lowest poverty rates and highest life expectancy. The fools!

Alright, back to Russia, let's go to the Thought Bubble. During these years, Peter was also building a European-style city with an outlet to the Baltic called, you'll never guess it, St. Petersburg. Tens of thousands of serfs were commandeered from aristocrats' workforces to build the new city at a great cost in lives. The marshy site needed to be entirely reclaimed through the building of canals. You'll remember Peter's admiration for Amsterdam, and he ordered museums and libraries and universities and stately government buildings to adorn the city.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

His aristocratic subjects were ordered to build lavish houses and to hold social events, like dances. Peter also saw the city as the backdrop for the reform of womens' role in society. They were to leave seclusion and appear at public events. Peter decreed the end to veiling for women and an end to dresses or kaftans for boyers, that is, men in the old aristocracy.

Further reforms aimed to develop his middle and upper class subjects as modern thinkers, especially in math and the sciences. To remain in the aristocratic ranks, for instance, sons had to study math, science, or engineering, also requirements for serving as officers in the military. Peter founded schools, including military schools, to teach these subjects and additional schools to teach women reading and writing and other skills, and unlike earlier Russian rulers, Peter embraced foreigners--not just their canal building and lamplighting, but also their manners and fashion. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So Peter also ended the practice of men wearing beards. Did the center of the world just open? They weren't easy to see back there, but it's Stan's favorite joke: the old stick-on mustache. Movie magic. How do I look, Stan? You would say that. I once tried to do

this in a--when I was shaving my beard and I came downstairs to show my wife and she said, and I'm going to quote her directly, "No."

So in Peter's Russia, you had to shave your beard so that you could be like, a modern proper European person, but just as in Elizabeth I and Henry VIII's England, you could pay a tax to keep your beard, and listen, I don't like to get political on this show, but if we re-instituted that tax, the cities of New York and Portland would pay for healthcare for everyone.

So despite his move toward the rational and refined and clean-shaven, Peter himself could be rough, crude, heartless, and violent; that is, the complete opposite of the kind of citizen he wanted to populate his kingdom, and that is a lesson we keep learning over and over in history: paradox is not unusual.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

As for serfs, their lives became more difficult as new regulations meant to attract aristocratic loyalty gave them fewer rights. Serfs were stripped of the right to move from the noble estate where they worked. Most lived precarious lives and were subjected to landowners' brutality. They had little recourse to protect themselves from abuse, and were forced to work in extremely difficult conditions.

Most serfs did manual or agricultural labor, but some became highly skilled artisans to embellish life for the upper classes, creating intricate cabinetry or music or paintings. Some noble families even rented out their artist serfs or sent them touring to bring in funds with their accomplishments. These traveling serfs helped connect far-flung Russians to one another through paintings of distant cities or landscapes or notable people, for example, and peasant song also eventually found its way into Russian classical music as it developed in the 19th century.

But to be clear, Peter's modernization did not mean increased protection or power for the most vulnerable, which raises a question: does modernization generally result in protection or power for the most vulnerable? Should it? And can we even generalize about what it means to be modern when there is so much variety just on this one continent, or arguably subcontinent?

So the time of Czar Peter had massively different effects depending on where you stood. Some people were learning more about science or art than they'd ever been able to before. Others were bound to land or lost their lives in the construction of St. Petersburg. History is not just about what happened, but also about where you sit. Are you a boyer's son, learning new mathematical discoveries, or a peasant born to a fate of hard labor you can never escape?

The other rising Eastern kingdom during this time was the house of Brandenburg-Prussia, a bird with an arm.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Stan informs me that Brandenburg-Prussia was actually headed by the Hohenzollern family. It grew over the centuries from a tiny holding to an extensive kingdom, albeit one that was initially land-locked. Okay, so I'm gonna need you to brace yourselves, because many Fredericks are coming. It's gonna be a little confusing, but we will get through this together.

The first one to know about is the Great Elector, Frederick William, who was one of the seven electors of the holy Roman empire. He worked to keep his territories together in the closing days of the 30 years war and to protect them from attack by Sweden in the 1650s, but as Sweden started to weaken, Poland gave its dependent Prussia the status of kingdom and the title of King of that new kingdom went to the aforementioned Great Elector, Frederick William, and then later to his son, Frederick III. At that point, Frederick III became known as King Frederick I of Prussia, because, you know, it wasn't already confusing enough.

Anyway, as a ruler, Frederick I was something of a connoisseur of all the fine things that were coming to characterize increasingly affluent and worldly European monarchs. While his son, King Frederick William I, I wish I was kidding, was quite the opposite. The Hohenzollern kings who, like the Romanovs of Russia, ruled into the 20th century, created very strong institutions, beginning with the Great Elector, Frederick William in the 17th century, the military was especially important to Prussia's survival and growth.

He understood that Brandenburg-Prussia's lack of natural boundaries made it really vulnerable to those wanting to expand their territory, which, in the 17th century was everyone, so state-building in Prussia involved fortifying its borders. A strong military isn't the only way to stabilize power, but it certainly is a way.

Additionally, the Great Elector, Frederick William, weakened the representative bodies or the states general through which the nobility had its say in the kingdom's running, but to make up for it, the monarchs allowed the nobility to intensify their grip on peasant lives, very similar to what happened in Russia.

===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====

That, by the way, is called reinfeudation, which means additional regulations that tightened serf obligations to their lords. It happened often and in many places. Monarchs would give noble families greater power over ordinary peoples' labor in exchange for the nobles giving greater service to the kingdom's military and administration. This strategy of power consolidation, by the way, still happens. The most powerful placate the less powerful by giving them control over the least powerful.

The Great Elector's grandson, King Frederick William I, made the Prussian army the most modern in Europe. He created a branch of government called the General Directory that oversaw the operation of the kingdom to the benefit of the army, raising taxes and recruiting administrators and soldiers, and Frederick William I sought a certain kind of recruit, specifically giant soldiers, at least 6' in height from all across Europe. He sold off his father's more luxurious possessions such as silver and works of art to boost military strength even more. Prussia was called a large army with a small state attached, kind of like Russia today. He's back, isn't he? It's just--he's very subtle but I can--I can feel his presence.

One of the weirdnesses of building a state or an empire is that in order for it to work, you must convince both those outside of your borders and those within them that your state is really real and also really powerful. States do this partly through treaties, partly through state-building exercises like national anthems and national histories and partly by building structures within the state, armies, government apparatuses, state-wide laws that strengthen the state and make it less vulnerable to attack, and the rising monarchies of Russia and Prussia were very effective at state-building, which would allow them to shape the future of Europe as a whole and also aid in the final demise of Poland Lithuania over the 18th century.

===== (14:00) to (14:56) =====

Poland-Lithuania failed in part because its constitutional system failed. The nobility wheeled and dealed instead of fortifying government institutions like Russia and Prussia had and because of the ways Prussia and Russia organized political power, that wasn't

as much of a problem in their kingdoms. There were problems, of course, which would eventually prove catastrophic and we'll get there eventually, but first, things are about to get a bit brighter around here, because next time, we get to turn our attention to the Enlightenment.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

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