Eastern Europe Consolidates: Crash Course European History #16

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So we've talked a lot about shifting perspectives in this series; being able to see from more than one angle helps us to be empathetic, but it also reminds us that there is no single correct way to look at human history. Zooming in to understand the individual choices of individual historical figures is important, but so is zooming out to understand larger forces.

And if we can zoom way, way out for a moment, two of the big questions of European history (and world history) are how centralized should government power be, and who should decide who wields that power? We've seen attempts to centralize government power over large communities in western Europe, and fights over constitutionalism or absolutism. But now we're going to turn east, to see how another region of Europe was governing and growing in the 17th century.

INTRO In 1618, Poland-Lithuania was the largest kingdom fully located in Europe. It enjoyed a consensus form of government. When a monarch died, a successor king was elected.

Representatives from dozens of smaller political units across the kingdom were summoned to meet and determine who would be king. Consensus was reached through negotiations among uppercrust aristocrats and candidates for king. The Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania formally came into being in 1569, but in reality it had been established with the fourteenth century marriage of a Polish queen to a Lithuanian Grand Duke.

During the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century, Poland remained Catholic. Also, and unusually, the consensus-style government gave freedom to individual princes who wanted to follow Luther, Calvin, or any of the other gajillion religious reformers. Now of course freedom for princes isn't freedom for peasants, but still… Candidates for king even had to commit themselves to religious pluralism.

That toleration drew Jewish people from Spanish and other intolerant regimes eastward into the kingdom. It was a very diverse place -- both in terms of religion and ethnicity. The creation of Poland-Lithuania also meant that present-day Ukraine was now part of Poland's holdings.

The Commonwealth's ambitions sent its people and its government southward into Ukraine where there were fertile lands available for settlement--not the last time that Ukraine's abundant farmland would make it a center of expansionist attention. And the Polish nobility followed as the kings awarded them vast Ukrainian estates, which their new owners ruled with an iron hand—alienating both former inhabitants and new migrants. So, at this point, Eastern Europe as a whole was complicated and competitive, as all theses kingdoms struggled to acquire more territory for farmland and better access to resources.

To Poland-Lithuania's north, Sweden had a united Lutheran population and an excellent fighting force; it too wanted to expand into the continent's Baltic territories. The Ottoman empire, which was more powerful and controlled most of Hungary by the middle of the seventeenth century, was primarily Muslim. But because of its more westerly and northerly conquests, it had large pockets of Orthodox Christians.

And hundreds of thousands of Ottoman families had moved to the Balkans and other Ottoman possessions in southeastern Europe. And many Jews had migrated to the Ottoman Empire because of Habsburg persecution. In fact, compared to most other European rulers, Muslims were tolerant: they did not persecute religious minorities by seeking them out and burning them at the stake in great numbers as Christians did.

Instead, they were taxed at a higher rate than Muslims were. Which...you know, compared to being burned alive... I would take .

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1. The Ottoman Empire had developed politically through the efforts of some spectacularly successful leaders. 2. One was Mehmet I who in 1453 took Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire. 3.

Then there was Selim I who conquered Egypt in 1517, 4. followed by Suleyman the Magnificent's series of triumphs across the Middle East 5. and further expansion into southwestern Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. 6. The Ottomans had a far from constitutional process for succession. 7. The sultan often had many concubines who lived together in the harem, 8. which was not, as is often depicted, a kind of brothel, 9. but instead the seat of government. 10.

It was a place for state business, policy decision-making, and other important matters. 11. But after any one of the sultan's partners gave birth to a son, 12. she and her son usually moved to the provinces, 13. where the boy learned rulership skills while also developing a network of followers. 14. And then when the sultan died, the oldest son usually succeeded him, 15. but not always. 16.

Factions, often developed by an aspiring son's mother, struggled for a place in the empire. 17. Unsurprisingly, murder was often involved. 18. A new sultan's brothers were usually murdered on his accession to the throne so they couldn't plot coups. 19.

All in all, they could have used some good family therapy. 20. But on the other hand, you know, king-making is kind of an inherently dirty business. Thanks Thought Bubble.

Despite that not-very-secure-sounding system, the absolutist Ottoman state was among the longest lived empires in history, lasting until 1922, at which point Constantinople became Istanbul, clearing the way for They Might Be Giants to record their third best song. In any conquered region, the Ottoman government drafted young Christian boys into its army and bureaucracy, educating them, and converting them to Islam. Taken from their parents, they became part of the Janissary corps, in which they could and did rise to the highest reaches of government alongside advisors and bureaucrats from influential families.

The rulers and nobility also developed a different household type, including multiple wives and large numbers of offspring. Given Ottoman men's service as ghazis, or warriors, and given the immense slaughter across the entire European population at the time, having many wives seemed like the prudent thing to do. because there just weren't that many men. Women in these households were often wealthy and empowered to purchase warehouses and manufacturing establishments, whereas women to the west often did not have inheritance or property rights.

And when men were off fighting, women served as unofficial replacements in the Ottoman Empire—Hurrem, the sole wife of Suleyman being a prime example. And in communities where many girls and women were left in seclusion, other women had opportunities to serve as their lawyers, accountants, and scribes, and doctors, and teachers, and other professionals. So the Ottomans had developed different social structures and state structures.

I know it's tempting to view all of this through a modern lens, and think about this is good, this is bad, this is modern, and this is not modern. I don't think that's the right lens through which to view all of this. We're talking about the 17th Century, so we should

compare it to the rest of the 17th Century.

And in many ways, the 17th Century Ottoman Empire had big advantages over other European communities, but after their failure to capture Vienna in 1683, which we'll get to in a minute, the Empire's competitive edge did dull. Nearby, Russia was also expanding thanks to Ivan IV, aka Ivan the Terrible, who did have vicious outbursts of temper and, also, did kill his own son during a quarrel, which to be fair is kind of terrible. Ivan's grandfather Ivan III had begun growing the Russian empire as well as creating a modern state structure, complete with administrative departments and functionaries.

He also oversaw extensive building at the Kremlin complex. The first part of Ivan IV's rule continued Russia's institutional development with the creation of an improved code of laws and better tax collection. Ivan also summoned distinguished representatives of the orthodox church and the nobility along with wealthy townspeople to an assembly (zemskii sobor), which continued to meet.

And for these accomplishments, as well as Ivan's expansionist ambitions, many historians have restored the word groznyi—once interpreted to mean "terrible"—to the meaning held by Russians of his day: Ivan the "formidable," or "fearsome," or even "awesome." Meanwhile high churchmen were working to make Ivan literally awesome by creating imagery in churches of a tsar connected to the divine. They also depicted the connection between the tsar and people along a divine continuum. At the time, the head of the Orthodox church claimed that the Russian ruler was, quote, "everywhere under the vault of heaven the one Christian Tsar, mounted on the holy throne of God of the holy apostolic church, in place of the Roman and Constantinopolitan [thrones] in the God-saved city of Moscow." So, not God Himself or anything--just mounted on the holy throne of God.

Rather like Louis XIV over in France. Did the center of the world just open? Is Jesus in there?

It's a crucifix. You might be thinking, "did you just shoehorn in this center of the world bit?" Yeah, I did. And it's not the first time Jesus has been shoehorned in where he doesn't fit well.

If you ever read the accounts of Jesus's life, one thing that you'll note is that, uh, he was never a political leader, nor did he ever choose political leaders, nor did he ever express much interest in choosing political leaders. But just as every religion has to adapt to the culture in which it finds itself, cultures have to adapt to religions. It's this endless, very complicated dance.

And that's how you end up with one guy mounted on the holy throne of God in Russia, and a different guy mounted on the holy throne of God in France. But back to Russia. As it bureaucratized along the lines of the western European kingdoms, Russia developed the rituals of a top-down autocratic state, which lasted into the twentieth-century.

Serfs—that is, laborers bound to the land and unfree in their movements--groveled before their lords, who often saw these workers as not even deserving of the word "human." However, the nobility also groveled in front of the tsar, displaying abject submission akin to what serfs showed their lords. But it's important to understand that it wasn't as simple as people considering themselves, and others, purely inferior or superior. Instead, the belief was that everyone had a role to play within the system.

Now, to be clear, within that system, most people had very little freedom or what we would now call "human rights." But still, throughout history, people have found ways to express human agency no matter the rigidity or oppressiveness of the system in which they are living. Ivan IV was energetic, especially in the first half of his reign. He took Russia's borders eastward, capturing among other conquests the Muslim stronghold of Kazan.

Russian settlers headed for new farmland right up to the Pacific Ocean. And helping Ivan in this conquest, even as absolutist tendencies developed in Russia, was another group of ordinary people who were neither serfs nor noble grovellers but free individuals. Called Cossacks (from the word Kazak, meaning free), they survived through plunder and trade and through selling their military services to rulers and nobility who needed their fighting skills.

Until late in the seventeenth century, the Cossacks generally looked down on farming. They led nomadic lives, capturing people to sell or robbing ships on the Caspian Sea. Located along the Ukrainian, Russian, and Ottoman borderlands, they were more democratic than the rulers to whom they often sold their services, including the Russian tsars whose defeat of Kazan in 1552 they helped facilitate.

After that, the Cossack Yermak Timofeyevich led Russian advances deeper into Siberia with its lucrative fur trade and became a Russian hero. Ivan IV died in 1584 of a stroke while playing chess, and his heir Fyodor died in 1598, and after that, claimants to the leaderless Russian throne abounded. Poland-Lithuania spotted an opening for establishing a Polish prince as Russian tsar.

The sense was that Moscow was so disorganized and the monarchy was so weak that it could easily fall. This resulted in the "Time of Troubles," which was so named because of the famine of 1601-3, as well as Poland-Lithuanian and Swedish attacks on Russia, and the general devastation caused by that warfare. These finally ended with Russia's victory in 1613 and the ascension to the throne of Michael Romanov—chosen by an "Assembly of the Land" of nobles and, as the new tsar put it, also chosen by God and the voice of the people.

But mostly by the nobles. Cossack troops and units from the nobility drove back the enemy, knocking Poland-Lithuania and Sweden out temporarily from the competition for control of the region. And for their efforts, the new tsar thanked his saviors by raising taxes, cutting back on privileges, and otherwise behaving as if the tsar himself, not his military, had won the day.

But don't worry the nobility will get back at the Romanovs in just 300 short years. The Cossacks, supported by an increasingly oppressed Ukrainian peasantry, went on to reduce Polish power through war that slaughtered tens of thousands of Jewish estate managers, Protestant minorities, and their supporters living in Ukrainian territory. In 1654, Russia joined what became known as the Russo-Polish war, at the end of which in 1667 the eastern part of Ukraine including Kiev became part of the Russian empire, while the western part remained part of Poland-Lithuania.

Fortunately, arguments over Ukrainian land had at last been resolved. What's that, Stan? Oh.

Still? Stan, is he behind me? Because we had a deal that he wasn't going to come out this whole series...

GAH...putin. Right. Meanwhile, the Polish kingdom, while on a downward path because of these defeats, would live to fight a fair few more battles.

The most famous and consequential of these battles for the continent was the battle for Vienna in 1683 when elected Polish king Jan Sobieski joined forces with the Habsburg monarchy to drive out the invading Ottoman forces. We previewed this earlier

because it's a big deal. This led to Habsburg rule being solidified around Austria, and Hungary, and other east-central European territories.

And it also meant that Europe was gaining some of the political contours that would shape its modern history. I mean, there wasn't yet a Germany as such, or even an Austrohungarian Empire, but the scene was being set. I know we covered A LOT of power and territory struggles today.

There was a lot of war in Europe in the 17th Century. But if we zoom out, we see generations-long disagreements over how centralized communities should be, and where the right to rule comes from. These changes were happening in the long run, which is important, but of course no human life is lived in the long run, including yours.

Each of us--whether a Jewish person escaping religious persecution or a woman becoming a lawyer during a time of war--is profoundly shaped by the short run we happen to inhabit. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.