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MASTERING MODERN EUROPEAN HISTORY

STUART T. MILLER

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EDUCATION

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PREFACE

Like all textbooks, there is very little originality of content in *Mastering Modern European History*. The original ideas and interpretations have been carefully quarried from many of the books referred to in the Further Reading section, to whose authors I owe a general acknowledgement. The claim to originality on behalf of this book rests upon the following factors:

(i) *A logical synthesis*

There is a middle way between the Marxist view that there are preordained patterns in historical development and Henry Ford's claim that 'History is just one damn thing after another' (just a little less famous than his remark that 'History is bunk'). I have desperately avoided the antique 'There were 37 causes of the French Revolution' method of teaching, although I have used an enumeration system for convenience. Certainly in retrospect historical events are due usually to the *interaction of several factors* and do follow some sort of narrative pattern. I have thus used chronological accounts where necessary in combination with considered analyses of the component factors contributing to events.

(ii) *Coverage of controversy*

The work of the historian is not only the accumulation of data, but also its *interpretation*. History is therefore a subject full of controversy. There is an awful danger that a textbook can become a sort of exercise in name-dropping, and I have sometimes lapsed into this behaviour, but it is important that attention should be drawn to the main issues of controversial interpretations. On many occasions – as with the origins of the Second World War and of the imperialism of the late nineteenth century – I have deliberately taken time to consider theories and their interaction.

I have included selections of sample questions drawn from the reservoirs of a number of examination boards and these are a typical cross-section. A number of questions have been devised by myself, especially when the subject content of the book gets beyond the 1960s and begins to exceed the chronological limits of many examination syllabuses as they at present

PREFACE

exist. I have deliberately not written the book as answers to questions, simply because this can cause structural problems. However, there is everything to be said for encouraging students to regard History as a vast complex of questions as to what happened, why it happened, and why it mattered. Most of the section and paragraph headings which I have used are easily equated with these fundamental questions.

The book is intended primarily as an introduction for those studying for a first examination in Modern European History. However, I believe that it will also provide a valuable guide and synthesis for those involved in courses at a higher level. Within both of these categories I include the growing volume of mature and part-time students handicapped by a belated return to study and a pressing shortage of time. I would also like to think that it is quite readable in its own right, and that the famous 'general reader' might browse through it.

My thanks are due to a number of people who contributed towards the completion of this book in one way or another. Peter Oates and Jon Finegold of Macmillan were pillars of friendly encouragement and advice. My wife, Constance, and my children Gillian and David 'endured' long periods of my silent furious scribbling and helped me in more ways than I can possibly itemise. Mrs Mary Milburn typed the manuscript expertly and without once expressing the despair she must have felt when confronted with a handwriting style which reached its peak at the age of 12 and then steadily degenerated.

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NOTE ON NAMES

AND

DISTANCES

I have followed certain conventions in referring to some of the states of Europe. First of all, though, a point should be made about the title of the book. Britain played a vital role in European history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to her economic leadership until 1914, her recurrent interventions into European international relations, and her imperial activities. However I have tended to treat her very much as 'the offshore island' until the post-1945 period, when Britain became a member of various European organisations and especially the EEC. I have not attempted to deal with the internal affairs and development of Britain. For this latter, the reader is directed to the excellent volume *Mastering Modern British History* (Macmillan, 1984) by Norman Lowe. Also after 1945, it becomes increasingly difficult – and of questionable value – to try and segregate European from World history. I hope that I have achieved a reasonable compromise.

Apart from this, I have faced the usual problems of nomenclature in dealing with a number of states and I hope that the following explanation is adequate.

(i) *The Habsburg Monarchy*

The problem arises because the Monarchy included provinces called Upper Austria and Lower Austria. Nevertheless for convenience I have usually referred to 'Austria' or 'the Austrian Empire'. However, in a number of chapters where this policy could cause confusion I have used the titles 'Habsburg Monarchy' – and, after 1867, 'the Dual Monarchy' or 'Austria-Hungary: At least the First World War solved this problem!

(ii) *Germany*

Before 1871, I have occasionally employed the old-fashioned contemporary practice of talking of 'the Germanies'. The complexities of the membership of the German Confederation are explained in the relevant chapter.

(iii) *The Ottoman Empire*

Although I have used the proper title before 1914, I have often used the term 'Turkey' and spoken of 'the Turks', just as contemporaries did.

(iv) *Piedmont*

Technically, the correct title of the northernmost Italian kingdom was 'the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont'. In keeping with usual practice, though, I have used the term 'Piedmont'.

(v) *Russia*

After 1917, I have tended to employ, as we do today, a number of titles interchangeably. 'Russia', 'the Soviet Union', 'Soviet Russia' and the 'USSR' all refer to the same state. In fact, technically, 'the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic' is only one – albeit the greatest – of the units of the USSR.

Any other confusion that might arise on this subject must be attributed entirely to my own carelessness.

(vii) *Distances*

Finally I have standardised distances on the mile (1 Kilometre = 0.62 miles or 8 Kilometres = 5 miles).

PROLOGUE:

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY

EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

The French Revolution is usually seen as the start of an era and the chief event to which can be related the main threads of European history in the nineteenth century. In fact – like other ‘turning points’ in history – the ‘Great Revolution’ was as much the end of a period as the beginning. Equally, Napoleon Bonaparte – the heroic ‘superman’ of the new Romantics – was in many respects the last and greatest of the old-style enlightened despots and mercantilists. The eighteenth century was characterised by a number of features:

- (i) *A stratified social system, with a rigid pattern of orders and groups surmounted by monarchy.*
- (ii) ‘Mercantilism’ or the *commitment of state power to intervention in the economy to promote growth.*
- (iii) Economic changes associated with the use of *manufacturing industries.*
- (iv) ‘Enlightened Despotism’, especially in the twenty-five years before the Revolution, which involved a recognition that royal power should be exercised to some extent in the *interest of the subjects*

THE ANCIEN REGIME

Although there were very considerable variations between the states of western Europe, worthwhile generalisations can still be made:

(a) The overwhelming predominance of peasant society

Society was essentially *rural*, and peasants were by far the largest social group. However, the status and conditions of the peasantry

varied considerably throughout the continent, and even within states. There was a great difference between the lives of the free peasantry and the **serfs**, who were virtually the property of the landowner. In general, serfdom was more prevalent in eastern Europe and was especially marked in **Russia** despite the best intentions of Catherine II after her accession in 1762.

(b) The influence of the aristocracy

The aristocracy exercised very considerable **local influence**, officered the professional armies and monopolised the higher posts in the bureaucracies. They also had **rights of jurisdiction** and **exemption from some types of taxation** in every state other than Britain and the United Provinces. In addition, two other features are worth noting:

- (i) *Varying degrees of exclusiveness.* In Britain, entry to the nobility was traditionally easier than elsewhere. Marriage and money could easily compensate for birth. As was once remarked in the sixteenth century: 'In England gentlemen be made good cheap'. The situation was very different as one moved eastwards. In France though, although the old military '*noblesse de l'épée*' was dominant this had been supplemented by a more recent '*noblesse de la robe*' drawn from prominent middle-class families. In general, there was a tendency in the eighteenth century for the nobility to respond to economic and social pressures by trying to *assert its powers and privileges and restrict further creations*.
- (ii) *The range of status and wealth within the nobility.* There could be a vast difference between the great magnates and the small squires of, say, Poland, Hungary and England. In France, there were 250,000 '*noblesse*' but only 4000 genuine courtiers with any access to the king. In Spain, there were 500,000 nobles but only a hundred or so real '*grandees*', as opposed to the myriads of petty '*hidalgos*'.

(c) The prevalence of monarchy

There were vast differences between the *size and structure of states*. They ranged from large, centralised nation states like Britain and France, to the masses of very small principalities of Italy and 'the Germanies' – the 'swarm of gnats' as William Pitt the Younger called them – and the diverse collections of peoples and territories which made up states such as Prussia and Austria. The *antique Holy Roman Empire* ruled by the Habsburg dynasty and extending from northern Italy to the Netherlands and Prussia *existed only in theory*. All of

PROLOGUE

these units were ruled, however, by some form of *hereditary monarchy*. No one seriously questioned this form of government. Only in the United Provinces was republicanism strong, and its decline as a state was a bad advertisement. It was also the lack of a strong monarchy which largely explained the ease with which Poland was partitioned between Prussia, Russia and Austria in the last quarter of the century. The strength of monarchy was further enhanced by the continuance of the traditional view of one's king as the 'father of his people', and the survival of the legend that monarchy was ordained by God and that kings, therefore, enjoyed a 'divine right'.

'PROSPERITY BY COMPULSION'

Since the late seventeenth century at least, governments had displayed a tendency towards 'mercantilism' – that is, towards the use of state power to build up *economic wealth* and, thereby, *political and military might*. The process was cyclical, because the acquired strength was in turn used to accumulate territory and colonies to expand the economy. The wars of the eighteenth century were *power struggles* between dynasties and rival empires rather than ideological disputes. In practice, mercantilism involved a welter of legislation and regulations to steer trade and production into definite channels by means of bounties, trade tariffs, prohibitions and monopolies. There was no clearly articulated theory of mercantilism, but in practice it suffered from two particular *weaknesses*.

(a) The sacrifice of the interests of the consumer

The main critic of the system was the Scottish economist *Adam Smith*, who in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) insisted that 'consumption is the sole end and purpose of production'. Instead of countries specialising in their most efficient industries and trading freely in wider markets and at lower costs and prices they were caught up in 'beggar-my-neighbour' policies of *protection* and *self-sufficiency*.

(b) The opposition of vested interests

Mercantilism – with its complex rules, and large bureaucracies – involved *corruption, mismanagement and conflicts of interest* between protected and preferred trades and those which were discriminated against. *Smuggling* – often on an enormous scale – was one response to tariffs and prohibitions. It was the attempts of the British government to tighten up the regulations against smuggling and

evasion which stimulated the problems in the British North American colonies which led eventually to the *American War of Independence* in 1775. In general, it was the *emerging middle classes* (see below) which were most adversely affected by mercantilist restrictions.

ECONOMIC CHANGES (see Fig. P.1.)

The century saw a considerable *increase in population*. In Spain, population grew from 5 million in 1700 to 11 million in 1800. In Russia it grew from 18 million in 1725 to 27 million in 1780. In Europe as a whole it grew from 118 million in 1700 to 187 million in 1800. The reasons for this are not very clear. It was partly associated with a *decline in the virulence of epidemic diseases*. However, it was broadly related to a general increase in the *standard of living*.

(a) Improved food supplies

Better transport and some agricultural improvements reduced the recurrence of *shortage crises*. They did not totally disappear, however: in the 1770s and 1780s there were serious shortages and price increases. The fact that agriculture was the biggest sector of employment as well meant that a bad harvest not only affected the prices and increases of the agricultural sector but also had dire effects on *urban employment*.

(b) Industrial development

The Industrial Revolution in Britain was not matched on the continent. There were some large-scale factories such as the Van Robais textile factory at Abbeville which employed 3000 workers. But the bulk of manufacturing production, even in Britain, was still by means of the 'domestic system' and in small workshops although it was increasing significantly.

(c) Urban growth

One aspect of this rising prosperity was the *expansion of the towns*. In fact, only in the United Provinces, England and part of Italy was it more than a fraction of the total. The population of Paris was only 2 per cent of the total French population. Even so, the towns were influential because of their – often considerable – municipal rights and privileges and the power of the class of great financiers, bankers and merchants. In fact, the middle class was largely made up not of manufacturers or merchants but of small property owners, office holders and professional people.

PROLOGUE

Fig. P.1 *The relative contributions of agriculture and industry to the national product of the United Kingdom (1788–1907), percentages, the shaded columns represent industrial production*

The changing proportions between the two sectors are typical of a developing economy. The pattern was most marked with the United Kingdom. What is also notable in this graph is the slackening off of growth in the *Edwardian* period. This reflects to some extent the tendency for the UK to derive more income from *commercial* and *financial* services.

Source: Based upon statistical information in C. Trebilcock, *The Industrialisation of the Continental Powers 1780–1914* (Longman, 1981).

ENLIGHTENED DESPOTISM

Partly under the influence of the theories of intellectuals such as the Genevan, *Jean Jacques Rousseau* who, in his *Social Contract* (1762), argued that royal rule was a sort of two-way contract of duties, obligations and consultation between the monarchy and citizens, there was a tendency towards the use of monarchical power to *improve the circumstances of the population*. This was very marked in the last quarter of the century. Employing large bureaucracies and working to fairly coherent programmes a range of rulers such as Catherine II of Russia, Frederick the Great of Prussia and Joseph II of Austria pursued a range of social, legal, fiscal and administrative reforms. On the other hand, there were various threats and dangers associated with this.

(a) The exaggeration of despotism

Given populations made up largely of ignorant and superstitious peasants and in a situation where there were all sorts of obstacles arising from the existence of masses of local privileges and rights, bad communications and a diversity of dialects, the operation of enlightened government involved *centralisation* and the employment of a very strong hand which provoked *resentment*.

(b) The resistance of conservative forces

Joseph II's reign (1782–90) was an extreme example, but the *vested conservative interests* he antagonised existed all over Europe. His attempts to end their tax exemptions and abolish serfdom infuriated the aristocracy and the Magyar squires. Attempts to reduce the excessive influence and power of the Catholic Church provoked devout Catholics. Only the opportune death of Joseph II in 1790 removed the danger of a revolution in Hungary.

(c) The theoretical implications

The acceptance of the need to use power in the interests of the population also implied that it could be *resisted rightfully* if this 'contract' was broken. Revolutionaries could argue that they were acting in self-defence and as conservatives against *misuse of royal power*, and so attract support from moderates.

CONCLUSION: 'THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN'

When the defeated troops of General Cornwallis marched out of Yorktown in 1781 to the cynical strains of the most popular song of the day the situation was somewhat exaggerated. The American colonists – like the Magyar squires – were no social revolutionaries. Only on occasion in the eighteenth century – as in bread riots and the vicious Gordon Riots in London in 1780 – did the lower classes and the feared 'mob' emerge as a force to be reckoned with. However once the ball of revolution has started to roll, *it is not easy to control or stop*. The 'Atlantic Revolution' had started in North America in the prosperous British colonies. Thousands of European troops who had been involved in the war, including the young Marquis de Lafayette, returned to Europe after 1783. By the 1780s conditions were favourable to revolution in a number of European states. It was in France where all of the main ingredients were assembled at the ideal moment.