-rise of the nation state

state, nation, and nation-state

The present-day layout of the world’s political map is a product of humanity’s endless politico-geographic accommodations and adjustments. A mosaic of more than 200 states and territories separated by boundaries makes the world look like a jigsaw puzzle. Human territoriality refers to a country’s (or more local community’s) sense of property and attachment toward its territory, expressed by its determination to keep it inviolable and defended.

A state is a politically organized territory, administered by a government, and recognized by the international community. A state must also contain a permanent population, an organized economy, and a functioning internal circulation system (infrastructure). Since certain countries have internal divisions, the solution is to capitalize “State” (e.g., State of Florida, State of Uttar Pradesh India)). When used for the formally independent political units, the term country and state are interchangeable. A nation, by contrast, is a tightly knit group of people possessing bonds of language, religion, ethnicity, and/or other shared cultural attributes. Theoretically, a nation-state is a recognized country possessing formal sovereignty and occupied by a people who see themselves as a single, united nation. In only a handful of countries do state territories largely coincide with the distribution of people who feel they are part of one nation. Iceland, Portugal, Denmark, and Poland are often cited as classic European nation-states. These are exceptional cases, and are even more uncommon outside Europe – Japan and Uruguay are good examples.

rise of the english nation-state

Bayeux Tapestry depicting events leading to the Battle of Hastings, which led to the Normans’ control of England

Where did the idea of the nation-state come from, as we know it today? The concept of statehood spread into Europe from Greece and Rome, where it lay dormant through the Dark Ages until feudalism began to break down. The Norman Invasion of 1066 was one of the most significant events in this process. The Normans destroyed the Anglo-Saxon nobility; created a whole new political order, and achieved great national strength under William the Conqueror. The Norman victory linked England more closely with Continental Europe, created one of the most powerful monarchies in Europe, changed the English language and culture, and set the stage for English-French conflict that would last for centuries. On the European mainland, the continuity of dynastic rule and the strength of certain rulers led to greater national cohesiveness.

One of the key beginnings of England’s (and eventually, the rest of the worlds’) constitutional law can be traced to the signing of the Magna Carta by King John in 1215. This document limited the power of the king stating that the will of the king could be bound by law – giving birth to a notion of sovereignty based in law. This was one of the events that led to the formation of England’s Parliament.

Years later, the Hundred Years’ War (1337 to 1453) pitted England against France. It was fought primarily over claims by the English kings to the French throne and was punctuated by several brief periods of peace, and the slow decline of English fortunes after the appearance of Joan of Arc in the early 1400s. Conflict finally ended with the expulsion of the English from France. The war gave impetus to ideas of French and English nationality, and largely delimited the French and English territories to the borders we see today.

Version of the Magna Carta issued in 1225

Scene depicting the Hundred Years’ War
Defining the Early Modern Times

As the destructive Hundred Years’ War was waging, Europe experienced something of an economic revival through the Renaissance, and internal as well as foreign trade increased. The Renaissance led to the development of an increasingly wealthy middle-class. City-based merchants gained wealth and prestige, while the nobility declined. Money and influence were increasingly concentrated in urban areas, and the traditional measure of affluence – land – became less important.

The Catholic Church suffered a decentralization of power through the Protestant Reformation, weakening its control over Europe. The lifestyles of many disadvantaged people improved and crucial technological innovations occurred through the Scientific Revolution. The so-called Dark Ages were over and a new Europe was emerging.

The Early Modern Times lasted from the Middle Ages toward the end of the 1400s to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 1700s. It is characterized by the rise of the importance of science, the rise of nation-states, and the dominance of the economic theory of mercantilism. The Modern Times began toward the end of the 1700s continuing to present day.

Rise and Fall of the Spanish Nation-State

Under Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, Spain had expelled the last Muslim rulers through the Reconquista in 1492 and began to enforce religious unity in Catholicism. In that same year, Isabella financed Columbus’s voyage across the Atlantic, leading to Spanish conquest of the Americas.

In 1519, Charles V, grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella, inherited an enormous empire. He not only inherited the crown of Spain but was also the heir of the Austrian Hapsburgs, which included the Holy Roman Empire and the Netherlands. As a devout Catholic, he fought to suppress the Protestant movement in the German states. His greatest foe was the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Muslim Turks who occupied much of Hungary and challenged Spain for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean. In 1555, after years of brutal fighting, Charles V signed the Peace of Augsburg, which ended the fighting between the Catholics and Protestants in the Holy Roman Empire.

In 1556, exhausted and disillusioned, Charles V gave up his titles, divided his empire, and entered a monastery. The Spanish successor, King Philip II, ruled for 42 years. He reigned as an absolute monarch, a ruler with complete authority over the government and the lives of the people. He also asserted that he ruled by divine right, believing his authority to rule came directly from God. In this capacity, Philip II worked tirelessly to unite his kingdom under one religion and one nationality.

The great undertaking of Philip’s life was to defend the Catholic Church. A general uprising broke out in the 1560s when Protestants in the Netherlands had enough of King Philip’s policies – high taxes, autocratic rule, and the Inquisition. This uprising led to the Eighty Years’ War, and would cost the Spanish Empire dearly in terms of gold, silver, and manpower.

By the 1580s, Philip saw England’s Queen Elizabeth I as his chief Protestant rival. Elizabeth encouraged Sea Dogs (English captains) to plunder Spanish galleons of their treasure. Francis Drake, perhaps the most notable English Sea Dog, explorer, and looter of Spanish cities in the Americas, was knighted by Elizabeth – much to the dismay of Philip.

The Spanish Armada vs. the English Royal Navy

To subdue the English and the Dutch, Philip prepared the “Invincible Armada”, to carry a Spanish invasion force to England. In 1588, the Armada sailed with more than 130 ships and 20,000 men. The larger, slower Spanish ships took losses from the smaller, faster English ships, which also had greater range with their artillery. The fleet was scattered and attempted to sail around the Northern...
part of the British Isle, however, they encountered the "Protestant Wind", a massive storm that wreaked havoc on the Spanish Armada. Fewer than half of the fleet limped home in defeat. Although this debacle ended Philip's ambitions of English conquest, it did not immediately weaken Spain's empire.

Nonetheless, by the mid 1600s, Spain's supremacy had ended. Costly wars drained wealth out of Spain almost as fast as it came in. Then, too, treasure from the Americas led Spain to neglect farming, industry, and commerce. American gold and silver led to soaring inflation, with prices rising much higher in Spain than anywhere else in Europe. Also, the expulsion of Muslims, and later the Jews, deprived the economy of many skilled artisans and merchants. By the late 1600s, France had replaced Spain as the most powerful European nation.

The French Nation-State under Louis XIV

From the 1560s to the 1590s, religious wars between Huguenots (French Protestants) and the Catholic majority tore France apart. In 1589, a Huguenot prince inherited the throne as Henry IV. Shrewdly, he converted to Catholicism, but protected the Protestants through the Edict of Nantes in 1598. This decree granted Huguenots religious toleration and allowed them to fortify their towns and cities.

After Henry IV was killed by a fanatic monk in 1610, his son inherited the throne as Louis XIII. The man who possessed most of the power, however, was Cardinal Richelieu. Seeking to consolidate royal power, he weakened the two groups who did not easily bow to authority - the Huguenots and the nobles. Richelieu destroyed their fortified walls and castles, outlawed their armies, yet still allowed the Huguenots to practice their religion.

Louis XIV inherited the throne in 1643 at the age of five, but he didn't inherit full ruling powers until years later. When he was still young an uprising - called the Fronde - began. Nobles, merchants, peasants, and the urban poor rebelled - each for their own reasons. At one point the rioters forced Louis XIV and his family from the palace.

Like his great-grandfather, Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV firmly believed in the divine right. Louis took the sun as the symbol of his absolute power. Just as the sun stands at the center of the solar system, so the "Sun King" stands at the center of the state. He was often quoted in saying, "L'état c'est moi" - "I am the state." Unlike the English system of checks and balances, there was no parliament to check the Louis' power.

France’s government followed mercantilist policies to bolster the economy. To protect French manufacturers, high tariffs were placed on goods (so the population would buy more domestic products). Overseas colonies were also expanded, such as New France in North America. Although France became the wealthiest state in Europe, no amount of money could keep up with Louis' court or his many wars.

The Construction of Versailles

In the countryside outside of Paris, Louis XIV transformed a royal hunting lodge into the immense palace of Versailles (ver sī). Its halls and salons displayed the greatest paintings and statues, and glittering chandeliers and mirrors. An extensive garden of flowers, trees, and fountains surrounded the palace in precise geometric patterns. As both the king's home and seat of government, it housed more than 10,000 people, from servants to nobles and officials. Louis XIV followed a precise and elaborate schedule ritualistically followed day after day.

Rituals such as levee, or rising, served a serious purpose. French nobles were descendants of feudal lords who held great power and vast claims to land. Louis turned these men into courtiers angling for privileges and titles rather than warriors battling for power. Louis was also a patron of the arts and sponsored musicians, painters, architects, and artists of all types. But it was Louis' obsession for power and prestige that would lead to disastrous times for France in the long run.
The Wars of Louis XIV would prove to be of little gain, and great cost. At first, the French army was virtually unstoppable. However, led by the Dutch or the English, European powers allied together to maintain a balance of power in the region, preventing any one state from dominating Europe. Many of Louis’ later wars drained the French economy. Much of the royal silverware was melted down to help pay for these expensive endeavors.

In 1685, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, resulting in the migration of more than 100,000 out of France. The persecution of the Huguenots was perhaps the Sun King’s most costly blunder. The Huguenots had been among the most hard-working and prosperous of Louis’s subjects. Their loss was thus a serious blow to the French economy, just as the expulsion of Muslims and Jews had hurt Spain. At the time of Louis’s death in 1715, France was the strongest power in Europe, but with virtually no money in its treasury.

The Thirty Years’ War and Its Impact on the Nation-State

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<th>Imperialists (Catholics)</th>
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The French philosopher Voltaire noted that, by early modern times, the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Instead, it was a patchwork of several hundred small, separate states. The Thirty Years’ War began in Bohemia, the present-day Czech Republic. The Bohemian king sought to suppress Protestants and assert his power over the local nobles. In 1618, a few rebellious noblemen tossed two royal officials out of a castle window in Prague - some fifty feet above the ground. This act started a local revolt, which widened into a massive European war.

The war took a terrible toll. Roving armies of mercenaries burned villages, destroyed crops, and killed without mercy. A novel of the time describes the plundering of a village by marauding soldiers:

“For one of [the peasants] they had taken they thrust into the baking oven and there lit a fire under him, … as for another, they put a cord around his head and twisted it so tight with a piece of wood that the blood gushed from his mouth and nose and ears. In a word each had his own device to torture the peasants.”

- Jacob von Grimmelshausen, *Simplicissimus*

Murder and torture were followed by disease. The war led to severe depopulation throughout Europe. Some estimate that as many as one third of the people in the German states may have died as a result of the war.

Rise of the Modern State

Finally, in 1648, the exhausted combatants accepted a series of treaties known as the Peace of Westphalia. He French emerged as the clear winner, gaining territory on both Spanish and German frontiers. The Netherlands and the Swiss Federation became independent states. The Hapsburgs were the big losers; having to accept the almost total independence of all princes from the Holy Roman Empire. Germany was divided into more than 360 states, “one for every day of the year.” Each state acknowledged the Holy Roman emperor, but each state also had its own government, coinage, state church, armed forces, and foreign policy (quite the opposite of a nation-state).

From a political-geographic perspective, the Peace of Westphalia can be seen as the first modern step toward the emergence of the European state. The treaties signed at the
end of the Thirty Years War (1648) contained language that recognized statehood and nation-hood, clearly defined boundaries, and guarantees of security. The Prince of any realm could determine the religion of that realm, as part of an arrangement that governed how territorial units in the Holy Roman Empire would relate to one another. This furthered the notion of sovereignty based in law.

Contemporary woodcut depicting two Catholic emissaries being thrown from a castle window. This event led to the Bohemian Revolt in 1618, and ultimately the Thirty Years’ War. The Catholics said that angels carried them to safety, whereas the Protestant version said they landed in a pile of horse manure which spared their lives.

The second major event that led to the modern era was the French Revolution that spread the ideas of the rights of nations. The doctrine of nationalism, however, existed earlier and encouraged monarchies like Spain to create cohesive states (e.g. kicking out the Moors through the Reconquista).

Europe’s politico-geographical evolution was to have enormous significance, because the European state model was exported through migration and colonialism, which rose from an instable core region (e.g. due to European competition, wars, and the philosophy of mercantilism) as countries sought out colonies to support the mother country.

European colonialism diffused the ideas of the Modern Times to a global scale

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Defining the Modern Times

Far from creating peace, the transition from feudal to modern institutions was marked by a series of Revolutions and military conflicts, beginning with the Eighty Years’ War, which resulted in Dutch independence. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) established the modern international system of independent nation-states (e.g., Netherlands), ending the feudal system. The English “Glorious” Revolution (1688) marked the ending of feudalism in Great Britain, creating a modern constitutional monarchy. The American Revolution (starting in 1776) marked the end of British control in the New World. It was also around this time that the Early Modern Times concluded.

The French Revolution (starting in 1789) overthrew the “Ancien Régime” in France, and as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, served to introduce political modernity in much of Western Europe. This event, along with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, often marks the beginnings of the Modern Times.

The English, American, and French Revolutions limited the powers of monarchs. Democracy, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (brotherhood) became the new standards of government and society. Social values such as salvation and honor became overshadowed by aims toward wealth, property, and individual rights.

Men such as Napoleon introduced new codes of law in Europe based on merit and achievement, rather than a class system rooted in Feudalism. The modern political system of Liberalism (derived from the word “Liberty”) empowered the members of the middle and lower classes to act - sometimes violently. The power of elected bodies (democracy) supplanted traditional rule by royal decree (absolutism). A new attachment to one’s nation, culture, language, and religion produced powerful forces of Nationalism. This in turn ultimately contributed to new ideologies in the 20th century such as Fascism, Socialism, and Communism.