

INTRODUCTION

In modern society the state with its government, powers and functions has come to occupy the principal and most dominating place. The state is like the strong skeletal framework within which society functions, is held together and protected. There is very little nowadays that society as distinct from the state could do without the state. What is called the Modern State started on its career in Europe in the 16th century. England, France, Holland, Spain and Portugal were the first countries to become modern states; later in the 18th century the countries of central Europe became modern states; in the 19th century Germany and Italy became modern states after unification; in the 20th century after the First World War several countries of north and south-eastern Europe became states. Since then countries in Asia and Africa have after winning their independence from colonial powers been endeavouring to become modern states.

From this brief enumeration we see how important, necessary and desirable people find it to establish modern states in their countries: their all-round progress depends upon this. In this chapter we shall study the growth and development of the modern states in two countries which can be said to be representative or typical of the growth and development of the

state in western and central Europe — France and Prussia. This growth and development took place around the monarchy, which was strong in both cases. It was the monarchy that hammered the state into shape. We shall first study the meaning of the terms 'Absolute Monarchy' and 'Enlightened Despotism' and compare them; then we shall very briefly go over the rule of Louis XIV of France as the best exponent of Absolute Monarchy in Europe, and next the rule of Frederick II of Prussia as the most outstanding example of Enlightened Despotism. After that there will be a short note on Peter the Great of Russia.

ABSOLUTE MONARCHY AND ENLIGHTENED DESPOTISM DESCRIBED

Absolute Monarchy is also referred to as Grand Monarchy, which is an expression taken from the appellation given to Louis XIV — **le grand monarque**: the Great King. Absolute Monarchy implies highly personal, uncontrolled, unchecked, arbitrary rule: the sovereign is not responsible to anyone or anybody in the matter of his rule. Such a conception or practice of ruling is based on a principle known as the Divine Right of the King to rule: all power and authority comes **directly** to the king from God, and in no way from the people. Hence the king in the exercise of his power is responsible only to God and to his own conscience, not to the people. All that the people have to do is respectfully to obey the king as God's anointed: it is not for them to question the king's authority, for the king's word is law.

James I of England in his grim struggle with the English Parliament for supreme, unrestrained power in government propounded the theory of the Divine Right of Kings in clear terms. Just as, he said, "it is atheism and blasphemy to dispute what God can do, so it is high presumption and contempt in a subject to dispute what a king can do, or say that a king cannot do this or that. Unto royal sovereignty belongs the **absolute** power not subject to any law. The first and chief mark of a sovereign prince is to be of power to give laws to all his subjects. The

laws of a prince depend on nothing but his mere and frank good will." Briefly, Absolute Monarchy amounts to royal autocracy and is the antithesis of democracy. Of course, it does not mean that the king does everything himself. This is physically impossible. But it does mean that all power and authority has the king as its fountainhead but is exercised by officers of state appointed by him and responsible only to him.

Enlightened Despotism is also called Benevolent Despotism, benevolent because enlightened. Here too the king has unlimited and unchecked power, and is not responsible to the people **legally** in the use of this power. But **morally** he is obliged to use power and to rule for the good of his people: it is for the king to take counsel and decide what is good for the people, and whatever good or benefit he does, whatever reform he introduces, is to be received by the people with respectful submission and gratitude: the idea is that everything in the state is **for** the people, nothing **by** the people. The sovereign, it is understood, is more enlightened than his people, and in a much better position than they to know and decide what is good for the country as a whole and for all the people. He also has possession and control of the resources that are required to give effect to his decisions for the benefit of the people.

There is really not much to choose between Absolute Monarchy and Enlightened Despotism: both are authoritarian, non-democratic forms of government, and both could turn into rank arbitrary, tyrannical rule. The conception and practice of Enlightened Despotism came later in Europe than those of Absolute Monarchy. The former was deeply influenced by an intellectual movement called the Enlightenment, which started in France early in the 18th century and later spread to central and eastern Europe. The Enlightenment sought to use reason as the supreme guide and instrument for the reform of society and for progress, both for the benefit of the people.

LOUIS XIV (1661-1715)

The great English historian Lord Acton thinks that Louis XIV "was by far the ablest man who was born in modern times on the

steps of a throne." He was by no means a political genius, but he took immense pains to be a successful king. Kingship meant to him not only high honour and great power but also unremitting labour in the business of Government, administration and diplomacy. *L'état c'est moi*, historians think, was not actually said by Louis XIV, but the words do apply to him. He was the state of France — its proud place in Europe, its greatness and glory, its power, its diplomacy, its culture — everything. It was this consciousness of his identity with France that prompted him to devote more than nine hours a day to the study of state papers and the formulation of policy, to undertake building projects on a magnificent scale, to patronize artists and craftsmen, to found and support learned Academies, and also to fight wars. On assuming the reins of government in his own hands after his royal tutelage under Cardinal Mazarin (1643-1661), Louis is reported to have solemnly announced to his Council of Ministers: "In future I shall be my own Prime Minister." He was true to his word.

Louis XIV was a shrewd and good judge of men, and either chose or continued in service the ablest men he could find. The highest officers of the state were the Chancellor of the Realm, the Comptroller General of Finance and four Secretaries of State in charge of the most important departments of Government — the Royal Household, Foreign Affairs, War and the Navy. There were besides four Councils of State in charge of Legislation and General Administration, Internal Affairs and Provincial Administration, Justice and Finance. The whole kingdom of France was divided into some 34 provinces or generalities, each presided over by a carefully chosen officer known as the **Intendant**. The **Intendants** were constantly in touch with the Council at the centre that looked after provincial matters. Although Louis XIV was assisted by these officers and Councils and set great store by this assistance, it was always clearly understood by all that the final and decisive word in any matter lay with the king, not with the law or Parliament, department or council. His power was absolute in this sense, but Louis was wise enough to realize that sheer arbitrary use of power would be ruinous to himself and to the kingdom. He gave a great

deal of initiative to ministers and secretaries whom he trusted and in whom he had confidence, and in turn these men served their king loyally and well. For instance Jean Baptiste Colbert, who was a man after Louis XIV's own heart even though he was a Calvinist, was the key man in the Government of France from 1665 to 1683.

Louis XIV was also his own Foreign Minister. He laid down the foreign policy of France, which was far from being arbitrary. It was directed to a very important objective, which, if attained, would have made for greater security for France: he wanted "natural frontiers" for his country — the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees — as natural bulwarks against attacks from the north-east, east and south from the Habsburg Austrian Empire, the formidable rival and enemy of France. In pursuance of this foreign policy he waged several, long and costly wars, and only partially secured the objects he had in view.

Max Beloff, an eminent Oxford historian, has written: "Historians have no alternative but to accept the common verdict of contemporaries that the central core of European civilization in the Age of Louis XIV and his successors was the monarchy of France." In other words, France was in the 17th and 18th centuries the centre of European culture and civilization — the French state was the leading state in Europe, French society was the cultural leader of Europe, French thought, art and social customs set the fashion for Europe, the French army and military strategy were the most effective in Europe. All this was in large measure due to the policy, lead, initiative and drive given by the French Monarchy, Louis XIV in particular, to the people. The monarchy made the French state and gave it its shape and contours in government and administration, both central and provincial, and in the bureaucracy, and thus created the conditions of law and order.

FREDERICK II OF PRUSSIA (1740-1786)

J. A. R. Marriott, an English historian, very perceptively summarizes the work of Frederick the Great in the following words: "In the evolution of Prussia Frederick II's long reign of 46

years marks with deep red characters the dividing line between the German principality and the European Power." In other words, Frederick II was the maker of the modern kingdom and state of Prussia: Prussia before him was just one principality in Europe, after him it became a Great Power in the European states-system of the 19th century. Frederick II was the Enlightened or Benevolent Despot **par excellence**.

He ascended the throne when he was 28 years old. As a young man he aspired to be a literary figure and poet, and even attempted, when Crown Prince, to run away from the court in order to escape the burdens of kingship. But his stern father knocked all this nonsense out of his head; and once the Prince had reconciled himself to shouldering the high duty and obligation that awaited him he became a very intelligent and assiduous student of military strategy and tactics and of state affairs, diplomacy and the art of government, and remained a learner all his life. He seemed to possess untiring energy and almost super-human powers of endurance, and was courageous and daring even to the point of recklessness. He looked upon himself as "the first servant of the state;" nevertheless he was not one to court popularity, never asked for gratitude, never troubled about the feelings of his subjects towards himself or his work. What energized his work and gave direction and purpose to his whole life was his burning passion for the territorial consolidation of Prussia, no matter what it might cost him or his people.

To this end Frederick the Great pursued a policy of war during the first half of his rule, 1740-63. It was said of him that he made war a national industry and negotiated peace treaties sword in hand. "Negotiations without arms," he said, "is like music without instruments." In the Seven Years War (1756-63) he fought against the heaviest odds because he was up against a formidable combination of powers; and at one time the military situation was so desperate when he and his armies were fighting with their backs to the wall that he cried out "Oh God, how weary I am! I am fit for nothing but to be thrown into a common sewer." He thought of committing suicide. But he held on grimly. The political situation changed. Allies in the combination pitted against him dropped out, and

in the end he won the war even though he lost nearly every battle in it except the last. He attained the prime objective of the wars — the greater territorial consolidation of Prussia.

In the second half of his rule (1763-86) Frederick became a man of peace, an administrator of consummate ability and a successful reformer. In his reforms he prided himself on being an eager disciple of the Enlightenment, and was in constant correspondence with Voltaire, a leading figure in this movement. He promoted agriculture and cattle-farming, industry and manufactures. In order to succeed in this he invited "experts" from other countries to come, settle and work in Prussia offering them very attractive incentives. He reformed the administration and the bureaucracy to such good effect that the Prussian bureaucracy and system of administration became models for Europe. He also reformed the administration of justice and speeded it up. He was like a dynamo, and drove both himself and those who worked under him: he was most demanding in the matter of intelligent efficiency. "Nothing," he used to say, "more resembles death than idleness." He set great store by the education of the youth of his country, but he paid professors in an important university as that of Halle in such a niggardly way that one of them complained: "We have to work like donkeys but are fed like canaries."

From what has been said we gather that Frederick II of Prussia is a very good example of Enlightened Despotism — despotic power used to achieve necessary and enlightened objectives, namely the consolidation of the territory of the Prussian kingdom and a progressive modern state. Though the price he and his country had to pay was very heavy indeed, he succeeded admirably. Lord Acton spoke of Frederick the Great as "the most consummate practical genius that in modern times has inherited a throne."

PETER THE GREAT OF RUSSIA (1696-1725)

Russia at the time of Peter's rule was the most backward country in Europe in every respect. It had been isolated from western and central Europe for centuries. Neither the Renaissance nor

the Reformation had touched and influenced it. The economy of Russia was poor, its society feudal in structure, the people were for the most part illiterate and sunk in superstition, the majority of the population were serfs working on estates belonging to the Tsar, the nobility and clergy.

Thus the task of the sovereign, called by the grandiose title of Tsar of all the Russias, would be a herculean one, should he decide to modernize his country and make it a powerful and progressive state. Peter took it upon himself to perform this most difficult task. He was iron-willed and ambitious for power, but it was for power to be used for modernizing and westernizing Russia. With great political insight he perceived that the future of Russia lay in adopting western industrial techniques and agricultural methods, army organization and navy-building, education and culture, science and technology — everything in which the West could serve as models for the Russians to follow. With this in mind Peter went to the countries of the West with a large number of his men and remained there more than a year in order to learn as much as possible from them.

On his return he rushed through a large number of important reforms — in the Greek Orthodox Church, in the administration, in the bureaucracy, in the army, in the textile and iron industries — in everything demanding efficiency and quick results. From where did Peter get the finances for all the enterprises he embarked upon? From taxation — very heavy taxation levied on Church property and on the nobility and landowners: in a word from anyone who had wealth in any form. He also had to have recourse to borrowing from wealthy Russians and from foreign countries.

But it should be noted that his policy of modernization through westernization was not an end in itself: it was in view of making Russia recognized as a Great Power by western and central Europe, i.e. in view of his foreign policy. For the greater part of his reign he was engaged in war, chiefly against Sweden in the Northern War (1700-21) and against the Ottoman Empire: in the former war his objective was to wrest from Sweden a commanding position in the Baltic Sea, and in the latter to re-

place Turkish influence in the Black Sea by Russian influence. He was eminently successful in gaining the first objective, and partially successful in the second.

Peter the Great's career is a good example of both Absolute Monarchy and Enlightened Despotism. He himself worked all the time at high pressure, and drove his people and drained them of their energy in the tasks he set before the country. His was great pioneering work; his successors were forced to follow in his footsteps. He indicated this in a homely way in the following words: "I have to harvest and thresh great quantities of sheaves of wheat, but I have no mill; and there is not enough water close by to build a water-mill. But there is enough water at a distance. Only I shall not have enough time to build a canal, for the length of my life is uncertain. So I am building the mill first and have given orders for the canal to be begun, which will better force my successors to bring water to the completed mill." Peter made a very discerning judgement in this, for his successors did build the canal and bring water to his mill.

CONCLUSION

It should be remembered that Absolute Monarchy in Europe was never strictly absolute, and that Enlightened Despotism was not always enlightened nor unmitigated despotism. Such forms of government were needed in 17th and 18th century Europe, and did very valuable service to the new nation-states: democratic government was just not possible in the circumstances of those times.

Absolute Monarchy and Enlightened Despotism were important in the history of Europe in that they helped greatly to create nation-states with the dynastic throne as their centre and rallying point: the Bourbon dynasty in France, the Habsburg dynasty in Spain and Austria, the Hohenzollern dynasty in Prussia and the Romanov dynasty in Russia. From the 17th century onward the history of Europe has largely been the history of the relations between these nation-states.

Again, it was under the absolute and despotic rulers of Europe that modern armies and navies, modern bureaucracies and admi-

nistration, modern industry and agriculture, modern commerce and finance, modern diplomacy and military strategy were greatly developed.

Finally, the strong centralized monarchies of the 17th and 18th centuries deprived the privileged classes of the clergy and nobility in Europe of their political power, so that the king was no longer merely **primus inter pares** — first among equals, but sovereign in a real sense, thereby giving unity to the nation, state and people. Gradually the king came to rely more and more upon a rising new class, the middle class, which was becoming highly educated, wealthy and ambitious to supplant the two privileged classes of the feudal order of society.

Briefly, Absolute Monarchy and Enlightened Despotism did much to establish the modern state, the modern nation and modern society in Europe.