

## **Memo: Transitions from Monarchy in Europe**

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Background: Absolutist monarchy in Europe is best understood as a “transitional” form of political rule, characterizing the period between the breakdown of feudalism and the rise of modern nation-states.

Up through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was divided into a large number of small states, with fairly porous, undefined borders. Although Kings were the titular rulers of these states, they had, in fact, relatively little power. As is the case in many underdeveloped (“weak”) states today, rulers had little power outside of a “capital” city; most people had little contact with or even knowledge of the King and his court. Instead, local notables (what we would today call “warlords”) were the prime source of authority. Correspondingly, identities during this period were regional, local or religious rather than national. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that this period was characterized by almost constant conflict and instability, both on a domestic and international level.<sup>1</sup>

Bringing an end to this conflict and instability (and the disruption of trade and agricultural production that accompanied it) required moving beyond the weak and decentralized rule of the time. The late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were thus the age of centralizing, absolutist monarchies—when Kings began building states capable of maintaining public order, deterring and if necessary fighting wars, and raising the funds necessary for these and other tasks. It was under these Kings, in other words, that the basic apparatus of the modern state—bureaucracies,

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<sup>1</sup> The Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), for example, devastated Europe; during this period the population of what would become Germany was reduced by one-third. The French Frondes (1648-53), are perhaps the best known examples of the type of domestic rebellions or uprisings that characterized this period.

standing armies, taxation, etc.—was built. Perhaps ironically, however, it was the very success of absolutist monarchs at state-building that helped undermine them. By laying the foundation of modern states—by centralizing authority, undermining the power of local notables and traditions, and restoring a degree of stability and predictability—absolutist monarchs also laid the foundation for industrialization, nationalism and other aspects of modernization—the very forces that would do them in.

**What set of economic, demographic, social or geopolitical factors interacted to destabilize the monarchy? What set of more immediate factors precipitated the crisis in the monarchy?**

In 1788 all European countries were ruled by monarchs, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century none were.<sup>2</sup> The only way to understand this broad trajectory is by looking at the long-term structural changes alluded to above. In particular the basic components of modernization-- economic growth, social change and cultural/ideological shift—worked to gradually undermine the socioeconomic and ideational foundations of monarchy. However, the full elimination of monarchy as a form of political rule took over a century and half to complete and during this time monarchies went through a large number of collapses and resurrections. To understand such short to medium-term developments, attention to more immediate factors is necessary. In particular, economic crises and/or the loss of a war were the most prominent initiators of monarchical crises.

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<sup>2</sup> By this I am referring to monarchs who actually ruled their countries. Monarchs remain as figureheads up to the present day in some parts of Europe, but during the interwar period monarchs ceased to exert real authority over either governments or policy making.

Against a backdrop of relative political stabilization, European economies and populations began once again to grow in the 18<sup>th</sup> and especially 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These changes helped undermine the socioeconomic foundations of monarchy. Traditional monarchy in Europe, as elsewhere, was based on religious sanction and in a social order characterized by hierarchy and fundamental inequalities. Monarchs based their claim to rule on divine authority and political power was inherited as an aspect of family and property. We can see challenges to aspects of this order as early as the Reformation (which began breaking down the belief in divine sanction and inequality before God) and sporadically throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Enlightenment, the English civil wars and Glorious revolution,<sup>3</sup> and the American Revolution being particularly important here). It was the French Revolution, however, which really signaled the beginning of the end of monarchy in Europe. In addition to chopping off the head of the King--a shocking and hugely symbolically important event for the time—the French Revolution placed questions about the nature and justification of political rule and authority at the forefront of France and Europe’s political agenda. European history for 150 years following the revolution was defined by a struggle between those with different answers to these questions.

In addition to a reshaping the nature of political debate and conflict in Europe, the period following the French Revolution was also defined by unprecedented economic development. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe fully entered the industrial age, gradually destroying the social and economic relationships upon which monarchy and the whole pre-modern world had been built. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional communities and beliefs were torn apart and new socio-

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<sup>3</sup> Absolutism came to an early end in Britain with the 1688 Glorious Revolution. After this point, Britain was ruled by a constitutional monarchy. Although on the periphery of Europe during this time, the chopping off of the King’s head during the English civil wars of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century did send a shocking message to the rest of Europe—namely, that it could be done. This message would, of course be sent even more powerfully and consequentially during the French revolution.

economic groups, namely the middle and working classes, grew in both number and power. Also important to note is that the destabilization caused by economic development and modernization helped feed a wave of nationalism that spread across Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By insisting that the national community was the ultimate source of authority and that it was the duty of political leaders and governments to serve and protect such communities, nationalism helped further undermine the traditional beliefs and relationships upon which monarchical rule was based. Thus as European societies and economies were transformed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a political order based on privilege and hierarchy, that excluded the vast number of citizens from the political sphere, began to seem increasingly anachronistic. Growing popular discontent, combined with the ever more complex nature of governance in an increasingly developed and modern Europe, forced all monarchs to make significant changes in the manner of their rule during this time. By the eve of the First World War, parliaments, some form of suffrage, and governments run largely by ministers, bureaucrats and bureaucracies were the rule of the day in all monarchical regimes.

In short, if we want to understand the gradual but inexorable decline in the power and legitimacy of monarchy from approximately 1789 to 1918 we must look first and foremost to broad changes associated with modernization: it simply proved impossible to reconcile a system or rule based on inherited authority, privilege and hierarchy, with increasingly secular, mobile, well-informed and economically advanced societies.

However, such broad changes cannot explain the vicissitudes in Europe's political development trajectory. In the period between 1789 and 1918 monarchies rose and fell many times. To explain such outcomes, short to medium term factors come into play. In particular,

wars (especially when lost) and economic crises seem to have played a role in many, if not most, examples of monarchical collapse.

For example, we see this clearly in the French Revolution, where the monarchy's involvement in several wars (e.g. the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence) helped drain its treasury. The economic reforms required to solve the monarchy's monetary problems highlighted the inherent contradictions between the system of privilege, hierarchy and exemptions upon which the monarchy was built and the financial needs of an increasingly modern and ambitious state. Another critical example of war initiating monarchical crisis came during 1914-8: the chaos and destruction generated by the First World War put the final nail in the coffin of most European monarchs. By bringing their countries into this devastating war without institutionalized consultation with their citizenry, monarchs were forced to confront the negative consequences of this continent on their own. The loss of war, or even a titular win when accompanied by significant harmful (economic, financial, social) consequences, dissipated whatever limited legitimacy many European monarchs still had.

Alongside war, economic and/or financial crises were the other great precipitator of monarchical collapse. This was a factor in the French revolution and the 1848 revolutions, both of which were preceded by economic downturns, agricultural slumps and food riots.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that many of these crises were self-induced. Just as the problem facing the French King in the period before the revolution was not the cost of his wars but the inability of the reigning political/financial system to finance them, so many economic crises were the consequence of the "no taxation without representation" dilemma. This was, for example, the case in the German Kaiserreich. By the eve of the First World War the Emperor's government had been brought to

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that many of these economic crises followed on the heels of periods of relative economic growth. These were, in other words, classic instances of dashed rising expectations.

standstill, unable to raise the funds necessary to cover the costs of running a modern state (including the financing of an increasingly expansive war machine) because conservatives refused sanction any direct taxation. This is because they understood (correctly) that direct taxation would only fan the flames of discontent against their political prerogatives and whole authoritarian system of rule they were a part of.<sup>5</sup> It is, in short, very difficult, if not impossible, to extract resources by force out of economically advanced and politically mobilized societies. Instead some form of political power sharing/consultation if not outright democracy is necessary to raise the funds necessary for running a modern state.

### **3. Did elite divisions within the monarchy play a major role in the transition?**

Yes, of course, especially as time went on. It is important to recognize that even during the classic period of absolutism, monarchs always had to rule through subordinates. As noted above, this became even truer as time went on: the more advanced and complex European societies and economies became, the more complicated became the task of governing. Hence, government—even under monarchical rule—became increasingly impersonal throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Impersonal rule itself posed something of a threat to monarchs as it stood in contradiction to the view that rule was the provenance of the divinely sanctioned and that political power was an aspect of family and property.)

Not only did the number of people involved in administrating and running European governments increase over time, their relationship with the monarchical rulers they ostensibly served also changed dramatically between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Up through the

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<sup>5</sup> It is precisely for this reason—i.e. to head off growing demands for political reform—that some argue that German conservatives rushed head-long into the First World War.

17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Europe as in many underdeveloped economies today, wealth and power depended heavily on ties to and favors granted by the King and his court. When Europe entered the capitalist age, however, all this began to change. Not only did the state become ever more bureaucratized and professionalized (that is to say, filled with people whose loyalty was increasingly to their position rather than the King), but it was no longer necessary to cultivate the King and his court to prosper, gain access to jobs, achieve social status, etc. Modernization, in other words, and economic development more specifically, transformed what had once been a feudal relationship between the King and his administrators to an instrumental one. This, of course, made monarchs very vulnerable: although they increasingly needed large numbers of administrators to help run their governments, once these administrators stopped viewing monarchs as the best route to the satisfaction of their interests, defection became likely. And indeed by the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries growing numbers of ministers, civil servants, and bureaucrats as well as conservatives more generally came to see Kings as harmful to their own and their countries' interests. The defection of portions of the governing coalition and/or significant sectors of conservative, upper and upper/middle groups played a role in causing or hastening the collapse of monarchy in France in the period leading up to 1848 and in Germany and Spain during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**4 and 5: Did mass mobilization against the monarchy play a major role? Did violence play a major role? Why or why not?**

Especially if we are somewhat generous with our time lines (i.e. not looking purely at the period immediately surrounding an abdication but rather at the phase leading up to it) then some sort of mass mobilization did indeed play a role in almost all monarchical collapses during the modern period. This is because the collapse of monarchies for the most part implied regime change—that is, the shift from one form of political rule to another. This mobilization did not, however, always turn violent. Often there were long running demonstrations and other forms of political mobilization that while occasionally unruly or resulting in mob behavior or even small-scale rioting, never degenerated into a widespread breakdown in order. If we look at the major periods of transformation—1789, 1848, and 1918—we see that all were accompanied by significant mobilization (although in later case the mobilization against the war and Kings were inextricably intertwined) and violence. However, there are other cases where Kings were forced out without the accompaniment of violence (early 18<sup>th</sup> century France, interwar Spain, and the gradual decline into obsolescence of the English and Scandinavian monarchs come to mind here.)

Although it is again hard to generalize, a number of factors seem to have played a role in determining whether monarchical collapse would be accompanied by violence. The first and most straightforward was war—monarchical collapses during or at the ends of wars were violent by definition. Second, the degree of intransigence: some monarchs could see the writing on the wall while others could not. Even during the French Revolution, for example, if the King had played his cards better he probably could have escaped with his life (and perhaps could have even salvaged some remnants of his regime) and the more chaotic and violent later phases of the



Revolution might well have played out differently. Perhaps related to this is the amount of incorporation exhibited by the regime in the period preceding the crisis. As Jeff Goodwin has pointed out with regard to political revolutions more generally, it is when regimes leave their citizens “no other way out” (i.e. no institutionalized mechanisms for making their voices and demands heard) that they have no alternative but to press for radical transformation.<sup>6</sup> We might extrapolate, therefore, that those monarchs who refused to allow any liberalization or incorporation into their regimes in the period preceding a crisis would be most vulnerable to mass uprisings (of a potential violent nature) and overthrow than their more liberal counterparts. On the other hand, it also seems to be case that the more evenly matched the forces (opposing and supporting a monarchy); the more likely to be a battle once a crisis comes. (I.e., if an uprising against the monarchy occurs and the monarch retains the support of significant sectors of the population, violence and/or protracted struggle are likely to ensue.) The way to reconcile these two positions is by looking more carefully at the nature of coalitions or opposing forces. Where monarchs retain the support of a relatively narrowly defined and closed (i.e. caste like) group of supporters, violent repression of uprisings is more likely. Where, on the other hand, monarchs have begun incorporating new groups into the political order and/or made attempts to address the concerns of a wide array of citizens, violence is much less likely to occur.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff Goodwin, No Other Way Out. States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991 (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

## **7. What role did international actors play in either undermining autocracy or facilitating/impeding a democratic transition?**

Unlike today, throughout most of the period when Kings reigned in Europe democracy was not the “default” form of government. In addition, international intervention in response to domestic issues did not have the legitimacy it does today. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that international actors did not play significant roles in determining political outcomes in Europe from 1789 on. To start at the beginning, the French Revolution had a well known messianic aspect—and Napoleon’s charge across Europe in the name of the Revolution’s principles permanently transformed the continent. Concomitantly in reaction to Napoleon and the French Revolution more generally, Europe’s monarchs got together at the Congress of Vienna to re-impose conservative, autocratic regimes across the continent. The next wave of European democratization in 1848 also had an international dimension: democratic transitions spread across borders and individuals and lessons from one country influenced developments in others. However, perhaps the most dramatic instance of international actors undermining autocracy and fostering a democratic transition was during the First World War. Wilson made clear that he believed the U.S. was fighting a war to “make the world safe for democracy” and these beliefs played a critical role in the war’s endgame. Although the Kaiser was himself doomed by the war, the disappearance of the monarchy overall was largely the work of Wilson who refused to negotiate with Germany until he believed that the country had made a full transition to a democratic, republican form of government.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, negotiations over what a “transition to democracy” actually meant in the German context (i.e. did the monarchy have to go entirely or did the Kaiser need to resign and have a figurehead take his place?) held up the war’s endgame with critical consequences for political outcomes in Germany.

Of course if we expand our view beyond 1918, the role of international actors in shaping political outcomes in Europe is even more evident: after 1945 the continent's political future was essentially determined by the U.S. and the Soviet Union and during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the political transitions in Southern and Eastern Europe were significantly (albeit largely indirectly) shaped by presence and actions of EC/EU.