**The Thirty Years’ War**

Voltaire described the Holy Roman Empire as neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. It was made of several hundred small, separate states. The Holy Roman emperor was chosen by seven leading German princes called electors. Religion divided the German states. The North was largely Protestant and the south was Catholic. This sparked the Thirty Years’ War.

The War had both religious and political causes. It began in Bohemia when Ferdinand tried to suppress Protestants and assert his royal authority. Ferdinand, the Holy Roman Emperor, tried to assert Catholic authority with the help of Spain and Poland. Protestant powers like the Netherlands and Sweden tried to help the other side.

Catholic and Protestant rulers shifted alliances to suit their own interests. Mercenaries, or soldiers for hire, burned villages and killed without mercy. The war led to severe depopulation. As many as one-third of the people in the German states may have died as a result of the war.

In 1648, they accepted the Peace of Westphalia. The war ended with a general European peace and an attempt to settle other international problems. France emerged as a clear winner, gaining territory on both its Spanish and German frontiers. The Hapsburgs were the biggest losers because they had to accept the almost total independence of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. The Netherlands and the Swiss Federation won recognition as independent states. Germany was divided into many small, separate states.

**Hapsburg Austria**

The Hapsburgs wanted to create a strong united state by expanding their lands. They added Bohemia, Hungary, and parts of Poland and Italy to their Austrian lands. Uniting these lands was difficult because they were so diverse. The Hapsburgs exerted some control over the people. They sent German-speaking officials to the provinces. However, they never had a fully centralized government.

In the early 1700s, emperor Charles VI had no heir to the throne. He tried to convince other European rulers to recognize his daughter, Maria Theresa’s right to succeed him. When he died, many ignored this request.

In 1740, Frederick II of Prussia seized the Hapsburg province of Silesia. Maria Theresa made a dramatic plea for help from her Hungarian subjects. She also received help from Britain and Russia.

During the eight-year War of the Austrian Succession, Maria Theresa was not able to force Frederick out of Silesia. Still, she preserved the Empire and won allegiance. She strengthened Hapsburg power by reorganizing the bureaucracy and improving tax collection. She even forced nobles and clergy to pay taxes.

**The Rise of Prussia**

While Austria was molding a strong Catholic state, Prussia emerged as a new Protestant power. In the 1600s, the Hohenzollern family ruled lands across northern Germany. After the Peace of Westphalia, the Hohenzollern family united their lands. They set up a central bureaucracy and reduced the independence of their nobles (called Junkers).

Prussian rulers like Frederick William I created the best-trained army in Europe. Frederick William I won the loyalty of the Junkers by giving them positions in the army and government. By 1740, Prussia was strong enough to challenge its rival Austria.

Frederick William I’s son Frederick II became king in 1740. He boldly seized Silesia from Austria, sparking the War of Austrian Succession. In several later wars, Frederick made brilliant use of his disciplined army, forcing all the accept Prussia as a great power. He earned the name Frederick the Great.

The great powers of Europe in 1750 were Austria, Prussia, France, England and Russia. They formed various alliances to maintain the balance of power. The Seven Years’ War, which lasted from 1756 to 1763, was fought on four continents. Prussia, Austria, Russia, France and Britain battled in Europe. Britain and France also fought in India and Africa. In North America, the French and Indian War also involved Native American nations. The Treaty of Paris ending the wars gave Britain a huge empire.

**Peter the Great of Russia**

Peter, king of Russia, was very educated and learned about the advanced technology that Western European monarchs had. In 1697, he travelled to European cities to study this technology. When he returned, he embarked on a policy of westernization, or the adoption of western ideas, technology, and culture.

He wanted to strengthen the military, expand Russian borders, and centralize royal power. He forced the boyars, or land-owning nobles, to serve Russia in civilian or military jobs.

To increase their ability to trade with the west, Russia searched for a warm-water port. Peter was unable to defeat the Ottomans and gain this warm-water port along the Black Sea.

In 1700, Peter began a long war against the kingdom of Sweden. Early on, Russia suffered many defeats. In 1709, he rebuilt his army and defeated the Swedes to win lands along the Baltic Sea. On land won from Sweden, Peter built a new capital city called St. Petersburg.

Under Peter, Russia signed a treaty with Qing China, defining their common border in the east. In the early 1700s, Peter hired a Danish navigator Vitus Bering to exploring what became known as the Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia. Some Russian pioneers migrated as far south as California.

**Catherine the Great of Russia**

Peter the Great died without naming a successor and there was a power struggle between the Romanov royal family. The monarch that won was known as Catherine the Great. She was a German princess who married an heir to the Russian throne. Her husband, Czar Peter III, was murdered and so Catherine took the crown of Russia.

Catherine proved to be an efficient empress. She reorganized government, codified laws, and began state-sponsored education for boys and girls. Like Peter the Great, she embraced western ideas.

She granted a charter to the boyers, or wealthy landowners, outlining important rights for them. She also expanded Russia’s border by going to war against the Ottoman Empire. She achieved a warm-water port on the Black Sea and seized territory from neighboring Poland.

Poland was once a great European power but they were unable to centralize their government. In the 1770s, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and Emperor Joseph II of Austria agreed to partition, or divide, Poland.