

## **Condition of Europe on the Eve of French Revolution**

### **Introductory:**

In Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, monarchs and rulers sought to increase their power both domestically within their own states and internationally by adding to their territories and populations. Both in consolidating their power internally and expanding their power externally, they employed three aspects of state-building: control, extraction, and integration.

### **A. Condition of Europe in General:**

With the outbreak of the French Revolution, “European, history merges into the history of one nation, one event and one man; the nation is France, the event is the French Revolution and the man is Napoleon.”

However, before we deal with the French Revolution itself, it is desirable to refer to the condition of Europe on the eve of that great event in European history.

Generally speaking, Europe was organized aristocratically. This was true not only in the case of monarchies but also in the case of Republics.

The Republic of Venice was governed by an oligarchy and the same was the case with Switzerland. Even in England where Parliament was strong, the power rested not with the people but with the landed aristocracy. Parliament itself was controlled by big landlords.

The man in the street still did not count. If this was true of England, the same was the case in other European countries like Austria-Hungary, Prussia, Russia, France, Spain, Poland, etc. In most of the European countries, the rulers were despots although during the 18th century they were called enlightened despots. The people had no hand in the administration of the country. They did not enjoy any personal liberty and everything depended upon the whims of the rulers. Serfdom prevailed almost everywhere in Europe.

European rulers at that time were dishonest and unprincipled. International morality reached its lowest ebb during the 18th century. A man like Frederick, the Great, did not hesitate to annex Silesia in spite of his promises to Charles VI, the father of Maria Theresa. Russia, Prussia, and Austria conspired among themselves to put an end to the very existence of Poland.

There was a general craze for territorial expansion at the expense of the weaker neighbours. “No consideration was paid to race limits or national boundaries.” In the words of Prof Holland Rose, “That respect of dynastic rights and treaty obligations which generally held sway when Christendom was more than a name, now gave place to a state policy which avowedly aimed at little else but gain of territory or markets.” Prof Hazen says, “The old regime in Europe was disloyal to the very principles on which it rested” and those principles were respect for the established order and regard for regality and engagements.

All over Europe there were privileged classes which were completely or partially exempted from taxation and the burden of taxation fell on the unprivileged classes. The rich paid less to the state and the main burden fell on the poor.

European society was organized on a feudal basis and the landlords acted like petty sovereigns in the localities. The serfs were attached to the land and most of the proceeds from land went into the pockets of the landlords.

The condition of the serfs was miserable. To quote, “The great sub-structure of European society was an unhappy, un-free, unprotected, undeveloped mass of human beings, to whom an opportunity for growth and improvement was closed on every side.”

While a few enjoyed privileges, the others suffered. Inequality in every field weakened the very foundations of the social system. There was hardly any awakening among the masses of Europe and thus the system continued.

As regards the religious condition of Europe, Western and Central Europe were roughly divided between a Protestant North and a Roman Catholic South. In the Centre, people of Switzerland and Savoy were Protestants.

The people of Ireland and Poland were Catholics. In Eastern Europe, the Orthodox or Greek Church held sway over Russia and the Balkans. The Jews were found all over Europe. In some places, they were tolerated, while at others persecuted.

Europe was not free from religious strife but religious toleration was making headway. It was felt that persons of different faiths could be the loyal subjects of the state. The growth of humanitarianism also played its part. The spread of the spirit of scientific inquiry made for tolerance. There was the decline of dogmatic religion.

The Roman Catholic Church was attacked and its position was weakened. In 1763 was published a book entitled *On the Present State of the Church and the Lawful Authority of the Roman Pontiff*. This was written by a Roman Catholic bishop. It denied the authority of the Pope over the bishops. Joseph II was influenced by this book and he made the Church subordinate to his authority.

The Pope was forced to modify the famous Bill of 1713 against the Janenists in France. In 1759, the Jesuits were turned out from Portugal. In 1764, their Order was suppressed in France. In 1767, they were expelled from Spain, Sicily and Parma. In 1773, the Pope abolished the Order of the Jesuits. The Jesuits got protection only in Russia and Prussia.

## **B. Germany:**

As regards the political condition of Europe, there were a large number of states which were struggling for expansion and supremacy. Germany was disunited and weak. There were more than 360 sovereign states and their only bond of union was their inclusion in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Emperor came from Austria-Hungary for the last many centuries.

There was an Imperial Diet to regulate the internal affairs of the Holy Roman Empire, but it was not strong enough to accomplish anything. Voltaire pointed out that the Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy nor Roman nor an Empire. The affairs of Germany were controlled by Austria and Prussia and both of them were deadly enemies of each other.

## **C. Prussia:**

As regards Prussia, its prestige had been raised very high during the reign of Frederick, the Great, who ruled from 1740 to 1786. It was he who annexed Silesia and in spite of the efforts of Maria Theresa during the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War to get back the same, Frederick was able to retain it notwithstanding heavy odds against him. Although Catherine, the Great, wanted to annex the whole of Poland herself, Frederick persuaded Austria to join hands with him to force Russia to give them a part of the spoils.

The result was that when the first partition of Poland took place in 1772, Frederick was able to get West Prussia as a part of his share. With the help of West Prussia, Frederick was able to link up East Prussia with the rest of his territories and thereby establish the territorial continuity of Prussia. Frederick also prevented Austria from acquiring Bavaria by exchanging it with the Austrian Netherlands or Belgium.

He also formed the Frustenband or the League of German Princes with a view to putting a check on the power of Austria in Germany. Frederick was absolutely unscrupulous in his dealings with other countries. He followed a policy of expediency which was explained by him in these words "Take what you can you are never wrong unless you are obliged to give back."

"If there is anything to be gained by being honest, honest we will be; and if it is necessary to deceive, let us be scoundrels." Regarding the conquest of Silesia, he observed: "My soldiers were ready, my purse was full." Again, "Silesia was that part which was most useful to the House of Brandenburg."

As regards his home policy, he promoted the material resources of the country. He improved agriculture by draining marshes. He constructed new canals. He encouraged industries by giving subsidies. He worked day and night to bring about the material prosperity of his country. He followed a policy of religious toleration and was prepared to allow even the Turks to come to Prussia, if they could add to the prosperity of his country.

When Frederick died at the age of 74, he left behind him a kingdom which was nearly double in size with a population more than doubled. He considered himself as the first servant of the state. However, he always thought more of Prussia and not of Germany.

He considered the German language as a "Jargon devoid of every grace." In spite of that he was regarded throughout Germany as a great national hero and he captured the imagination of the people of Germany in the same way as Luther had done before.

Frederick did not rule Europe or the whole world, but he was the most celebrated king of his time. His principles and methods of "enlightened despotism" were admired and copied by half the rulers of his day. When he died, a peasant pronounced his epitaph in these words: "Who is now to rule the world?"

After the death of Frederick, the Great, in 1786, Frederick William II came to the throne. He was a man of feeble intellect and vacillating nature. He was opposed to both Austria and Russia. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Prussia was interested more in the affairs of Poland than those of France.

#### **D. Austria-Hungary:**

The Habsburgs ruled in Austria-Hungary. Their Emperor was also the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. However, this state was not very strong because the territories were

scattered and there were people of many nationalities within the Empire. There was no solidarity on account of their racial, religious and linguistic differences. The bond of union between the Bohemians, Hungarians, Netherlanders, Milanese and Austrians was a very weak one.

Maria Theresa was the ruler of Austria from 1740 to 1780. She was a woman of lofty character and high spirits. She was one of the greatest women rulers of modern times, comparable to Queen Victoria of England. Her husband was the Emperor but she was the real ruler. She was kind, generous and beautiful. She was loved by Germans, Magyars, and Slavs.

All of her subjects thronged to kiss her hand at the palace on New Year's Day. She was an able ruler and vigorous reformer. It was she who made the Austrian army march in step for the first time. Even Frederick, the Great, admitted that her measures were worthy of a man. It is true that she lost Silesia to Prussia but she left no stone unturned to recover the same. She had her share of the partitioning of Poland.

She was succeeded by Joseph II who became the Holy Roman Emperor in 1765 after the death of his father. He inherited the dominions of the House of Austria in 1780 on the death of his mother. He was a typical enlightened despot.

He was industrious and conscientious. He worked day and night for the improvement of his people. His object was to unite all the dominions of the House of Austria by abolishing all differences of race, language and religion. He aimed at welding together the various races of his Empire into one Austrian Nation.

He abolished the old territorial divisions and re-divided the whole of his Empire into 13 provinces. Each province was put under a military commander. Provinces were divided into districts and towns and a uniform system of government was set up in all of them.

German was declared to be the official language all over the Empire. The judicial system was overhauled. A uniform code of law was prescribed for the whole country and the people were guaranteed equality before law, freedom of press and religious toleration.

He founded a large number of schools. He abolished all privileges of the nobles and the clergymen and everyone was required to pay a tax of 13 per cent on his land. He tried to bring the Church under the control of the state and lessen the control of the Pope. The control of the clergymen in educational field was lessened. He practically abolished serfdom within his Empire.

However, his reforms were carried out in a hurry, unmindful of the sentiments and traditions of the people. The people were not ready for those reforms. Joseph II boasted that he had made philosophy the architect of his Empire, but by doing so he committed a blunder. He ought to have known that philosophical ideas rarely find a place in the practical life of the people.

It was impossible to force the people to rise to the high ideals which were set for them by the genius of Joseph II. The result was that all his reforms failed. His attempt to consolidate his Empire almost brought about its dissolution.

The Empire of Austria-Hungary was a polyglot Empire and it was impossible to create out of it a homogeneous state. Joseph II was trying to do the impossible, and no wonder he failed. However, he had the courage to cancel all his reforms before his death. To quote, "In the most courageous act of the reformer's career, he decreed the revocation of his entire work."

It is said about Joseph II that "he does not know how to eat or drink or amuse himself or to read anything but official reports." In spite of that he failed because, as Frederick said, "he took the second step before he took the first." Joseph himself suggested the following for his epitaph, "Here lies a prince who, with the best of intentions, failed in all he attempted."

A reference may be made to the foreign policy of Joseph II. The main object of his foreign policy was to re-establish the supremacy of the Habsburgs in Germany and also to readjust the boundaries of his Empire. Joseph II co-operated with Prussia in the first partition of Poland to prevent Russia from annexing the whole of Poland.

Along with Russia, and Prussia, Joseph II got a share of the spoils. He was also able to get Bukovina from the Turks. He forced Holland to give up the barrier fortresses which were allowed to be garrisoned by her by the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713.

He unsuccessfully tried to throw open the river Scheldt. He entered into an alliance with Russia to check the growing influence of Prussia. He tried to exchange the Austrian Netherlands with Bavaria but failed to do so on account of the opposition of Prussia.

He also declared war against the Turks with a view to dismembering Turkey. However, he did not succeed in his mission on account of the hostile attitude of Prussia. Prussia, England and Holland entered in a Triple Alliance to help the Turks and in 1791, Leopold II, who came to the throne of Austria in 1790, retired from the war.

The Austrian Empire was in a state of intense ferment on the eve of the French Revolution. She was not only interested in the affairs of France but was also concerned over the intrigues of Russia and Prussia in Poland. This divided attention was in the interests of the cause of the French Revolution.

#### **E. Russia:**

Catherine, the Great, was the ruler of Russia from 1762 to 1796. She was a very clever and crooked woman and she followed in the footsteps of Peter, the Great. She was an enlightened despot. She took pleasure in the company of the learned persons of Europe and patronised literary persons like Diderot. She set up a very efficient system of administration but otherwise did not care much for the lot of the people. No freedom was given to the people in any field and her word was law in every sphere.

Her foreign policy was directed against Poland and Turkey. The war between Russia and Turkey started in 1768. The Turks were defeated and forced to evacuate Moldavia and Wallachia. The war was ended by the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji in 1774. By this treaty, Russia got Azoff and a number of other places which gave her control over the northern shore of the Black Sea and also over the Sea of Azoff.

The Black Sea was opened to Russian navigation. The independence of the Crimea was recognized. Russia was to have her Consuls in Turkey. Russian subjects were to be allowed to visit the holy places in Palestine. Russia was given the right to interfere in the internal affairs of

Turkey to protect the Greek Christian subjects of Turkey. Peace between Turkey and Russia did not last long and war was renewed in 1787.

At this time, Catherine joined hands with Joseph II to Austria to dismember Turkey. Austria was forced to withdraw from the war in 1791 on account of the Triple Alliance between England, Prussia and Holland. However, Russia carried on the war alone which was ended in 1792 by the Treaty of Jassy. By this treaty Turkey recognized the Russian annexation of Crimea. Thus she lost her control over the northern coast of the Black Sea up to the river Dniester.

Catherine, the Great, played the most important part in the three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795. Her original idea was to annex the whole of Poland but both Prussia and Austria joined hands to force her to give them a part of the spoils in 1772. As regards the partition of 1793, Austria got no share but Prussia got something. In the third partition of Poland in 1795, Russia got the lion's share, although both Prussia and Austria also got their shares.

It cannot be denied that Catherine, the Great, raised the prestige of Russia in Europe. Her achievements can be summed up in her own words thus: "I came to Russia as a poor girl; Russia has dowered me richly, but I have paid her back with Azov, the Crimea and the Ukraine."

#### **F. Great Britain:**

The Hanoverians ruled England. In accordance with the provisions of the Act of Settlement, George I ascended the throne of England in 1714 after the death of Queen Anne. He was succeeded in 1727 by his son George II who ruled up to 1760. It was during the reign of George I and George II that the Whig oligarchy ruled in England. It was during that period that the cabinet system was put on a stable basis.

The office of Prime Minister came into existence under Walpole. England had to fight the Jenkin's Ear War, the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War. The Seven Years' War was still in progress when George III came to the throne in 1760. He ruled up to 1820. He differed from his father and grandfather in many respects. He was born and brought up in England and glorified in that fact.

From the very beginning, he was determined to set up his personal rule. Pitt, the Elder, resigned in 1761 and Lord Bute, King's own tutor, acted as Prime Minister from 1761 to 1763. From 1760 to 1770, George III followed the policy of creating dissensions among the Whigs and also giving training to his own friends whom he could trust. Having accomplished this by 1770, he appointed Lord North as his Prime Minister and the latter occupied that position up to 1782.

It was during this period that the dispute with English colonies in North America took a serious turn and the War of American Independence started. England was defeated and she had to recognise the independence of the American colonies by the Treaty of Versailles of 1783. In December 1783, Pitt, the Younger, was appointed Prime Minister and he held that office up to 1806 with some break.

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Pitt, the Younger, was at the helm of affairs in England. The Industrial Revolution and the Agrarian Revolution were making a lot of progress in England and as a result England was leading Europe in the field of agriculture and industrial production. France was destined to get the greatest amount of opposition from England.

## **G. Poland:**

Poland was a very powerful State during the 16th and 17th centuries and she was responsible for saving Vienna which was besieged by the Turks in 1683. She saved not only Germany but the whole of Europe from the danger of Turkish domination. However, she began to decline from the 18th century and her very name was removed from the map of Europe towards the end of the century. That was due to many causes.

Polish monarchy was elective and the result was that after the death of every king, there were intrigues and the neighbouring countries got an opportunity to interfere in the internal affairs of Poland. The Great Powers had their own groups in Poland which backed their interests. Those groups owed their allegiance to their foreign patrons and were prepared to subordinate the interests of their own country to those of their patrons.

At the time of the election of a Polish king, the nobles of Poland managed to get a large number of concessions and this process was repeated on the occasion of the election of every king. The nobles managed to get a large number of privileges and concessions and consequently the position of the king became very weak.

As a matter of fact, real power was in the hands of the nobles. Moreover, the election of foreign princes as the kings of Poland added to her difficulties. Those princes brought their own dominions along with them when they became kings of Poland and consequently Poland was unnecessarily dragged into European politics.

Another unfortunate institution of Poland was the *Liberum Veto* by which even one member of the Polish Diet had the power to veto any bill in Parliament. The result was that no legislation could be passed unless there was unanimity in the Diet.

This was impossible to secure because the other Powers which were interested in the fall of Poland, could easily manage to win over a few nobles to oppose the progressive legislation in the country. The *Liberum Veto* was the most absurd thing and proved to be fatal. This gentlemen's agreement was the most stupid political instrument which could not be found in any sane country. The nobles insisted on it on account of their vanity and pride, unmindful of its consequences.

There was too much inequality in Poland. While on the one side the nobles had all their privileges, the condition of the peasants was simply deplorable. The result was too much bitterness in the society. Under the circumstances, there was no solidarity in Polish society and that considerably weakened the strength of the country. Religious differences added to the difficulties of Polish patriots.

The Polish Protestants were cruelly persecuted by the Catholics. Racial differences also were responsible for the lack of homogeneity in Polish society. There were many elements in Poland who looked up to foreign countries for help and support for their independence. Unluckily, Poland had no geographical unity and the various parts of the Polish kingdom did not consider themselves as the parts of a single organism.

Poland had no natural boundaries of rivers or mountains and consequently it was difficult for her to defend herself from foreigners. It was unlucky for Poland that during the second half of the 18th century some very unscrupulous persons were the rulers of the neighbouring states.

Both Catherine, the Great, and Frederick, the Great, were absolutely unscrupulous in their dealings, and no wonder Poland met her doom at their hands.

Both Catherine the Great, and Frederick, the Great, had their eyes on Poland. To begin with, they tried to exclude the House of Saxony from the throne of Poland. They got their opportunity in 1763 when Augustus III, King of Poland, died. Both Russia and Prussia put pressure on the Polish nobles and got their nominee elected.

The new King of Poland was Stanislaus Poniatowsky who was a great favourite of Catherine. Having put their nominee on the throne of Poland, preparations were made for the partition of the country. The patriots of Poland resented the influence of Russia and formed a League to resist the same.

War started between Russia and Poland and Russia was able to break the resistance of the Poles. Frederick proposed the partition of Poland but the proposal was rejected by Catherine who wanted to have the whole of Poland for herself.

However the opportunity of Frederick came when war started between Russia and Turkey. When Austria and Prussia joined hands, Russia agreed to the partition of Poland. The first partition took place in 1772. By this partition, Russia got Livonia and a part of Lithuania and thus advanced up to the Duna and Dnieper. Prussia got West Prussia and Austria got Zips and Red Russia (Galicia). On the attitude of Maria Theresa, the cynical remark of Frederick, the Great, was that “she weeps but takes all the same.”

After the first partition of 1772, Poland became dependent on Russia and for some time the patriots of Poland could do nothing on account of an alliance between Russia and Prussia. Things improved after 1781 on account of an alliance between Prussia and Austria which was friendlier to Poland than Prussia. In 1787, there started a war between Russia and Turkey. In 1788 was formed the Triple Alliance which aimed at checking the ambitions of Russia and Austria.

The Polish Diet met in 1788 and decided to carry out certain reforms. Unfortunately, the work of reforms was delayed because the King of Poland was afraid of Russia and also because the Polish nobles were not in favour of reforms. Opposition came from Prussia also. According to the reforms of 1791, Kingship was to be hereditary in the family of the Elector of Saxony. The Polish king was to control the army and the executive.

The Libero Veto was to be abolished. Religious toleration was to be given to all. Russia resented these reforms and decided to take action against Poland. She also encouraged Austria and Prussia to take interest in the French Revolution so that she might be able to have her own way in Poland. Prussia also gave up her friendly attitude towards Poland and no wonder the Poles resented this change of attitude.

The attitude of Austria was friendly. It was in this atmosphere that Russia attacked Poland and defeated the Poles. The latter were forced to cancel the new reforms. They got no help either from Austria or Prussia and all their resistance collapsed. Poland was partitioned for the second time in 1793. Austria got nothing. Russia got Eastern Poland including Minsk, Podolia, Volhynia and Little Russia and Prussia got Danzig, Thorn, Rosen, Gnesen and Kalisch.



Russia got four times as much territory and twice as many new subjects as Prussia. The partition revealed the shameless selfishness of the Powers and their utter distrust of one another. Austria strongly resented the partition which was made without her approval and which brought the Russian territory into touch with the Austrian dominions. The relations between Austria and Prussia were strained.

Russia strengthened her position in Poland and the king of Poland became a mere agent of the Russian Minister at Warsaw. The Poles resented the partition and secret societies were set up to regain their independence and carry out the necessary reforms. In 1794, Russia demanded the disbandment of the Polish troops, but that demand was rejected.

There were revolts and the Russians were turned out from many places in Poland. Russia attacked Poland and defeated her. All opposition was crushed. It was then that the third partition of Poland took place in 1795. According to it, Russia got the land between Galicia and the Lower Duna covering about 2,000 sq. miles of territory. Austria got Cracow and the rest of Galicia and her share included about 1,000 sq. miles of territory in all.

Prussia received Warsaw and the land between Bug and the Dnieper, about 700 sq. miles of territory in all. By a treaty of January 1797, Russia, Prussia and Austria asserted "the necessity of abolishing everything which may recall the memory of the existence of the kingdom of Poland."

Guedalla says that the partitioning of Poland was the most shameless and barren act of European diplomacy. It was shameless because it was against the canons of international morality and justice. It was barren because it brought no strength to those countries which received their shares of spoils. The Poles never reconciled themselves to the partition of their country and continued their struggle relentlessly till they got their freedom in the 20th century.

The Polish territories in the possession of Russia, Prussia and Austria remained free undigested fragments in three stomachs. The partition of Poland was "a vast national crime". However, the interference of the Great Powers in the affairs of Poland helped the cause of the French Revolution. France was able to maintain her independence because her enemies were divided on the question of Poland and consequently could not take any concerted action against her.

## **H. Italy:**

Italy at that time was merely a geographical expression and was divided into a large number of states. In the north, there was the kingdom of Savoy with Sardinia, the two republics of Geneva and Venice and four duchies of Milan, Parma, Modena and Lucca. In the south were the duchy of Tuscany, the Papal States including Rome and Naples along with Sicily. Corsica went to France in 1769.

After the War of Spanish Succession, Austria succeeded Spain as the dominating power in Italy. Austria had Milan in direct sovereignty. The house of Emperor Francis held Tuscany. Austria exercised a measure of control over Parma, Modena and Lucca. She also cast her hungry eyes on Venice.

It is true that the states of Italy were independent but that did not mean much. The glories of Genoa and Venice were over. The Papal States were the worst governed States in Europe. Naples was very backward. However, Tuscany was the best governed State in Europe.

In 1737, Francis, Husband of Maria Theresa, succeeded to the throne of Tuscany. His work was continued by his son, Leopold (1765—90). Serfdom was ended and feudal rights were limited. The Inquisition was abolished. The powers of the Clerical Courts were reduced. Torture was abolished. The annual budget was published. Thus, Tuscany became a model to Italy and Europe.

The most promising feature of the situation in Italy was the steady growth of the house of Savoy. It is true that Savoy (or Sardinia) was not prepared at that time to take the lead in any Italian movement but she developed considerable ability in exploiting her strategic position. She joined sometimes one power and sometimes another and at times was in danger of being crushed. However, she was able to enlarge and consolidate her territories in a manner pregnant for the future.

“Italy (said a French observer about this time) has seven or eight centres of civilization. The simplest action is performed in an entirely different way in Turin and Venice, Milan or Genoa, Bologna or Florence, Rome or Naples. Venice is gay and frank whilst Turin is surely aristocratic, Milanese good humour is as familiar as Genoese meanness. The Bolognese are full of fire, passion, generosity, and sometimes imprudence. As for the Neapolitan, he is the servant of the whim of the moment”.

### **I. Spain:**

Spain was a great country during the 16th century under Charles V and Philip II. She became a second-rate power during the course of the 17th century. Reactionary forces directed the destiny of the country. After the War of Spanish Succession, the grandson of Louis XIV of France was recognised the ruler of Spain. In 1761, Spain entered the Seven Years ‘War on the side of France.

A series of reforms were carried out by ministers like Albemoli and Patino. In the time of Charles III, further reforms were carried out by which the legal system was reformed, brigandage was suppressed, the severity of the Inquisition was lessened, the Jesuits were turned out from the country, and the economic development of the country progressed. An impetus was given to the intellectual life of the country also. The new king, Charles IV, was a weak and unsteady person.

### **J. Portugal:**

Under Pombal, the minister of Joseph I, a large number of reforms were carried out by which industry was expanded, education was encouraged and secularized, the power of the Pope was reduced and the jurisdiction of the Inquisition was curtailed.

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