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SECTION: GEOGRAPHY AND NATURAL SCIENCE

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GERMANY IN THE XVIII CENTURY

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At the beginning of the 18th century, industry began to slowly revive. Cotton and pottery production developed in Saxony. A porcelain factory opened in Meissen. The wool industry spread in Württemberg, and metalworking in Westphalia. However, weak consumer demand led to the instability of the first large factories. The situation was better for factories that produced weapons and cloth for the army. Porcelain, carpets and mirrors were in high demand among the nobility and bourgeoisie.

Industrial growth led to social change. In the most developed areas, a bourgeoisie and a class of wage labourers began to form. However, compared to England, this process was very slow.

In the 18th century, the Brandenburg-Prussian state became very important among the German principalities. Brandenburg belonged to the Hohenzollern dynasty, which also ruled Prussia at the beginning of the 17th century. The dynasty inherited this duchy. As a result of the Thirty Years' War, the Brandenburg elector increased his possessions. The Brandenburg rulers began to control the trade routes to the North and Baltic Seas, which contributed to the economic development of their state.

The demand for foodstuffs contributed to the economic strengthening of the Hohenzollern state. This led to the emergence of a large ruling class of junkers, who enriched themselves through cheap serf labour and profitable foreign trade.

The Brandenburg-Prussian state was an absolute monarchy. It had no large feudal lords capable of resisting central authority. The interests of the Junkers required a strong state that could keep the peasants in check and maintain access to the sea. In 1701, Elector Frederick III received the title of King of Prussia from the Holy Roman Emperor. The Brandenburg-Prussian state became the Kingdom of Prussia.

The Prussian kings of the 18th century differed from each other in character and abilities, but they were like-minded when it came to protecting the interests of the nobility. The frivolous Frederick I spent 6 million thalers on his coronation (while having only 3 million thalers in state revenue). His son, Frederick William I, unlike his father, was afraid to spend extra money, but he created an army of almost 90,000 soldiers, which ‘ate up’ 80% of the budget (5-6 million out of 7 million thalers). During his reign, the system of ‘Prussianism’ was finally formed – a military-police monarchy that protected the interests of the junkers.

Frederick III (1688–1713), continuing to use the same methods of manoeuvring and betrayal (as his father had done), managed to benefit from two major conflicts that engulfed the whole of Europe: the Northern War of 1700–1721 and the War of the Spanish Succession. By promising to support Austria against its enemies, he obtained the royal title from the emperor and in 1701 proclaimed himself King of Prussia under

the name Frederick I. The Elector of Brandenburg thus became the independent King of Prussia.

The nobility held all the most influential and lucrative positions in the state apparatus, and under Frederick II, military service also became the monopoly of the nobility. Military and civil service gave younger sons in noble families the opportunity to pursue a career without interfering with their older brothers' right to inherit undivided estates.

Prussian absolutism, whose military-bureaucratic features were already quite evident at the end of the 17th century, took its final form in the 18th century. Prussian absolutism ensured, first and foremost, the inviolability of serfdom in the interests of this class. In the interests of the same nobles, the kings of Prussia continued the intensive expansion of their kingdom's borders.

Representatives of Prussian absolutism employed various methods in their policies. One of them was the regime of aristocratic serfdom dictatorship, which was carried out quite openly using ‘iron-fisted methods’ without masking it with any liberal phrases or ‘reforms.’ Other Prussian monarchs, especially in the second half of the 18th century, draped themselves in the garb of ‘enlightened absolutism,’ presenting themselves as ‘friends of enlightenment,’ ‘servants of society’ (in the words of Frederick II), and supporters of liberal reforms. King Frederick William I (1713–1740) was a representative of the openly military-despotic Prussian system. Frederick William was frugal in his spending on civil administration and spent enormous sums on the army. By the end of his reign, the Prussian standing army numbered 89,000 bayonets. With the relatively small population of Prussia at that time (2,500,000 people), its army ranked fourth in Europe in terms of size. In essence, Frederick William's royal administration boiled down to extracting funds from the population, which were mainly used for military preparations. The new military-financial centralised administration organised by Frederick William, with its name ‘Higher Administration of Finance, Military Affairs and Domains,’ spoke for itself. This institution combined three previously existing departments: the Ministry of War, the administration of royal estates (domains) and the Finance Chamber, which was responsible for collecting direct and indirect taxes.

In an effort to increase treasury revenues, Frederick William pursued a high-handed policy towards industry. But in practice, this patronage took the form of ugly police regulations. The king forbade the population from sewing clothes from foreign materials and ordered the merciless destruction of imported fabrics. On his orders, the police stopped men and women wearing imported fabrics on the streets of Berlin and fined them on the spot.

The policies of King Frederick II (1740–1786) appeared quite different on the surface. At one point, the young Frederick even attempted to flee abroad to escape his father, but he was apprehended, imprisoned in a fortress, and faced a court martial. In his youth, Frederick wrote mediocre French poems and played the flute. Both were subjects of ridicule by the old king, as was his son's fascination with French literature. Frederick absorbed some of the ideas of the French Enlightenment. Religious freethinking remained a characteristic feature of Frederick in his later years. Frederick's

literary language was French. The phraseology of the French Enlightenment is sometimes evident in the style of his government decrees and orders.

Frederick II tried to get closer to Voltaire. The leader of the French Enlightenment even visited his ‘friend the king’ in Potsdam. However, the influence of the French Enlightenment on the king was superficial and external. Frederick II's ‘enlightened absolutism’ was merely a cover for ordinary Prussian military-junker absolutism. He carried out several minor reforms aimed at eliminating the most glaring shortcomings in public administration, such as streamlining the activities of financial and judicial bodies, expanding primary education in urban and rural areas, and abolishing some medieval laws relating to religion. Otherwise, everything in Prussia remained the same.

Frederick II pursued an active foreign policy. As a result of two wars with Austria, he annexed Silesia. Almost the entire southern coast of the Baltic Sea became part of Prussia. During the Seven Years' War (1766–1763), Frederick II inflicted several defeats on the Austrian and French armies. Prussia's attack on Austria marked the beginning of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748). This war was caused by the desire of the Prussian nobility to enrich themselves by plundering and subjugating the neighbouring rich Austrian province of Silesia, which was openly aggressive on the part of Prussia. The weak economic base could not satisfy the enormous ambitions of the Hohenzollerns, and this exhausted the state's strength. The further development of the state depended on the extent to which Prussia could free itself from its feudal heritage.

Thus, the main factors that caused Germany to lag behind the leading countries in economic terms were: the results and consequences of the Thirty Years' War; the shift of the centre of international trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and, accordingly, the decline of the trade route from north to south Europe; the rapid economic growth of the centralised national economies of England, Holland and France and the resulting increase in competition in Europe; the political fragmentation of the country; the absence of a single centralised national market; and the persistence of feudal structures in both rural and urban areas.

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