

Geography and History Activity

Conflict and Absolutism in Europe

Territorial Expansion of Prussia and Austria

In 1648, Europe's balance of power began to shift as many of the regions belonging to the Holy Roman Empire were granted sovereignty following the Thirty Years War. Prussia and Austria continued to expand their territories and emerged as the two largest and most powerful German states through the mid-eighteenth century. Though both of these newly sovereign states were governed under absolute monarchies, the social and political geography of each region affected its territorial expansion in different ways.

A **region** is a broad geographic area distinguished by similar features. People living within a particular region form a sense of identity called their **regional consciousness**, or regional identity. To understand the challenges of ruling the expanding Prussian and Austrian territories, it is important to consider the differences in their regional identities. In the cases of Prussia and Austria, the concepts of regional consciousness, social geography, and political geography are closely intertwined. **Political geography** deals with the relationships between nations and territories and the relationships among people and governments.

Throughout the late seventeenth century, Prussia became a highly centralized territory under the rule of Frederick William the Great Elector. He established a powerful standing army that merged military power with civic control. He gained support for the monarchy through exploiting the region's social classes. He taxed the peasant class and granted their wealthy masters executive power and ranked military positions. He eventually weakened the independence of the towns. He laid the foundation for both a powerful bureaucracy and military; his successors, Frederick I and Frederick II, continued to govern Prussia with absolute power. Prussia eventually expanded to include much of West Pomerania, Poland, Silesia, and many other economically and geographically rich but small provinces.

Like Prussia, Austria emerged as a powerful region throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The emperors of the Hapsburg dynasty ruled Austria with absolute power, and expanded the territory to include present-day Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, and later, Transylvania, Slavonia, and Bohemia. Though rulers governed with absolute power, the empire was far more decentralized than Prussia. The varied ethnic, social, economic, political, and cultural makeup of various regions within the land-locked empire presented little opportunity for the monarchy to foster a united regional identity.

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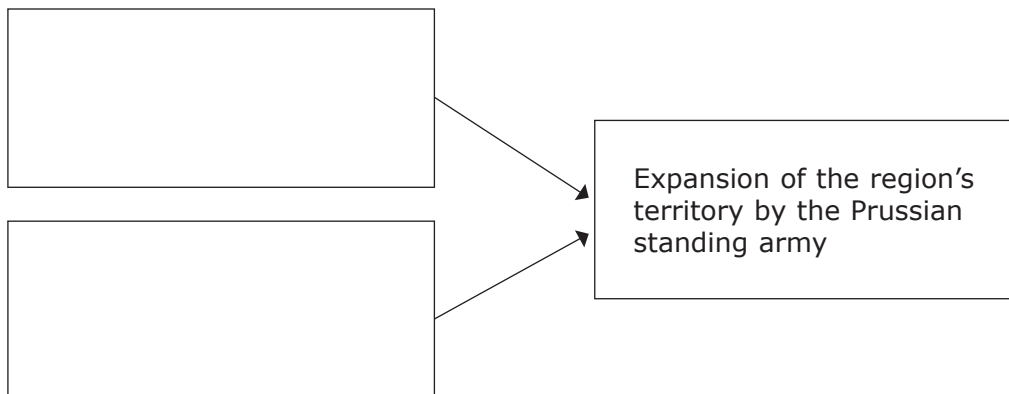


Caption: Between 1648 and 1748, Prussia and Austria used military strength and political negotiation tactics to expand their territories from relatively small states to large, influential European empires.

Directions: Answer the questions below in the space provided.

Understanding Concepts

- Graphic Organizer** In what ways did the Prussian standing army help expand the region's territory?



Geography and History Activity *Cont.*



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2. **Explaining** Explain the concept of political geography. How did Frederick William manipulate Prussia's political landscape to create a more centralized state?

3. **Making Inferences** Why did the Hapsburgs decide to expand Austrian territory to include regions such as Croatia and Slavonia? What benefits did the addition of these two states provide?

Applying the Concept

4. **Drawing Conclusions** The concept of European nationalism was still in its infancy during the eighteenth century. What could Hapsburg monarchs have done to foster a common national sentiment among people of the Austrian empire?

5. **Making Connections** The Austrian expansion created an empire made up of many distinct regions that had their own unique social, ethnic, cultural, religious, and political identities. In what ways can human diversity benefit or strengthen a region?
