Lesson 2 Introduction

In 1902, economist J.A. Hobson wrote, "No mere array of facts and figures adduced to illustrate the economic nature of the new Imperialism will suffice to dispel the popular delusion that the use of national force to secure new markets by annexing fresh tracts of territory is a sound and a necessary policy for an advanced industrial country like Great Britain...." In short, many people of the European continent, along with their governments, felt not only the right but also the privilege to use persuasion if possible and military force if necessary to acquire lands and resources in other continents, such as the Americas, Africa, and Asia. For some Europeans, these lands provided an opportunity to share religious beliefs and culture, but the overwhelming draw to visit Asia and Africa was for the gathering of wealth and power.

In 1770, the young and attractive Marie Antoinette, daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, became the wife of the dauphin (crown prince) who was afterwards Louis XVI of France. She wrote her mother the following letter in June of 1773 (excerpt):

As for honors, we received all that we could possibly imagine; but they, though very well in their way, were not what touched me most. What was really affecting was the tenderness and earnestness of the poor people, who, in spite of the taxes with which they are overwhelmed, were transported with joy at seeing us.

Yet, just 20 years later, Irish politician and member of the English Parliament Edmund Burke lamented Queen Marie Antoinette's death as a result of the radical turn the French Revolution took after its onset in 1789:

O, what a revolution! and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream, when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her, in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor, and of cavaliers! I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards, to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone; that of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.

How did Europe turn so sharply from simply promoting liberalism and a contract between the people and their government to executing its rulers? This lesson focuses on the French Revolution, and its American precursor, as well as the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and a new wave of nationalism sweeping across the European continent. It also discusses the expansion of European imperial power, the style of government known as enlightened absolutism, and the beginnings of constitutional government in some parts of Europe. It covers important definitions used in politics that have endured for more than three centuries.