CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter surveys the life and institutions of eighteenth century Europe before 1789. They are known as the old regime (ancien regime), to separate them from the great innovations which followed the French Revolution. Politically, the term stood for absolute monarchies, large bureaucracies, and armies led by aristocrats. Economically, the old regime was marked by a scarcity of food, agrarian economy, slow transport, little iron production, unsophisticated finances, and sometimes commercial overseas empire. The society of pre-revolutionary Europe was traditional and hierarchical. It ranged from a governing aristocratic elite through an urban middle class and labor force divided into guilds, to a rural peasantry living at the edge of poverty. Society was also corporate and privileged, for men were more conscious of their communal associations and group rights than of individual liberties. The old regime was marked by great contrasts between different classes and regions, especially between western Europe and the countries east of the Elbe River. Finally, although the character of the old regime was very distinct, it was not static. Society itself fostered a number of developments which eventually led to change: revolutions in agriculture and industry, the creation of new products and wealth, population expansion and tension between monarchs, nobles and the middle class.

The economy of the eighteenth century depended on the land. In the west, most of those who lived in the countryside were free peasants, in the east, most were serfs. The landowners subjected both of these groups to feudal dues, services and strict control, which often resulted in peasant discontent and rebellion. The most dramatic revolt was Pugachev's rebellion of 1771-1775 which involved all of southern Russia.

A basic cause of peasant discontent was the growing desire of landlords to change the traditional ways of production in order to maximize profits. A steady rise in the price of Europe's food staple, grain, because of population growth, encouraged a revolution in agriculture, leading to greater productivity. Improvements in grain production further spurred population growth: in 1700, the population of Europe had been 100-120 million; by 1800, it was about 190 million. Improvements in hygiene and sanitation were also significant. The population explosion placed new demands and pressures on eighteenth century society as did the incipient industrial revolution in the second half of the century which limited production with sustained growth. European economic expansion has continued almost without interruption ever since.
Europe's cities grew considerably during the century, although even in urbanized Britain and France, they seem to have contained less than twenty percent of the population. The cities were not industrial centers, but either market towns, commerce and financial centers, or capital cities. A small group of nobles, rich merchants, bankers, financiers, clergy and officials ruled the towns. Below them was the prosperous middle class (bourgeoisie), a dynamic element increasingly resentful of aristocratic monopoly of power and prestige. The largest and poorest group in the city was made up of shopkeepers, artisans and wage earners who were generally organized into guilds. Even before the French Revolution, this lower class often expressed their political grievances by rioting.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the Jewish population throughout Europe. This period in Jewish history, from the end of the fifteenth century into the eighteenth, can be described as the "Age of the Ghetto." The vast majority of Jews lived in Eastern Europe and dwelled in most nations without enjoying the rights and privileges of other subjects of the monarchs. In cities they usually lived in distinct districts known as ghettos, and in the countryside, in Jewish villages. Jews could not and did not mix in the mainstream of the societies in which they dwelled. A very small number of Jews helped finance the wars of major rulers and came to be known as "court Jews." But the majority of Jews lived in poverty. Under the Old Regime, all of this discrimination was based on religious separateness. Those who converted to Christianity generally were welcomed into the major political and social institutions of gentile European society. Without conversion, however, Jews were subject to various religious, civil, and social disabilities.

By the end of the eighteenth century, many of the facets of the old regime had been changed in fundamental ways. Europe stood on the brink of a new era.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. **Family Structure and Family Economy**: A section of this chapter focuses on family structure. Most Europeans worked within the context of the family economy. This is to say the household was the fundamental unit of production and consumption. Family members worked together to sustain their economic life because it was almost impossible to support oneself independently. Recent demographic investigation has revealed that the northwestern European household was not extended, but nuclear. Children lived with their parents only until their early teens when they often moved away and worked in
other households as servants. The family economy also established many of the chief constraints on women in pre-industrial society. A woman's life was devoted to the maintenance of her parent's household and then to assuring that she would have her own to live in as an adult. Bearing and rearing children were often subordinate to these goals. Children too became part of the family economy; there were many perils of early childhood, but the 17th and early 18th centuries saw new interest in preserving the lives of abandoned children with the establishment of foundling hospitals.

2. **The Agricultural Revolution**: The chapter emphasizes the importance of the agricultural innovations of this period. Jethro Tull, for example, introduced the iron plough and "Turnip" Townsend, the three field system of crop rotation. Such innovations required large blocks of land and landlords enclosed common land throughout the countryside which brought about social turmoil, but did not depopulate the rural areas as is sometimes claimed.

3. **The Industrial Revolution**: As in agriculture, Britain took the lead in the industrial revolution, favored as it was by rich deposits of coal and iron ore, a stable political structure, consumer demand from the colonies, a low tax structure and relative social mobility. The chapter details such innovations as the flying shuttle, spinning-jenny, and water frame in the textile industry and the development of the steam engine. Important as these changes were, their full economic and social ramifications were not really felt until the 19th century.

4. **The Aristocracy**: Before 1789, the aristocracy was still the wealthiest and most influential sector of the population in all countries, although it differed from place to place. Britain's nobility was Europe's smallest, wealthiest and most socially responsible, while France's aristocracy was larger, more complex and benefitted from more legal privileges, especially tax exemption. The chapter discusses in further detail the aristocracies in Poland, Prussia (Junkers) and Russia. Squeezed between absolutist monarchs and the growing commercial classes, Europe's nobles tried to reassert their power throughout the century, a movement termed the "aristocratic resurgence."

5. **The European Old Regime in World Perspective**: The eighteenth century witnessed important societal changes throughout the world. The population explosion was a global
event made manageable through expanded acreage and new crops. Still, it created pressures on all the existing social structures. In both China and Europe commerce grew and banking was improved. Japan stood in marked contrast to China and Europe. Tokugawa rule was stable, but restrictive. European society was on the brink of a new era in which the commercial spirit led increasingly to a conception of human beings as individuals rather than as members of communities. Finally, the conflicting political ambition of monarchs, nobles and the middle class generated innovation. By the close of the century, a movement toward world interconnectedness and interdependence had begun.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*The London of William Hogarth.* International Film Bureau. 26 min.

*Civilisation IX: The Pursuit of Happiness.* Time-Life Films. 52 min.

*Industrial Revolution in England.* Encyclopaedia Britannica. 25 min.