

Defining characteristics of the modern state history essay



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As everybody knows, social and political order is not a constant state. They are dynamic and continually evolving. Over the years and throughout the globe, we have seen major transitions between different political systems and major changes in the way authority is exercised. One of the major political transformations in history was the movement towards the contemporary states system. The reason why this change was so important was that for the first time we have a universal political system. In order to examine this change we must examine the origins and defining characteristics of the modern state.

States can be defined as “ territorially defined political units that exercise ultimate internal authority and that recognize no legitimate external authority over them” (Rourke, 2003: 197). In the modern era, states have become the most important political units in defining the identity of most people. States have a number of defining characteristics. The main defining characteristic of a state is sovereignty. The concept of a sovereign state is centered on the fact that a state has independent authority over its territory. A sovereign state does not have to answer to superior authorities and has the right to go about its day to day running without interference from other entities. Territory and a population are two obvious requirements of a state. For statehood to be achieved, a political entity’s independence must be recognised by other countries i. e. diplomatic recognition must be granted. A state must also have an internal government and have the support of its population.

What are the origins of the modern state and how did the contemporary states system come into being? After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth

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century a new era, known as the Middle Ages or medieval times, began. With the new era came a new way of political organization. Political power in Europe during these times was held by two levels of authority. On a universalistic level, “ international organizational authority existed in the form of the catholic church.”(Rourke, 2003: 202) The Roman Catholic Church provided a universal language in the form of Latin. The Christian doctrine was often the basis for ideas about rights, justice and political norms. Even kings were often subordinate to papal authority. The Holy Roman Empire was strengthened in 936 when Otto I was crowned head. However, over the centuries the overarching authority of the church was overturned with the emergence of multiethnic empires such as British, French and German. These empires were ruled by monarchs and citizens often lacked emotional attachment to them. Most of these empires lasted into the 20th century with the collapse of the Soviet Union marking the end of the last of the great multiethnic empires.

During the medieval times, authority on a micro-level was based on the feudal system. “ The feudal system was characterized by principalities, dukedoms, baronies, and other such fiefdoms, which were ruled by minor royalty who provided local defence.”(Rourke, 2003: 204) Under the feudal system all land within the kingdom belonged to the king. The king was at the top level of feudal hierarchy. The king gave land or fiefs to his noblemen (barons and bishops). In return for the land each noble promised to supply the king with soldiers. Noblemen divided their land among knights in return for their service as soldiers. The knights ruled over the fiefs. They rented their land to peasants who worked for them. The trained knights were bound

by oath to serve the nobles who had granted them their fiefs. The peasants were at the bottom of the feudal tree. They farmed the land of the knights and in return were promised protection. The idea of loyalty and service was important in feudal society. Everyone owed a service to a person higher up on the feudal pyramid.

The decline of the feudal system in the middle ages was a result of two main factors: Military technology and economic expansion. Advances in military technology meant that commoners could now fight knights and therefore the ability of manors to provide protection for the people diminished. “ The growth of Europe’s economy undermined the feudal system and promoted the state system.”(Rourke, 2003: 204) Improved trade and mass production created a wealthy class, leading to a change in political power. Increased trade meant that political areas (towns) were needed as trading centres. The universalistic authority of the Holy Roman Empire also declined. The period known as the Renaissance only reinforced the move away from papal authority with educated people now looking to concepts of personal freedom. The Protestant Reformation saw Martin Luther reject the Catholic Church as the necessary link between the people and God. This marked the beginning of challenges to the authority of the Catholic Church and before long a quarter of western Europeans were Protestants. Secular Breaks occurred in the Catholic Church one being the creation of the Anglican Church in England. All of these changes opened the way for the creation of a new political system: - the modern state.

“ It was at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that Europe consolidated its long transition from the middle Ages to a world of sovereign states.”(Sovereignty, <https://assignbuster.com/defining-characteristics-of-the-modern-state-history-essay/>)

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu>). The treaty of Westphalia ended the thirty years war and gave leaders the authority to determine the religion of their own lands. The treaty also gave rise to many territorial adjustments with many countries becoming more secure in their independence(holland, france and England to name a few.)