

Absolutism: The Time of Absolute Monarchs!

During the Medieval period (500 CE to 1500 CE) and Renaissance (1300 CE to 1600 CE), European monarchs struggled to establish their authority over the country as they battled renegade nobles and the Catholic Church for supremacy. By the seventeenth century most monarchies of Europe had used cunning and power to dominate their countries and create kingdoms with unquestioned rulers who held all the power within their states' boundaries. These powerful states took control of every aspect of society and the politics of a nation became a matter of personality as the ambitions and beliefs of one man or woman became the state itself. The age of absolutism was a time of great upheaval which left in its wake the modern states of Europe.

Divine Right of Kings

Rulers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries amassed power and created systems in which their rule could not be challenged. One step in achieving this was the creation of the theory of divine right. Divine right says that God created the monarchy and that the monarch acted as God's representative on Earth. An absolute monarch answered only to God, not to his or her subjects. The divine right theory became the justification for all the acts of the government and enabled kings to act freely in creating policy and centralizing authority.



Over time the decline of feudalism and the rise of a middle class allowed for greater and greater power to be held by the kings of Europe. Monarchs used the wealth of colonies to pay for their ambitions. Furthermore, religious and territorial conflicts between states led to almost continuous warfare. This caused governments to build huge armies and to levy even heavier taxes on an already suffering population. These pressures in turn brought about widespread unrest. Sometimes peasants revolted. In response to these crises, monarchs imposed order by increasing their own power. As absolute rulers, they regulated everything from religious worship to social gatherings. They created powerful bureaucracies to control their countries' economic life. By taking these steps the kings of the Age of Absolutism freed themselves of the limitations imposed by the nobility and by representative bodies such as Parliament.

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Luxury and Extravagance

The kings of Europe surrounded themselves with luxury. They devoured meals created by Europe's greatest chefs and lived in great palaces. The greatest example of this extravagant lifestyle was France's king Louis XIV. Louis' Palace of Versailles was a city unto itself with lavish decorations and decadent furnishings throughout. Louis turned his life into a spectacle, the center of all attention for the nobility. Louis forced his nobles to come to court or lose favor. The nobles followed Louis throughout the day in hopes that Louis would notice them. Having the nobles in his palace increased royal authority in two ways. It made the nobility totally dependent on Louis. It also took them away from their homes, thereby giving more power to the intendants, bureaucrats loyal to only the king.



Other European monarchs lived in similar ways to Louis, building their own palaces filled with gold, marble, and great works of art. In Russia, Peter the Great not only built palaces, but also cities. Peter used his absolute power to force modernization. He forced his nobility to adopt the customs of European nobility and resolved to make Russia compete with Europe on both military and commercial terms. Peter's goal of Westernization was a way to make Russia stronger. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was the establishment of his new and modern seaport which eventually became his capital, St. Petersburg. Peter forced thousands of serfs to leave their homes to transform a swamp into one of the great cities of Europe. An estimated 25,000 to 100,000 people died from the terrible working conditions. When St. Petersburg was finished, Peter ordered many nobles to settle in his new capital. St. Petersburg became Russia's "window on Europe," transforming Russia into a truly European power through his will and determination.

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Monarchs Battle for Central Europe

In Central Europe pair of Absolute Monarchs battled for control. Maria Theresa of Austria and Frederick the Great of Prussia each had dominating personalities and used their will to mold their countries in their own image. Maria decreased the power of the nobility and limited the amount of labor that nobles could force peasants to do in order to create a powerful centralized state. Meanwhile, Frederick was practical and militaristic. Frederick was obsessed with transforming his relatively small state of Prussia into a military juggernaut, once writing that "the fundamental role of governments is the principle of extending their territories." These giants of their time fought two major wars, the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War (which included the war between France and Great Britain in North America, called the French and Indian War) in an attempt to overtake the other. The wars devastated Europe, pulling in most of the other European powers, ending without much real change in the territorial situation in Europe. In the end, both Austria and Prussia emerged as powerful states and important actors in the future of European politics.



An Age of War & Conflict

Whereas the sixteenth century was filled with religious conflicts, the next two centuries saw continued warfare in the name of power. These centuries saw a series of wars which were launched by absolute monarchs to fulfill their ambitions and extend their state's power. The great French king Louis XIV fought one war after another to expand his territory. Perhaps the most notable of these wars was the War of Spanish Succession which involved virtually every state in Europe against the French who had managed to supplant the king's grandson as the king of Spain. Fearful of a French and Spanish union, England and Austria led a coalition against the French for nearly fourteen years before it finally concluded, largely a draw. The treaty allowed Louis' grandson to retain the throne but promised that Spain and France would never be united. The English won control of Gibraltar as well as control of several American possessions of France.

The century was filled with these ambitious wars which had become global conflicts due to the expansive empires which had grown out of the Age of Discovery. Many of these wars bankrupted the state and pushed the burden of paying for these conflicts to the peasants who were forced to pay exorbitant taxes. The era of Absolute Monarchs may have created effective government, but it also brought hardship and anger to the lower classes who would slowly begin to question divine right and demand reforms to improve their own lives.