

The Age of Absolutism

1550 - 1800



Setting the Stage

- Europe was in a period after Reformation. Still divided religiously.
 - Catholic territory: Spain, France, Italy, Southern Germany.
 - Protestant territory: England, Netherlands, Northern Germany
- Spain, France, and England had colonies in Asia, the Americas, and Africa.



Spain – Philip II

- Thanks to silver from Americas, his empire became the wealthiest in Europe.
- Absolute monarch: complete authority over government and lives of people.
- Ruled by divine right: believed his authority to rule came directly from God.
- Sought to protect and strengthen the Catholic Church. Counterreformation; turned Inquisition against Protestants. Enforced Catholic unity in his lands.



Spain and England

- Queen Elizabeth I was chief Protestant enemy who supported the Dutch rebellions.
- She also knighted Sir Francis Drake, a pirate who looted Spanish treasure ships.
- In response, Philip II Prepared a huge Armada (fleet of 130 ships) against England.
- Due to storm on English Channel, armada was destroyed.
- England won and surpassed Spanish power thereafter. Victory for Elizabeth I and England.



Spain's Economic Decline: 1600s

Economic decline because:

1. There were less able successors after Philip II
2. Wars overseas drained Spain financially.
3. Expulsion of Muslims and Jews = deprived the economy of many skilled artisans and merchants
4. France (and England) replaced Spain as most powerful European nation.



France

- France experienced a crisis of religion in the 1500s as Huguenots(French Protestants) and the Catholic majority tore France apart.
- In 1589 a Huguenot prince(Henry IV) becomes king and promotes religious tolerance as well as creates and strong central govt to restore order.
- He will be assassinated in 1610 despite converting to Catholicism and having his excommunication by the Pope reversed.



Response to Crisis in Europe


- Absolute monarchs reigned in several European nations during the seventeenth century. Louis XIV, considered the best example of absolute monarchy, ruled France with an extravagant lifestyle and waged many military campaigns. Meanwhile, Prussia, Austria, and Russia emerged as great European powers under their monarchs' leadership.
- **Absolutism**, the political doctrine and practice of unlimited centralized authority and absolute sovereignty, as vested especially in a monarch or dictator.



European Nation-States, 1700



By 1700, powerful European monarchs had set aside the feudal past and built strong, centralized nation-states. Most of these rulers held absolute power.

 Major European monarchies

ATLANTIC OCEAN

10°W

Azimuthal Equidistant Projection

0 250 500 Miles



Primary Source - Attitudes towards the Monarchy

- “Rulers . . . act as the ministers of God and as his lieutenants on earth. It is through them that God exercises his empire. But kings, although their power comes from on high . . . should not regard themselves as masters of that power to use it at their pleasure . . . they must employ it with fear and self-restraint, as a thing coming from God and of which God will demand an account.
- The royal power is absolute . . . Without this absolute authority the king could neither do good nor repress evil. It is necessary that his power be such that no one can hope to escape him, and, finally, the only protection of individuals against the public authority should be their innocence.”

■ Jacques-Benigne Bossuet (1627-1704)



Primary Source Account

- In 1661, Louis XIV took over supreme power of France after the death of Cardinal Mazarin.
- “Up to this moment I have been pleased to entrust the government of my affairs to the late Cardinal. It is now time that I govern them myself. You *[secretaries and ministers of state]* will assist me with your counsels when I ask for them. I request and order you to seal no orders except by my command. I order you not to sign anything, not even a passport without my command; to render account to me personally each day and to favor no one.”





Louis XIV

- Fashion and masculinity was quite different in the 1600s.



France – Louis XIV

- Never called a meeting of the Estates General, a council that was established to check royal power.
- Appointed intendants to collect taxes, recruit soldiers, and carry out his policies throughout France.
- Under Louis XIV, French army became the strongest in Europe.
- His finance minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert followed mercantilist policies, helping make France the wealthiest state in Europe.



- Built palace of Versailles, the most magnificent building in Europe.
- Versailles became symbol of the Sun King's wealth and power. Housed 10,000 people.
- No expense was too great. Lavish lifestyle was embraced
- Court of Louis supported splendid century in the arts.
- French academies established to support higher learning.



- Reigned for 72 yrs, longer than any other monarch.
- French culture, manners, and customs replaced those of Renaissance Italy as the standard for European taste.
- Revoked Edict of Nantes forcing over 100,000 Huguenots to flee France. Caused serious blow to French economy.
- Also drained economy with warfare. Refused Philip V of Spain's attempt to unite the two crowns.
- By the time Louis XV inherited throne, France was in a state of chaos.

Louis XIV



King Charles

- After the English Civil War, Parliament set up court to put King Charles on trial.
- He was condemned as tyrant, traitor, and public enemy, and beheaded.
- 1st time in history that a monarch had been tried and executed by his own people.
- Sent clear message that in England, no ruler could claim absolute power and ignore the rule of law. Clearly the monarchy was in trouble.



Other Notable Events/People

- Prussia and Austria emerged as great European powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- Russia emerged as a great power under Peter the Great, a member of the powerful Romanov dynasty. This dynasty would last until the Russian Revolution in 1917.
- The religious and political conflicts of seventeenth-century Europe were reflected in the art, literature, and political thought of the time. Art produced during the movements of Mannerism and the baroque aroused the emotions, and the literature spoke of the human condition. Political thinkers debated concerns about power and order in their works.



In New France (Canada)

- It was during this time period that France had taken a significant interest in Canada.
- Samuel Champlain has been attempting to build colonies across the St Lawrence River, most notably in modern day Quebec city.
- The Company of One Hundred Associates, a French trading and colonization company chartered in 1627 to capitalize on the North American fur trade and to expand French colonies in the New World.
- The Black Robes (Christian Jesuits) had been arriving in New France in droves and have been attempting to convert the indigenous population of eastern North America.

