

Conflict and Absolutism in Europe 1550-1715

THE STORY MATTERS...

In seventeenth-century Europe, absolutism was a reaction to instability. In England, the desire of King James II to practice his Catholic faith openly was opposed by Parliament, ending in the creation of a constitutional monarchy under the joint rule of William III and Mary II. Mary's life mirrors the conflicts of her time. Raised as a Protestant, she reluctantly overthrew her own Catholic father, James II.

Lesson 18-3

Absolutism in Europe

READING HELPDISK

Academic Vocabulary

stability emerge authority

Content Vocabulary

Absolutism boyar czar

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

• How does the exercise of absolute power affect a country?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

In reaction to the crises of the seventeenth century, several European nations turned to absolute monarchy, with France's Louis XIV as its epitome. He waged many military campaigns and was extravagant. While Prussia, Austria, and Russia were emerging as great European powers under their monarchs' leadership, Spain was declining in power.

France Under Louis XIV

GUIDING QUESTION *Why is the reign of Louis XIV regarded as the best example of absolutism in the seventeenth century?*

One response to the crises of the seventeenth century was to seek more stability by increasing the power of the monarch. The result was what historians have called absolutism.

Absolutism is a system in which a ruler holds total power. In seventeenth-century Europe, absolutism was tied to the idea of the divine right of kings. This means that absolute monarchs supposedly received their power from God and were responsible to no one except God. They had the ability to make laws, levy taxes, administer justice, control officials, and determine foreign policy.

The reign of Louis XIV has long been regarded as the best example of absolutism in the seventeenth century. French culture, language, and manners reached into all levels of European society. French diplomacy and wars dominated the political affairs of Europe. The court of Louis XIV was imitated throughout Europe.

Richelieu

French history for the 50 years before Louis XIV was a period of struggle as governments fought to avoid the breakdown of the state. Louis XIII and Louis XIV were only boys when they came to the throne. The government was left

in the hands of royal ministers. In France, two ministers, Cardinal Richelieu with Louis XIII and Cardinal Mazarin with Louis XIV, played important roles in preserving the authority of the monarchy.

Cardinal Richelieu (RIH • shuh • loo), Louis XIII's chief minister, strengthened the monarchy's power. Because the Huguenots were seen as a threat to the king, Richelieu took away their political and military rights. He did preserve their religious rights. Richelieu also set up a network of spies to uncover and crush conspiracies by nobles, executing the conspirators.

Louis in Power

After his minister Cardinal Mazarin died in 1661, Louis XIV took over supreme power. The new king, at the age of 23, stated his desire to be a real king and the sole ruler of France. Well aware of her son's love of fun and games and his affairs with the maids, Louis's mother laughed at him. Louis was serious, however. He kept a strict routine and also fostered the myth of himself as the Sun King – the source of light for all of his people.

One key to Louis's power was his control of the central policy-making machinery of government. The royal court that Louis established at Versailles (vuhr • SY) served three purposes. The royal council was the personal household of the king. In addition, the chief offices of the state were located there. Finally, Versailles was the place powerful subjects came to find favors and offices for themselves.

The greatest danger to Louis's rule came from the highest nobles and royal princes. They believed they should play a role in the government. Instead, Louis removed them from the royal council. It was the king's chief administrative body, which supervised the government. At the same time, Louis enticed the nobles and royal princes to come to his court, where he kept them busy with court life and out of politics.

Louis's government ministers were to obey his every wish. Said Louis, "I had no intention of sharing my authority with them." Thus, Louis had complete authority over the traditional areas of royal power: foreign policy, the church, and taxes. Although Louis had absolute power over nationwide policy making, his power was limited at the local level. Nobles, local officials, and town councils had more

influence than the king in the daily operation of local governments. As a result, the king bribed important people in the provinces to see that his policies were carried out.

Desiring to maintain religious harmony as part of the monarchical power in France, Louis pursued an anti-Protestant policy aimed at converting the Huguenots to Catholicism. Early in his reign, Louis ordered the destruction of Huguenot churches and the closing of their schools. As many as 200,000 Huguenots fled to England, the United Provinces, and the German states.

The cost of building palaces, maintaining his court, and pursuing his wars made finances a crucial issue for Louis XIV. He was most fortunate in having the services of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (kohl . BEHR) as controller-general of finances.

Colbert sought to increase France's wealth and power by following mercantilism. To decrease imports and increase exports, he granted subsidies to new industries. To improve communications and the transportation of goods within France, he built roads and canals. To decrease imports directly, Colbert raised tariffs on foreign goods and created a merchant marine to carry French goods.

To increase his royal power, Louis developed a standing army numbering 400,000 in time of war. He wished to achieve the military glory befitting the Sun King and ensure that his Bourbon dynasty dominated Europe. To achieve his goals, Louis waged four wars between 1667 and 1713. Many nations formed coalitions to prevent him from dominating Europe. Through his wars, Louis added some territory and set up a member of his own dynasty on the throne of Spain.

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

Louis XIV to his Chancellor (1661)

"[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] I 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 favour no one."

— Louis XIV, quoted in *Princes and Peoples*

INTERPRETING How do Louis XIV's instructions to his Chancellor exemplify absolutism?

Legacy of Louis XIV

In 1715, the Sun King died. He left France surrounded by enemies and many of the French people in poverty. On his deathbed, the 76-year-old monarch seemed remorseful when he told his successor (his great-grandson), "You are about to become a great king. Do not imitate me either in my taste for building or in my love of war. Live in peace with the nations.. .. Strive to relieve the burdens of your people in which I have been so unfortunate as to fail."

Did Louis mean it? We do not know. In any event, his successor probably did not remember this advice; Louis's great-grandson was only five years old.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Classifying How was the monarchy of Louis XIV characteristic of absolutism?

The Spread of Absolutism

GUIDING QUESTION How did Prussia and Austria emerge as great powers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe?

Although absolutism largely failed in Spain, it was more successful in central and eastern Europe. After the Thirty Years' War, there were more than 300 German states. Of these, Prussia and Austria emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as two great European powers.

The Decline of Spain

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Spain was the most populous empire in the world. To most Europeans, Spain seemed the greatest power of the age. Reality was quite different, however.

The reign of Philip IV came closest to the practice of absolute monarchy. A program of political reform sought to centralize the government of Spain in the hands of the monarchy. However, unlike Louis XIV in France, the king was unable to curtail the power of the Spanish nobles. Expensive military campaigns led to revolts and the decline of Spain as a great power.

The Emergence of Prussia

Frederick William the Great Elector laid the foundation for the Prussian state. Realizing that Prussia was a small, open territory with no natural frontiers for defense, Frederick William built a large and efficient standing army. He had a force of 40,000 men, which made the Prussian army the fourth-largest in Europe.

To maintain the army and his own power, Frederick William set up the General War Commissariat to levy taxes for the army and oversee its growth. The Commissariat soon became an agency for civil government as well. The new bureaucratic machine became the elector's chief instrument to govern the state. Many of its officials were members of the Prussian landed aristocracy, or the Junkers, who also served as officers in the army.

In 1701, Frederick William's son Frederick officially gained the title of king. Elector Frederick III became King Frederick I.

The New Austrian Empire

The Austrian Hapsburgs had long played a significant role in European politics as emperors in the Holy Roman Empire. By the end of the Thirty Years' War, their hopes of creating an empire in Germany had been dashed. In the seventeenth century, however, the Hapsburgs created a new empire in eastern and southeastern Europe.

The core of the new Austrian Empire was the traditional Austrian lands in present-day Austria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. After the defeat of the Turks at Vienna in 1683, Austria took control of all of Hungary, Transylvania, Croatia, and Slavonia. By the beginning of the eighteenth

century, the Austrian Hapsburgs had gained a sizable new empire.

The Austrian monarchy, however, never became a highly centralized, absolutist state, chiefly because it was made of so many different national groups. The Austrian Empire remained a collection of territories held together by the Hapsburg emperor, who was archduke of Austria, king of Bohemia, and king of Hungary. Each of these areas had its own laws and political life. No common sentiment tied the regions together other than the ideal of service to the Hapsburgs.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Comparing How was the role of the military significant in Prussia and Austria?

Peter the Great

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did Russia emerge as a powerful state under Peter the Great?

A new Russian state emerged in the fifteenth century under the principality of Muscovy and its grand dukes. In the sixteenth century, Ivan IV became the first ruler to take the title of czar, the Russian word for *caesar*.

Ivan expanded the territories of Russia eastward. He also crushed the power of the Russian nobility, or boyars. He was known as Ivan the Terrible because of his ruthless deeds, including stabbing his son to death in a heated argument. When Ivan's dynasty ended in 1598, a period of anarchy, the Time of Troubles, followed. This period ended when the *zemsky sobor*, or national assembly, chose Michael Romanov as the new czar in 1613.

The Romanov dynasty lasted until 1917. One of its most prominent members was Peter the Great, who became czar in 1689. Like other Romanov czars who preceded him, Peter was an absolute monarch who claimed the divine right to rule.

After becoming czar, Peter visited the West. Determined to westernize Russia, he was eager to borrow European

technology. Modernization of the army and navy was crucial to make Russia a great power. Peter employed Russians and Europeans as officers. He drafted peasants for 25-year stints of service to build a standing army of 210,000 soldiers. By Peter's death in 1725, Russia was a great military power and an important European state.

Peter began to introduce Western customs, practices, and manners into Russia. He ordered the first Russian book of etiquette to teach Western manners. Men had to shave their beards and shorten their coats. Upper-class women were allowed to remove their traditional face-covering veils.

Along with making Russia into a great state and military power, Peter wanted to open a "window to the West," meaning a port with ready access to Europe. This could be achieved only on the Baltic Sea, which Sweden, the most important power in northern Europe, controlled. Peter acquired the lands he sought after a long war with Sweden. On the Baltic in 1703, Peter began construction of a new city, St. Petersburg, a base for the new Russian navy and a window to the West. St. Petersburg became Russia's most important port and remained the Russian capital until 1918.

To impose the rule of the central government more effectively, Peter divided Russia into provinces. He hoped to create a "police state," a well-ordered community governed by law. However, few bureaucrats shared his concept of honest service and duty to the state. Peter's personality created an atmosphere of fear. He wrote to one administrator, "According to these orders act, act, act. I won't write more, but you will pay with your head if you interpret orders again." Peter wanted the impossible – that his administrators be slaves and free persons at the same time.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Stating In what ways did Peter the Great modernize both the culture and the military of Russia?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

absolutism	a political system in which a ruler holds total power
czar (or tsar)	Russian for "Caesar"; the title used by Russian emperors
boyar	a Russian noble