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The Age of Absolutism

Historians like to divide history into neat, sometimes arbitrary, periods to help keep historical events organized. Terms such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages are examples of this kind of historical packaging. The period covered by this book—roughly 1650 to 1789—is one which historians of European history have labeled the age of Absolutism.

While specific dates are sometimes tricky to use in identifying a sweep of history, the age of Absolutism falls between the reign of young Louis XIV (which began in 1661) and the events leading to the French Revolution in 1789.

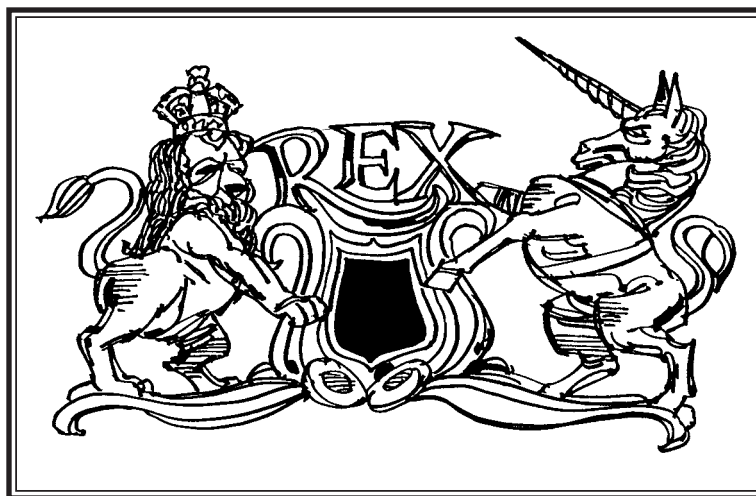
Absolutism was a purposeful attempt by European rulers—kings and queens, emperors and empresses, tsars and tsarinas—to extend their royal or dynastic control over all aspects of life in the lands they ruled.

This heavy-handed approach to ruling was in part based on the old concept of the divine right of kings. This theory assumed that God appointed all monarchs to rule on His behalf. Therefore, any policy, decree, plan, or approach adopted by royalty could not be questioned or disobeyed.

This trend was not new in 1650. Early Absolutism could be found in several corners of Europe in 1500 in France, England, and other states. During the period from 1660 to 1789, Absolutism was most successful in France. A series of French rulers developed a political structure and social system which was later labeled the *ancien régime* or “old regime.” The French king, Louis XIV, did more to consolidate monarchical power than any previous French ruler. His reign was extremely dictatorial.

In part, the Protestant Reformation allowed for the rise of Absolutism. Monarchs in the 1500s used the new faith as an excuse to force their authority to

become the protesting power against control by the Roman Catholic Church, its popes, and other Catholic rulers.



While 17th- and 18th-century leaders ruled by Absolutism, they did not think in terms of unlimited power. They did not think they had the power to rule in any way they chose.

Most absolute rulers did not believe they could or should order decisions which were irresponsible or based on whimsy.

Rulers knew they needed to justify their decisions to several different groups of people within their kingdoms. If a king's or queen's decisions did not meet with the approval of the right people—the nobility, the Church, the merchant classes, or landowners, etc.—those policies and practices would not stand for very long.

Absolute monarchs, therefore, had responsibilities to provide and sustain peace, stability, and economic growth at home and abroad. The years prior to 1650 were fraught with wars, both civil and religious, such as the French religious wars, the Thirty Years' War, and the English Civil War against Charles I. All these conflicts made peace, stability, security, and order difficult.

Many of the rulers of the late 17th century decided the only way to preserve their nation's peace and tranquility was to rule with an emphasis on law and order. To maintain the order of a kingdom, a monarch ruled absolutely. He or she came to symbolize true authority. Such a ruler kept power by controlling the state's military, its legal system, and its tax collections. The result is a historical period where absolute rulers such as Louis XIV of France, Peter the Great of Russia, Frederick William of Prussia, and Maria Theresa of Austria tried to keep good order and control over their states.

1648 Europe: A Map Study

At the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), the political map of Europe, especially western Europe, greatly resembled the map of Europe today. Many of the modern nations such as England, France, Spain, the Scandinavian states, Portugal, and the German states assumed the basic geography they have today.

By comparison, eastern Europe was greatly

different in 1648 compared to its modern counterpart. Austria was larger, Poland much larger still, and the Ottoman Empire covered the territory of several modern states such as Greece and the Slavic states (including Bosnia, Serbia, and others). Russia existed, but did not have the borders it has today. The Baltic states—Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and Finland—were not yet fully developed.

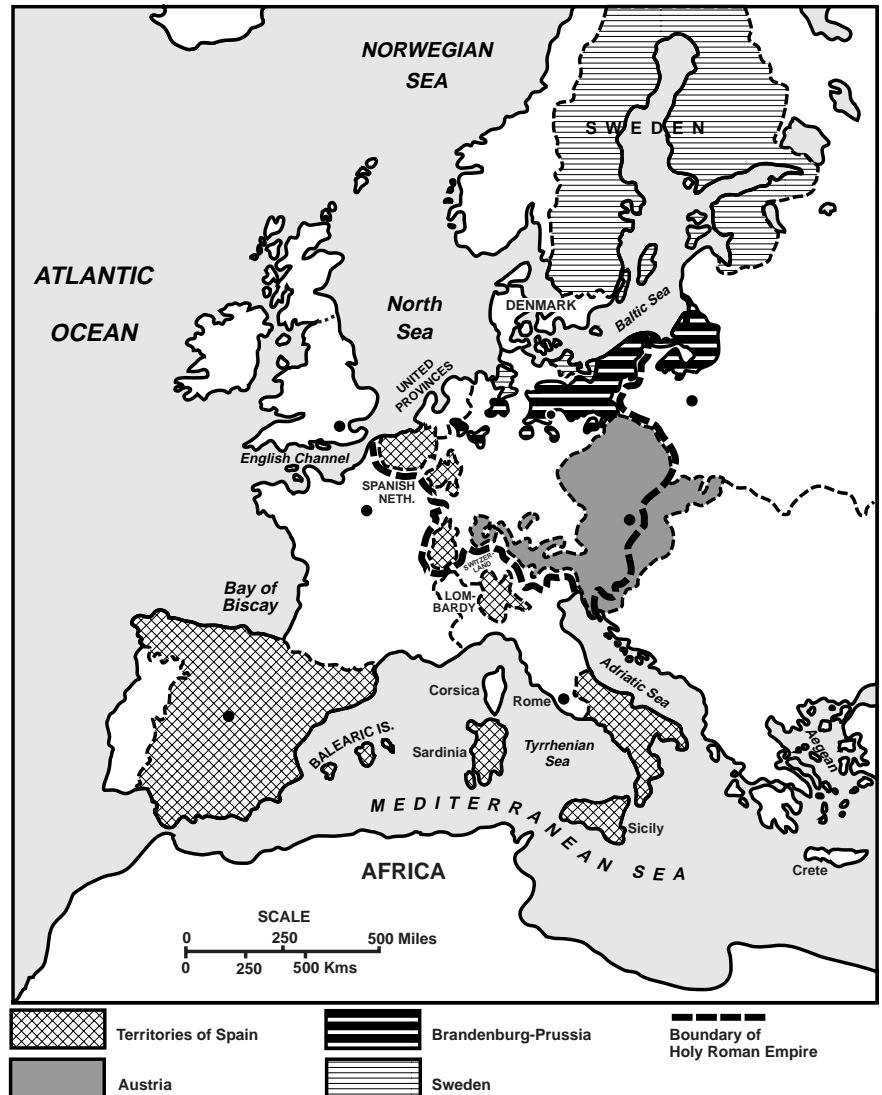
Map Exercise

Using the map, identify the following states as they existed in 1648: Portugal, Spain, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, the German states, Norway, Poland, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, East Prussia, Brandenburg, the Italian states, London, Paris, Madrid, Warsaw, Vienna, and Berlin. Then answer the questions.

1. What European states were territories of the Spanish Hapsburgs?

2. What modern states did 1648 Sweden control? (You may have to use additional sources.)

3. What modern states cover territory that was part of the Ottoman Empire in 1648? (You may have to use additional sources.)



Restoration England

While Absolutism existed throughout Europe during the second half of the 17th century, England found itself in the midst of a political experiment. Before the century's end, England experienced two revolutions against established kings and the creation of a constitutional monarchy.

Following the beheading of King Charles I, Parliament established a government ruled by a civilian, a Puritan named Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell's rule was followed by that of his son. This Inter-Regnum lasted from 1649 to 1660 and was increasingly unpopular. Finally, in 1660, pressure mounted across England to reestablish the monarchy. The son of Charles I (Charles II) who was living in France in exile, agreed to return to England to rule [1660–1685].

The reestablishment of the English monarchy (the Restoration) was greeted with great joy in England. Despite its popularity, however, in a short time, serious problems developed. Parliament passed a series of religious restrictions called the Clarendon Code, restricting the privileges of Catholics first, then of non-Anglican Protestants. These acts were passed between 1661 and 1665. Under these laws, for example, only members of the Church of England could serve as teachers, professors, or government bureaucrats.

Before the 1660s came to an end, London experienced an outbreak of the Bubonic Plague (1665) and a fire (1666), which destroyed the center of the city. Despite such challenges, Charles II proved to be a capable monarch in the face of difficult times. He had a reputation for being an optimistic man with only moderate views.

Charles II was successful as king despite those who tried to make trouble for him. One such conspirator was Titus Oates, who, in 1678, created an alleged plot by Catholics to overthrow Charles and his rule. Called the Popish Plot, it resulted in the executions of 35 alleged Catholic conspirators.

Upon the death of Charles II, his brother James II came to the throne in 1685. His reign

was doomed to be a short one. James was a tactless and arrogant man who was almost universally disliked. While Charles II was a man of little controversy, James sought it out. He was a strong Catholic supporter and attended mass in public.

He also allowed Catholics to hold government offices. James attempted to decree toleration for both non-Anglican Protestants and Catholics.

His subjects tolerated him, and Parliament watched as James II pursued his controversial agenda. But when James II gave birth to a son in 1688—a potential heir to follow in his footsteps—James's critics rose up. Two groups—royalists called Tories, as well as middle-class members of Parliament and their supporters, such as merchants, called Whigs—conspired against James II.

Before the close of 1688, the conspiracy resulted in direct revolution. The leaders of the the Tories and Whigs offered the throne to the king of the Netherlands, William of Orange (his wife, Mary, was the daughter of James II). When William agreed, Parliament officially offered both him and Mary the crown. Watching these events (including William's landing with an army on the English coast), James II fled to France. This immediate change in monarchy in England is called the Bloodless or the Glorious Revolution.



Charles II

Review and Write

Within 40 years, England experienced two revolutions (1640s, 1680s) which ended the reigns of two kings. Why do you think such revolutions came to England?