

4. THE AGE OF ABSOLUTISM (1550–1800)

Key Facts

- European monarchs sought absolute power over their nations and peoples.
- Louis XIV achieved royal absolutism and helped France become the most powerful nation in Europe in the 1600s.

During the 1500s and 1600s, European monarchs worked to centralize their power. As they competed for overseas empires, the center of world civilization shifted to Europe.

Extending Spanish Power

During the 1500s, Spain became the first modern European power. Thanks in part to silver from the Americas, Spanish kings were able to expand Spain's influence and strengthen the Catholic Church. Spain became the foremost power in Europe. Spanish kings became **absolute monarchs**. That is, they ruled with complete authority over the government and lives of the people. Absolute monarchs believed that they ruled by **divine right**. That is, the kings believed that their authority to rule came directly from God.

King Philip II of Spain fought many wars to increase Spanish Catholic power throughout the world. Over time, however, costly wars drained the wealth out of

Spain almost as fast as it came in. By the late 1600s, France had replaced Spain as the most powerful nation in Europe.

France Under Louis XIV

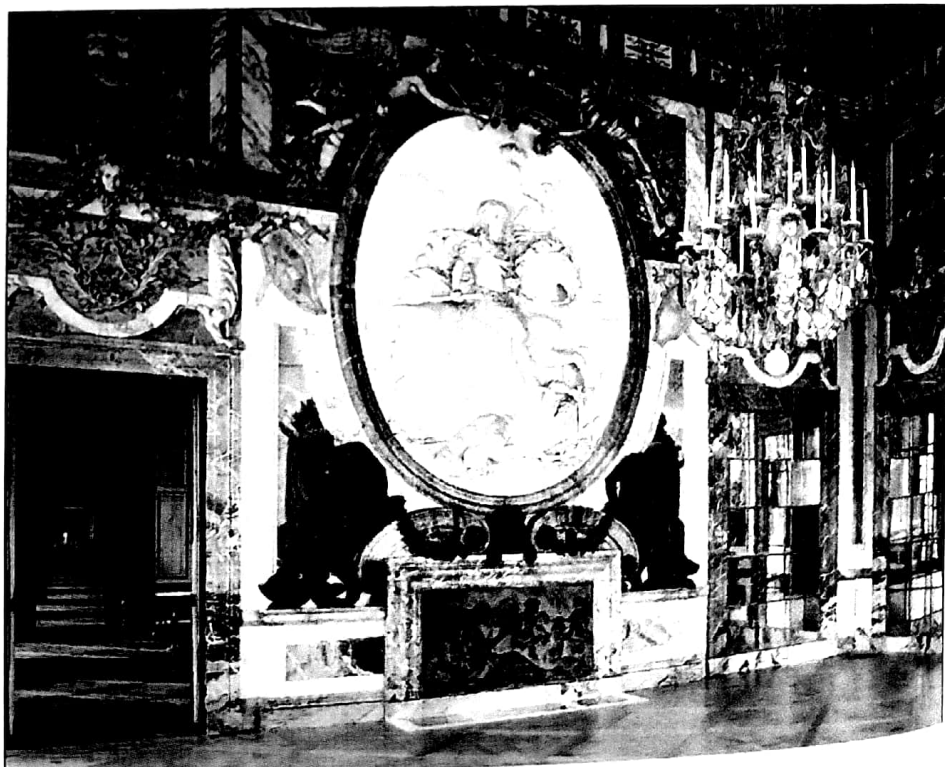
In the late 1500s, religious wars between French Protestants and the Catholic majority tore France apart. A series of kings sought to restore order. One man who promoted Catholic power was Cardinal Armand Richelieu, the chief minister of the king of France. Richelieu was determined to destroy the power of French nobles and French Protestants. He and his successors extended royal power and the interests of the Catholic church.

King Louis XIV. In 1643, five-year-old Louis XIV inherited the French throne. While still a

teenager, he took over the government himself. Like his great-grandfather, Philip II of Spain, Louis believed in divine right. He took the sun as the symbol of his power and became known as the Sun King.

To increase royal power, Louis expanded the bureaucracy and appointed wealthy middle-class men to collect taxes. This helped tie the middle class to the monarchy. He poured vast resources into wars to gain more land and dominate Europe. Louis' European rivals, however, joined together to fight him. They hoped to maintain the **balance of power**, or the distribution of military and economic power that would prevent any one nation from dominating Europe.

Louis XIV ruled France with absolute authority for 72 years.



▲ **Salon de la Guerre, Versailles** The Salon de la Guerre, or Hall of War, is a dazzling example of an ornate artistic style called baroque.

During that time, French culture, manners, and customs became the standard for European taste. Louis built the immense palace of Versailles (ver sī), which housed at least 10,000 people. He spared no expense to make Versailles the most magnificent building in Europe.

Triumph of Parliament in England

In contrast to France, England turned away from royal absolutism. From 1485 to 1603, England had been ruled by the Tudor dynasty. Although the Tudors believed in divine right, they recognized the value of good relations with Parliament in order to raise money and gain political support. However, when the English throne passed to the Stuarts, the ruling family of Scotland, trouble began. The Stuarts behaved as absolute monarchs. They clashed with Parliament and with a group of English Protestants called Puritans. When one Stuart king, Charles I, tried to arrest leaders of Parliament's House of Commons, civil war began.

The English Civil War. The civil war lasted from 1642 until 1649. When Parliamentary forces won, Charles I was tried and executed. This was a clear signal that in England, no ruler could claim absolute power or ignore the rule of law. For the next ten years, England would be a republic, known as the Commonwealth.

The new republic faced many problems. Supporters of Charles II, the uncrowned heir to the throne,

attacked England. Puritans called for social reforms, angering the gentry. Eventually, a newly elected Parliament asked Charles II to return to England, restoring the monarchy. Still, Puritan ideas remained important. Years later, they would play an important role in shaping the United States of America.

Limits on Royal Power.

Three years after the death of Charles II, Parliament invited his niece Mary and her husband William III of Orange, to become the rulers of England. Before they could be crowned, however, they had to agree to Parliament's demands. These demands became known as the English Bill of Rights. Under the Bill of Rights, England became a limited monarchy, a government in which a constitution or legislative body limits the monarch's powers. English rulers still had much power, but they agreed to obey the law and govern in partnership with Parliament.

Absolute Monarchy in Russia

In the early 1600s, Russia was still a medieval state, untouched by the Renaissance and largely isolated from Western Europe. However, when Peter the Great took power in 1682, he set Russia on the road to becoming a great modern power. Using terror to enforce his absolute authority, he centralized royal power. Peter also pushed through social and economic reforms, imported Western technology, and built Russian military power.

By the mid-1700s, absolute



▲ Peter the Great shearing a beard to encourage men to shave and adopt European ways

monarchs ruled four of the five major European powers—Prussia, Austria, France, and Russia. Britain, with its strong Parliament, was the only exception. But new ideas would soon shatter the French monarchy, upset the balance of power, and revolutionize societies around the globe. That is the story of *The Modern Era*.

Review

- 1. Identify** (a) Louis XIV, (b) Puritans, (c) Stuarts, (d) Peter the Great
- 2. Define** (a) absolute monarch, (b) divine right, (c) balance of power, (d) limited monarchy
- 3. Describe** one way in which Louis XIV strengthened the power of the French monarchy.
- 4. Why** did the Stuarts clash with Parliament?

Absolutism in Europe

Even though Philip II lost his Dutch possessions, he was a forceful ruler in many ways. He tried to control every aspect of his empire's affairs. During the next few centuries, many European monarchs would also claim the authority to rule without limits on their power.

The Theory of Absolutism These rulers wanted to be **absolute monarchs**, kings or queens who held all of the power within their states' boundaries. Their goal was to control every aspect of society. Absolute monarchs believed in **divine right**, the idea 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.

Drawing Conclusions

How was Philip II typical of absolute monarchs?

> Analyzing Key Concepts

Absolutism

Absolutism was the political belief that one ruler should hold all of the power within the boundaries of a country. Although practiced by several monarchs in Europe during the 16th through 18th centuries, absolutism has been used in many regions throughout history. In ancient times, Shi Huangdi in China, Darius in Persia, and the Roman caesars were all absolute rulers. (See Chapters 4, 5, and 6.)

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. **Making Inferences** Why do you think absolute rulers controlled social gatherings?

See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R10.

2. **Hypothesizing** Today several nations of the world (such as Saudi Arabia) have absolute rulers. Judging from what you know of past causes of absolutism, why do you think absolute rulers still exist today?

Causes

- Religious and territorial conflicts created fear and uncertainty.
- The growth of armies to deal with conflicts caused rulers to raise taxes to pay troops.
- Heavy taxes led to additional unrest and peasant revolts.



ABSOLUTISM

Effects

- Rulers regulated religious worship and social gatherings to control the spread of ideas.
- Rulers increased the size of their courts to appear more powerful.
- Rulers created bureaucracies to control their countries' economies.

Growing Power of Europe's Monarchs As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, monarchs grew increasingly powerful. The decline of feudalism, the rise of cities, and the growth of national kingdoms all helped to centralize authority. In addition, the growing middle class usually backed monarchs, because they promised a peaceful, supportive climate for business. Monarchs used the wealth of colonies to pay for their ambitions. Church authority also broke down during the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. That opened the way for monarchs to assume even greater control. In 1576, Jean Bodin, an influential French writer, defined absolute rule:

PRIMARY SOURCE

The first characteristic of the sovereign prince is the power to make general and special laws, but—and this qualification is important—without the consent of superiors, equals, or inferiors. If the prince requires the consent of superiors, then he is a subject himself; if that of equals, he shares his authority with others; if that of his subjects, senate or people, he is not sovereign.

JEAN BODIN, *Six Books on the State*

Crises Lead to Absolutism The 17th century was a period of great upheaval in Europe. 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 tried to impose order by increasing their own power. As absolute rulers, they regulated everything from religious worship to social gatherings. They created new government bureaucracies to control their countries' economic life. Their goal was to free themselves from the limitations imposed by the nobility and by representative bodies such as Parliament. Only with such freedom could they rule absolutely, as did the most famous monarch of his time, Louis XIV of France. You'll learn more about him in the next section.