15 - The Age of Absolutism: The 1600s

During the first half of the seventeenth century, Europe was racked by economic, social, and political crises from which emerged secular political systems that brought order to a population fearful of the ravages of war and internal rebellion. Although European states developed different political systems, aristocrats across the continent retained their power, and in many states, absolutism granted broad powers to monarchies. Divine Right monarchs attempted to control the political, economic, and social policies of their realms, often taking advantage of the lower classes to fund wars and building projects. In contrast to the system of absolutism that had developed on the European continent, by the end of the century constitutionalism was developing in England, and debates over political philosophy, characterized by the divergent theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, began to be heard.

KEY TERMS

absolutism	Divine-right monarchy	mannerism	Stuart monarchy
Act of Toleration	Dutch Realism	mercantilism	Treaty of Utrecht
baroque	*Fronde*	oligarchy	urban gentry
Battle of Lepanto	Glorious Revolution	*Parlements* of France	Versailles
Bill of Rights	Habsburg dynasty	Parliament of England	War of Spanish Succession
Bourbon dynasty	Hohenzollern dynasty	Peace of Westphalia	Westernization (Peter the
boyars	*intendants*	procurator	Great)
Defenestration of Prague	janissaries	Romanov dynasty	

KEY CONCEPTS

- In response to the religious wars and internal rebellions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Europeans began to search for order and stability. Seemingly the key to political and economic security, absolutism became the dominant political system in most areas of Europe. England, on the other hand, turned to limited monarchy in response to the growing demands of Parliament.

- In much of Europe, social tensions brought on by war, famine, and disease escalated in the first half of the seventeenth century.

- Following the Renaissance, art and theater flourished in Europe. Art styles changed rapidly, moving from the mannerism of the mid-sixteenth century to the baroque style and Dutch realism of the first half of the seventeenth century and finally to French classicism by the end of the seventeenth century.

For a full discussion of state building and the search for order in the seventeenth century, see *Western Civilization*, 8th and 9th editions, Chapter 15.

Motives and Means for Expansion

A political system in which a divine-right monarch enjoys absolute power over all affairs of state, absolutism emerged in the seventeenth century. In theory, the monarch received this power from God and was responsible only to God for his actions – because God had ordained this ruler, no one had the right to question his authority. This theory of divine right was most prominently articulated by French bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet. Although absolute monarchs wielded immense powers, they had to find ways to appease the nobles, who had the means to oppose them.

France

Catapulted into power in 1610, at age nine, Louis XIII struggled to maintain control of France. Cardinal Richelieu, his chief minister, orchestrated policies to control the growing power of the nobility and to strengthen the power of the king, even employing spies to root out and execute conspirators.

> ### AP Tip
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> Cardinal Richelieu exercised great power. He centralized the monarchy by employing civil servants, called *intendants*, to carry out the king's orders, often at the expense of aristocratic authority. Although he tried to reform the French economy, he failed, and Louis XIV inherited a large debt when he succeeded to the throne in 1643. When considering the rule of absolute monarchs, also consider the influence of their advisors.

Louis XIV became king at age four and ruled until his death in 1715, just four days before his seventy-seventh birthday. Cardinal Mazarin, his chief minister, virtually ruled the state during Louis's minority and faced dangerous challenges to monarchial authority. Noblemen, upset at the continuing erosion of their power, sided with the *Parlement* of Paris, the nation's most significant court, to oppose Mazarin's tax increases. Although this revolt, the first *Fronde*, ended peacefully, a second *Fronde* led to violence when a different group of nobles again challenged royal power. Although both *Frondes* ended in a victory for Louis,

he never forgot his experiences and worked to control the nobles' power-hungry tendencies.

After Mazarin's death in 1661, Louis took personal control of the government and made France the envy of Europe. The epitome of an absolute monarch, Louis – known as the Sun King – still faced challenges from noblemen and towns and provinces that wanted to retain their own power. These challenges often shaped Louis's policies.

Although not truly absolute in his governing power, Louis exercised great control over the administration of France. He replaced high aristocrats on his royal council with lower ones and enticed the displaced nobles to move to Versailles, where they busied themselves with court life and were virtually powerless to affect regional or national policies or raise their own armies against the king. In control of his royal council, Louis was able to make most important foreign and domestic policy decisions.

Fearing that religious differences would breed political opposition, Louis sought to enforce the Bourbon motto: "One king, one law, one faith." To that end, he revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, removing the rights of French Huguenots to worship freely in their own cities, and he ordered the destruction of Protestant churches and schools, forcing several hundred thousand citizens to flee to the surrounding Protestant nations, where they created a large base of foreign opposition.

Economic stability was a crucial issue because of Louis's lavish spending and the debt passed on by his father. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis's finance minister, pursued mercantilist policies in an attempt to maximize royal income and strengthen the French economy. To create a favorable balance of trade, he encouraged the expansion of domestic industries through special privileges and tax breaks and established a large free-trade zone called the Five Great Farms. Roads and canals were built or improved, and Versailles and the Louvre were remodeled. The tax burden for the nation, however, fell even more heavily on the peasant class.

Hungry for military glory, Louis created a standing professional army of some 100,000 men that swelled to about 400,000 during war. He initiated four significant wars during his reign, each time meeting resistance from an alliance of neighbors intent on controlling Bourbon expansion and protecting the balance of power. Louis gained little from his military endeavors. In 1702, he engineered the accession of his grandson to the Spanish throne, which led to the War of Spanish Succession. This, his final war, ended in 1713 with the Peace of Utrecht, which allowed Philip V to accede to the throne of Spain but prevented a consolidation of France and Spain. The Habsburgs gained a few territories, as did Prussia, but England fared the best, gaining Gibraltar and territories in North America.

AP Tip

Louis's wars engaged France in almost constant military conflict and drained the French treasury. This debt eventually became one cause of the French Revolution.

Spain

Outdated and inefficient administrative and military infrastructures; an overabundance of priests, monks, and privileged nobles who paid virtually no taxes; an economy crippled by recurring bankruptcy – all led to the decline of Spain in the early seventeenth century. Philip IV and his adviser the Count of Olivares failed to centralize government power and curtail the power of the nobility. Economic problems were exacerbated when Philip continued to fight France in the Thirty Years' War. Internal revolts resulting from its loss in the Thirty Years' War forced Spain to recognize Dutch independence and cede territory in the Spanish Netherlands to France.

Prussia

As the Thirty Years' War created a power vacuum in parts of central Europe, two major German states rose to power, one of which was Brandenburg-Prussia. The Hohenzollern family had long controlled Brandenburg, a minor duchy in northern Germany, and had added lands to the west, near the Rhine, and to the east, the province of East Prussia. During the Thirty Years' War, Hohenzollern leader Frederick William the Great Elector set up a large standing army to protect his noncontiguous territories. The army was overseen by the General War Commissariat, which raised taxes for its expenses. Soon this body was put in charge of political affairs, and Prussian aristocrats, the Junkers, quickly took on positions of power in the state. Frederick William gave the nobles almost complete power over the peasants and serfs on their estates, freedom from taxes, and positions of leadership in the army and the state. Many peasants lost their freedom, as the Junkers took over their land and made them serfs.

AP Tip

Brandenburg-Prussia was just one of more than 300 German states in the Holy Roman Empire. This changed when Frederick III offered to help the Habsburgs in the War of Spanish Succession in return for the independence of Prussia and the title of Prussian king. Be sure you can discuss Prussia's origins.

Austria

Recognizing that they could no longer reunify and rule their former empire, the Habsburgs concentrated on consolidating their southern and eastern territories into the Austrian empire. A major threat to the Hapsburgs, the Ottomans challenged Austrian control of the regions east of

Vienna and conducted the siege of Vienna in 1683. Despite their strength, the Ottomans eventually fell to a combined European army. This was a turning point for Austria: the Habsburg counterattack forced the Ottomans to accept the 1699 Treaty of Karlowitz, which granted large amounts of territory in Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Austria.

Spain had controlled most of the Italian states since 1556. The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) gave Austria control of the Spanish Netherlands and parts of Italy to check Bourbon power, but the growing multinational character made the empire hard to control and prevented the Habsburgs from forming a tightly administered empire like that of Prussia.

Russia

Known as the Kingdom of Muscovy in the fifteenth century, Russia began to expand eastward under the leadership of Ivan IV "the Terrible" (1530-1584), the first ruler to use the title of tsar. Ivan expanded the power of the monarchy, brutally crushing the *boyars* – nobles – who challenged his control. Upon Ivan's death, the boyars fought one another in a brutal power struggle, the so-called Time of Troubles. In 1613, hoping to bring stability, the Zemsky Sobor, an advisory body of noblemen, chose as czar one of their own members, Michael Romanov, first in the last dynasty of Russia.

Seventeenth-century Russian society was highly stratified. At the top was a divine-right ruler aided by a Duma (legislature) and the Zemsky Sobor. As in Prussia, the boyars tightly controlled their peasants and expanded their power over the serfs. Farmers and merchants were bound to their cities, their businesses often controlled by the government. Peasants and merchants revolted but were crushed. Still, plagued by revolts, isolation from the west, and a split in the Russian Orthodox Church, Russia struggled.

Peter the Great became tsar in 1689 and set out to make Russia a great power by expanding his military and modernizing his nation. He established a 25-year draft, increased the standing army to about 210,000 men, and created a navy. He traveled to Western Europe to learn customs and technical skills, which he forced on Russia. Western art influenced the design of his crowning jewel, St. Petersburg. The Zemsky Sobor and the Duma were abolished, making way for a new bureaucratic system.

AP Tip

Peter the Great created a Table of Ranks, a civil service system based on merit, by which he built a loyal aristocracy. Even commoners could rise to the rank of aristocrat. Keep this unique system in mind.

Peter reorganized the Russian Orthodox Church, creating the Holy Synod, an ecclesiastical body that ensured church loyalty. He even required nobles to cut their traditional beards and sleeves. Intransigent nobles lost their privileges. Although he tried to adopt Western customs and ideals, Peter enforced his will through violent means. His presence on the Baltic Sea created tension with Sweden, which Peter bested in the Great Northern War. When he died, Russia was stronger than ever militarily, economically, and politically, but many of his achievements dwindled quickly.

Scandinavia

Rivalries for control of Baltic Sea trade led to problems between Denmark and Sweden. Denmark established a centralized administration controlled by the king, with noblemen the chief office holders. Sweden was weaker economically and politically than Denmark for much of the seventeenth century because the rulers succeeding Gustavus Adolphus were weak. Crowned in 1697, Charles XII, who declared himself responsible only to God, temporarily renewed the power of the monarchy.

The Ottoman Empire

Following the acquisition of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Turks began an effort to take control of more Balkan territory. Despite setbacks, they advanced into Danube territories, conquering all the way to Vienna by 1529, where they were halted. The Turks were also advancing into the Mediterranean, but their power and control were reduced after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, a decisive Spanish victory. By the seventeenth century, the Ottomans had trade and diplomatic relations with other European powers. Their strong, well-organized government was led by a sultan (a king) and grand viziers (prime ministers). Their military also was well organized, with Janissaries – Christian boys taken from their parents – loyal to the Sultan. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Ottomans again attempted to expand into Habsburg lands, but a coalition of central and eastern European nations repulsed the siege of Vienna in 1683 – the Turks' last serious threat to Europe.

AP Tip

Although it was commonly thought that absolute rulers controlled every facet of their realm, new scholarship suggests that local rulers and institutions could have an impact. The landed nobility, holding most military and government positions, had real power. To exercise definitive control in his own nation, a king had to find ways either to work with the aristocracy or to manipulate them to his own advantage.

Limited Monarchy and Republics

While absolute monarchy dominated the continent in the seventeenth century, a few nations turned to a republican form of government or a limited monarchy. These included Poland, the Dutch Republic, and England.

Poland

In 1569, Poland and Lithuania united, forming a strong state that ruled a vast amount of territory. The nobles elected the king and retained enormous power over the monarchy, the serfs, and the estates. After 1572, when the ruling Jagiello dynasty ended, the Polish noblemen decided to elect outsiders as kings; it would allow them to protect their powers and create the possibility of new foreign alliances. Weak kings had to share power with the Sejm, the assembly, which was dominated by the nobles. This led to weak government, which grew even weaker when the liberum veto, allowing a single member to stop the Sejm's proceedings, was agreed to in 1652.

The Dutch Republic

The Dutch gained great power in the seventeenth century because of their dominant role in Atlantic seaboard commerce. In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia gave the seven northern provinces independence and recognition as the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Throughout the seventeenth century, leaders who favored a republican form of government struggled with the house of Orange, which wanted more power to strengthen the monarchy. The republican faction and the States General, a representative legislature, ruled for most of the century. In 1672, fearing foreign threats, the States General invited William III of Orange to assume power. After his death, however, the States General took back control.

The financial dominance of Amsterdam fueled the sixteenth-century success of the Dutch Republic. Between 1570 and 1610, the city's population of 30,000 doubled, in part because of the influx of religious refugees from the Spanish Netherlands. In response, Dutch leaders built more canals and housing and encouraged expansion of business – military equipment, for one. By 1660, the city had grown to 200,000 and thrived as the commercial center of Europe. Its ambitious merchants had large fleets to service the North Sea herring industry and transport goods of other nations and of the Dutch East India and West India trading companies. Profits from trade were used to establish the Bank of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, which promoted more financial growth. However, the rise of English power, continued warfare, and challenges to Dutch shipping led to serious economic problems by the beginning of the eighteenth century.

England In The Seventeenth Century

JAMES I

James I (James VI of Scotland), cousin of Queen Elizabeth I, assumed the English throne in 1603 and founded the Stuart dynasty. Having helped Queen Elizabeth rule, Parliament immediately clashed with James because he claimed the divine right of kings. James also had difficult dealings with Puritan leaders, many of whom served in the House of Commons or held other important government jobs.

AP Tip

The ongoing struggle between Stuart monarchs and Parliament led to a constitutional system by the end of the seventeenth century. Be sure you can contrast English constitutionalism with French absolutism in the seventeenth century.

CHARLES I

Charles I became king in 1625, continuing the conflicts with Parliament. Parliament forced Charles to accept the Petition of Right in 1628, designed to limit royal power. Unwilling to abide by it, Charles ruled without Parliament from 1629 to 1640. Like his father, he clashed with his subjects over the collection of extralegal taxes and religious policies. When Charles tried to force the Scottish Presbyterian Church to use the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Scotland declared war on England. Charles was forced to call Parliament and ask for funds, but the "Long Parliament" (1640-1660) granted funds only in return for new restrictions on the king's power. By 1641, Parliament was split over religious policy; some members were happy with the Anglican Church, while some Puritans wanted to eliminate the bishops. Charles hoped to use this split to regain control, but when he sent troops to arrest some members at a meeting of Parliament, the Parliamentary forces united against the king and civil war broke out.

The civil war saw Cavaliers, supporters of the king, facing Roundheads, supporters of Parliament. The Parliamentary forces, allied with Scotland and trained in the latest military tactics by Oliver Cromwell, captured the king in 1646. But the Parliamentary forces split; the Presbyterian majority, who wanted to restore Charles and establish a Presbyterian state church, was pitted against the army and more radical Independents, Puritans who hated the king and were loyal to Cromwell. The radicals prevailed. They purged Parliament, creating a body known as the Rump Parliament, which then tried Charles for treason. He was convicted and beheaded.

OLIVER CROMWELL

After Charles's execution, Parliament declared England a Commonwealth. Cromwell used his army to brutally suppress a Catholic rebellion in Ireland and uprisings in Scotland. There was opposition at home, too. The Levellers, a radical group of reformers, advocated extreme democracy and equality, and the Rump Parliament was difficult to work with. Cromwell crushed the Levellers, sent the Rump Parliament home, then set himself up as Lord Protector in 1653, using his army to stay in power. Cromwell died in 1658 and was succeeded by his son.

Parliament deemed army rule unworkable and so restored the Stuart monarchy. Charles II was crowned in 1660.

CHARLES II

Charles ruled with Parliament, giving it great power over taxation. Parliament made the Anglican Church once again the state church and passed laws against Puritans and Catholics. Believing these laws unjust, and in order to protect his Catholic brother, James, Charles suspended the laws with the Declaration of Indulgence. Infuriated, Parliament passed the Test Act to bar Catholics from holding public office and to ban James from becoming king. Charles eventually disbanded Parliament. By the Treaty of Dover, he got financial help from the French in exchange for abandoning his alliance with the Dutch and vague promises to become a Catholic.

JAMES II

Charles II was succeeded by his brother in 1685. Openly Catholic, James II angered Parliament by appointing Catholics to government positions. Hoping he would soon die and be succeeded by one of his Protestant daughters, Parliament allowed James to remain king but ousted him when his second wife, a Catholic, bore a son in 1688, threatening a Catholic hereditary monarchy.

AP Tip

It is important to understand the differences between Tories and Whigs. Tories disliked James II but wanted to retain the traditional system of succession; Whigs wanted to exclude him from the throne. These differences simmered until the birth of James's Catholic son. Between 1688 (Glorious Revolution) and 1832 (Great Reform Bill), most Tories supported royal power and the Church of England, while most Whigs supported parliamentary power and constitutional monarchy and freedom for all Protestants. Whigs were more open to reform, but neither party disrupted the traditional power of the nobility.

The Glorious Revolution

Fearing a Catholic dynasty, Tory leaders joined with the Whigs to invite William of Orange, husband of James's Protestant daughter Mary, to rule England. William and Mary raised an army and sailed to England in 1689 to fight for the throne, but James and his family fled to France. This "Glorious Revolution" brought to power two monarchs who agreed to recognize Parliament as the source of their power and to accept the Bill of Rights as the basis for a constitutional monarchy. Further settling old wounds, William and Mary and Parliament agreed to the Toleration Act, which granted Puritans (but not Catholics) the right to public worship.

Political Philosophy and Revolution

England's many political crises of the seventeenth century prompted the development of two models of political philosophy known as social contract theory, one by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the other by John Locke (1632-1704). Both began with a "state of nature," without civil laws or authorities, that at some point gave way to civil society. From there, Hobbes and Locke, holding vastly different views of human nature and the state of nature, arrived at starkly different models of the proper organization of government. Their political philosophies are still used today.

- Hobbes believed that the state of nature resembled a state of chaos in which humans acted selfishly, having no respect for other people or for natural law. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes asserts that self-preservation drives people to do anything – no matter how cruel or immoral – and that only a government that grants all power to an absolute ruler and forbids rebellion can provide security.
- *In Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke held that people are born free and equal, with the inalienable rights of "life, liberty and property." He believed that humans would live relatively peacefully in the state of nature but that conflicts over these rights could arise. To settle differences, people would create a government based on a social contract: individuals would empower a government to protect their rights. Government would act as an umpire. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that the people had the right to overthrow a government that did not carry out its obligations and protect the inalienable rights of its citizens.

European Culture

The enormous artistic energy unleashed by the Renaissance continued throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the 1520s, the art of the high Renaissance had given way to Mannerism, a style characterized by proportions and figures distorted to reflect the suffering and uncertainty of the times. One famous Mannerist painter was El Greco.

Replacing Mannerism in the late sixteenth century, the Baroque style was the art of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. It used dramatic movement, color, and lighting effects to evoke intense emotion and spiritual awe. Among the most famous baroque artists were Rubens, Bernini, and Artemisia Gentileschi, a female artist best known for her series of Old Testament heroines, particularly *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.

French Classicism, more subdued than the baroque, emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century. A

reaction to the baroque style, which was thought to be too showy, French Classicism reflected the classical values of the Renaissance. Nicholas Poussin was one of the most famous French Classicist artists.

Differing significantly was Dutch Realism. Unlike baroque artists, who often depicted religious themes, the Dutch masters painted landscapes, still-lifes, townscapes, and portraits of wealthy merchants and leaders of Dutch society. Dutch Calvinism forbade artwork in churches, so artists painted secular scenes that would appeal to a lay clientele. The Dutch realists included Judith Leyster, a prominent female artist. The stars were Rembrandt van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer.

English and Spanish literature also flourished, as did theater. The Elizabethan Renaissance included William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, and Edmund Spenser. The Spanish Golden Age saw the founding of theaters in most major Spanish cities, including Mexico City. The most notable Spanish playwright was Lope de Vega. While English and Spanish playwrights wrote for a broad audience, French dramatists wrote for the elite. With patronage from French nobles and the court of Louis XIV, French theater became popular in the second half of the seventeenth century; famous playwrights included Moliere and Racine.

The seventeenth century saw a divergence in political structure that profoundly affected all of Europe. Both absolutism and constitutionalism attempted to bring order to a world wracked by war and religious conflict. By the end of the century, England and France had emerged as the dominant European powers. Both pursued the same goals, but each was governed differently.