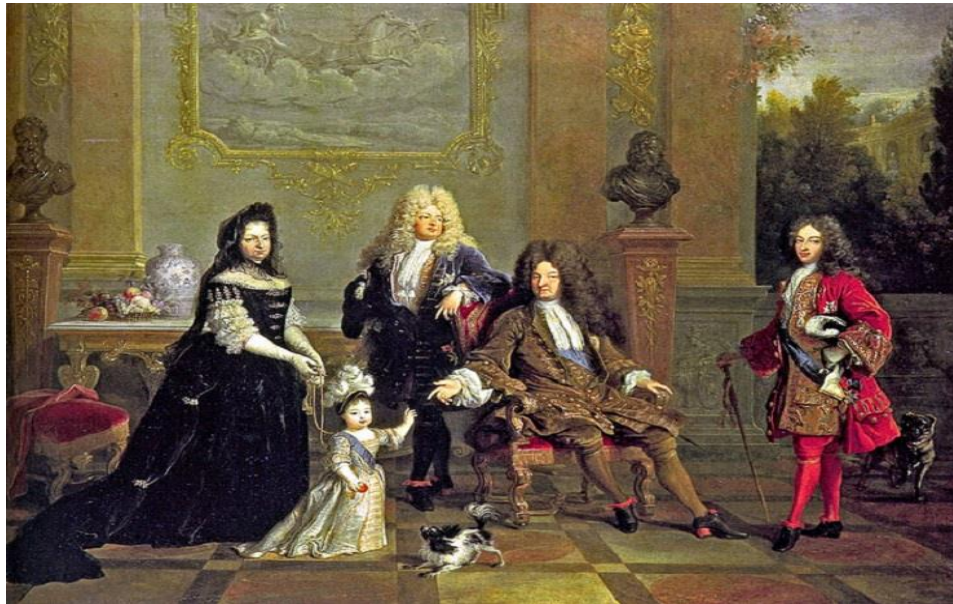


Age of Absolutism



[Image Source: Wikimedia Commons](#)

Even though we live in a world where kings and queens typically hold more symbolic power than actual political authority, we still seem to be a little obsessed with the monarchical system. Whether it's the next royal wedding in Great Britain or Lewis Carroll's character The Queen of Hearts, screaming "off with her head!" we still keep our eyes fixed on the happenings of those wearing crowns. But if you think we are a bit fascinated by royalty in today's day and age, wait until you hear about the Age of Absolutism. Monarchical rule was all the rage during this era and you can bet your crown jewels that it is a time period that will show up on the next AP European History exam.

The Age of Absolutism did sweep through Europe like a political wildfire, so it can be a bit tough keeping track of all the royal lineages out there. Can you differentiate between all eighteen King Louis' of France? If you can't, that's ok. We've created this AP European History Crash Course on the Age of Absolutism to provide you with the tips and tricks so you don't have to memorize every single monarch in all of European history. This AP Euro review will go over the most important details that characterized the Age of Absolutism and put them in relation to the AP Euro exam itself.

Age of Absolutism Cont.

What was the Age of Absolutism?

The Age of Absolutism was the period around the 17th and 18th centuries when Europe (kind of) was ruled by very powerful monarchs. Monarchs with absolute control. Thus, the Age of Absolutism.

Absolute monarchs were rulers who held all the power in a country. Under their rule there were no checks and balances on their power, and there were no other governing bodies they shared the power with. These monarchs also ruled by divine right or the belief that their power came from God. To oppose them was to oppose God.

Hopefully you noticed our “*kind of*” disclaimer next to the word Europe up there. We put that in there for two reasons. First, despite its name the absolute monarchy system of political control was not necessarily as powerful as the name implies. The system was never uniform nor did it exist without struggle. We will discuss these issues in further detail later in this AP European History Crash Course, but for the purposes of the AP Euro exam always keep in mind that this was still a complex era of political control.

Second, the Age of Absolutism typically refers to Europe roughly around 1550 to 1800. But absolute monarchs have ruled outside of Europe and during different periods in human history. Just think of the Egyptian Pharaohs. They ruled with absolute control and under the belief in a divine right. Again, chances are that the AP European History exam will reference Europe, but the people at the *CollegeBoard* love it when you understand the complexities behind the terms they are examining you on.

Age of Absolutism Cont.

Who Ruled During the Age of Absolutism?

As we mentioned above, the Age of Absolutism occurred over a diverse cross-section of Europe during several hundred years. We also mentioned that there were quite a few monarchs that reigned during this era, including those that implement non-absolutist policies in order to create even more control.

Since we cannot cover every single aspect of this era, we will go over four different places of rule that represent the Age of Absolutism in its entirety. These nations include Spain, England, France, and Prussia. By examining the histories of these four monarchies, we can show the rise and fall of the Age of Absolutism.

England

The English monarchy was one of Europe's oldest and most complex systems of royal rule (and remains so to this day). Monarchical rule began on the island around the 12th century, well before the Age of Absolutism. But since the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, the rule of the British monarchy was limited.

Ever since the Magna Carta, royalty on the island engaged in a push and pull between royal authority and civil rights. Queen Elizabeth I, for example, became an incredibly popular leader because she showed relative religious, social, and political tolerance. She also turned to mercantilism, including the colonization of the New World, as a way to retain political power and control.

Her successor, James I, was a bit different, however. James I, as many of the English kings after him, constantly fought with Parliament for more power. It was no secret that he strongly supported absolute monarchy, especially the belief that his divine right permitted him to ignore Parliament in order to get things done. In the end, this kind of infighting between the royal houses and Parliament led to a civil war (1642-1651), the result of which nearly cut off all political power from the English crown.

Age of Absolutism Cont.

Spain

Spain saw a series of absolute monarchs. Some of the best examples of these were Philip II, Philip III and Charles IV of Spain, who ruled during Spain's heyday as the strongest naval empire coming out of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Remember that Spanish monarchs were extremely Catholic, and so, strongly believed that God gave them the divine right to rule.

Just to put things into a little bit of context, Philip II was the king who tried to invade England during the Reformation via the Spanish Armada because he wanted them to be Catholic. But all three of these monarchs pushed for colonization and established Spain as a world power, using their version of absolute authority to not only rule over the Spanish peoples but those they colonized as well.

They were able to rule with iron fists by extracting gold and other resources from the Americas, while implementing religious conversion through the conquistadors and the Inquisition system. But this ultimately wouldn't last too long, since their many wars (especially with England) proved costly and used up their gold supply. This decline occurred well into the 19th century when Napoleon invaded and forced the Spanish crown to abdicate.

France

Speaking of Napoleon, let's move onto France. The French monarchy has been remembered as perhaps one of the most influential regimes in the Age of Absolutism. This is partially because of the total opulence that French kings and queens lived in. They enjoyed lavish castles, extravagant parties, and fine jewelry.

In other words, they lived the high life and in complete decadence. Henry IV started the whole French royalty experience off in the 16th century. He helped to put France on the map as a global and economic power largely due to the wealth the country gained due to the colonization of North America. These colonization efforts also helped French monarchs from Henry IV and onward to fund their rich tastes and pay for their powerful regime.

Age of Absolutism Cont.

King Louis XIV was perhaps the most opulent and memorable of the absolute monarchs in French history. He called himself the “Sun King” and famously said, “L’état, c’est moi!” Or, “I am the state!” In other words, he wanted everyone to know that he ruled France with absolute power. He made France the capital of luxury in Europe, from building the Palace of Versailles to keeping complete control of the feudal nobility. But his expensive habits also led to terrible economic crisis and poverty amongst his people.

The next two Louis kings kept up the French grandeur, until King Louis XVI found himself in the middle of a revolution. The more the French people began demanding civil rights and privileges (built from Enlightenment ideals), the less the French monarchy became absolute and eventually faded under the new French Republic.

Prussia

France would not be the only country hit by the Enlightenment, however. Beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, monarchs throughout Europe were realizing the absolute control was becoming more difficult since their populations began asking for their own rights and privileges.

What is different about the absolute monarchs of Prussia and others like it was that they reigned under a new form of absolute monarchy—enlightened absolutism. These monarchs were influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, and so these monarchs better supported the arts, tended to be more supportive of religious toleration and were more prone to follow the laws.

And if the Enlightenment Absolutists had a leader, it would have been Frederick the Great. He was the King of Prussia between 1740 and 1786, smack-dab in the middle of the Enlightenment movement in philosophy and science. He believed in modernizing the Prussian state by improving the lives of his subjects. But he also encouraged religious toleration more so than any monarch before him.

Age of Absolutism Cont.

He would not be the only one either. Leaders like Catherine the Great, Joseph II of Austria, and Frederick VI of Denmark were all known for including the tenets of the Enlightenment in their monarchical rule. Despite these advances, though, these rulers were still monarchs and what they said was still law. So, ultimately, the absolute monarchs used Enlightenment ideas as a way to further assert their control and avoid the types of revolutions that were occurring in France and North America.

The Age of Absolutism and the AP European History exam

The AP European History exam loves a topic like the Age of Absolutism because it hits so many of the Learning Objectives laid out by the CollegeBoard. During your AP Euro History review periods, you've probably started to notice that a major theme of the course itself has to do with States and Other Institutions of Power (Theme 4, to be exact). If you want to catch up on your AP European History course Themes, go ahead and take a quick look at the [AP European History Course and Exam Guide](#) from the CollegeBoard website.

This course theme covers all sorts of political power throughout European history, including the ways that the royalty during the Age of Absolutism justified their own power and authority, how they maintained control, and those challenges that arose against them.

Luckily for you, we have covered all of these things in this AP European History Crash Course on the Age of Absolutism. But just in case, let's take a quick look at an example from the AP Euro exam itself and see how the topic might pop up in future editions.

Let's take a look at an example from the [AP European History exam from the year 2004](#):

"Analyze the shifts in the European balance of power in the period between 1763 and 1848."

Age of Absolutism Cont.

Granted, this was one of the Free-Response Questions from a few years ago, but you can easily see how this question (or one similar to it could show up on next year's AP Euro exam as a Long-Essay Question. Either way, this is a perfect example of how the term Age of Absolutism might actually pop up as topic on the AP European History exam.

Like we discussed above, the era in question here comes right at the tail end of the absolutist monarchy movement that was the central political platform in Europe. You already know that monarchs believed their rule to be absolute, but others always found a way to challenge their authority. Events that occurred in places such as France, like those revolutionaries turning towards the values of the Enlightenment helped to spark a shift towards Enlightened Absolutism, but ultimately the monarchies would give way entirely to republics and liberal politics.

No matter, how the topic comes up on your AP Euro exam, just remember everything we've covered in this AP European History Crash Course on the Age of Absolutism and you're bound to dominate the exam like the best European despotic monarch!