Chapter 8 : Absolute Monarchy in France

In the wake of the disastrous Wars of Religion in the late sixteenth century, King Henry IV, the first of the French Bourbon kings, began restoring the power of the French monarchy. Then, in the early seventeenth century, Cardinal Richelieu, the chief minister of King Louis XIII, raised the authority of the French monarchy to new heights and increased France's power in Europe.
Cardinal Mazarin continued Richelieu's work during the early years of the reign of King Louis XIV, further reducing the power of the nobility, After Louis XIV's personal rule began in 1661, the French absolute monarchy stood at the height of its power both in France and
Europe. The wars of Louis XIV proved extremely costly, however, and left France a burden of debt that would lead the French monarchy to collapse in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, in the seventeenth century, France was the most powerful country in Europe.

King Henry IV (r. 1589-1610)

In 1589, at the end of the Wars of Religion, Henry of Navarre, the first Bourbon to wear the French crown, became king (see Chapter 5). As Henry IV, he began the process of reestablishing the power of the French monarchy. Henry had been a Protestant, but in 1593 he converted to Roman Catholicism, thereby embracing the faith of the overwhelming majority of his subjects.
In an effort to heal the wounds caused by the Wars of Religion, in 1598 Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes, granting limited toleration to the more than one million French Protestants, the Huguenots.

The Duke of Sully

The Duke of Sully (1560-1641) served as Henry IV's finance minister and deserves the credit for much of the king's success. To increase the crown's income, Sully introduced sound accounting practices and sought to eliminate financial inefficiency and corruption. He did not, however, attempt any fundamental financial reforms, such as ending the tax-exempt status of the nobility and clergy. As a consequence, the tax burden borne by the bourgeoisie, peasantry, and working classes remained considerable.
While Sully tended to neglect industrial development, he promoted the construction of roads and canals. He also inaugurated the system of sending royal officials into the provinces to deal with many of the functions of local government, thereby reducing the nobility's influence in local affairs.
Sully's policies served to promote both the prosperity of the French economy and the political and financial strength of the monarchy.

King Louis XIII (r. 1610-1643)

In 1610, a Catholic fanatic assassinated Henry IV. During the more than a decade of political turmoil that followed the assassination, Henry IV's widow, Marie de Medicis (1573-1642), acted as regent for her son, King Louis XIII, who was only ten years old when he succeeded his father. The queen regent arranged for her son's later marriage to a Spanish princess. She also dismissed Sully, leaving France without strong leadership. The nobility and the Huguenots took advantage of the situation to press their own interests at the expense of royal authority.

Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642)

In 1621, Armand-Jean du Plessis, the Cardinal-Duke of Richelieu, became Louis XIII's chief minister, remaining in that position until his death in 1642. With the strong support of the king, Richelieu developed and executed policies designed to reassert royal control over the nobility, destroy the political privileges of the Huguenots, and increase French power in Europe.

Richelieu and the Nobility

The French nobility had not yet been fully subordinated to the crown, and many noblemen routinely defied the king's authority. Aristocrats who held high offices in the government, the military, and the church often used their power to advance their own individual and class interests. Richelieu gradually reduced the influence of the nobility in the government. He extended the system established under Henry IV of sending royal officials into the provinces, establishing the office of *intendant*. These officials became important instruments in the process of centralizing political authority in the hands of the king's government. This reduced the power of the nobility, as did Richelieu's efforts to appoint more members of the middle class, especially lawyers, to the royal administration.

Richelieu and the Huguenots

The Edict of Nantes had not only granted limited religious toleration to the Huguenots but had also enabled them to establish centers of political power in their fortified towns. In 1625, several prominent Huguenot noblemen led a revolt against Richelieu. In 1627, Richelieu launched an assault against the Huguenot stronghold at La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast. Following a siege of fourteen months, his forces took the city in 1628. The next year, Richelieu deprived the Huguenots of the right to hold fortified cities, but he preserved their freedom to practice their religion. He thus succeeded in destroying the Huguenots' independent political power without initiating a policy of religious persecution that might have led to civil war.

Foreign Affairs Under Louis XIII and Richelieu

French power and prestige in Europe had declined during the years of domestic turmoil that followed the murder of Henry IV in 1610. In his effort to restore France's position in Europe, Richelieu revived the traditional French opposition to the Hapsburgs. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), Catholic France joined with Protestant Sweden and the Protestant German states to fight the Catholic Hapsburgs (see Chapter 5). By the time the war ended with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, France had become the most powerful country on the European continent.

King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715)

The long reign of King Louis XIV had a powerful impact on France and Europe.

Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661)

When Richelieu died in 1642, he was succeeded by Cardinal Mazarin, who remained in power following the accession of Louis XIV in 1643 until his own death in 1661. Louis XIV was only five when he became king, and Mazarin ruled with the queen regent, Anne of Austria (1601-1666), the king's mother.

Mazarin continued Richelieu's policies in both domestic and foreign affairs. Following the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, France remained at war with the Spanish Hapsburgs, acquiring part of the Spanish Netherlands under the terms of the Treaty of the Pyrenees of 1659.

The *Fronde*

From 1648 to 1653, the *Fronde* involved a series of rebellions against royal power by elements of the nobility and the townspeople, whose traditional position of

Europe, 1648

influence in French politics and society had been undermined by the growth of the crown's authority. (The term "*Fronde*" is derived from the French slang for the slingshot used by boys in the streets of Paris.) The *Fronde* began in June 1648, when the *Parlement* of Paris objected to Mazarin's financial policy. (The *Parlement* was a court of law, comprised of members of the nobility and the wealthy middle class, rather than a legislative body.) When Mazarin ordered the arrest of the *Parlement's* leaders, a revolt broke out in Paris and quickly spread among the provincial nobility. The uprising quickly degenerated into infighting among the nobility, as individuals and factions pursued their own ambitions. By 1653, the movement had ended.

The *Fronde* represented a threat to the crown's power, and its failure demonstrated the success of Richelieu and Mazarin in developing strong political institutions that could withstand the nobility's opposition. The *Fronde* ultimately served to strengthen the crown, since the disorder created by the revolt convinced many that being ruled by a strong king was preferable to being dominated by competing and contentious noblemen.

The Personal Rule of Louis XIV

Louis XIV's personal rule began following Cardinal Mazarin's death in 1661. Until his own death in 1715,

Louis XIV ruled France as an absolute monarch, supposedly declaring: "*L'état, c'est moi*" ("I am the state"). One important instrument of the king's absolute power was the *lettre de cachet*, an administrative order that authorized imprisonment or exile without trial.

In 1660, Louis married the Spanish infanta, Marie Thérèse (1638-1683), the daughter of King Philip IV of Spain, for political reasons.

Louis XIV and the Nobility

The experience of the *Fronde* taught Louis XIV to distrust the nobility, and he now sought to destroy whatever remained of their ability to oppose his will. He appointed to high office more men of middle-class origin, continuing the traditional practice of selling titles of nobility. The creation of hundreds of these new "nobles of the robe" served to undermine the prestige of the old "nobility of the sword."

Bishop Bossuet and Divine Right

The theory of the divine right of kings provided an intellectual justification for absolute monarchy. A French bishop, Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), set forth this theory in the treatise *Politics Drawn From Holy Scripture*, published about 1670. Referring to the Bible as the authority for his arguments, Bossuet maintained that the king ruled by the will of God and was responsible only to God and not to any earthly power. Obedience to the will of the king was a religious obligation.

Versailles

Louis XIV spent immense sums on the construction of his vast and lavishly furnished palace at Versailles with its immense formal gardens. Located outside Paris, Versailles served as both the king's residence and the center of government.

At Versailles, the Sun King, as Louis was known, was surrounded by his servants and courtiers and a privileged group of French nobility, who, having lost their independence, were now reduced to fawning over the king.

Jean-Baptiste Colbert

Colbert (1619-1683) served Louis XIV as controller general of the finances from 1662 to 1683. A mercantilist, he sought to promote national economic prosperity by maximizing exports, limiting imports, and building up France's supply of gold and silver. He expanded the government's role in the economy, encouraging industry, reducing domestic customs barriers, and attempting to eliminate the ability of the nobility to interfere with trade. Colbert promoted the building of roads and canals and the expansion of France's merchant fleet. On the negative side, mercantilist regulations were often excessively restrictive, limiting innovation in industry and trade. As a consequence, progressive businessmen came increasingly to oppose mercantilist policies.

State Finances Under Louis XIV

Despite Colbert's policies, the government continued to depend on a haphazard financial system. The nobility and clergy remained exempt from most direct taxes; the wealthy middle class succeeded in evading many taxes. Thus, the main tax burden fell on the peasants and the lower middle class. The burden on the peasants was especially heavy, since they had to pay a substantial portion of their income in the form of taxes and other levies to the government, the church, and the landowners. The peasants were also subject to the *corvée* (forced labor on the roads).

The French government continued the traditional practice of farming out taxes to tax collectors who paid for the privilege. These tax collectors customarily forwarded only a small percentage of their receipts to the government.

While France was the richest and most powerful country on the European continent, the inadequacy of the government's financial system would become a major source of weakness for the monarchy.

Louis XIV and the Catholic Church

As an absolute monarch, Louis XIV wanted to extend his authority more completely over the Roman Catholic Church. Louis strongly defended the policy known as Gallicanism that had been established by his predecessors. Under this policy, the king exercised administrative control over the church in France while recognizing the pope's authority over faith and morals.

Louis XIV and the Jansenists

Although Louis XIV insisted on his right to control the administration of the French Catholic Church, he was devout in matters of faith and ardently opposed any teaching that deviated from orthodox Catholic doctrine. This resulted in his campaigns against both the Jansenists and the Huguenots.

The Jansenists were followers of the teaching of Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), a Flemish theologian. Jansen's writings on the theology of St. Augustine appeared in 1640, two years after his death. Jansenism resembled

Calvinism in its emphasis on predestination and its insistence that God's grace comes as a gift, irrespective of any good works the believer may perform. In addition, like the Calvinists, the Jansenists insisted on a puritanical morality.

Both Pope Innocent X (r. 1644-1655) and Pope Clement XI (r. 1700-1721) condemned Jansenist teachings, and Louis XIV ordered the closing of the large Jansenist monastery at Port-Royal, near Versailles, in 1704.

Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

Although the Edict of Nantes had granted limited toleration to the Huguenots, France's overwhelming Catholic majority remained antagonistic to them. By the 1660s, the Huguenots constituted about 10 percent of the population.

Like most of his fellow rulers, Louis XIV believed that religious unity was a prerequisite for political unity. In October 1685, the king revoked the Edict of Nantes and initiated a campaign of active persecution. Many Huguenots accepted forced conversion to Roman Catholicism, but others resisted. While they were not permitted to emigrate, some 200,000 Huguenots nevertheless fled, leaving their property behind. They found refuge in England, the Netherlands, Brandenburg and other Protestant German states, Switzerland, and the English and Dutch colonies in North America and South Africa. Many of these Huguenots were well-educated and industrious, and their departure deprived France of their knowledge and skills.

The Wars of Louis XIV

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) and the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659) had broken the power of the Hapsburgs and created the possibility that France could establish its dominance over the European continent. The achievement of this ambition could be blocked only by an alliance of the other European powers.

France was at war during much of Louis XIV's reign, as the king sought to increase French power in Europe and advance France's frontiers in the northeast at the expense of the Spanish Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire. He fought four major wars over the course of forty-six years.

The War of Devolution (1667-1668)

The War of Devolution began with a French invasion of the Spanish Netherlands (modern Belgium) and the Franche-Comté, also a Spanish possession, on France's eastern border. The Triple Alliance of England, Holland, and Sweden intervened in the war and forced Louis to withdraw. The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1668) awarded France several towns along the border of the Spanish Netherlands.

The Dutch War (1672-1678)

Louis XIV succeeded in breaking up the Triple Alliance by signing the Treaty of Dover with King Charles II of England in 1670. Louis then invaded Holland in 1672. William of Orange was able to defend his country only by opening the dikes, which resulted in the flooding of much of northern Holland. William also secured the support of the Holy Roman emperor, Brandenburg, and Spain. Under the terms of the Peace of Nijmegen of 1678-79, France gained the Franche-Comté and several additional towns along the border of the Spanish Netherlands.

The War of the League of Augsburg (1688-1697)

Also known as the Nine Years' War, the War of the League of Augsburg resulted from the efforts of Louis XIV to push France's frontier to the northeast into territory along the Rhine River. William of Orange, who became King William III of England in 1689, took the lead in forming a new alliance against the French. While the French made substantial conquests during the war, the Treaty of Ryswick of 1697 deprived Louis of most of his gains, although France retained Alsace, including the city of Strasbourg.

The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714)

The last of Louis XIV's wars, the War of the Spanish Succession, was both the longest and the hardest fought. When the childless King Charles II (r. 1665-1700), the last Hapsburg king of Spain, died in 1700, he left the Spanish crown to Philip of Anjou, the grandson of Louis XIV. The Hapsburg Holy Roman emperor Leopold challenged the succession, claiming the Spanish crown for his son Charles. The stakes were great, since the victor would acquire not only Spain and its possessions in Europe but also Spain's overseas colonies with their vast wealth. The other powers of Europe could not permit France to acquire Spain and its domains and would accept a Bourbon as king of Spain only if he and his heirs were barred from ever holding the French crown as well. England, Holland, and the Holy Roman emperor joined

forces to oppose the French, England played a major role in the war against Louis XIV. The great English general, John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), joined with the Hapsburg commander, Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736), to defeat the French in 1704 at I3lenheim in southern Germany and in other battles. In 1704, England occupied Gibraltar, thereby acquiring an important naval base in the Mediterranean.

France signed peace treaties with her enemies, except the Hapsburgs, at Utrecht in 1713. The Treaty of Baden and Rastatt of 1714 ended the war with the Hapsburgs. The peace settlement recognized Philip of Anjou as King Philip V (r. 1700-1746) of Spain, but provided that neither he nor his successors could occupy the French throne. The Austrian Hapsburgs were compensated by the acquisition of the Spanish Netherlands and also received Naples, Sardinia, and Milan. Sicily was awarded to the Italian state of Savoy, which exchanged it in 1720 with the Austrian Hapsburgs for Sardinia. The French lost a number of colonies that the English had taken during the war, including Newfoundland, Acadia (Nova Scotia), and the Hudson Bay area, although France kept Quebec. The English retained Gibraltar and Minorca and also acquired the *Asiento*, a contract to supply slaves to Spanish America for thirty years. Finally, the elector of Brandenburg was recognized as king of Prussia.

From 1589 to the early 1640s, Kings Henry IV and Louis XIII and their chief ministers, the Duke of Sully and Cardinal Richelieu, established the foundations of the French absolute monarchy. In the mid-seventeenth century, Cardinal Mazarin's success in suppressing the Fronde marked the end of the nobility's efforts to reassert its independence of royal authority, although the nobles retained some of their traditional privileges.

During his long reign, King Louis XIV enjoyed virtually unchallenged authority. Nevertheless, his revocation of the Edict of Nantes was a blunder, while his wars proved to be enormously expensive. When Louis XIV died in 1715, he left a legacy of financial problems for his successors to deal with.