CHAPTER 15

Absolutism and State Building in Europe, 1618-1715

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction

As a result of the religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth century, the political order virtually collapsed. In light of this political instability and civil wars, Thomas Hobbes wrote his book *Leviathan*. In it he argued that in the state of nature humans found themselves in constant conflict. Therefore they agreed with each other to form a political society in which a ruler made laws, administered justice and maintained order. In the seventeenth century, European kings turned to absolutism to restore order to their chaotic and war-ravaged countries.

A. The Nature of Absolutism

1. Introduction

To best understand absolutism we need to differentiate between theoretical definitions as postulated by writers such as Thomas Hobbes and practice as applied by the various monarchs of Europe. Although the term *absolutism* may conjure images of despotic rulers, seventeenth-century kings did not have the resources and power to impose their will on the entire people of their country.

2. The Theory of Absolutism

When seventeenth-century political writers such as Jean Bodin refer to the king as having absolute power, they mean that he did not share the power to make laws with national representative assemblies; in other words he was “sole legislator.” In addition, to discourage rebellion, absolute monarchs claimed that they held power by divine right; therefore a revolt against the king was to resist divine will. Absolutist kings also claimed that they were above the law and as the highest judge in the land could not be held accountable for their actions. This meant that they acted for reasons of state, i.e. the benefit of the entire kingdom, and therefore could not be expected to observe the rights and liberties of their subjects. The same theorists argued that the distinctive feature of European absolutism was that the kings abided by the rule of law, while non-European rulers such as the Ottoman sultan and the Russian tzar could seize the property of and execute their subject without reference to the law.
3. The Practice of Absolutism

In the seventeenth century European monarchs took several steps to ensure their authority was held supreme within the state. First, they eliminated or weakened national representatives assemblies. Second, they secured the support of smaller regional assemblies, which posed less of a direct challenge to centralized authority. Third, they subordinated the nobility to the king and made them dependent on his favor, while excluding him from positions of power. Fourth, the kings established centralized bureaucracies that collected taxes, recruited soldiers and operated the judiciary.

4. Warfare and the Absolutist State

The growth of European states in the seventeenth century was largely the result of war. Between 1600 and 1721 Europeans powers were constantly at war. By the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648, most European countries had a standing army, which could be used in foreign wars as well as in maintaining internal order. In the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century these armies became larger. They were equipped with new gunpowder technology such as the musket, which required more intensive training. The cost of recruiting soldiers, equipping them with arms and uniforms and training them was so high that only the state could afford it. The need to meet the financial cost of the military forced states to improve the bureaucracy and tax collection.

B. The Absolutist State in France and Spain

1. Introduction

The two European countries where royal absolutism first became the form of rule were France and Spain. While France under Louis XIV became the model of an absolutist state, which others sought to copy, Spain established forms of absolutist rule, but never matched the achievements of France.

2. The Foundations of French Absolutism

Efforts to establish the absolute monarchy in France began in response to the chaos of the religious wars. The Huguenot Henry IV (r. 1598-1610) converted to Catholicism when he became king of France. He restored internal religious peace by granting toleration to the Huguenots in the Edict of Nantes (1598). His chief minister, the Duke of Sully, promoted the economic recovery of France by giving government support to commercial expansion. When Henry IV was assassinated, his heir Louis XIII (r. 1610-1643) was still a child. The aristocracy took advantage of this weakness to try and build up its power. Louis XIII and his chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu, worked to centralize power in the hands of the French state. Richelieu suppressed rebellions led by nobles and restricted the independence of the regional supreme courts or parlements. Richelieu also improved the administration by establishing a system of professional bureaucrats called intendants to supervise local
administration. When conflict erupted between the Huguenots and the crown, they were defeated and their town fortifications were razed. Richelieu also increased such taxes as the taille and imposed a tax on office holders. After Richelieu died, he was succeeded as by Cardinal Mazarin (1601-1661). As chief minister during the early reign of Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) who became king at the age of three, Cardinal Mazarin faced a series of revolts against the crown called the Fronde. The first Fronde was led by the judges of parlement of Paris, who refused to register a royal order requiring them to give up four years worth of their salary. The royal family fled Paris and used royal troops to blockade the city until a compromise was reached. The second Fronde, led by the Prince of Condé, was also defeated by the crown. Within a decade the French state had recovered from these challenges.

3. Absolutism in the Reign of Louis XIV

After the death of Cardinal Mazarin, Louis XIV personally took over the government of France. Louis XIV acquired a reputation as the most powerful European monarch of the seventeenth century both through his policies as well as through the image he conveyed. Art and architecture was used to convey the enormous power of the king. He built a new royal palace at Versailles in the baroque style, which through its size emphasized the unrivaled power of the king. Paintings, sculptures and theatre productions always portrayed the symbols of power. In more practical manner, Louis curbed the power of the nobility, by requiring members of noble families to live at Versailles for part of the year. At court they participated in the ritual of court life that revolved around the person of the king, but were excluded from the running of the government. The offices of state were filled by bureaucrats recruited from the merchant and professional classes. At the local level, intendants ensured the cooperation of city councils, judges and parish priests to enforce the royal will. Louis also promoted religious uniformity by revoking the Edict of Nantes, forcing the Huguenots to either convert or leave the country. Large numbers of Huguenots emigrated to the Netherlands.

The government took an active role in the economic life of the country. The controller general, Jean Baptiste Colbert, promoted a set of policies called mercantilism to promote the economic expansion of France by improving the transportation network, promoting industry and expanding the merchant fleet.

4. Louis XIV and the Culture of Absolutism

Louis XIV attempted to transform French culture by his patronage of cultural institutions. To promote the fine arts Louis XIV granted royal patronage to the Academy of Fine Arts and established the Academy of Music and the theatre company Comédie Française, which had among its dramatists Jean Baptiste Molière and Jean Racine. He also established the Académie Française, which produced the first French Language dictionary. He also founded the Royal Academy of Sciences.
Louis also introduced uniformity to the government. His personal life, the royal bureaucracy and the army were all organized along rational, orderly principles. The achievements and style of Louis XIV influenced other royal courts, which attempted to copy him in the eighteenth century.

5. The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667-1714

Louis XIV waged four of wars to increase the territory of France at the expense of the German states and Spain. These wars led Great Britain, Spain, Austria and the Dutch republic to form coalitions to stop French expansion and establish a balance of power among the power of Europe. Louis XIV’s last war was known as the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713). When Charles II of Spain died without an heir, he left the Spanish crown and empire to Louis XIV’s grandson. The other power refused to accept this increase of French power. After a decade of war, the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) allowed Louis XIV’s grandson, Philip V, to become king of Spain on the condition the French and Spanish crowns never be unified. Also, the Spanish territories in Italy and the Netherlands were awarded to the Austrian Habsburgs.

6. Absolutism and State Building in Spain

In the seventeenth century Spain faced military defeat, population decline and economic failure. Spain in the seventeenth century remained a collection of territories with their own separate institutions unified only by the person of the monarch. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Count-Duke of Olivares (1587-1645) attempted to integrate the various principalities into a more centralized state. He reformed the tax system replacing the *millones* tax with proportional tax contributions from all villages and town and required all territories to contribute to national defense. He also attempted to reduce the autonomy enjoyed by the different principalities. His policies produced separatist opposition in the various principalities. Although Spain managed to retain control of Italy and Catalonia, it lost Portugal. In the end he failed to reproduce the absolutist state of France because of military defeat abroad and internal opposition.

The seventeenth century is the Golden Age of Spanish letters and art. However, faced with decline and defeat, Spanish culture turned toward nostalgia. Writers like Miguel de Cervantes in his *Don Quixote* wrote of elusive dreams of military victory. The paintings of Diego de Velázquez reflected the ideals of seventeenth century absolutist culture, but avoided the reality of Spanish military and political decline.

C. Absolutism and State Building in Central and Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

The military experiences, which created the absolutist states in France and Spain, also contributed to the creation of absolutist states in the German lands and Eastern Europe.
2. Germany and the Thirty Years’ War, 1618-1648

The German lands were a confederation of kingdoms, principalities and church territories known as the Holy Roman Empire. The empire was not a unified, sovereign state. In 1618 a political incident in Bohemia known as the Defenestration of Prague where Protestant members of the Diet threw two royal officials out of a royal castle window triggered the Thirty Years’ War. The war devastated the German lands and retarded economic growth for more than half a century. The war ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which allowed the German territories to develop as sovereign states with their own armies and central governments. The two most powerful were the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy and Brandenburg-Prussia.

3. The Growth of the Prussian State

In 1648 Prussia was made up of a series of territories scattered throughout northern Germany and almost no state bureaucracy. Under the Great Elector Frederick William (r. 1640-1688), King Frederick I (r. 1688-1713) and King Frederick William I (r. 1713-1740) Prussia became a powerful state. The Great Elector secured the support of the Prussian nobles, known as Junkers, by giving them legal power over the serfs on their estates. Prussian rulers, then proceeded to enlarge and centralize the royal bureaucracy in Berlin, improved tax collection and expanded the army. By 1740 Prussia had an 80,000-men army, which was also the best trained army in Europe. Although the Prussian rulers consulted the local assemblies, they were sole legislators at the national level.

4. The Austrian Habsburg Monarchy

The Habsburg rulers of Austria were less successful in consolidating their state. The Habsburg territories were made up of several autonomous principalities with their own institutions and privileges, speaking different languages and following different religious practices and creeds. The Habsburgs created the Court Chamber as a unified bureaucratic institution to supervise the collection of taxes and recruit troops. The Habsburgs were most successful in the Austrian and Bohemian lands. Bohemia had been defeated at the Battle of White Mountain (1629) and its Protestant nobility was deprived of power. Hungary was able to resist Habsburg attempts to limit its constitutional autonomy.

5. The Ottoman Empire: Between East and West

The military frontier between the Habsburg and Ottoman lands marked both a political and a cultural boundary. The Ottoman Turks were not considered part of the West, as they were Muslims. The Turkish rulers, known as sultans, were considered by Western writers despots who ruled over their subjects as slaves. In practice their power, like that of western absolutist monarchs, was limited by the spirit of Muslim law. Also, Ottoman provinces enjoyed much
autonomy. While Ottomans and Europeans were frequently at war, contacts between the two included trade. Although most Europeans viewed the Ottoman Empire as “oriental,” it was a really a border between east and west.

6. Russia and the West

Russia also was a border state between east and west. Russia was ruled for several centuries by Asian peoples and did not participate in the European cultural experience. It also followed an Eastern orthodox form of Christianity. Thus, westerners saw it as “oriental.” During the Reign of Peter I, the Great, (r. 1682-1725) Russia began to adopt Western ways. Peter the Great established a standing army, trained in Prussian methods, imposed new taxes, created a centralized bureaucracy, and promoted industry. He also built the new city of St. Petersburg as a “window to Europe.”

D. Resistance to Absolutism in England and the Dutch Republic

1. Introduction

While the absolutist state was being established throughout most of Europe, England and the Dutch Republic successfully resisted centralization on power in the hands of the crown.

2. The English Monarchy

The English had a long tradition of relying on Parliament to make laws and levy taxes. The Stuart kings tried to introduce royal absolutism. James I (r. 1603-1625) was a strong believer in the royal prerogative and argued the function of Parliament was only to give advice, but made no attempt to legislate without it. When his successor, Charles I (r. 1625-1649) proceeded to impose forced loans on his subjects, Parliament responded with the Petition of Rights stating the fundamental rights of the people. In response Charles did not call Parliament from 1629 to 1640. During this period of personal rule, Charles collected taxes on his own authority. At the same time, his chief religious advisor, Archbishop William Laud, proceeded to restore ritual practices that leaned toward Catholicism. When Charles I tried to introduce this new liturgy to Scotland, it produced a civil war. Desperate for money to fight the Scots, Charles recalled Parliament.

3. The English Civil War and Revolution

Tensions between Charles and Parliament brought about the first modern revolution. The Long Parliament met from 1640-1649. It impeached royal officials and judges and declared the taxes not passed by parliament illegal. When the king attempted to arrest several members of Parliament, civil war broke out. Parliament created a new efficient army and defeated the king. When Presbyterian members of Parliament attempted to reach a compromise with the king, the army purged the Presbyterians from Parliament. The remaining members of Parliament, known as the Rump, put the king on trial.
He was convicted and executed in January of 1649. The revolution created a Republic with the House of Commons as supreme legislator. Soon, the popular party known as the Levellers began pushing for a more democratic form of government, including annual Parliaments and universal suffrage. The army again intervened, and its commander-in-chief, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) was named Lord Protector of England. When Cromwell died in 1558, the political conflict between the Parliament and the army was renewed. In 1660, the army restored the monarchy.

4. Later Stuart Absolutism and the Glorious Revolution

Charles II (r. 1660-1685) and his successor James II (r. 1685-1688) both favored absolutism, but neither tried to rule without Parliament. Their policy was to influence Parliament by packing it with their supporters. The major political crisis of Charles’ II reign came between 1679-81 when a group of members of Parliament known as the Whigs led by Earl of Shaftesbury (1621-1683) attempted to exclude the kings’ brother James from succeeding the English throne on the grounds that he was Catholic. The attempt failed and James succeeded the throne when Charles II died 1685. When James II exempted Catholics from the Test Act of 1673, which excluded them from public office, the country revolted against him. James II fled and Parliament invited his Protestant daughter, Mary and her husband, William of Orange, to become the new rulers. They were required to accept The Convention, which limited royal power and excluded Catholics from the throne. These events known as the Glorious Revolution were not really a revolution as the basic institutions remained the same. Only the center of power shifted from the king to the aristocracy sitting in Parliament. The Glorious Revolution was justified by John Locke in his Two Treatises of Government. Locke argued that man left the state of nature and established a government to protect its property and avoid chaos. But if the king acted against the interests of the people, they could revolt against him. The English Parliament as the new center of power followed the pattern set by other states in improving the military and expanding the bureaucracy.

5. The Dutch Republic

The Dutch Republic remained a decentralized state. The Provinces formed a loose confederation sending deputies to the States General. The provinces also remained decentralized. Political power laid in the hands of the wealthy merchants and bakers who served as regents in the city councils. In foreign policy, first John de Witt, the grand pensionary of Holland, and later the House of Orange led in providing some semblance of centralized authority in the face of foreign threat. Like other countries, Holland accumulated a large standing army. The Dutch Republic played an important role in international trade serving as the middleman between Europe and the World and among European nations. The Dutch East India Company established trading posts in Asia and the Americas. The Exchange Bank of Amsterdam facilitated international trade transactions by having a monopoly of exchange in foreign currencies.
Because of its role as the great middleman of international trade it was the Dutchman, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) who first argued for the freedom of merchants to use the open seas. One of the more unusual features of the Dutch bourgeoisie was its willingness to allow a large degree of toleration to different religious groups. One of the most important contributions of the Dutch to European culture was in the arts. Because the Dutch Calvinist Reformation ended the tradition of religious paintings, Dutch artists of the seventeenth century turned to producing realistic portraits of merchants and financiers. Among its most famous painters were Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) and Jan Steen (1626-1679). In the early eighteenth century the Dutch Republic lost its economic superiority to the French and English.
### TIMELINE

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event 1</th>
<th>Event 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1618</td>
<td>Defenestration of Prague</td>
<td>Edict of Nantes Revoked</td>
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<td>1648</td>
<td>Execution of Charles I</td>
<td>Glorious Revolution in England</td>
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<td>1649</td>
<td>Peace of Westphalia</td>
<td>Treaty of Utrecht</td>
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### TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Fronde</td>
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<td>James I of England</td>
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<td>True Law of Free Monarchies</td>
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<td>Count-Duke Olivares</td>
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<td>Cardinal Richelieu</td>
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<td>Petition of Right</td>
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<td>Long Parliament</td>
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<td>Diego de Velázquez</td>
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MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter.

1. Locate the following places on the map.

   - the states with limited or constitutional monarchies
   - the states with more absolute forms of government
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What was the “divine right of kings?” To what extent was it used by European monarchs?
2. How did warfare affect development of the absolutist state?
3. What was the theory of royal absolutism? How did it work in practice?
4. What were the origins of the royal crises of the seventeenth century? What theories were elaborated that permitted resistance to the monarchy?
5. What factors account for the rebellions in England? What was their result? How did Locke’s political theory justify them?
6. How did Louis XIV complete the creation of absolute government? How successful was it? How did other states attempt to copy it?
7. How did eastern European rulers acquire the support of their nobles to establish absolutism in their states?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

The following questions test your ability to interpret the primary source documents in the textbook.

1. What reasons did Louis XIV give for revoking the Edict of Nantes? What steps did he take to enforce religious conformity of the former Huguenots?
2. Based on Grimmelshausen’s account, how did the troops behave when they attacked a region?
3. Why did John Lilburne feel the cause of the English Revolution had been betrayed?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. Compare and contrast absolutism in France and Spain in the seventeenth century. How did monarchs centralize their power? What resistance did they encounter? What economic policies did they pursue? How did the arts convey the values of the period? Which monarchy fared better during the period?
2. Discuss the reign of Peter the Great in Russia. In what ways did he try to Westernize Russia? How did he increase the power of the tsar? Why did he fight wars with the Turks and Swedes? How did St. Petersburg symbolize his reign?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which did NOT result from the wars of the seventeenth century?
   a. the loss of royal authority
   b. the growth of the size of royal armies
   c. the increase in efficiency of royal bureaucracies
   d. improvements in the collection of taxes

2. Which of the following artists was associated with Spanish art?
   a. Diego Velazquez.
   b. Peter Paul Rubens
   c. Ben Jonson.
   d. Anthony Van Dyck

3. The author of the *Leviathan* was
   a. John Locke.
   b. Miguel de Cervantes.
   c. Thomas Hobbs.
   d. Hugo Grotius.

4. Absolutism meant that the king
   a. was supreme legislator.
   b. could seize his subjects’ property at will.
   c. must consult the Diet frequently.
   d. was a despot.

5. Louis the XIV did all of the following to promote absolutism in France EXCEPT
   a. deprive the nobles of their role in government.
   b. call the Estates General.
   c. have himself painted holding the symbols of power.
   d. appoint professional bureaucrats.

6. The aristocratic rebellion in France against the regency government of Cardinal Mazarin was called the
   a. Fronde.
   b. Catalan rebellion.
   c. Sicilian Vespers.
   d. Jacquerie.
7. Which of the following did NOT result from the English Civil War?
   a. Parliament became more powerful than the king.
   b. Religious toleration became the rule.
   c. Royal power over taxation was curtailed.
   d. Absolute monarchy became constitutional monarchy.

8. Which of the following states did NOT develop royal absolutism?
   a. Dutch Republic
   b. Prussia
   c. France
   d. Russia

9. Eastern European Monarchs secured the acceptance of absolutism by their nobles by
   a. calling more frequent national Diets.
   b. cutting taxes.
   c. granting them power over the peasants on their estates.
   d. militarily crushing the nobles.

10. The institution that facilitated international commerce by holding a monopoly of foreign exchange was
   a. the States General.
   b. the Grand pensionary.
   c. the Stadholder.
   d. the Exchange Bank of Amsterdam.