What is Absolutism?

Absolutism, or Absolute Monarchy, is a situation where Kings rule with total authority. European monarchs claimed to rule by ‘Divine Right’, which suggested that God had placed them on the throne, and as such, they were responsible only to God — not to nobles, or to a Church, or to a Parliament. To question their authority was to question God himself. Certainly, there was no separation of Church and State!

What led to Absolutism?

The era of absolutism in Europe is generally considered to have peaked in the 16th and 17th centuries. (Although several Absolute Monarchies continued through the 18th and 19th centuries.)

The Protestant Reformation had quite a bit to do with the rise of Absolute Monarchs. Following the Reformation was a period of religious warfare that plagued much of Europe. Many people looked for order out of the chaos, and national monarchs arose to create that order.

Additionally, the Reformation weakened the two most powerful political structures in Europe: the Papacy (i.e. The Church) and the Holy Roman Empire. As these two institutions weakened, regional national monarchs took advantage and strengthened their positions.

Also, many national monarchs seized control of the Church and all its lands (whether Catholic or Protestant) in their kingdom. Some monarchs made themselves head of the Church in their nation. This began the solidification of

Divine Right vs. Mandate of Heaven

People often like to draw a comparison to 16th & 17th century European absolutism and traditional Chinese dynastic rule.

Both claim the source of their authority or power was supernatural, or heavenly, but they differ on their interpretation of the scope of that power.

European monarchs tended to feel that their power was unlimited, and was not to be questioned. To question the monarch was to question God. The monarch was God’s representative on Earth, and thus, was responsible only to God.

The Chinese looked at the Mandate as a grant of power that might be quite temporary. The Chinese people looked for signs to tell them that the dynasty had lost heaven’s mandate. The rulers had responsibilities to the people they ruled — to keep them fed and safe. Europeans were not subject to the same restrictions.

Star Power

Despite their power, most successful Absolute Monarchs were very hard working rulers who enjoyed long, peaceful reigns and were adored by their people. These monarchs were especially popular if they were able to create a stable and prosperous economy!
**Being an Absolute Monarch**

**The Goal of Absolute Monarchs**

- Absolute Monarchs sought to enhance the grandeur and status of their nation through military conquest, economic development, territorial expansion and construction projects.

**Economic Solidification**

- The economy held the (golden) key to total political power for many monarchs. If they could raise money without raising new taxes, they could rule without a Parliament.
- Thus, monarchs became more involved in growing the economy.
  - **First**, they began to offer military protection to business ventures (especially those in colonies), because the more money businesses made, the more money would flow into the treasury.
  - **Second**, they offered incentives to entrepreneurs to start new businesses. This increased the tax base. Thus, without raising taxes, they effectively raised revenue.
  - **Third**, they often began building economic infrastructure within their nation to facilitate trade. This included construction of roads and canals.
  - **Fourth**, they streamlined tax collection so that less money was lost.
- Increased revenues was an essential part of successful Absolutist rule. It financed military build-up which allowed for territorial conquest. It also financed building projects that reflected the power of the monarch.

**Solidification of Political Control**

- Most monarchs, whether Catholic or Protestant, were aided by the Protestant Reformation and the weakening of the Catholic Church. This helped gain some political authority.
- The most difficult political obstacle in most nations was the power of the nobility, and the existence of a Parliament.
- Most monarchs had to get the approval of a Parliament before raising taxes (ie. raising money). Absolute monarchs refused to share their political power with a Parliament, so they had to find a way of raising money without raising taxes.
- Absolute monarchs also refused to share their political power with the nobles in their nation. Different monarchs used different techniques to subdue their nobles.

**Military Build-up**

- Build-up of the military (especially the construction of a navy by the 1600s), became an essential part of achieving an Absolute Monarch’s goals of territorial acquisition and expansion of the economy.

**Building Projects**

- Not unlike the Ancient Romans, most Absolute Monarchs engaged in large scale building projects of Palaces, gardens, or other public works, designed to represent their power and grandeur.
Louis XIV of France

**Louis XIV**

- Louis XIV (14th) of France is considered by most to be the epitome (best example) of absolutism. Perhaps he is the best example because his reign was the most absolute. Or perhaps he is the best example because his style of rule was imitated by other monarchs across Europe. Either way, he ruled France for an amazing 72 years!

**Young Louis**

- Louis XIV began his reign as King of France when he was just 4 years old. Obviously he was not old enough to really rule by himself, so a regent was appointed to rule for him.
- Cardinal Mazarin ruled along with Louis’ mother until the Cardinal died in 1661, and Louis took direct control of the affairs of government.
- At the age of 21, Louis began to make his presence and his views of governing known by saying, “L’etat, C’est moi”, or “I am the state”, or literally, “The state, it is me”.
- He also proclaimed himself “The Sun King”. The image suggested that even as the planets revolved around the sun, so too did all of France revolve around Louis.

**Versailles**

- Louis XIV built his stunning palace at Versailles (just outside of Paris) as a showplace and tribute to his greatness. It was to be his primary residence, the seat of his government, and a reception place for foreign diplomats.
- Building costs are not known exactly because many records were destroyed, but historians estimate them to be between $2-3 billion. Maintenance expenses were costly as well, consuming between 10-25% of government resources (estimates vary).
- Versailles was used by Louis as a tool to help keep an eye on his nobles. He invited his nobles to live with him at Versailles not only to keep a direct watch over them, but also to cut them off from the support they experienced back in their home estate.
- Versailles was also used as a place for Louis to showcase French crafts. Soon these crafts were desired all over the world.
- The palace was so impressive and successful that royal families from nations all over Europe built similar palaces. Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery!

**The Sun King Reigns...**

- Louis XIV was an international sensation. Nobles in nations throughout Europe sought to imitate French culture. They bought French clothes and French furniture, and even began speaking French in their own courts!
- By the late 1600s, France had become the most powerful nation in Europe. Spanish power had been in decline since their defeat at the hands of the English in 1588, and the English were not yet powerful enough to challenge the French.
- Since France was so powerful, Louis became entangled in the international politics of the day. And of course, as an absolute monarch, Louis looked for ways to expand his considerable empire.
Life at Versailles

• Life at Versailles revolved around the life of the King. Nobles deemed it a great privilege to help the King dress in the morning, or to assist him in his prayers.
• Life was also filled with pleasure. Nobles walked in the gardens, hunted in the woods, attended plays and ballets in the palace theater, dined extravagantly, played cards, dice and billiards, and enjoyed the pursuit of relationship intrigues.
• While it was deemed a great privilege to be asked to live with the King at Versailles, many understood that the nobles lived in a “gilded cage”. Louis carefully watched over his nobles, and made sure they were not plotting against him. It was yet another use of Versailles, and another method of absolute control exerted by Louis.

Jean Baptiste Colbert

• How did Louis pay for both the construction of, and the lifestyle of, Versailles without raising taxes? This unenviable task fell to the finance minister Jean Colbert.
• Colbert did a number of things to grow the economy.
  - First, he offered tax incentives to entrepreneurs. This encouraged the creation of new businesses. More businesses meant more revenue into the treasury. In this way he grew the tax base. Without raising taxes, he collected more taxes because there were more businesses to tax!
  - Second, he imposed protective tariffs on imported goods, making imports more expensive than domestically produced goods. This helped French businesses because most people could only afford to buy French products -- not the expensive imports.
  - Third, he pursued a mercantilist policy with France’s North American colonies. Many resources were imported from the colonies, but most important was fur.
  - Fourth, he used domestic craftsmen in the construction and furnishing of Versailles. As Versailles became a world showplace, French goods were prominently on display, and began to be desired the world over.
  - Finally, he tightened up tax collection, so that less revenue was lost.
• In this way, Colbert was able to increase the revenues of the French treasury without increasing taxes.

The Sun Begins to Set

• Colbert died in 1683, and despite all of his efforts to enrich France, the King worked equally hard to squander the results.
• Louis engaged in a number of expensive foreign wars. These wars were instigated by Louis because of his desire for military glory and territorial conquest.
• They were only marginally successful, and ended up bankrupting the treasury by the end of Louis’ reign.
• From his deathbed, Louis implored his great-grandson and heir Louis XV NOT to make the same mistakes that he did and waste money in pursuit of pleasure and in pursuit of territory through expensive warfare.

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Philip II of Spain

Some Background...

• Philip II of Spain was the great-grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and the son of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. When Charles retired, he split his possessions, giving Philip Spain, the Netherlands and Spain’s New World possessions. Philip inherited Spain at the height of her power, but at the time of his death in 1598, Spain was in decline.
• Most of Spain was conquered by Muslim invaders in the 700s. Between 700 and the 1400s, the remaining independent Christian kingdoms in Spain attempted to reconquer the peninsula (a movement known as the Reconquista).
• The Reconquista was completed by Ferdinand & Isabella on January 2, 1492, when they seized Granada. The duo then began to purify Spain using the Inquisition. Spain became a hostile place for any Jews or Muslims.

Philip’s Spain

• Spain in the mid 1500s was the largest Empire in the world, spanning some two billion acres in Europe, the South Pacific, and the Americas.
• The Spanish Armada (navy) was considered the most modern and powerful fighting force in the world, and it was this Armada that protected Spanish interests.
• Culturally, Spain had survived the Protestant Reformation as one of the most fervently Catholic nations in Europe. Philip followed in the footsteps of his predecessors Ferdinand & Isabella through his use of the Inquisition, and he remained firmly committed to the eradication of Protestantism and the re-establishment of Catholicism — no matter what the cost to his nation. The work of the Spanish inquisition during this era was infamous.
• Economically, Spain suffered. Philip inherited a Spain from his father that was in terrible debt, however, he made that debt worse by engaging in numerous foreign wars. Philip did little to strengthen the core of the economy, and he relied on huge shipments of silver from the Americas to finance his campaigns. This influx of silver created its own problems — tremendous inflation.
• The era of Philip II, for all of its problems, is considered a Golden Age for Spain, particularly in the area of literature — yielding such classics as Miguel Cervantes’ Don Quixote. This novel used the main character, Don Quixote, as a personification of Spain.

Philip’s Legacy

• Philip remains a classic example of an Absolute Monarch. Under his rule, Spain reached the peak of its power.
• He fought wars to expand his power and territory, he ruled with total authority, and he built a huge palace, El Escorial.
• El Escorial is located outside of the capital, Madrid, and represents Philip better than anything else. Fortress-like, sparsely decorated and austere, El Escorial served as the seat of Philip’s government, but also as a school and a cloister for monks.
Philip’s relationship with England

• England played a role in the Protestant Reformation when Henry VIII broke with the Church so that he could divorce his first wife Catherine. Catherine was the great-aunt of Philip of Spain.
• Ironically, it was Catherine & Henry’s daughter Mary who ascended the English throne in 1553. In 1554, the recently widowed Philip II made a great political marriage to Mary. Not only did this marriage unite two powerful European kingdoms, but it also allowed Philip to reintroduce Catholicism into England. The marriage was unpopular in both kingdoms, however.
• Mary, raised a Catholic and eager to impress her fervently Catholic husband, began to persecute Protestants in England, thus earning her (perhaps unfairly) the nickname Bloody Mary.
• Unfortunately for Mary, she was truly in love with her husband (rare for political marriages), and Philip was an absentee husband. He spent most of his time in Spain, while Mary remained in England. Over time, she wasted away with longing for Philip.
• Mary died, childless in 1558, and her sister Elizabeth came to the throne. Philip proposed marriage to Elizabeth, but she refused him.
• Elizabeth re-established Protestantism in England, and she took pains to needle Philip. She encouraged her sea captains to attack Spanish galleons and pirate their treasure. She also helped support the Dutch in their independence struggle against the Spanish.

The Magnificent Spanish Armada

• In 1571, the Spanish Armada (navy) scored a stunning victory over the Ottoman fleet, and prevented further Ottoman intrusion in the Mediterranean Sea. The Armada was considered the world’s finest navy.
• In 1588, Philip sent his mighty Armada to crush the English. The English fleet was much smaller (in terms of size of ship), badly outnumbered and outgunned. However, the English fleet was faster, and they used their speed to great advantage while the Armada was squeezed in the narrow English Channel.
• The English won a stunning victory over the Armada, which was ultimately destroyed by a terrible storm while rounding Scotland and Ireland.
• The battle marked the rise of England and the slow demise of Spanish power.

The Spanish Economy

• The economy was gravely injured by the work of the Spanish inquisition. Many of the artisans and small businessmen that made up Spain’s middle class were Jews and Muslims. They were systematically driven from the country, leaving a gaping hole in Spain’s economic infrastructure.
• Spain could not fully take advantage of a mercantilist system because they did not have the manufacturing support.
• Additionally, Spain’s importation of huge quantities of silver from the Americas created a world-wide inflation felt as far away as China.
Elizabeth I of England

Oh, England...

• The country of England was slightly different from other European nations in the era of Absolutism. For one thing, England had a long history of placing limitations on the monarch. Dating back to 1215 with the passage of the Magna Carta, the nobles exerted some authority over the King.
• Parliaments met with a fair degree of regularity from the 1200s through the 1600s for purposes of tax approval.
• The Tudor monarchs, who were notoriously headstrong, battled furiously with the Parliament, but ultimately respected it as one of the roots of English government.

Elizabeth I

• Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Bolyne. Henry had broken with the Catholic Church to marry Elizabeth’s mother. He established the Church of England, and declared England a Protestant nation.
• Mary, Elizabeth’s half-sister, came to the throne before Elizabeth, and tried to convert the country back to Catholicism.
• When Elizabeth came to power, she tried to bring peace to an internally torn nation. She proclaimed England a Protestant nation, but tolerated Catholics.
• Elizabeth was highly educated (she could read and write more than 5 languages), and was considered the best political marriage in Europe. Kings from across Europe vied for her hand, but Elizabeth kept them all at bay – she didn’t say ‘yes’, and she didn’t say ‘no’. Eventually, they lost interest. This way, she did not offend one by marrying another. Elizabeth never married; she often said she was married to England.

Elizabeth’s Policies

• Elizabeth had as hot a temper as her red hair suggested. She often had monumental conflicts with the Parliament. Both were stubborn and willful, but ultimately, Elizabeth worked with the Parliament, instead of dissolving it and attempting to rule alone.
• One of Elizabeth’s suitors was Philip II of Spain. Elizabeth rejected him, and then took special pains to torment him.
• She directed her sea captains to pirate Spanish galleons heavy with American treasure. She also supported the Protestant Netherlands in their quest for independence from Catholic Spain.
• Ultimately, Philip turned his wrath on her and sent his powerful Armada to invade England. The Armada was defeated in one of England’s greatest victories.

Good Queen Bess

• Elizabeth presided over a Golden Age in England. Her reign was long (45 years), and largely peaceful – it was the age of Shakespeare and Francis Drake, the English Renaissance, and the beginning of English exploration.
• Unfortunately, since Elizabeth never married, she died childless, and the throne passed to the son of her cousin – James, King of Scotland of the House of Stuart.
The Stuarts and Civil Wars

The House of Stuart

• James Stuart was the cousin of Elizabeth I of England, and the King of Scotland. He inherited the throne when childless Elizabeth died in 1603. However, as a Scotsman, he was considered something of a foreigner in England. Additionally, he was used to ruling without many limits on his power — something that would not play well in England.

• James had a very rocky relationship with the English Parliament. He was quick to show his disdain for them, and he often proclaimed his belief in divine right rule.

The Commonwealth Era

• After the execution of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell and the Parliament ruled the country from 1649-1660 in an era known as the Commonwealth. England was, essentially, a Republic.

• Cromwell imposed harsh puritanical laws on the people, and he became even more unpopular than Charles I had been.

The English Civil War

• King James died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son, Charles I.

• Charles was even more insufferable than his father had been from the Parliament’s point of view. He attempted to rule as an Absolute Monarch, proclaiming his divine right, dismissing Parliament, squandering money, and levying taxes without the consent of Parliament.

• The First English Civil War broke out in 1642. The forces of Parliament known as the Roundheads were led by Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan. The forces of the King, known as the Cavaliers, were made up primarily of nobles and peasants. The King’s forces were decisively defeated in 1645, and it was expected that Charles would agree to rule as a Constitutional Monarch.

• Instead, Charles rallied his troops in Scotland and provoked a Second Civil War (1648-49). Charles’ troops were again defeated, and Charles was tried and executed for treason.

The Restoration

• After Cromwell’s death, the Parliament voted to restore the monarchy. Charles II, son of Charles I, was invited to rule.

• Charles II ruled without major incident until his death in 1685, at which point his brother James II came to power.

• James II proclaimed himself to be Catholic. This did not thrill the English, but it wasn’t considered a major problem until James had a son with his new young wife.

The Glorious Revolution

• James had an older daughter, Mary, who was married to Prince William of Orange (Netherlands).

• Since the Parliament feared future religious strife with a Catholic monarchy in a Protestant nation, they dethroned James (who fled to Ireland). They then invited William & Mary to rule England. This all occurred without bloodshed, and it firmly cemented the power of the Parliament over the monarchy.
Peter the Great

Background
• Russia had labored for several centuries under Mongol domination — a domination that served to deepen Russia’s separation from western Europe. The Mongol yoke was finally overthrown in 1480 by Russia’s first Tsar (Czar) Ivan III. By the late 1600s, Peter the Great engaged in a major campaign to both modernize and westernize his country.

Peter’s Belief and Vision
• Peter believed that the political, military and economic changes in western Europe were beginning to move it ahead of other areas of the world.
• Peter also believed that Russia had long been dominated by eastern (Byzantine & Mongol) influences, and had largely been cut off from western contact.
• Finally, he believed it was essential to modernize Russia to keep up with the increasing domination of the west. Thus, he felt Russia must create industry to make the economy more sophisticated.

Peter’s “Secret” Travels
• Peter pursued his goals by traveling to the Netherlands to do a little industrial espionage. He disguised himself as a peasant and worked in the Dutch shipbuilding industry. (In reality, no one was fooled by Peter’s disguise. He stood almost 7 feet tall, and it’s pretty tough to disguise that.) The Dutch had the largest shipyard in the world, and Peter learned a lot about the industry and about western culture.
• Peter also spent time in France and England, observing how their economies functioned. While in France, Peter visited Versailles. He must have been very impressed with French culture and society, because many of the changes he implemented at home reflected the French.
• Another reason for Peter’s European Tour was to meet with other monarchs and rally support for Russia against the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman Empire had land Peter wanted. As it turned out, the Europeans were more concerned with events in Europe, and Peter did not achieve his goal.

Peter’s Legacy
• Peter, in many ways, was a bold and visionary monarch for Russia. He recognized some of Russia’s shortcomings, and he took aggressive steps to rectify them.
• Peter attempted to get closer communication with the West, and began development of industry in Russia. He also began development of modern weapons.
• However, for all his insight, Peter had a dark side. He bullied people in order to get his way, and could become extremely violent, especially when drinking. He was paranoid, and thought his son was plotting against him. He had his son arrested, and tortured to death.
**Peter’s Modernizations & Westernizations**

**Peter’s ‘Window to the West’**

- In accordance with Peter’s other goals, he declared that Russia must open a ‘window to the west’ to promote greater contact. His plan for this ‘window’ was focused on a bit of swamp land on the Baltic Sea. The problem was... the land was controlled by Sweden.
- Peter fought Sweden in the Great Northern War and attained the land he desired for his new, modern city.
- In 1703, thousands of serfs began draining the land and preparing it for construction. Peter invited architects and engineers from all over Europe to help design the buildings of his city. He demanded that all masons in Russia work on his new capital city.
- St. Petersburg grew out of the swamp to be the shiny new capital of Russia, glistening on the shores of the Baltic Sea. This ‘window’ allowed the Russians greater contact with northern Europe, at least.

**Peter’s Westernizations**

- A westernization suggests an adoption or imitation of western culture. Peter sought to change Russian culture in the following ways:
  - **Grooming & Clothing** (Peter forced Russian nobles to cut their long beards and coat sleeves, and all upper class people were to wear French fashions.)
  - **Language** (Peter simplified the Russian alphabet and promoted French as the spoken language of the court.)
  - **Government** (Peter modeled it on the strong German govt but also adopted French absolutism. He built a residence outside of St. Petersburg that resembled...

**Peter’s Modernizations**

- To modernize suggests an improvement in technology (usually through mechanization) or production. Peter focused his modernization efforts in the following categories:
  - **Industry** (ship-building, factories, and iron & copper foundries)
  - **Military** (weapons, army & navy)
- Ship-building began to improve the economy by providing industry and creating the vehicle for trade. The iron and copper foundries produced metals for ships & weapons.

**Peter’s Wars**

- No absolute monarch’s reign would be complete without a few foreign wars, and Peter was no exception.
- Peter fought a series of skirmishes and wars with the Ottoman Empire, and although he was able to win battles from time to time, he was unable to hold on to the land he gained, as the Ottomans regained what was lost.
- He was seeking land on the Black Sea, which would give him access to the Mediterranean, and trade with southern Europe. Most importantly, a Black Sea port would remain ice free year round.
- Peter’s wars with Sweden were slightly more successful, yielding the land where St. Petersburg was built.