



The Age of Absolutism

Historians like to divide history into neat, sometimes arbitrary, periods to help keep historical events organized. Terms such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages are examples of this kind of historical packaging. The period covered by this book—roughly 1650 to 1789—is one which historians of European history have labeled the age of Absolutism.

While specific dates are sometimes tricky to use in identifying a sweep of history, the age of Absolutism falls between the reign of young Louis XIV (which began in 1661) and the events leading to the French Revolution in 1789.

Absolutism was a purposeful attempt by European rulers—kings and queens, emperors and empresses, tsars and tsarinas—to extend their royal or dynastic control over all aspects of life in the lands they ruled.

This heavy-handed approach to ruling was in part based on the old concept of the divine right of kings. This theory assumed that God appointed all monarchs to rule on His behalf. Therefore, any policy, decree, plan, or approach adopted by royalty could not be questioned or disobeyed.

This trend was not new in 1650. Early Absolutism could be found in several corners of Europe in 1500 in France, England, and other states. During the period from 1660 to 1789, Absolutism was most successful in France. A series of French rulers developed a political structure and social system which was later labeled the *ancien régime* or “old regime.” The French king, Louis XIV, did more to consolidate monarchical power than any previous French ruler. His reign was extremely dictatorial.

In part, the Protestant Reformation allowed for the rise of Absolutism. Monarchs in the 1500s used the new faith as an excuse to force their authority to

become the protesting power against control by the Roman Catholic Church, its popes, and other Catholic rulers.



While 17th- and 18th-century leaders ruled by Absolutism, they did not think in terms of unlimited power. They did not think they had the power to rule in any way they chose.

Most absolute rulers did not believe they could or should order decisions which were irresponsible or based on whimsy.

Rulers knew they needed to justify their decisions to several different groups of people within their kingdoms. If a king’s or queen’s decisions did not meet with the approval of the right people—the nobility, the Church, the merchant classes, or landowners, etc.—those policies and practices would not stand for very long.

Absolute monarchs, therefore, had responsibilities to provide and sustain peace, stability, and economic growth at home and abroad. The years prior to 1650 were fraught with wars, both civil and religious, such as the French religious wars, the Thirty Years’ War, and the English Civil War against Charles I. All these conflicts made peace, stability, security, and order difficult.

Many of the rulers of the late 17th century decided the only way to preserve their nation’s peace and tranquility was to rule with an emphasis on law and order. To maintain the order of a kingdom, a monarch ruled absolutely. He or she came to symbolize true authority. Such a ruler kept power by controlling the state’s military, its legal system, and its tax collections. The result is a historical period where absolute rulers such as Louis XIV of France, Peter the Great of Russia, Frederick William of Prussia, and Maria Theresa of Austria tried to keep good order and control over their states.

