

Case Studies in Absolutism

A Comparison of Absolute Monarchy and Democracy	
Absolutism	Democracy
Nature of Power Monarch has unlimited power	Government is based on will of people
Source of Power Inheritance and divine right	Popular elections
Law Monarch above the law Subjects must obey royal command without question	Everyone must obey the law Citizens have right to criticize government
Religion Monarch chooses state religion Monarch combines religious and political leadership	Citizens have freedom to worship as they wish Separation of church and state
Purpose of Government Government exists for its own sake Subjects' role is to serve monarch	Government exists to serve people

The rise of nation states in Europe was made possible by an increase in the power of central government. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, government was by personal rule, so this meant an increase in the power of the monarch. Had monarchs not had the power to decide policy, to build national armies, to impose and collect taxes, to centralize administration, and to encourage trade, it is doubtful that strong nations like France and Spain could have emerged.

Monarchs who gathered so much power into their hands became absolute rulers.

They claimed that they ruled by **divine right**, deriving their authority from God and responsible to Him alone. They ignored representative institutions like the Spanish **Cortes** and the local assemblies in France.

For those who believe in the virtues of republican democracy, absolutism is never good. But in the early modern era, most individuals accepted the power of the monarch, provided it was used for the benefit of the people and the kingdom. Unfortunately, no one but the monarch could decide if his or her actions were right and just. Absolute rulers were swift to silence or limit the power of institutions such as parliaments and law courts that challenged their decisions. This allowed

them to wage costly wars that brought no benefit to their subjects but instead caused massive tax increases. Moreover, absolutism did not guarantee stable government. Many rulers were weak and incompetent and chose equally incompetent and corrupt advisors.

In the pages that follow, you will read about some of the more competent absolute rulers. As you study their actions, decide for yourself whether or not their rule benefited their people.

10 Describe the responsibilities of a citizen in an absolute monarchy and in a democracy.

Resistance to Absolutism: Growth of Parliamentary Democracy in England

Growth of Parliamentary Democracy in England					
1200	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700
<p>1215 Barons force King John to sign Magna Carta giving them right to approve new taxes & assuring freemen of right to be tried by peers</p>	<p>1295 Model Parliament includes nobles, bishops, smaller landowners, and town burgesses</p>	<p>1376 Good Parliament has House of Lords (nobles & bishops) & House of Commons (knights & burgesses)</p>	<p>1529-1536 Reformation Parliament breaks with Rome; makes king head of English church</p>	<p>1628 Petition of Right: king agrees to levy taxes only with consent of Parliament</p>	<p>1689 Bill of Rights requires frequent Parliaments; guarantees free speech in Parliament; gives it control over taxation</p>
<p>1559 Parliament creates new English church</p>			<p>1640 Long Parliament wins control of government</p>		

The later Middle Ages saw the development of representative institutions in several European nations. These fledgling parliaments were abolished or disregarded by absolute rulers like Louis XIV, but in a few nations they grew stronger.

Ever since the barons had forced King John to sign the **Magna Carta** (see the time line), English monarchs had acknowledged that their subjects had legal and political rights. Parliament was the institution that symbolized these rights. It began as a Great Council of nobles summoned by the king to advise him. Gradually other kinds of people—smaller landowners and town burgesses—were included in these meetings. They were elected by qualified voters and represented their interests.

Parliament changed from an occasional meeting to an institution that was summoned fairly regularly, though only when the monarch wished. But the monarch needed the Parliament, particularly the House of Commons, because it had won the right to approve all tax levies. Parliament represented the interests of many sections of the population. Its approval assured the monarch that he or she had the support of the whole nation when major legislation

was enacted. Thus it was that Edward III secured the support of Parliament when he began the 100 Years' War. Henry VIII used Parliament to separate England from the Catholic Church and to dissolve the monasteries. His daughter Elizabeth created the Anglican Church when Parliament enacted the Act of Supremacy in 1559.

15 Using the time line and text, list three stages in the evolution of parliamentary power. Explain why each stage was important.

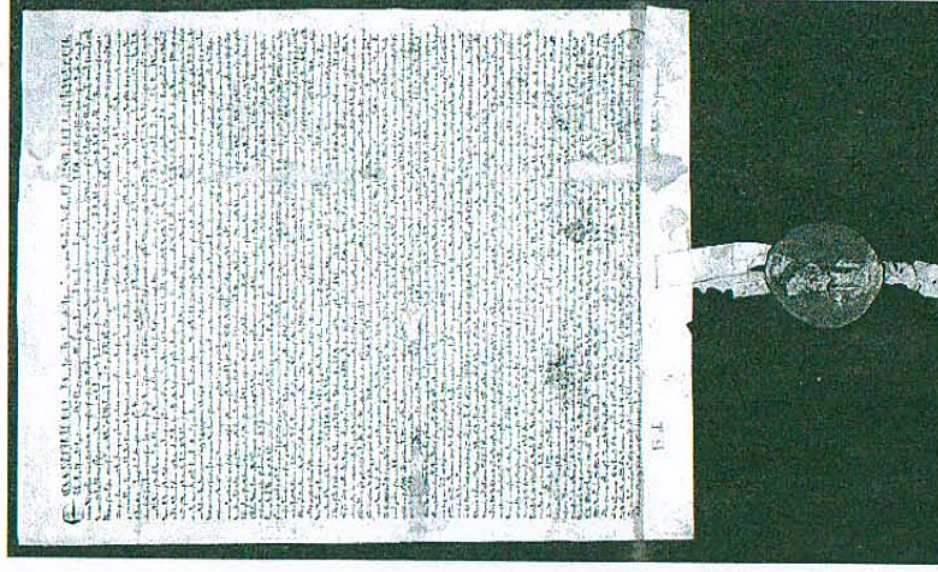
- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

Provided English monarchs pursued a policy that was popular with their people, Parliament was willing to foot the bill. The kings and queens of the **Tudor** dynasty (who included Henry VIII and Elizabeth I) were loved or respected. But the **Stuart** monarchs who succeeded them were less popular and less able. **James I** (1603–25) lost many friends when he lectured Parliament on his divine rights; his demands for money were ignored.

His son **Charles I** had still more strikes against him. He allowed his French queen to fill the court with Catholics. He opposed the growing Puritan movement and moved the English Church closer to Catholicism. When Parliament refused to fund a war with Spain and France, Charles forced the **gentry** (lesser nobles) to lend him money. In the **Petition of Right**, the Parliament of 1628 reasserted its right to control taxation. This persuaded Charles to summon no Parliaments for 11 years. But by 1640 England was involved in a religious war with Scotland, and the king needed new tax money to defend the country. The Long Parliament of 1640 was dominated by Puritans and enemies of the Crown. It made sure it could not be dismissed, executed the king's chief advisors, and ended illegal taxation. Within two years, supporters of the king and supporters of Parliament were at war.

By 1648, the Royalists had been defeated, and Charles was formally tried and executed. England became a republic under military rule with **Oliver Cromwell**, a great general and member of parliament, as Lord Protector. During this **Puritan Revolution**, a Puritan lifestyle was imposed on the people and religious toleration was granted to all Protestants except Anglicans. Radical ideas about religion and democracy were widespread, especially in the army.

In 1660, the people welcomed back Charles II, the son of the executed king. Parliament



The Magna Carta established certain legal and political rights.

imposed more limits on royal rule, but still Parliament was not a permanent part of government—Charles ruled without it for five years. It was not until the **Bill of Rights of 1689**, that Parliaments were regularly summoned. Other clauses of the Bill made England a **constitutional monarchy**: Parliamentary consent was required for levying taxes and maintaining an army; laws could not be suspended; members could debate freely; and individuals were granted basic legal rights.

16 Both the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights dealt with the issue of

- A control of the army
- B free speech
- C parliamentary power
- D the king's ability to levy taxes

Louis XIV in France

The Reign of Louis XIV of France										
1640	1650	1660	1670	1680	1690	1700	1710	1720		
1643 Louis XIII dies; five-year-old becomes Louis XIV	1650 Cardinal Mazarin dies; Louis takes control of France	1660 Colbert becomes Minister of Finance	1665 Building of palace at Versailles begins	1667 Louis invades Spanish Netherlands; wins major Flemish cities	1668 Court moves to Versailles	1672 Louis invades Dutch Netherlands; wins Franche Comté	1685 Louis revokes Edict of Nantes; 200,000 Huguenots flee from France	1688 War ends in French defeat; Treaty of Utrecht makes Louis' grandson king of Spain	1701 War of Spanish Succession	1715 Louis dies
1648 Treaty of Westphalia; France now strongest European state	1651 Angry mob invades Louis' bedchamber									

Unlike the Hapsburgs, **Louis XIV** had the advantage of ruling over a homogeneous and centralized kingdom. Two experiences as a youngster encouraged him to win total control over his kingdom. The first was the domination of Cardinal Mazarin who ruled France until his death when Louis was 23. The second was a revolt in which nobles and peasants demanded that the king of France be held accountable for his actions.

To escape the constant pressure of the impoverished Parisian mob, Louis moved his court to the sumptuous new palaces he built at Versailles. To break the power of his nobles, he cajoled and enticed them to attend him there, instead of serving in government positions. Their reward was freedom from taxation, the honor of taking part in court rituals, and the pleasure of such entertainments as the plays of Molière and Racine and the music of Lully and Couperin.

Louis chose his chief officials, able men like **Colbert** his finance minister and Le Tellier and Louvois his war ministers, from middle-class families. Louvois' army reforms gave Louis a fine fighting force, while Colbert's **mercantilist** policies promoted trade and industry. But Colbert failed to reform France's antiquated tax

system. This system imposed a heavy tax burden on the peasants but failed to raise enough funds to pay for Louis' costly wars. These wars were Louis' undoing. He began gloriously by invading the Netherlands and capturing wealthy cities and duchies. But this aggression prompted neighboring states to form a powerful coalition against him and the last war he fought was a shattering defeat.

Like the Hapsburgs, Louis' religious policies caused him to lose many of his most productive subjects. By revoking the **Edict of Nantes** which guaranteed religious toleration, he drove the skilled, hard-working Protestant Huguenots abroad.

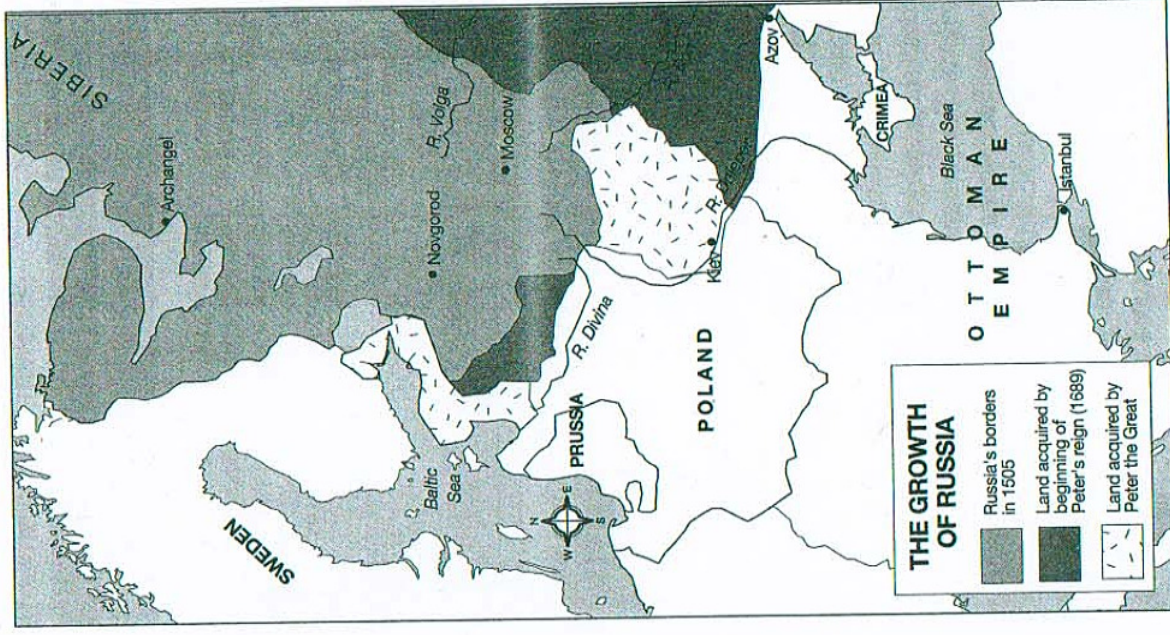
13 Describe two ways in which Louis XIV increased his control over France.

Peter the Great in Russia

When Peter the Great became Czar of Russia in 1689, he found that most of his subjects were illiterate and knew and cared little about the world beyond their farms and villages. Single-handedly, he tried to bring Russia out of the Middle Ages and make it into a European power. His rule was far more personal and direct than that of other absolute monarchs. He ordered Russian men to shorten their beards and wear European clothes. Russian women were told to stop secluding themselves.

One of Peter's passions was ships. He travelled around the shipyards of England and the Netherlands learning how to build them. He wanted Russia to have a port on the Baltic Sea—a "window to the West"—from which her ships could trade with Europe. Accordingly, he waged war on Sweden whose territory blocked Russia's access to the sea. In 1704 he won the land shown on the map where he built his new capital of St. Petersburg. Peter failed in his efforts to reach the Black Sea and build a warm-water port on its shores. However, he was able to persuade China to accept Russian control of Siberia.

Peter reformed many Russian institutions, bringing them more closely under royal control. He eliminated the power of the Patriarch and put the Eastern Orthodox Church under a Holy Synod (council of bishops) which reported to the government. Like Louis XIV, Peter wanted to harness the nobility to the service of the crown. In return for holding government office, they were freed from all taxes and given full control over their serfs. These wretched peasants were no longer allowed to leave their lord's service, but were bought and sold like cattle. Peter also placed the mining and metalworking industries under government control.

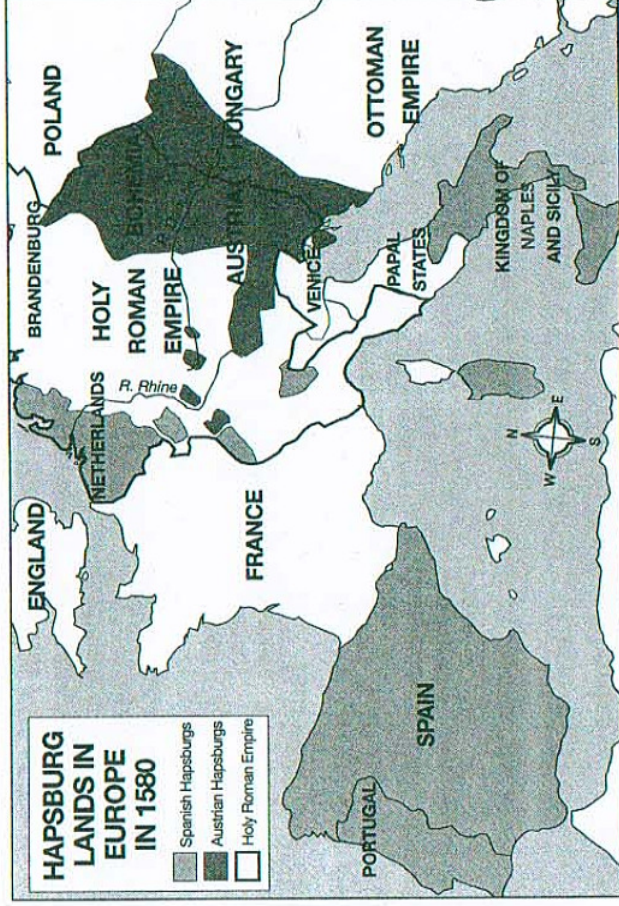


14 An absolute ruler does not share power. Peter reduced the power or freedom of all of the following EXCEPT

- A the church
- B the navy
- C the nobility
- D the serfs

The Spanish Hapsburgs: Charles V and Philip II

The Hapsburgs were blessed and cursed by the extent of their lands. **Charles V**, the Holy Roman Emperor, governed most of the Hapsburg lands shown in the map as well as Spain's possessions in the New World. The difficulty of governing such far-flung domains persuaded Charles in 1556 to divide up his empire along the lines shown in the map. His brother Ferdinand inherited the Austrian lands and the remainder went to Charles' son, **Philip II** of Spain.



Unlike Akbar the Great, the Hapsburgs did not believe in religious toleration. They countered the spread of Protestantism in their lands by threats (in Germany) and by war (in the Netherlands). They used the Inquisition against Jews in Spain. This policy was a costly failure. German princes used religious differences to increase their independence. Jews and Protestants had been among the Hapsburgs' most hard-working subjects. Protestants in the Netherlands rebelled and the Dutch-speaking northern Netherlands broke away from Spain.

Hapsburg power intimidated other rulers. Charles spent much of his reign fighting an envious Francis I of France. Philip sent an **Armada** to punish Elizabeth of England when she challenged his supremacy; the Armada was destroyed by English ships and high winds.

Charles and Philip were conscientious and intelligent rulers, but they could not cope with all the problems they faced. Philip

made all officials responsible to him alone and refused to delegate power. This made his administration very inefficient.

The Hapsburgs' worst failure was economic. Treasure ships from their American empire brought back hoards of gold and silver. Some of this money was used to finance the constant wars, but some entered the Spanish economy and caused steep **inflation**. Prices of Spanish agricultural and industrial goods rose to the point where no one could afford them; poverty and unemployment were the result.

12 What prevented both Charles V and Philip II from wielding absolute power?
