

Readings

French Absolutism

WHAT IS ABSOLUTISM?

WHAT WAS THE PRIME EXAMPLE OF AN ABSOLUTIST GOVERNMENT IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA?

Absolutism is a type of national monarchy in which the monarch has great power and tends to be looked up to with awe and reverence.

In spite of the name, the power of the monarch is limited by the need to have some measure of support by the landed aristocracy. The aristocracy is subordinate to the monarchy, provides political and military support for the monarchy, yet may also, from time to time, challenge its authority.

France is the prime example of absolutism in the early modern era.

Absolute government involved centralizing political power in the hands of a monarch, who allied with and exercised control over the traditional landed aristocracy, gained loyalty and support from the merchant rulers of cities, and exercised power through a bureaucracy and a standing army.

The degree of control was not comparable to twentieth century totalitarianism. The king's power was dependent upon the aristocracy which, though subordinate, still retained independent sources of power and wealth. Lack of technology limited the ability of government to regulate people's lives.

France is the principal example of absolute government. King Henry IV and his financial minister, Sully, laid the foundations of support for the monarchy through enlightened policies which benefited the people. Cardinal Richelieu, as minister under King Louis XIII, established dominance over the landed aristocracy, and improved the central administration of the realm. The Huguenots (French Protestants), were subordinated to the power of the central government, and fortified cities were abolished.

Although Richelieu, and King Louis XIV after him, managed to raise revenues through cooperation with local elites who taxed the people, they failed to establish a secure, independent source of revenue. This would plague France throughout the eighteenth century, and limit the power of the monarchy. Under Cardinal Mazarin, Richelieu's successor as minister to the king, new revenue raising efforts led to a rebellion (the Fronde) by elements of the aristocracy. The outcome of the civil war was a compromise with the social elites, who, in return for their cooperation, were given special privileges and exemption from taxation.

The long reign of King Louis XIV (1643-1715) represents the pinnacle of absolute monarchy in France. He received a practical education in handling the affairs of state under the guidance of Mazarin. He surrounded himself with all the "trappings of majesty", playing the role of a superior all-powerful monarch, and he worked long and hard at the job. Although, supposedly absolute in power, he succeeded by collaborating with the aristocracy. Although more centralized and efficient than any previous French monarchy, absolutism was in reality "the last phase of a historical feudal society." (p.506)

Aristocratic power was weakened and by-passed through pre-occupation with the grandiose life at court, and employment of non-elite (middle class) people in the royal

bureaucracy. Royal patronage was an important source of social mobility as well as increasing royal power. However, the greatest weakness in the system was financial and economic: tax farmers or collectors kept large shares of the taxes they collected while the prosperous elite groups were exempt. The efforts of Colbert, the King's finance minister, were directed towards a mercantilistic policy which involved government subsidies of French industry and government regulations to encourage self-sufficiency and an export trade. These efforts had some success but were hampered by the inadequate tax base. The French economy was primarily dependent upon agriculture and French farmers were so heavily taxed that the agricultural sector was continually in crisis. Furthermore, costly wars burdened the government and the economy.

King Louis XIV led France into imperialist wars which aroused fear and concern among the other European nations, drained French resources, and brought widespread misery to the French peasantry -- all this for the acquisition of the Strasbourg area and a few provinces bordering the Spanish Netherlands. At his death in 1715, France was on the brink of financial bankruptcy and the country exhausted and war weary.

The characteristics of absolutism which developed in eastern Europe by the seventeenth century were considerably different from that of France and Spain in the west. Eastern Europe recovered from the period of famine and disease in the fourteenth century in a different way. In the West, when population levels were low and there was a shortage of labor (the 14th century), the peasantry were able to achieve greater freedom from feudal restrictions, while in the East, the landed aristocracy was able to tighten the restrictions on the peasantry and reduce their freedoms. This may have been due in part to the fact that western towns were much more influential than in the East because of the extensive commercial revolution which occurred in the West. The towns provided an alternative and often a refuge for peasants who left the land. Furthermore, western monarchies often protected the peasantry from some of the worst abuses of aristocratic domination. As western capital was used to buy food in the East, the landlords, who controlled the trading contacts, exerted pressure upon the peasantry to produce for export rather than for their own consumption. Meanwhile, urban growth in the East was limited and monarchs were able easily to dominate the towns. The monarchs invariably gained support from the aristocracy by allowing them a free hand in controlling their peasantry. Moreover, the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and other conflicts taking place on the broad open central plains of eastern Europe placed a premium on the need for the armies of the aristocracy or of a monarchy to grow strong and numerous.

The three areas where powerful monarchies developed were Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

Absolutism and France

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Absolutism within France was a political system associated with kings such as Louis XIII and, more particularly, Louis XIV. Absolutism or absolute monarchical rule was developing across Europe during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Important politicians such as Cardinal Richilieu were staunch supporters of absolutism.

Absolute rule meant that the power of the monarch was, in theory, unlimited except by divine law or by what was called 'natural law'. In an absolute society, the only person who could change the powers of the monarch was the monarch him/herself. As such, it is difficult to think in terms of an absolute monarch diluting his/her own authority and power.

Quotes attributable to Louis XVI

"I have no intention of sharing my authority"

"L'état, c'est moi." (I am the state)

"One king, one law, one faith."

"The interests of the state must come first"

Absolute rule replaced a system whereby the monarch worked with others. Prior to absolute rule, a king of France worked with the Estates. He was still a powerful ruler but in one sense he shared his authority with them. When this system broke down, a country could descend into civil war.

In a French absolute society, the king's word was law. He had access to a standing royal army that was loyal only to him. A career in the military appeared to be one worth pursuing for someone with a noble background. The standing army was a symbol of an absolute monarch's authority and a ruler's power was based and enforced by it.

For those on the receiving end of absolutism, the army played a key role. In absolutist states, the army invariably collected taxes; a large part of this revenue was invested in the army which got larger and more powerful; a larger army was capable of becoming even more effective at collecting taxes which were then further invested in the army. In this way, the people were trapped: they paid their taxes to a body that expanded as a result and that made it an even better collector of revenue.