

Chapter 10: Absolutism

“Absolutism” is a concept of political authority created by historians to describe a shift in the governments of the major monarchies of Europe in the early modern period. In other words, while the monarchs of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries certainly knew they were doing something differently than had their predecessors, they did not use the term “absolutism” itself. The central idea behind absolutism was that the king or queen was, first, the holder of (theoretically) absolute political power within the kingdom, and second, that the monarch's every action should be in the name of preserving and guaranteeing the rights and privileges of his or her subjects, occasionally even including the peasants.

Absolutism was in contrast to medieval and Renaissance-era forms of monarchy in which the king was merely first among equals, holding formal feudal authority over his elite nobles, but often being merely their equal, or even inferior, in terms of real authority and power. As demonstrated in the case of the French Wars of Religion, there were often numerous small states and territories that sometimes rivaled larger ones in power, and even nobles that were part of a given kingdom had the right to raise and maintain their own armies outside of the direct control of the monarch.

That changed starting in the early seventeenth century, primarily in France. What emerged was a stronger, centralized form of monarchy in which the monarch held much more power than even the most powerful nobleman. Royal bureaucracies were strengthened, often at the expense of the decision-making power and influence of the nobility, as non-noble officials were appointed to positions of real power in the government. Armies grew and, with them, the taxation to support them became both greater in sheer volume and more efficient in its collection techniques. In short, more real power and money flowed to the central government of the monarch than ever before, something that underwrote the expansion of military and colonial power in the same period, as well as a dazzling cultural show of that power exemplified by the French “sun king,” Louis XIV.

France

The exemplary case of absolutist government coming to fruition was that of France in the seventeenth century. The transformation of the French state from a conventional Renaissance-era monarchy to an absolute monarchy began under the reign of Louis XIII, the son of Henry IV (the victor of the French Wars of Religion). Louis XIII came to the throne as an eight-year-old when his father was assassinated in 1610. Following conventional practice when a king was too young to rule, his mother Marie de Medici held power as regent, one who rules in the name of the king, enlisting the help of a brilliant French cardinal, Armand de Richelieu. While Marie de Medici eventually stepped down as regent, Richelieu joined the king as his chief minister in 1628 and continued to play the key role in shaping the French state.



Cardinal Richelieu, in many ways the architect of absolute monarchy in France.

Richelieu deserves a great deal of the credit for laying the foundation for absolutism in France. He suppressed various revolts against royal power that were led by nobles, and he created a system of royal officials called *Intendants*, royal governors who were men who were usually not themselves noble but were instead drawn from the mercantile classes. They collected royal taxes and oversaw administration and military recruitment in the regions to which they were assigned; they did not have to answer to local lords.

Richelieu's major focus was improving tax collection. To do so, he abolished three out of six regional assemblies that, traditionally, had the right to approve changes in taxation. He made himself superintendent of commerce and navigation, recognizing the growing importance of commerce in providing royal revenue. He managed to increase the revenue from the *taille*, the direct tax on land, almost threefold during his tenure (r. 1628 – 1642). That said, while he did curtail the power of the elite nobles, most of those who bore the brunt of his improved techniques of taxation were the peasants; Richelieu compared the peasants to mules, noting that they were only useful for working.

Richelieu was also a cardinal: one of the highest-ranking “princes of the church,” officially beholden only to the pope. His real focus, however, was the French crown. It was said that he “worshiped the state” much more than he appeared to concern himself with his duties as a cardinal. He even oversaw French support of the Protestant forces in the Thirty Years’ War as a check against the power of the Habsburgs, and also supported the Ottoman Turks against the Habsburgs for the same reason. Just to underline this point: a Catholic cardinal, Richelieu, supported Protestants and Muslims against a Catholic monarchy in the name of French power.

Louis XIV - the Sun King

Louis XIII died in 1643, and his son became king Louis XIV. The latter was still too young to take the throne, so his mother became regent, ruling along Richelieu’s protégé, Jules Mazarin, who continued Richelieu’s policies and focus on taxation and royal centralization. Almost immediately, however, simmering resentment against the growing power of the king exploded in a series of uprisings against the crown known as The Fronde, essentially a noble-led civil war against the monarchy (the rebels even formed a formal alliance with Spain). They were defeated by loyal forces in 1653, but the uprisings made a profound impression on the young king, who vowed to bring the nobles into line.

When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis ascended to full power (he was 23). Louis went on to a long and dazzling rule, achieving the height of royal power and prestige not just in France, but in all of Europe. He ruled from 1643 – 1715 (including the years in which he ruled under the guidance of a regent) meaning he was king for an astonishing 54 years; consider the fact that the average life expectancy for those surviving infancy was only about 40 years at the time(!) Louis was called the Sun King, a term and an image he actively cultivated, declaring himself “without equal,” and being depicted as the sun god Apollo (he once performed as Apollo in a ballet before his nobles, to rapturous applause – he was an excellent dancer). He was, among other things, a master marketer and propagandist of himself and his own authority. He had

teams of artists, playwrights, and architects build statues, paint pictures, write plays and stories, and build buildings all glorifying his image.

Famously, Louis developed what had begun as a hunting lodge (first built by his father) in the village of Versailles, about 15 miles southeast of Paris, into the most glorious palace in Europe, built in the baroque style and lavishly decorated with ostentatious finery. Over the decades of his long rule, the palace and grounds of the Palace of Versailles grew into the largest and most spectacular seat of royal power in Europe, on par with any palace in the world at the time. There were 1,400 fountains in the gardens, 1,200 orange trees, and an ongoing series of operas, plays, balls, and parties. 10,000 people could live in the palace, counting its additional buildings, since Louis ultimately had 2,000 rooms built both in the palace and in apartments in the village, all furnished at the state's expense. The grounds cover about 2,000 acres, or just over 3 square miles (by comparison, Central Park in New York City is a mere 843 acres in size).



A contemporary photograph of the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, a spectacular example of baroque architecture and interior design.

Louis expected high-ranking nobles to spend part of the year at Versailles, where they were lodged in apartments and spent their days bickering, gossiping, gambling, and taking part in elaborate rituals surrounding the person of the king. Each morning, high-ranking nobles

greeted the king as he awoke (the “rising” of the king, in parallel to the rising of the sun), hand-picked favorites carried out such tasks as tying the ribbons on his shoes, and then the procession accompanied him to breakfast. Comparable rituals continued throughout the day, ensuring that only those nobles in the king’s favor ever had the opportunity to speak to him directly. The rituals were carefully staged not only to represent deference to Louis, but to emphasize the hierarchy of ranks among the nobles themselves, undermining their unity and forcing them to squabble over his favor. One of the simplest ways in which Versailles undermined their power was that it cost so much to maintain oneself there – about 50% of the revenue of all but the very richest nobles present in the town or the château was spent on lodging, clothes, gifts, and servants.

Around the king’s person, courtiers had to be very careful to wear the right clothes, make the right gestures, use the correct phrases, and even display the correct facial expressions. Deviation could, and generally did, lead to humiliation and a sometimes permanent loss of the king’s favor, to the delighted mockery of the other nobles. This was not just an elaborate game: anyone wishing to “get” anything from the royal government (e.g. having a son appointed as an officer in the army, joining an elite royal academy of scholars, securing a lucrative royal pension, serving as a diplomat abroad, etc.). had to convince the king and his officials that he was witty, poised, fashionable, and respected within the court. One false move and a career could be ruined. At the same time, the rituals surrounding the king were not invented to humiliate and impoverish his nobles per se; instead, they celebrated each noble’s power in terms of his or her proximity to the king. Nobles at Versailles were reminded of two things at once: their dependence and deference to the king, but also their own dignity and power as those who had the *right* to be near the king.

Not just nobles participated in the dizzying web of favor-trading, gossip, and bribery at Versailles, however. Perhaps surprisingly, any well-dressed person was welcome to walk through the palace and the grounds and confer with those present (Louis XIV prided himself on the “openness” of his court, contrasting it with the closed-off court of a tyrant). Both men and women from very humble origins sometimes rose to prominence, and made a healthy living, at Versailles by serving as go-betweens for elites seeking royal positions through the bureaucracy. Others took advantage of the state’s desperate need for revenue by proposing new tax schemes; those that were accepted usually came with a payment for the person who submitted the scheme, so it was possible to make a living by “brainstorming” for tax revenue on behalf of the monarchy. Despite the vast social gap between the nobility and commoners, many nobles

were perfectly happy to form working relationships with useful social inferiors, and in some cases real friendships emerged in the process.

Some aspects of life at Versailles seem comic today: the palace is so huge that the food was usually cold before it made it from the kitchens to the dining room; on one occasion Louis' wine froze en route. Some of the nobles who lived on the palace or its grounds would use the hallways to relieve themselves instead of the privies because the latter were so inadequate and far from their rooms. The palace had been designed for display, not comfort.

The costs of building and maintaining such an enormous temple to monarchical power were enormous. During the height of its construction, 60% of the royal revenue went to funding the elaborate court at Versailles itself (this later dropped to 5% under Louis XVI, but the old figure was well-remembered and resented), an enormous ongoing expenditure that nevertheless shored up royal prestige. Louis himself delighted in the life at court, refusing to return to Paris (which he hated) and dismissing the financial costs as beneath his dignity to take notice of. At Versailles, life orbited around his person and, by extension, his power, which was never seriously challenged during his lifetime.

Louis did not just preside over the ongoing pageant at Versailles, however. He was dedicated to glorifying French achievements in art, scholarship, and his personal obsession: warfare. He created important theater companies, founded France's first scientific academy, and supported the *Académie Française*, the body dedicated to preserving the purity of the French language founded earlier by Richelieu (during Louis XIV's reign, the Academy published the first official French dictionary). French literature, art, and science all prospered under his sponsorship, and French became the language of international diplomacy among European states.



The above martial portrait of Louis XIV depicts him, symbolically, in his role as supreme military commander. He is dressed in full (ceremonial) armor, holding a sword, and presiding over a battle in the background.

To keep up with costs, Louis continued to entrust revenue collection to non-noble bureaucrats. The most important was Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619 – 1683), who doubled royal revenues by reducing the cut taken by tax collectors (only a quarter of revenue used to reach royal coffers; he got it up to 80% in some cases), increasing tariffs on foreign trade going to France, and greatly increasing France's overseas commercial interests. Colbert was the model of a powerful commoner despised by the nobility: not only was he part of the system that held noble power in check, he was a mere shopkeeper's son.

While Louis' primary legacy was the image of monarchy that he created, his practical policies were largely destructive to France itself. First, he relentlessly persecuted religious minorities, going after various small groups of religious dissenters but concentrating most of his attention and ire on the Huguenots. In 1685 he officially revoked the Edict of Nantes that his

grandfather had created to grant the Huguenots toleration, and he offered them the choice of conversion to Catholicism or exile. While many did convert, over 200,000 fled to parts of Germany, the Netherlands, England, and America. In one fell swoop, Louis crippled what had been among the most commercially productive sectors of the French population, ultimately strengthening his various enemies in the process.

Second, he waged constant war. From 1680 – 1715 Louis launched a series of wars, primarily against his Habsburg rivals, which succeeded in seizing small chunks of territory on France's borders from various Habsburg lands and in saddling the monarchy with enormous debts. Colbert, the architect of the vastly more efficient systems of taxation, repeatedly warned Louis that these wars were financially untenable; Louis simply ignored the question of whether he had enough money to wage them. The threat of France was so great that even traditional enemies like England and the Netherlands on one hand and the Habsburgs on the other joined forces against Louis, and after a lengthy war, the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 forced Louis to abandon further territorial ambitions. Furthermore, the costs of the wars were so high that his government desperately sought new sources of revenue, selling noble titles and bureaucratic offices, instituting still new taxes, and further trampling the peasants. When he died in 1715, the state was technically bankrupt.

Elsewhere in Europe

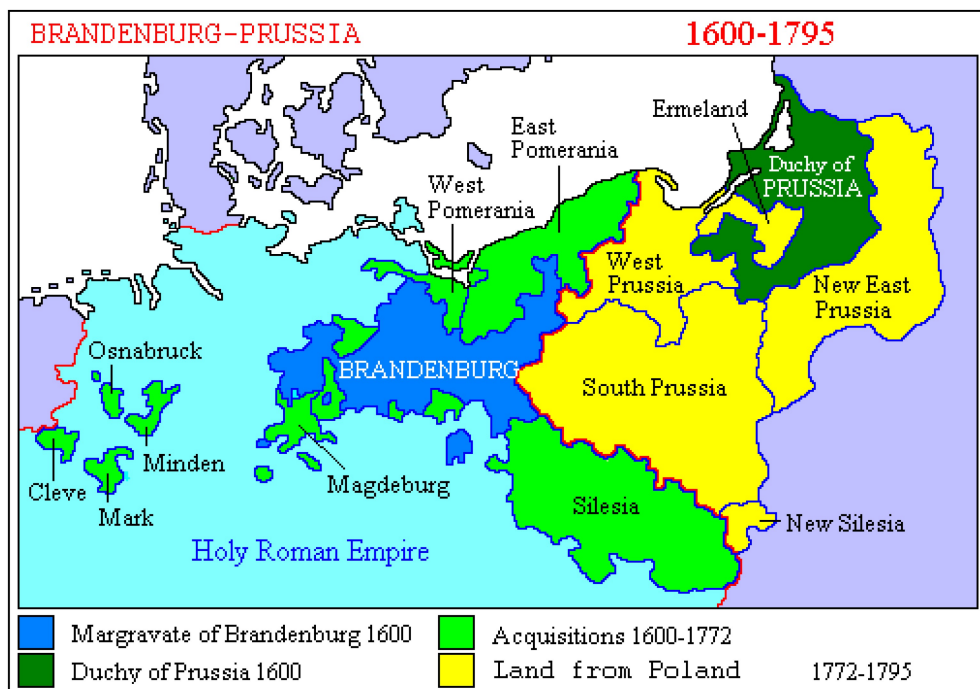
Almost everywhere in Europe, other monarchies tried to imitate both the style and the substance of Louis XIV's court and style of rule. They built palaces based on Versailles even as the early-modern military revolution, not to mention Louis' constant wars, obliged them to seek out new forms of taxation and reliance on royal officials to build up their armies and fortifications. In most cases, from Sweden to Austria, monarchs worked out compromises with their nobles that saw both sides benefit, generally at the expense of the peasantry.

Prussia

Arguably the most successful absolutist state in Europe besides France was the small northern German kingdom of Brandenburg, the forerunner of the later German state of Prussia. In 1618, the king of Brandenburg inherited the kingdom of East Prussia, and in the following years smaller territories in the west on the Rhine River. From this geographically unconnected series of territories was the country now known as Germany to evolve.

In 1653, the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm struck the “Great Compromise” with his nobles. He received a military subsidy in the form of taxes, along with the right to make law independent of noble oversight. In return, the nobility received confirmation that only nobles could own land and, further, that they had total control over the peasants on their land. In essence, the already-existing status of serfdom on Prussian lands was made permanent. Serfs could not inherit property or even leave the land they worked without the permission of their lord. One Prussian recalled being taught, presumably in a church-run primary school, that “the king could cut off the noses and ears of all his subjects if he wished to do so, and that we owed it to his goodness and his gentle disposition that he had left us in possession of these necessary organs.”

In turn, Friedrich Wilhelm oversaw the creation of the first truly efficient state apparatus in Europe, with his tax collection agency (which grew out of the war office) operating at literally twice the efficiency of the French equivalent. The major state office was called General Directory Over Finance, War, and Royal Domains; it was perhaps one of the original sources of the stereotypes of ruthless German efficiency. His son, Frederick I (r. 1688 – 1713) further consolidated the power of the monarchy, built up the royal capital of Berlin, and received the right to claim the title of “King of Prussia” from the Holy Roman Emperor.



Prussia began as the union of Brandenburg and the Duchy of Prussia, eventually growing to become one of the most powerful German states.

His grandson, confusingly also named Friedrich Wilhelm (“Friedrich Wilhelm I” as opposed to just “Friedrich Wilhelm,” r. 1713 – 1740) built on the work of his grandfather and father primarily by concentrating all state power on the military. He more than doubled the size of the Prussian army (from 30,000 to 83,000, making it the fourth largest in Europe), lived modestly in a few rooms in the palace, wore his officer’s uniform everywhere, and occasionally punched out the teeth of judges whose sentences he disagreed with. It was said during his rule that “what distinguishes the Prussians from other people is that theirs is not a country with an army. They have an army and a country that serves it.” Most importantly, Frederick Wilhelm created formal systems of conscription (i.e. “the draft”), meaning more men in Prussia served in the military than did men anywhere else in Europe, and he established the first system of military reserves, with reservists drilling for two months a year during the summers. In short, Prussia became the most militarized society in Europe.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Prussia was embroiled in a series of wars that confirmed its status as a European “great power.” Its version of absolutism, one centered on the authority of the king, the rights of the nobles, and an overwhelming focus on the military, proved effective in transforming it from backwater to the only serious rival to Austria for dominance in Central Europe. Notably, Prussia joined Austria and Russia in dividing up the entire kingdom of Poland in 1772, extinguishing Polish independence until the twentieth century.

Austria

Prussia’s great rival in the eighteenth century was Austria. Austria, as the ancestral state of the Habsburgs, had always been the single most powerful German state within the Holy Roman Empire. The Habsburgs, however, found that the diversity of their domains greatly hampered their ability to develop along absolutist lines. In some cases, they were able to reduce the power and independence of some of their nobles by supporting even more onerous control of peasants: for example, in Bohemia, peasants were made to work three days a week for their nobles, for free, and in return the Bohemian nobles allowed the emperor more control of the territory itself. In other territories like Hungary, however, nobles successfully resisted the encroachment of their Habsburg rulers.

The long-term pattern was that, especially after the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 rendered the political structure of the Holy Roman Empire virtually meaningless, “Habsburg” meant “Austrian.” The Habsburgs ruled Austria itself and exercised real control over the constituent kingdoms of their empire like Hungary and Bohemia, but had virtually no authority over the other Holy Roman states. With the Spanish branch of the family

dying off in 1700 (the last Spanish Habsburg, Charles II, died without an heir in 1700), this identification was even stronger.

Spain

Practically every other kingdom in Europe saw at least an attempt by a king or queen to reorganize the state along the absolutist lines followed by France. From Sweden, to England, to Spain, monarchs tried to consolidate royal power at the expense of their nobles and on the backs of their peasants. Those efforts were at least partly successful in places like Sweden and Denmark, but were disastrous failures in places like Spain and England.

Spain had been the most powerful kingdom in Europe in the sixteenth century. Thanks to its takeover of Central and South America, it had enormous reserves of bullion in the sixteenth century, and thanks to shrewd marriages by the Habsburgs, Spain was part of the largest dynastic system in Europe. However, both the failed invasion of England in 1588 and the ongoing debacle of the Dutch Revolt resulted in enormous losses of both wealth and prestige by the Spanish. By the 1620s and against the backdrop of the Thirty Years' War, the monarchy was bankrupt and Spain itself was divided between numerous small but mostly independent kingdoms and territories. Spain became almost like a smaller version of the Holy Roman Empire, with the Spanish king only directly ruling the central territory of Castile (it was the Castilian dialect, centered on Madrid, that became the official Spanish language).

Spanish nobles came to hold their own kings in contempt and asserted their own sovereignty against the pretensions of the monarchy. Attempts by royal officials to enact reforms similar to those undertaken by Richelieu in France met with failure; even as Spain was losing the Dutch Revolt, it was trying to bankroll the Catholic forces of the Thirty Years' War, thereby undermining its own financial reserves and stretching its military power to the breaking point. The regional parliaments of various Spanish territories revolted against the central monarchy in the mid-seventeenth century, with Portugal achieving complete independence in 1640.

Simultaneously, there was little economic dynamism in Spain. There was a small middle class, and Spain's conservative nobility succeeded in preventing non-nobles from achieving positions of authority within the Spanish royal bureaucracy. The earlier assaults on Jews and Muslims had already driven out the most dynamic economic elements from Spain, and the attack on the Moriscos and Conversos (descendants of the Muslims and Jews who had converted to Catholicism) drove many of them away as well. Spain's vast empire continued to produce great wealth, but relatively little of that wealth ended up in the coffers of the monarchy,

and the sheer scale of the slave-based extraction of precious metals from the New World ran up against simple economics laws: by the seventeenth century this bullion-based system was in dire straits thanks to the inflation silver imports introduced to the European economy.

There was a strong mood of depression and nostalgia among elite Spaniards of the time, most memorably expressed in one of the great works of Spanish literature, Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (published in two parts, 1605 and 1615), portraying a delusional minor nobleman trying to live out a glorious tale of fighting giants and dragons while actually attacking windmills. Especially as its royal line grew moribund in the second half of the seventeenth century, and following the inconclusive end of the Thirty Years' War Spain had largely financed, the power of the Spanish state grew ever weaker.

The English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution

England was perhaps the most outstanding example of a state in which the absolutist form of monarchy resolutely failed during the seventeenth century, and yet the state itself emerged all the stronger. Ironically, the two most powerful states in Europe during the following century were absolutist France and its political opposite, the first major *constitutional* monarchy in Europe: the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

Some of the characteristics that historians often associate with modernity are representative governments, capitalist economies, and (relative, in the case of early-modern states) religious toleration. All of those things first converged in England at the end of the seventeenth and start of the eighteenth centuries. Likewise, England would eventually evolve from an important but secondary state in terms of its power and influence to *the* most powerful nation in the world in the nineteenth century. For those reasons it is worthwhile to devote considerable attention to the case of English politics during that period.

The irony of the fact that England was the first state to move toward "modern" patterns and political dominance is that, at the start of the seventeenth century, England was a relative backwater. Its population was only a quarter of that of France and its monarchy was comparatively weak; precisely as France was reorganizing along absolutist lines, England's monarchy was beset by powerful landowners with traditional privileges they were totally unwilling to relinquish. The English monarchy ran a kingdom with various ethnicities and divided religious loyalties, many of whom were hostile to the monarchy itself. It was an unlikely candidate for what would one day be the most powerful "Great Power" in Europe.

The English King Henry VIII had broken the official English church - renamed the Church of England - away from the Roman Catholic church in the 1530s. In the process, he had seized an enormous amount of wealth from English Catholic institutions, mostly monasteries, and used it to fund his own military buildup. Subsequently, his daughter Elizabeth I was able to build up an effective navy (based at least initially on converted merchant vessels) that fought off the Spanish Armada in 1588. While Elizabeth's long reign (r. 1558 – 1603) coincided with a golden age of English culture, most notably with the works of Shakespeare, the money plundered from Catholic coffers had run out by the end of it.

Despite Elizabeth's relative toleration of religious difference, Great Britain remained profoundly divided. The Church of England was the nominal church of the entire realm, and only Anglicans could hold public office as judges or members of the British parliament, a law-making body dominated by the gentry class of landowners. In turn, the church was itself divided between an "high church" faction that was in favor of all of the trappings of Catholic ritual versus a "Puritan" faction that wanted an austere, moralistic approach to Christianity more similar to Calvinism than to Catholicism. The Puritans were, in fact, Calvinist in their beliefs (concerning the Elect, predestination, and so on), but were still considered to be full members of the church. Meanwhile, Scotland was overwhelmingly Presbyterian (Scottish Calvinist), and Ireland - which had been colonized by the English starting in the sixteenth century - was overwhelmingly Catholic. Within English society there were numerous Catholics as well, most of whom remained fairly clandestine in their worship out of fear of persecution.

Thus, the monarchy oversaw a divided society. It was also relatively poor, with the English crown overseeing a small bureaucracy and no official standing army. The only way to raise revenue from the rest of the country was to raise royal taxes, which were resisted by the very proud and defensive gentry class (the landowners) as well as the titled nobility. The traditional right of parliament was to approve or reject taxes, but an open question as of the early seventeenth century was whether it had the right to set laws as well. The bottom line is that English kings or queens could not force lawmakers to grant them taxes without having to beg, plead, cajole, and bargain. In turn, the stability of government depended on cooperation between the Crown and the House of Commons, the larger of the two legal bodies in the parliament, which was populated by members of the gentry.

The Stuarts and the English Civil War

While her reign was plagued by these issues, Elizabeth I was a savvy monarch who was very skilled at reconciling opposing factions and winning over members of parliament to her perspective. She also benefited from what was left of the moneys her father had looted from the English monasteries. This delicate balance started to fall apart with Elizabeth's death in 1603. She died without an heir (she had never married and was, probably falsely, sometimes called the "virgin queen" as a result), so her successor was from the Scottish royal house of the Stuarts, fellow royals related to the Tudors. The new king was James I (r. 1603 – 1625), the first of the new royal line to rule England. James was already the king of Scotland when he inherited the English crown, so England and Scotland were politically united and the kingdom of "Great Britain" was born (it was later ratified as a permanent legal reality in 1707 with the "Act of Union" passed by parliament).

James, inspired by developments on the continent, tried to insist on the "royal prerogative," the right of the king to rule through force of will. He set himself up as an absolute monarch and behaved with noticeable contempt towards members of parliament. Still, England was at peace and James avoided making demands that sparked serious resistance. While members of parliament grumbled about his heavy-handed manner of rule, there were no signs of actual rebellion.

His son, Charles I (r. 1625 – 1649), was a much greater threat from the perspective of parliament. He strongly supported the "high church" faction of the Anglican church just as Puritanism among the common people was growing, and he began to openly encroach on parliamentary authority. While styling himself after Louis XIII of France (to whom he was related), he came to be feared and hated by many of his own people. Charles imposed taxes and tariffs that were not approved by parliament, which was technically illegal, and then he forced rich subjects to grant the crown loans at very low interest rates. In 1629, after parliament protested, he dismissed it and tried to rule without summoning it again. He was able to do so until 1636, when he tried to impose a new high church religious liturgy (set of rituals) in Scotland. That prompted the Scots to openly break with the king and raise an army; to get the money to fund an English response, Charles had to summon parliament.

The result was civil war. Not only were the Scots well trained and organized, when parliament met it swiftly turned on Charles, declaring his various laws and acts illegal and dismissing his ministers, an act remembered as "The Grand Remonstrance." Parliament also

refused to leave, staying in session for years (it was called “the long parliament” as a result). Meanwhile, a huge Catholic uprising took place in Ireland and thousands of Protestants there were massacred. Many in parliament thought that Charles was in league with the Irish. War finally broke out in 1642, pitting the anti-royal “round-heads” (named after their bowl cuts) and their Scottish allies against the royalist “cavaliers.” In 1645, a Puritan commander named Oliver Cromwell united various parliamentary forces in the “New Model Army,” a well-disciplined fighting force whose soldiers were regularly paid and which actually paid for its supplies rather than plundering them and living off the land (as did the king’s forces). Thanks to the effectiveness of Cromwell, the New Model Army, and the financial backing of the city of London, the round-heads gained the upper hand in the war. In the end, Charles was captured, tried, and executed by parliament in 1649 as a traitor to his own kingdom.



An engraving celebrating the victory of the parliamentary forces as “England’s Miraculous Preservation,” with the royalist forces drowning in the allegorical flood while the houses of parliament and the Church of England float on the ark.

During the English civil war, England went from one of the least militarized societies in Europe to one of the most militarized; one in eight English men were directly involved in fighting, and few regions in England were spared horribly bloody fighting. Simultaneously, debates arose among the round-heads concerning what kind of government they were fighting for; some, called the Levelers, argued in favor of a people's government, a true democratic republic. The most radical were called the Diggers, who try to set up what amounts to a proto-communist society in which goods and land were held in common. Those more radical elements were ultimately defeated by the army, but the language they use in discussing justice and good government survived to inspire later debates, ultimately informing the concept of modern democracy itself.

Thanks in large part to the ongoing political debates of the period, the Civil War resulted in an explosion of print in England. Various factions attempted to impose and maintain censorship, but they were largely unsuccessful due to the political fragmentation of the period. Instead, there was an enormous growth of political debate in the form of printed pamphlets; there were over 2,000 political pamphlets published in 1642 alone. Ordinary people had begun in earnest to participate in political dialog, another pattern associated with modern politics.

After the execution of the king in 1649, England became a (technically republican) dictatorship under Cromwell, who assumed the title of Lord Protector in 1649. He ruled England for ten years, carrying out an incredibly bloody invasion of Ireland that is still remembered with bitterness today, and ruling through his control of the army. Following his death in 1658, parliament decided to reinstate the monarchy and the official power of the Church of England (which took until 1660 to happen), essentially because there was a lack of consensus about what could be done otherwise. None of the initial problems that brought about the civil wars in the first place were resolved, and Cromwell himself had ended up being as authoritarian and autocratic as Charles had been.

The Glorious Revolution

Thus, in 1660, Charles II (r. 1660 – 1685), the son of the executed Charles I, took the throne. He was a cousin of Louis XIV of France and, like his father, tried to adopt the trappings of absolutism even though he recognized that he could never achieve a Louis-XIV-like rule (nor did he try to dismiss parliament). Various conspiracy theories surrounded him, especially ones that claimed he was a secret Catholic; as it turns out, he *had* drawn up a secret agreement with Louis XIV to re-Catholicize England if he could, and he proclaimed his Catholicism on his deathbed. A crisis occurred late in his reign when a parliamentary faction called the Whigs tried

to exclude his younger brother, James II, from being eligible for the throne because he was openly Catholic. They were ultimately beaten (legally) by a rival faction, the Tories, that supported the notion of the divine right of kings and of hereditary succession.

When James II (r. 1685 – 1688) took the throne, however, even his former supporters the Tories were alarmed when he started appointing Catholics to positions of power, against the laws in place that required all lawmakers and officials to be Anglicans. In 1688, James's wife had a son, which thus threatened that a Catholic monarchy might remain for the foreseeable future. A conspiracy of English lawmakers thus invited William of Orange, a Dutch military leader and lawmaker in the Dutch Republic, to lead a force against James. William was married to Mary, the Protestant daughter of James II, and thus parliament hoped that any threat of a Catholic monarchy would be permanently defeated by his intervention. William arrived and the English army defected to him, forcing James to flee with his family to France. This series of events became known as the Glorious Revolution - "glorious" because it was bloodless and resulted in a political settlement that finally ended the better part of a century of conflict.

William and his English wife Mary were appointed as co-rulers by parliament and they agreed to abide by a new Bill of Rights. The result was Europe's first constitutional monarchy: a government led by a king or queen, but one in which lawmaking was controlled by a parliament and all citizens were held accountable to the same set of laws. Even as absolutism became the predominant mode of politics on the continent, Britain set forth on a different, and opposing, political trajectory.

Great Britain After the Glorious Revolution

One unexpected benefit to constitutional monarchy was that British elites, through parliament, no longer opposed the royal government but instead *became* the government. After the Glorious Revolution, lawmakers in England felt secure enough from royal attempts to seize power unlawfully that they were willing to increase the size and power of government and to levy new taxes. Thus, the English state grew very quickly, whereas it had been its small size and the intransigence of earlier generations of member of parliament in raising taxes that had been behind the conflicts between king and parliament for most of the seventeenth century.

The English state *could* grow because parliament was willing to make it grow after 1688. It *did* grow because of war. William of Orange had already been at war with Louis XIV before he came to England, and once he was king Britain went to war with France in 1690 over colonial

conflicts and because of Louis's constant attempts to seize territory in the continent. The result was over twenty years of constant warfare, from 1690 – 1714.

To raise money for those wars, private bankers founded the Bank of England in 1694. While it was not created by the British government itself, the Bank of England soon became the official banking institution of the state. This was a momentous event because it allowed the government to manage state debt effectively. The Bank issued bonds that paid a reasonable amount of interest, and the British government stood behind those bonds. Thus, individual investors were guaranteed to make money and the state could finance its wars through carefully regulated sales of bonds. In contrast, Louis XIV financially devastated the French government with his wars, despite the efforts of his Intendants and other royal officials to squeeze every drop of tax revenue they could out of the huge and prosperous kingdom. Britain, meanwhile, remained financially solvent even as their wars against France grew larger every year. Ultimately, this would see the transformation of Britain from secondary political power to France's single most important rival in the eighteenth century.

The Overall Effects of Absolutism

While Britain was thus the outstanding exception to the general pattern of absolutism, the growth in its state was comparable to the growth among its absolutist rivals. As an aggregate, the states of Europe were transformed by absolutist trends. Some of those can be captured in statistics: royal governments grew roughly 400% in size (i.e. in terms of the number of officials they employed and the tax revenues they collected) over the course of the seventeenth century, and standing armies went from around 20,000 men during the sixteenth century to well over 150,000 by the late seventeenth century.

Armies were not just larger - they were better-disciplined, trained, and "standardized." For the first time, soldiers were issued standard uniforms. Warfare, while still bloody, was nowhere near as savage and chaotic as it had been during the wars of religion, thanks in large part to the fact that it was now waged by professional soldiers answering to noble officers, rather than mercenaries simply unleashed against an enemy and told to live off of the land (i.e. the peasants) while they did so. Officers on opposing sides often considered themselves to be part of a kind of extended family; a captured officer could expect to be treated as a respected peer by his "enemies" until his own side paid his ransom.

What united such disparate examples of absolutism as France and Prussia was a shared concept of royal authority. The theory of absolutism was that the king was above the

nobles and not answerable to anyone in his kingdom, but, he owed his subjects a kind of benevolent protection and oversight. “Arbitrary” power was not the point: the power exercised by the monarch was supposed to be for the good of the kingdom – this was known as *raison d'état*, right or reason of the state. Practically speaking, this meant that the whole range of traditional rights, especially those of the nobles and the cities, had to be respected. Louis XIV famously claimed that "*L'état, c'est moi*" - I am the state. His point was that there was no distinction between his own identity and the government of France itself, and his actions were by definition for the good of France (which was not always true from an objective standpoint, as was starkly demonstrated in his wars).

Those who lost out in absolutism were the peasants: especially in Central and Eastern Europe, what freedoms peasants had enjoyed before about 1650 increasingly vanished as the newly absolutist monarchs struck deals with their nobility that ratified the latter's right to completely control the peasantry. Serfdom, already in place in much of the east, was hardened in the seventeenth century, and the free labor, fees, and taxes owed by peasants to their lords grew harsher (e.g., the Austrian labor obligation was known as the *robot*, and it could consist of up to 100 days of labor a year). The general pattern in the east was that nobles answered to increasingly powerful kings or emperors, but they were themselves “absolute” rulers of their own estates over their serfs.

The irony of the growth of both royal power and royal tax revenue was that it still could not keep up with cost of war. Military expenditures were enormous; in a state like France the military took up 50% of state revenues during peacetime, and 80% or more during war (which was frequent). Thus, monarchs granted monopolies on products and then taxed them, and they frequently sold noble titles and state offices to the highest bidder (the queen of Sweden doubled the number of noble families in ten years). They relentlessly taxed the peasantry as well: royal taxes doubled in France between 1630 – 1650, and the concomitant peasant uprisings were ruthlessly suppressed.

One aspect of the hardening of social hierarchies, necessitated in part by the great legal benefits enjoyed by members of the nobility in the absolutist system, was that the rights and privileges of nobility were codified into clear laws for the first time. Most absolutist states created “tables of ranks” that specified exactly where nobles stood vis-à-vis one another as well as the monarch and “princes of the blood.” Louis XIV of France had a branch of royal government devoted entirely to verifying claims of nobility and stripping noble titles from those without adequate proof.

Conclusion

The process by which states went from decentralized and fairly loosely organized to "absolutist" was a long one. Numerous aspects of government even in the late eighteenth century remained strikingly "medieval" in some ways, such as the fact that laws were different from town to town and region to region based on the accumulation of various royal grants and traditional rights over the centuries. That being noted, there is no question that things *had* changed significantly over the course of the seventeenth century: governments were bigger, better organized, and more explicitly hierarchical in organization.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Cardinal Richelieu](#) - Public Domain

[Hall of Mirrors](#) - Jorge Láscar

[Louis XIV](#) - Public Domain

[Prussia](#) - Public Domain

[English Civil War Engraving](#) - Public Domain