The Age of Absolutism (17–18th Century)

Abstract

"Absolute monarchy or absolutism meant that the sovereign* power or ultimate authority in the state rested in the hands of a king who claimed to rule by divine right."

(Jackson J. Spielvogel. *Western Civilization*, St. Paul, 1991, p. 523)

Introduction

The Age of Absolutism

Absolutism* is a term used by historians to describe a form of monarchical power that is unlimited by any other
5   institution, such as the church, parliament, or social elites. The absolute monarch exercises* ultimate authority over the state and his subjects, as both head of state* and head of government.* In an absolute monarchy there is no constitution or legal restriction on the monarch's power. Absolute monarchy is normally hereditary* or passed on through marriage.

The term Absolutism is typically used in combination with some European monarchs during the transition
10   from Feudalism* to early Capitalism*, and monarchs described as absolute can especially be found in the 17th century through the 18th century. The Age of Absolutism is usually thought to begin with the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) and ends with the French Revolution (1789).

European Religious Conflicts of the 16th and 17th Centuries

Absolutism was primarily motivated by the crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Protestant Re-
formation (1517–1648) had led to a series of violent and bloody wars of religion, in the course of which thou-
15   sands of innocents met their deaths. The population in the German states, for instance, was reduced by about 15% to 30% in the Thirty Years' War* (1618–48) whereas the population of France, at between 16 to 18 million people in 1600, fell by 2 to 4 million during the French Wars of Religion* (1562–98). Similar wars took place in Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Ireland and Denmark.

Partly because of the religious wars, but also due to a growing secularization,* religion was losing its grip
20   on Europe. Inspired by the Renaissance and in particular by the Scientific Revolution, intellectuals took to think-
ing outside the boundaries of church ideology; and since changes in the economy were noticeably increasing the prosperity* of many Europeans, European society became more and more secular.

In this context, absolute monarchies were regarded as the solution to these violent disorders, and Europeans were more than willing to have local autonomy* or political rights taken away in exchange for peace and safety.

Decline of Feudalism and Origin of the Early Modern State

25   At the end of the Middle Ages, Feudalism declined. While the old feudal system had been defined by a weak monarchy attempting to control the lands of the realm* through mutual agreements with regional leaders of the nobility, the modern age was characterized by a rise of the king's power in some parts of Europe. These kings were soon to become absolute monarchs with a much greater power over the nobles and the common people. Thus historians generally regard the growth of the absolute monarchy as the origin of the modern state. Most of
30   the characteristic features of the modern state were more or less instituted* in the France of Louis XIV and other contemporary* monarchies in Europe (see below).

As for the economy, the decline of the feudal order also gave rise to the earliest forms of Capitalism. In most European nations through the 1800s, the established guild* system was dissolved and replaced by the idea of

free trade (i.e. an economic system in which goods and capital are traded in markets and profits distributed to owners).

An intermediate step on the way to early Capitalism was, for many nations, an economic system called Mercantilism* that helped absolutist rulers to centralize the economy. Mercantile theory claimed that the prosperity of a nation was dependent upon its supply of capital, which was best increased through a positive balance of trade* with other nations. The ruling government should advance this goal by encouraging exports and discouraging imports, notably through the use of tariffs* and subsidies*. In return, the taxes paid by the merchants would help to fill the treasury* and thus give the monarchs the financial power they were looking for. Take, for example, projects like Versailles: the amount spent on Louis XIV's royal palace is estimated at ca. 1.3 billion (!) euros.

Features of Absolute Rule

In order to achieve eagerly awaited stability after long years of war (see above), absolutists made sure that the key elements of national government would be solely placed into the hands of the monarch: the armed forces, tax collection, and the judicial* system. These were powers normally enjoyed by the local nobility in their territories; the national administration of these functions, however, required the formation of a nationwide bureaucracy* whose officials were answerable to the king alone.

Consequently, this new type of bureaucracy had to make a stand against the most powerful institutional forces opposed to the king: the nobility, the church, legislative* bodies (parliaments), and regions which had been autonomous until then. In order to centralize the administration of the state, the absolute ruler had to – some way or other – take political authority out of the hands of the nobles who had no desire whatever to give that authority up! On the whole, European kings were successful in crushing any kind of aristocratic resistance, with the exception of the Stuarts in England who were defeated in their campaign for absolute rule (see below) and the Polish kings who had to accept a nobles' democracy.

Apart from the rise of professional bureaucracies, absolute states featured a national legislation*, a national jurisdiction,* a large, standing military under the direct control of the king, and a national tax collection mechanism in which taxes went straight to the national government (i. e. the king's treasury) rather than passing through the hands of the local nobility.

Absolute monarchs spent exorbitant sums on warfare and extravagant buildings, such as the Palace of Versailles (see above), for themselves and the nobility. They often required the nobles to live at court for some time, while state officials ruled their lands in their absence. Behind this was the idea to reduce the effective power of the nobility by making them become reliant upon the munificence* of the monarch.

Foundations of Royal Absolutism

Absolute monarchies often gave birth to ideologies that eloquently justified the power exercised by the absolutist monarch. Political and religious doctrines* of royal absolutism were either based on the Divine Right of Kings* or a variation of the Social Contract* Theory.

Divine Right of Kings

The Divine Right of Kings states that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority since he derives the right to rule directly from God. As a consequence, he is not subject to the will of his people, the clergy or the nobility. The Divine Right of Kings implies that whoever might attempt to remove the king from his office or restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and thus commits heresy.*

The first author to come forward with this theory was Jean Bodin (1530–1596), a French professor of law and political philosopher, who based it on his interpretation of Roman law. He defined sovereignty* as "the abso-

lute and perpetual power" and emphasized that "the sovereign prince […] is only accountable to God" (*Six Books of the Commonwealth*, 1576).

In England the same theory surfaced under the reign of King James I of England (1603–25). In the book *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598), James categorically proclaimed his own ideas of kingship, explaining that for biblical reasons kings are higher beings than other men: "Kings are called gods […] because they sit upon God His throne in earth". This special status allows them to impose new laws by royal prerogative* (that is without consulting Parliament). However, this does not mean that kings use their powers arbitarily; James' reading of *The True Law of Free Monarchies* allowed that "a good king will frame all his actions to be according to the law, yet is he not bound thereto but of his good will."

During the reign of King Louis XIV of France, the theory of divine right was strongly promoted by the French bishop and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704). Court preacher to Louis XIV, Bossuet was a strong advocate of political absolutism. When chosen to be the tutor of the Dauphin,* oldest child of Louis XIV, he wrote several works intended as schoolbooks, one of which was *Politics Derived from the Words of Holy Scripture*, published posthumously in 1709.

Bossuet states that "God establishes kings as his ministers, and reigns through them over the people"; at the same time he stresses that "the prince must be obeyed on principle, as a matter of religion and of conscience", which practically makes the king a sacred* person. Although he declares the absolute authority of rulers, Bossuet underlines the fact that the king is not above the law, "for if he sins, he destroys the laws by his example."

The theory of divine right disappeared in England after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The American (1776) and French (1789) Revolutions further weakened its appeal, and by the early twentieth century, it was given up completely.

Social Contract Theory

The idea of the social contract is based on a reciprocal* agreement: the people transfer some of their rights to a government or ruler in order to receive social order and peace through the rule of law.

The first modern philosopher to articulate this kind of theory was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In his book *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argues for a social contract and rule by an absolute monarch. According to Hobbes, life without a strong central government would lead to chaos and civil war (*bellum omnium contra omnes*, "the war of all against all") since, in this "state of nature", each person has the natural right to everything. Thus people's lives would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". To escape from the state of nature, people agree on a social contract and thus establish a society. All individuals in that society transfer their natural rights to the monarch for the sake of protection. But peace comes at a stiff price: any abuse of power by bad rulers has to be accepted. There is no right to resist* and the process of transferring one's rights to the king is irreversible!

Historical Examples of Absolutism

The most prominent monarch who fully embodied absolutist principles was Louis XIV, called the Sun King, who ruled France from 1643 to 1715. His alleged statement, "L'état, c'est moi" (The state, it is me), gets to the heart* of absolute rulership, i. e. sovereignty resting in the hand of one individual. Although often criticized for his extravagance,* he reigned over France for a long period, and many historians consider him a successful absolute monarch. Many countries and monarchs turned to him as a role model for the modern government, while some countries, such as England, opposed this role model.

Most of the practices of the modern state were more or less instituted in the France of Louis XIV: in particular a strong government with Paris and the Royal Palace at Versailles as centre points, a centralized bureaucracy, a large standing military, and an efficient tax system that helped to restock the king's financial supplies.

Another country subject to absolute rule was Brandenburg-Prussia. Frederick William of Hohenzollern (1640–1699, known as the Great Elector*) used the chaos resulting from the Thirty Years' War to consolidate his territories in northern Germany, while at the same time increasing his power over his subjects. His state consisted of two semi-autonomous territories, Brandenburg in the north and Prussia in the southeast. In order to achieve

5   political unity, he built a large standing army (which would eventually become the largest army in the European world), and he established a centralized tax system. On the whole, his actions helped to mould the militaristic streak* of the Hohenzollern, the ruling dynasty in Prussia up to 1918.

Beginning with Leopold I (1658–1705), the Hapsburg Archdukes* tried to centralize the government of Austria and break the power of the noble landlords. They managed this by making deals with the landed nobility;

10   in the Czech-speaking territories, for instance, they passed national legislation that required peasants to work three days every week for their landlords. In exchange for this law, the landlords gave away the powers of their regional assemblies to the central government in Vienna.

Until 1905, the Czars* of Russia also governed as absolute monarchs. Peter I (the Great, 1682–1725) was determined to introduce western absolutist practices in Russia. He effectively reduced the influence of the nobil-

15   ity and strengthened the power of the Czar, establishing a central bureaucracy and a police state. He moved his capital and had a city built which he called Saint Petersburg. His royal palace there was meant to imitate and even rival Louis XIV's palace at Versailles.

While Europe steadily developed strong, absolutist monarchies, there was one exception to the rule. In the course of the 17th century, the tiny kingdom of England would undergo some radical changes: first to a republic

20   (the so-called Commonwealth, 1649-1660), then to a limited monarchy (1689). Thus the English were taking a completely different turn towards a modern state.

When James I (1603–1625) became King of England after the death of Elizabeth I, he tried to introduce the ideas which he had already put forward in his book *The True Law of Monarchies* (see above). Public fears that his son Charles I (1625–1649) was actually attempting to establish absolute rule in England was a major cause of

25   the English Civil War (1641–1651), the execution of Charles I and the temporary establishment of the Commonwealth. Finally, at the end of the 17th century, England experienced the irrevocable erosion of the monarch's powers as a result of the Glorious Revolution.* By signing the Bill of Rights in 1689, the new king, William III, had to accept his limited powers within the framework of a constitutional monarchy.

Enlightened Absolutism

Enlightened absolutism is a form of absolute monarchy in which rulers were influenced by the Age of Enlighten-

30   ment.* Enlightened monarchs tended to allow religious toleration, freedom of speech and the press, and the right to hold private property. Most of them patronized the arts, sciences, and education. Their ideas about royal power were often similar to those of absolute monarchs, in as much as they believed that they were entitled to govern by right of birth and generally refused to grant constitutions.

In particular, the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II (1765–1790), can be said to have fully embraced the ideas

35   of Enlightenment. In the true spirit of the movement, he stressed his ambitions to improve the lives of his subjects when he said: "Everything for the people, nothing by the people."

He quickly proceeded to realize his ideal of enlightened absolutism. Among his reforms were the emancipation of the peasantry,* the spread of education, the freedom of worship* and the compulsory use of the German language (replacing Latin or local languages). He also abolished the death penalty. However, many of his re-

40   forms did not last and were taken back by his successors.

In contrast, Empress Catherine II (the Great, 1762–96) of Russia entirely rejected the concept of the Social Contract. However, she took up many ideas of the Enlightenment: she introduced laws for the emancipation of

peasants and was a great patron* of the arts in Imperial Russia. She also incorporated many ideas of enlightened philosophers, especially Montesquieu, in her *Nakaz*, a blueprint for a modern law code.

Frederick II (the Great, 1740–1786) of Prussia was tutored in the ideas of the Enlightenment in his youth. For years he was a correspondent of Voltaire, with whom the king had an intimate, yet complicated, friendship.

5 Frederick modernized Prussian bureaucracy and civil service and promoted religious tolerance throughout his realm. He patronized the arts and philosophers. Because of his influence, Prussia's education system became one of the best in Europe. Frederick also abolished torture and corporal punishment.*

His ideas can be best summed up by his concept of the monarch as the "first servant of the state" (Ich bin der erste Diener meines Staates).

Absolutism Today

10 The popularity of the idea of absolute monarchy declined noticeably after the French Revolution (1789), which promoted theories of government based on the sovereignty of the people* rather than of the monarch. As a result, many former absolute monarchies have become constitutional monarchies (or even parliamentary republics).

Among the very few nations in which the monarch still claims full power (being both head of state and government) are Brunei, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland, and Vatican City.

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