The Age of Absolutism

Many seventeenth century monarchs in Europe responded to the crises of the previous century (i.e., the Protestant Reformation, the Wars of Religion, and the early Scientific Revolution) by developing absolutist states. In most cases, the political establishment and its backers, even if Catholic, sought to take advantage of the weakened power of the Papacy and the Catholic Church to build upon its own authority. The Wars of Religion further fueled the fires of absolutism by ushering in a new age of military combat, which required massive funds, supplies, and men - items that the state alone could coordinate and use effectively.

I. Preconditions of Absolutism
As we look at the Age of Absolutism, then, we can see a series of long term preconditions that set the stage for the new rulers by opening a power vacuum for them to fill.

> A. The Protestant Reformation
> B. The Wars of Religion
> C. The Scientific Revolution

II. Qualifying Absolutism Before We Go Further

> A. Absolutism did not usually mean despotism. The monarchs of Europe "did not understand [absolutism] as a license for untrammeled and arbitrary rule. . . . Despite the best efforts of the European monarchs to consolidate their authority, they could not issue irresponsible decrees and achieve lasting compliance. Aristocrats, churchmen, merchants, and entrepreneurs remained strong enough within their respective orders to ensure that kings and queens would need to justify the action they took"(Lerner, Meacham, Burns, *Western Civilizations*, Thirteen Edition, Volume II, 593-94).

> B. So, if absolutism did not mean absolute and arbitrary rule, what did it mean? What did these absolutist monarchs and their supporters want?
> The most evident answer is stability, order, and economic steadiness. These monarchs wanted their states to be ordered and prosperous at home so that they could be powerful abroad both militarily and culturally. The easiest way to have order, many thought, was to have a single leader with a centralized bureaucracy to carry out orders. Efficiency and stability were thus at the center of absolutist theory.

III. Absolutist Theory

A. Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527, Florence, Italy)

> 1. Machiavelli was the greatest political philosopher of the Renaissance. His most famous work, *The Prince*, focuses - not on the speculative issues of state formation and legitimacy - but, instead on the practical problems monarchs face as they attempt to stay in power. It is, perhaps, the greatest treatise ever written on the policy of *realpolitique*: governing based on retaining power rather than pursuing ideals.

> 2. Machiavelli opens *The Prince* describing the two principal types of governments: monarchies and republics. He focuses on monarchies in *The Prince*. The work is controversial because Machiavelli says that he wants to get to the truth about surviving as a monarch - and often Machiavelli's truth is not a pretty thing.

> 3. In chapter 15, he argues that lofty ideals will often hurt a Prince - and might lead to his downfall - while pragmatic vices might actually aid him.

> 4. In chapter 16, Machiavelli writes that although it is common for people to believe a prince should be generous, this quality is often a danger. If a Prince is generous in secret, no one will know and he will be thought greedy, but if he is generous in public, he may risk bankrupting his state to maintain his reputation. In this case, the Prince might extort more money from his subjects and be hated. So, Machiavelli says that it is best for a prince to be known as stingy. The only case in which generosity might lead to success is when it is shown to soldiers who have pillaged an enemy city.

> 5. In chapter 17, Machiavelli states that a Prince will have more success if he is severe -rather than merciful - when punishing people. Although severity through death sentences affects only a few, it will deter the crimes of the many. In addition, Machiavelli claims that it is better for a monarch to be feared than to be loved. The Prince must avoid, however, the hatred of his people, which can be accomplished by observing the property rights of subjects.

6. In chapter 18, Machiavelli presents his most controversial argument. He writes that the Prince should understand how to be deceitful when it might serve his own purpose, but that at the same time he must know how to appear genuine. The Prince must always exhibit five virtues in particular: mercy, honesty, humaneness, uprightness, and religiousness.

7. In chapter 19, Machiavelli reinforces the idea that the Prince should avoid acts that raise the ire or hatred of his subjects.

8. See also, the text of *The Prince* at:
http://daemon.ilt.columbia.edu/academic/digitexts/machiavelli/the_prince/title.html

B. Jean Bodin (French, 1530-96)

My presentation of Bodin is based on Lerner, Meacham, Burns, *Western Civilizations*, Thirteen Edition, Volume II, 528.

1. Bodin was a French lawyer who lived during the religious wars in France. He was upset by the mayhem of St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and sought to provide a political plan to stabilize the French regime. His most famous work, *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576), was the first in-depth and systematic argument for absolutism in modern Europe. Bodin argued that states were founded to defend the requirements of collections of families, but that once a state was formed and in control it should not allow opposition.

2. He was the first author to provide a definition of sovereignty, which was: "the most high, absolute, and perpetual power over all subjects," consisting principally in the power "to give laws to subjects without their consent."

3. Bodin acknowledged the possibilities of aristocratic and democratic governments, but he believed monarchy best. He argued that the monarch could not be limited by a legislature, a judicial body, the laws passed by previous monarchs, or laws passed by himself. Bodin also argued that subjects had to trust in the "frank good will" of the monarch. Even if he proved to be a tyrant, subjects were not justified in revolt, Bodin said, because this would lead to "licentious anarchy which is worse that the harshest tyranny in the world."

4. So, what we see with Bodin is the absolute centralization of power. Sovereignty could not be divided. It rested in one place and what total. (You may want to compare this with James Madison's idea of sovereignty: it is flexible and does not rest in one place, i.e. our legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government that share power).

C. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

My presentation of Hobbes is drawn from Wallace I. Matson's *A New History of Philosophy, Volume II, Modern* (292-296).

1. As we consider absolutist political philosophy, Thomas Hobbes comes to the forefront with his work *Leviathan*. In this book, he argued that the absolute rule of a single individual was reasonable and desirable.

2. Hobbes began his political philosophy with an assertion of human equality:
"Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found on man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind then another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himselfe any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he."

3. The equality of human beings leads to naturally to a state of quarrelsomeness because of the prevalence of:

  a. competition for scarce goods
  b. diffidence (fear of what others may do to us if we don't do it to them first)
  c. glory (desire for honor from others)

4. So, in a state of nature, humans would be at war with one another.

5. Hobbes sees the state of nature as a brutish place:
"In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; not Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be

imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."

6. Moreover, there is no law: "nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues."

7. However, competitive, diffident, glory-seekers are also fearful of death and desirous of a less nasty life. Using reason, they find there way out of the state of nature based on two principles:

    a. Right of Nature: each one of us has the right to do what we think necessary for survival
    b. Law of Nature: every man ought to endeavor peace as far as he has hope of obtaining it.

8. Social Contract

    a. I will not be peaceful unless everyone else will also be peaceful
    b. So, we all must agree to be peaceful, and we must choose a power to enforce our agreement
    c. All must agree to submit to the Leviathan - and in return he will give peace and defense
    d. The sovereign is not a part to the contract and cannot be accused of violating the agreement
    e. Sovereign is all powerful:

His Power cannot, without his consent, be Transferred to another; He cannot Forfeit it, He cannot be Accused by any of his Subjects, of Injury: He cannot be Punished by them: He is Judge of what is necessary for Peace; and Judge of Doctrines: He is Sole Legislator; and the Supreme Judge of Controversies; and of the Times, and Occasions of Warre, and Peace: to him it belongeth to choose Magistrates, Counsellours, Commanders, and all other Officers, and Ministers; and to determine of Rewards, and Punishments, Hounous, and Order.

D. Bishop Jacques Bossuet (French, 1627-1704)

1. Bossuet defended the Divine Right of Kings based on the Scripture with his book *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Scripture* (1708). He wrote that "God is holiness itself, goodness itself, and power itself. In these things lies the majesty of God. In the image of these things lies the majesty of the prince."

2. From this it followed that "The prince, as prince, is not regarded as a private person; he is a public personage, all the state is in him. . . . As all perfection and all strength are united in God, all the power of individuals is united in the Person of the prince."

IV. Absolutism in France

A. Roots of Louis XIV's Absolutism

1. French Religious Wars (1562-98)

a. We can trace the roots of French Absolutism back to the French Religious Civil Wars that were fought between Calvinists and Catholics in France. Henry of Navarre, who became Henry IV of France converted from Calvinism to Catholicism to end the wars, and in 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes, which declared Catholicism the official religion of France, but granted religious toleration to Huguenots.

b. Here, we see the centralization of power: the Catholic church is once more dominant, but its position relies at least in part on the support of the state.

2. The Thirty Years War (1618-48)

a. The Thirty Years War brings the first four central figures into play: Louis XIII, Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV.

b. <u>Louis XIII,</u> the king of France form 1610 to 1643, was a hunter and entertainer who was not much interested in the affairs of state.

c. To run the government he relied on his chief minister: <u>Cardinal Richelieu</u> (p. 1624-42), who was a *realpolitique*. Richelieu was concerned with trying to extend the power of the French monarchy at home and abroad. In the war, he sided with the Protestants from Sweden against the Catholic Habsburgs to ensure that Bourbon France would not be surrounded. In 1626, he destroyed the fortresses of the great nobles, and he removed them from positions of power in the navy he was building. He brought in a new set of bureaucrats who were from the middling ranks - they were not aristocrats and thus owed their power to Richelieu. They were loyal to the state.

d. Richelieu died in 1642, and Louis XIII died in 1643 before the Thirty Years War was over. But, Richelieu had hand chosen <u>Cardinal Mazarin</u> as his successor for the new king, Louis XIV who was five years old when he came to power. Mazarin continued the policies of Richelieu and even made the nobles pay taxes.

e. In response to the policies of Richelieu and Mazarin, which were designed to undercut the nobility and strengthen the king, the nobles revolted in the <u>Fronde Revolt</u> (1648-53). In 1651, they even broke into Louis XIV's room. The king would not forget this intrusion. By 1653, the nobles had been crushed by Mazarin.

F. After Mazarin's death in 1661, Louis XIV ruled without a chief minister. When asked by one of his supporters who should be approached concerning the affairs of state, Louis responded "I am the state."

B. Rule of Louis XIV

   1. Louis XIV had five key goals:

      a. absolute power within France
      b. cultural domination in Europe
      c. the development of a strong and unified nation-state, and empire
      d. extending his authority to the natural frontiers of France
      e. military domination in Europe

   2. Louis XIV had four main barriers to overcome to achieve his goals:

      a. Nobility
      b. Catholic Church
      c. Huguenots
      d. Money

   3. Louis XIV used six tools to overcome the barriers and achieve his goals:

      a. Versailles

         Versailles was the greatest royal complex in all of Europe. More like a city than a simple home, Louis used Versailles to achieve a number of his goals. It became the center of European high-culture as nobles from all over the western world traveled to attend the performances, dinners, balls, and other official occasions sponsored there. The French dress of Versailles's elite was imitated in every royal center in Europe. French became the language of Europe's most distinguished persons. In addition, the architectural style, the fountains, the flowers, the cuisine, the saddlery and carriages - in short every element of Louis's Versailles culture - became the paradigm by which all other absolutists were judged.

         In addition, Louis used Versailles to undercut the position of the nobles within France. To be a member of Louis's court, and thereby a member of the cultural elite in France and Europe, French nobles were forced to move to Versailles and give up the autonomy they had held at their countryside manors. Here, Louis could watch them and be sure that they were so busy with court affairs that they could not offer a serious threat to his absolute power.

      b. Commoner Bureaucracy

Like Richelieu and Mazarin before him, Louis brought in a Commoner Bureaucracy to further cement his absolute power. Typically, the nobility had held high positions in the state government. The nobles felt they had a right to their positions because of their high birth and family connections. By pushing them aside and bringing in commoners, who had no basis of power, Louis further removed the threat of the nobles, while at the same time making sure that his officials were absolutely loyal to him. Without Louis's support these commoners would be nothing in French society.

c. Gallican Articles

To remove the threat of dual alliances in the Catholic high church in France, Louis supported the Gallican Articles (1682), which were written by Jacques Bossuet. These declared that the French monarch had full supremacy in temporal or civil matters in France, and that the Pope's authority in spiritual matters must meet the approval of the French Catholic Church Council to be official. Louis's power to appoint high-church officials was also reiterated.

d. Revoked the Edict of Nantes-1685

Beginning in 1655, Louis set out to remove the Protestant "threat" in France. He firmly believed that in France - if he was to be absolute ruler - there could only be one absolute religion: Catholicism. In 1685, after years of religious struggle, he revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had granted the freedom of worship to some French Calvinists. 200,000 Calvinists fled France, but Louis had achieved his goal.

e. Jean Baptiste Colbert (p. 1665-83)

None of Louis's goals could have been achieved without massive supplies of money. Jean Baptiste Colbert (p. 1665-83) was the person in charge of generating state funds as Controller of State Finance. He raised money through three key innovations.

First, he lowered taxes on exports and raised them on imports. A simple economic plan of protecting internal producers and making it easy for them to export goods. Colbert used a system of law codes to make the quality of French exports uniform. He also, tried to make France self-sufficient in terms of food production by prohibiting the exportation of grain. To help carry out this tax system Colbert also instituted the *taille*, or head tax, which the peasantry in France was to pay.

Second, Colbert tried to expand commerce abroad by improving the domestic infrastructure - and as you see above lowering export taxes.

Third, Colbert attempted, without much success in the end, to lower the French debt.

f. French Army

The French Army was simply the biggest and most powerful in Europe. Louis devoted massive funds to the military so that he might pursue an aggressive diplomatic policy. His chief military leaders de Louvois - who improved artillery, instituted the use of bayonets, and brought in quicker-firing muzzle-loading handguns - and Vauban - the genius who worked out strategic fortresses - helped to give his army a dominant role in Europe. When Louis came to power in 1661, his army had less than 40,000 men in it, but by 1678 it had 279,000 and by 1700 it had 400,000 soldiers.

C. The Wars of Louis XIV
Information on the wars of Louis XIV from the fourth edition of *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History* by R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy.

1. Louis XIV fought four wars: The War of the Devolution (1667-68), the Dutch War (1672-78), the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-97), and the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713).

2. The War of Devolution

Upon the death of Philip IV of Spain (1665), Louis XIV claimed that Spanish possessions in the Netherlands had "devolved" on him through his wife, Marie Therese - the daughter of Philip IV.

After the new king of Spain, Charles II, refused Louis the land, the French overran (1667) the Spanish Netherlands. In response, the Dutch, English, and Swedes formed an alliance to protect the balance of power in the area, and finally induced Louis XIV to accept the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (May 1668), by which France retained some fortified towns in the Spanish Netherlands, but agreed to give up claim to the Spanish Netherlands as a whole.

3. The Dutch War

Louis set out to isolate the Dutch from England and Sweden. He signed treaties with the English and Swedish, and invaded the Netherlands. After Louis's armies made great advances, his international enemies formed an alliance against him because they were fearful of all that he might want. The armies of Spain, Austria, and Brandenburg were moved against Louis. After years of fighting, Louis won Franche-Comte, Alsace-Lorraine, and Louxembourg.

4. War of the League of Augsburg

"By 1680, France under Louis XIV threatened to secure hegemony over the continent. Her population, approaching 19 million, was 3 times that of England or of Spain and nearly 8 times that of the United Provinces (Netherlands). The organizational reforms of Louvois, Minister of War, had created the most powerful army in Europe. Under the administrative and financial genius of Colbert, the French Navy was one of the three major powers in the Atlantic and, after the withdrawal of the English from Tangier, was supreme in the Mediterranean.

Louis revocation of the Edict of Nantes (in 1685) had made in easy for William (of Orange, from the Protestant Netherlands) to establish an anti-French coalition (League of Augsburg; July 9, 1686). Two years later, Louis provoked the League into preparation for war by claiming the Palatinate. . . . Almost simultaneously, a revolution (Glorious Revolution) in England brought William of Orange to the English throne.

After Louis invaded the Rhine land, and declared war on Spain, the war focus of the war itself was moved mostly into the Netherlands. It saw France fighting against the United Provinces (Netherlands), Austria, Sweden, England, Spain, and some of the small German states. The League against France wanted to retain balance of power in Europe.

Fighting remained stalemated until 1697, when a treaty was signed at Ryswick in Holland (the Treaty of Ryswick), which ended the war. Louis was forced to give up all his recent gains except Alsace. He was also forced to recognize William III as king of England.

5. War of Spanish Succession

The most complex of all the Wars of Louis XIV. It was fought between the Grand Alliance (England, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, and Portugal) and a coalition of France, Spain, and small Italian and German principalities. The war was fought over the Spanish crown. Charles II, King of Spain, died in 1700, and he was childless. There were two contenders for the throne: Louis XIV and Leopold I of Austria. Louis claimed the throne for his second grandson Philip, Duke of Anjou (Philip V of Spain). Leopold claimed the throne for his second son: archduke Charles of Austria.

After Charles II died, his will stipulated that Philip of Anjou was to becomes king of Spain. An Anglo-Dutch-German alliances tries to defeat the French-Spanish alliance built up by Philip and his grandfather Louis XIV.

In 1708 Louis XIV sued for peace against this alliance, but negotiations broke down when he refused to join the Grand Alliance against his grandson. In 1709, under the leadership of the English Duke of Marlborough, Grand Alliance forces fro the moment defeated the French, but not on French soil.

The British, fearing that victory over France would now benefit Austria, dissolved the Grand Alliance, resulting in the pacts known collectively as the Peace of Utrecht (1713). The treaty recognized Philip as the king of Spain and repudiated the claims of Charles VI, who had in the meantime become king of Austria. Austria gained possession of the Spanish Netherlands and various Italian principalities.

D. Absolutism Throughout Europe
To combat Louis XIV, and in part spurred on by his example, most states in Europe became Absolutist regimes. The most important were in Brandenburg-Prussia, where Frederick William the "Great Elector" ruled from 1640 to 1688, and in Austria where Ferdinand III (1637-57) and Leopold I (1658-1705) ruled.

V. The English Exception - Constitutionalism

A. England was the exception to European Absolutism. The Tudor Monarchs, listed below, were popular. They believed in divine right and felt themselves to be the absolute rulers of England, but they worked with Parliament. The Tudors were popular with the people, and greatly increased the power of England.

B. When Elizabeth I died in 1603, she had no children, and so Parliament looked to her closest relative James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England. James I and his son Charles I were both vocal about their support for divine right.

Tudors
Henry VII (1485-1509)
Henry VIII (1509-47)
Edward VI (1547-53)
Mary Tudor (1553-58)
Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

C. James I survived on the throne because he did not get involved in foreign wars and so needed little money to run the government.

D. However, Charles I ran into trouble when he came to the throne because his monarchy needed new funds for war funds.

E. Charles I called Parliament in 1628, but dismissed it when it tried to get him to sign the Petition of Rights, which said that the King could not

1. quarter troops in private homes (which he had been doing to force people to give him money)
2. raise taxes without Parliament's support
3. suspend trial by jury
4. limit freedom of speech in Parliament.

F. Charles ruled the without Parliament from 1629-1640 (the eleven years of tyranny).

G. When he tried to force Anglicanism on the Presbyterian Scots, war broke out, and he was forced to recall Parliament for money in 1640.

H. When Parliament meets and some members try to chastise Charles, the King tries to arrest five of the dissidents. He fails and the nation divides. Roundheads support the Parliament, and Cavaliers support Charles.

I. The Civil War between Roundheads and Cavaliers lasted from 1642-49, when Charles I was tried for treason and beheaded. Oliver Cromwell who controlled the army instituted a Commonwealth, under which he became Lord Protector of England.

J. After Cromwell's death in 1659, most Englishmen were ready to bring the Stuarts back. Cromwell and his government had instituted a Puritanical government, which sought to limit the "sinful" practices of the English - like drinking, theatergoing, and working on the sabbath.

K. The rule of Charles II was not too controversial. He agreed to sign the Petition of Rights, and England seemed to be on course again. However, James II, Charles' s brother who was to be king upon Charles's death, was Catholic. The English did not want a Catholic king, but James took the throne in 1685 with relative peace. However, when he had a Catholic son, that was too much and Parliament invited William and Mary (James II's daughter) to England.

L. James II fled, and England had two new monarchs – William and Mary.

Stuarts and Commonwealth Period
James I (1603-25)
Charles I (1625-49)
Civil Wars (1642-49)
Commonwealth (1649-59)
Charles II (1660-1685)
James II (1685-88)
William III and Mary Stuart (1689-94)
William III alone (1694-1702)
Anne (1702-14)

M. This Glorious Revolution's main result was an English Bill of Rights, which did 13 things:

1. Underscored the right of Parliament to choose the successor to the English throne
2. Parliament must consent to all laws
3. No taxation without consent of Parliament
4. Church courts were declared illegal
5. No Catholic could be king
6. The Parliament had the right to Petition the King (could initiate legislation)
7. No standing army without consent of Parliament
8. All Englishmen could bear arms
9. Parliamentary elections had to bee free
10. Freedom of debate in Parliament
11. No excessive bail
12. Trial by jury
13. Frequent Parliamentary elections