

THE AGE OF ABSOLUTISM

(1650–1789)

The Age of Absolutism covers the final years of the last great European monarchies and the divestiture of monarchical power through reform and revolution. Emphasis is given to the absolute reign of Louis XIV of France, and the growth of constitutional monarchy in late-17th century England. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Locke, and their theoretical impact on the unraveling of royal power and the revolutions in France and America are discussed. Challenging map exercises and provocative review questions encourage meaningful reflection and historical analysis. Tests and answer keys included.

MP3400 The Age of Absolutism

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Table of Contents

The Age of Absolutism	1
1648 Europe: A Map Study	2
Restoration England.....	3
England’s Constitutional Monarchy	4
Redefining Power in England	5
The Reign of Louis XIV	6
Louis XIV Creates a Legacy	7
Life at Versailles	8
The Scientific Revolution Continues.....	9
The Enlightenment, Part I	10
The Enlightenment, Part II	11
John Locke: Government by the People	12
Europe’s Global Economy	13
Test I (Worksheets 1–13)	14
Eastern Europe, 1648–1721	15
The Rise of Brandenburg-Prussia	16
Enlightened Despotism	17
The Creation of the Russian Empire	18
The Reign of Peter the Great.....	19
Catherine the Great	20
New Causes, New Strategies	21
An Age of Warfare.....	22
The Seven Years’ War	23
The American Revolution Begins	24
Independence for America.....	25
Changes in Agriculture	26
The Coming of the French Revolution	27
Test II (Worksheets 15–27)	28
Answer Key	29–30

The Age of Absolutism

Historians like to divide history into neat, sometimes arbitrary, periods to help keep historical events organized. Terms such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages are examples of this kind of historical packaging. The period covered by this book—roughly 1650 to 1789—is one which historians of European history have labeled the age of Absolutism.

While specific dates are sometimes tricky to use in identifying a sweep of history, the age of Absolutism falls between the reign of young Louis XIV (which began in 1661) and the events leading to the French Revolution in 1789.

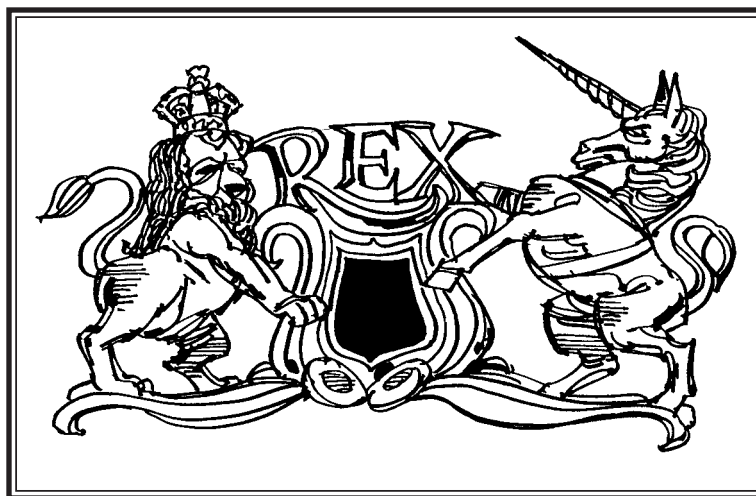
Absolutism was a purposeful attempt by European rulers—kings and queens, emperors and empresses, tsars and tsarinas—to extend their royal or dynastic control over all aspects of life in the lands they ruled.

This heavy-handed approach to ruling was in part based on the old concept of the divine right of kings. This theory assumed that God appointed all monarchs to rule on His behalf. Therefore, any policy, decree, plan, or approach adopted by royalty could not be questioned or disobeyed.

This trend was not new in 1650. Early Absolutism could be found in several corners of Europe in 1500 in France, England, and other states. During the period from 1660 to 1789, Absolutism was most successful in France. A series of French rulers developed a political structure and social system which was later labeled the *ancien régime* or “old regime.” The French king, Louis XIV, did more to consolidate monarchical power than any previous French ruler. His reign was extremely dictatorial.

In part, the Protestant Reformation allowed for the rise of Absolutism. Monarchs in the 1500s used the new faith as an excuse to force their authority to

become the protesting power against control by the Roman Catholic Church, its popes, and other Catholic rulers.



While 17th- and 18th-century leaders ruled by Absolutism, they did not think in terms of unlimited power. They did not think they had the power to rule in any way they chose.

Most absolute rulers did not believe they could or should order decisions which were irresponsible or based on whimsy.

Rulers knew they needed to justify their decisions to several different groups of people within their kingdoms. If a king's or queen's decisions did not meet with the approval of the right people—the nobility, the Church, the merchant classes, or landowners, etc.—those policies and practices would not stand for very long.

Absolute monarchs, therefore, had responsibilities to provide and sustain peace, stability, and economic growth at home and abroad. The years prior to 1650 were fraught with wars, both civil and religious, such as the French religious wars, the Thirty Years' War, and the English Civil War against Charles I. All these conflicts made peace, stability, security, and order difficult.

Many of the rulers of the late 17th century decided the only way to preserve their nation's peace and tranquility was to rule with an emphasis on law and order. To maintain the order of a kingdom, a monarch ruled absolutely. He or she came to symbolize true authority. Such a ruler kept power by controlling the state's military, its legal system, and its tax collections. The result is a historical period where absolute rulers such as Louis XIV of France, Peter the Great of Russia, Frederick William of Prussia, and Maria Theresa of Austria tried to keep good order and control over their states.

1648 Europe: A Map Study

At the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), the political map of Europe, especially western Europe, greatly resembled the map of Europe today. Many of the modern nations such as England, France, Spain, the Scandinavian states, Portugal, and the German states assumed the basic geography they have today.

By comparison, eastern Europe was greatly

different in 1648 compared to its modern counterpart. Austria was larger, Poland much larger still, and the Ottoman Empire covered the territory of several modern states such as Greece and the Slavic states (including Bosnia, Serbia, and others). Russia existed, but did not have the borders it has today. The Baltic states—Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and Finland—were not yet fully developed.

Map Exercise

Using the map, identify the following states as they existed in 1648: Portugal, Spain, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, the German states, Norway, Poland, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, East Prussia, Brandenburg, the Italian states, London, Paris, Madrid, Warsaw, Vienna, and Berlin. Then answer the questions.

1. What European states were territories of the Spanish Hapsburgs?

2. What modern states did 1648 Sweden control? (You may have to use additional sources.)

3. What modern states cover territory that was part of the Ottoman Empire in 1648? (You may have to use additional sources.)

