

In the 1500 and 1600s, many of the European monarchs worked to create powerful kingdoms in which they held all of the political power exclusively. Such kingdoms were ruled by a system known as absolutism. The term “absolutism” describes a form of rule in which the king was not limited by any constitution, law, or other institution. Let’s take a look at three countries where absolute monarchs ruled: France, Prussia, and Russia.



Absolutism is a form of government where all power is held by one individual, like a king. During the Age of Absolutism, absolute monarchs legitimized their rule by using a principle called divine right. Divine right was the belief that a ruler received his or her authority to rule directly from God. The people of the day believed in divine right because they were very religious and their lives revolved around the church.

Under divine right, the monarch was responsible only to God for his or her actions. The people had no role in limiting power.



Absolutism came to France under a set of Bourbon kings that centralized the power of France's government into an absolute monarchy. As a result, France became one of the most powerful nations in Europe during the 1500s and 1600s. One of the first steps that France took after establishing an absolute monarchy was to enter the 30 Years War taking place in the Holy Roman Empire, which is modern-day Germany and Austria.

## Henry IV – The 1st Bourbon King

**HENRY IV-1589-1610**  
 Founder of the House of Bourbon  
 Huguenot who was required to convert to Catholicism in order to become king  
 Issued Edict of Nantes which gave religious freedom to the Huguenots

The first step towards absolutism in France was the reign of Henry IV who was the founder of the house of Bourbon. Henry was a Huguenot and, in order to be crowned King of France, he was forced by the French nobles to convert to Catholicism. Henry realized that religion was a major issue in Europe at this time. He did not want a religious conflict to erupt in France between Catholics and Protestants. Being sympathetic to the French Huguenots, he issued the Edict of Nantes, which gave religious freedom to all French Protestants.

## Louis XIII The 2nd Bourbon King

Followed Henry IV

His mother Marie de Medici ruled for seven years until 1617

Gave power to advisor Cardinal Richelieu

Richelieu strengthened monarchy by reducing the power of the nobles and Huguenots



Henry IV laid the foundation for France to become an absolute kingdom. When he was assassinated in 1610, his nine-year-old son, Louis XIII inherited the throne. Louis was too young to rule France, so his mother Maria de Medici, who came from a wealthy family in Italy, ruled over France for seven years until Louis was able to appoint Cardinal Richelieu as his chief minister. Cardinal Richelieu spent the next 18 years strengthening and centralizing France's government.

Acting ruler of France until Louis XII came of age

Increased power of monarchy

- Weakened nobility by tearing down their castles
- Kept their families as “guests” or imprisoned at the royal palace
- Weakened rights of Huguenots he disregarded the Edict of Nantes!

Made France the richest and most powerful country by entering the Thirty Years War on the side of the Protestants (Northern Germany)

## Cardinal Richelieu



Cardinal Richelieu ran France until the Louis XIII was old enough to take control for himself. The Cardinal increased the power of the monarchy by destroying the power of the Huguenots and the nobles within France. He destroyed the Huguenots' cities, outlawed their armies, and did not enforce the Edict of Nantes, so Huguenots could not gain power.

At the same time, he destroyed the armies of the nobles, tore down their castles, and linked the nobles' fate to the king's by giving them higher posts in the king's court or in the Royal Army. Also, Richelieu forced the nobles and their families to join the king's court at the Royal Palace so he could keep a close eye on the nobles and make them dependent on the King. Cardinal Richelieu made France one of the most powerful countries in Europe by having France enter the 30 Years War on the side of the Protestants to fight against their biggest rival, the Holy Roman Empire.

**Louis XIV**  
**The 3rd Bourbon King**

The "Sun King"

Ruled for 72 years

L'état, c'est moi!  
French for "I am the state!"

Most powerful Bourbon monarch

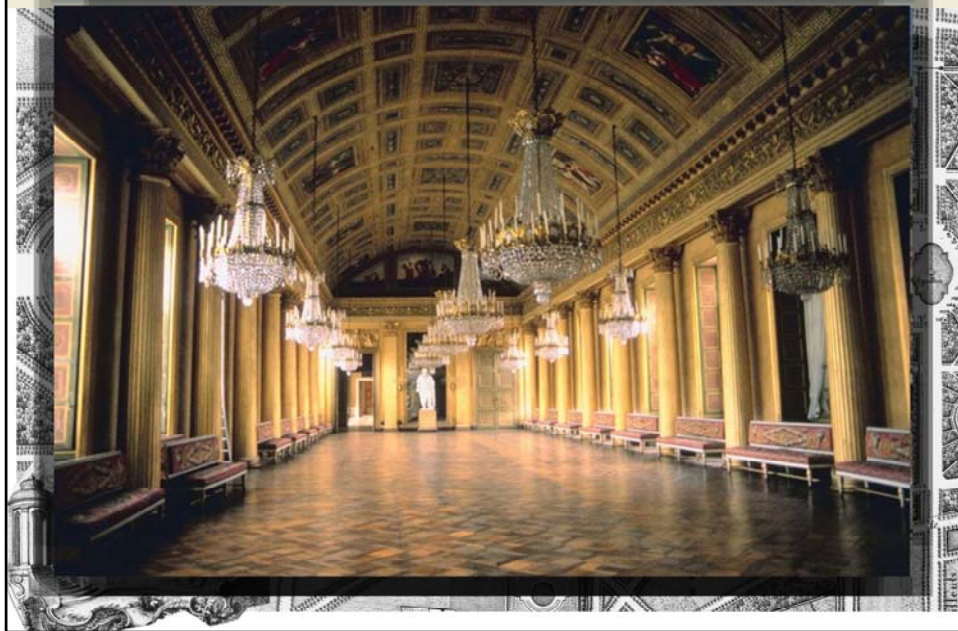
Lived at Palace of Versailles 30 miles outside of Paris where he had a magnificent palace built



The third Bourbon king to take the throne was Louis XIV who inherited the throne in 1643 at the age of five. Louis XIV was the prime example of an absolute monarch in France and he ruled for 72 years. Louis XIV called himself the Sun King because everything in France revolved around him, like the planets revolve around the sun. He is associated with the phrase "L'etat c'est moi", "I am the state."

At the time, no one was more important in France than the king. During his reign, he moved the royal palace from Paris to Versailles which is about 30 miles outside Paris. There, he built one of the grandest symbols of his royal power: the Palace of Versailles. This palace became the perfect symbol of the Sun King's wealth and power and served as the King's home and the seat of the French government for the next one hundred years.

## Louis XIV - Palace of Versailles



Louis spared no expense in making the Palace of Versailles one of the most magnificent palaces in Europe. Construction took tens of thousands of workers several decades to complete. The palace could house at least one thousand people including nobles, government officials, and servants.



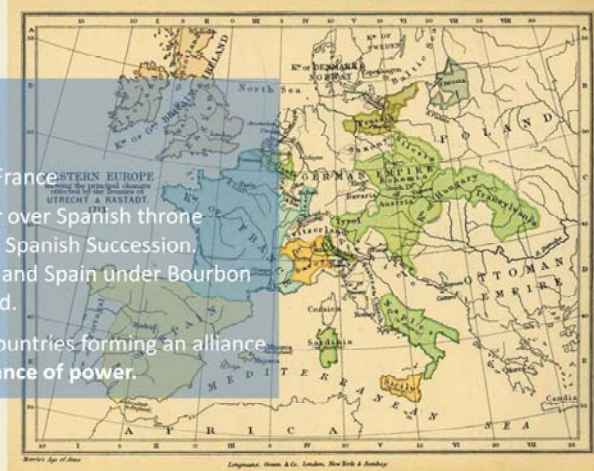
## Louis XIV – Government

Revoked the Edict of Nantes  
Strengthened the military

Fought for territory and glory for France

War of Spanish Succession-War over Spanish throne  
Treaty of Utrecht ended War of Spanish Succession.  
The treaty claimed both France and Spain under Bourbon rulers, but could never be united.

Louis' aggression led to other countries forming an alliance against France to achieve a **balance of power**.



Western Europe After the Treaty of Utrecht 1713

Louis XIV accomplished three things that united France and made it the strongest country in Europe at the time.

1. He limited the power of the Huguenots by revoking the Edict of Nantes.
2. Louis strengthened the military and made it the strongest in Europe by developing a professional army of three hundred thousand soldiers that was paid, fed, trained, and supplied by the state.
3. Louis used this army to enforce policies at home and abroad fighting for territory and glory for France.

France's growing strength led to imbalances in the power among European nations at the time. One of the primary causes of the War of Spanish Succession was that Charles II, the last of the Spanish Habsburgs, died leaving his grandson Phillip II of the French Bourbon family as the heir to the throne. Phillip was in line to the throne of France. The possible unification of Spain and France under one Bourbon monarch threatened the balance of power in Europe.

In response, Great Britain, the Holy Roman Empire, the Dutch Republic, and Portugal fought against France and Spain so that they would not become too powerful.



## Louis XIV – Government

- Jean-Baptiste Colbert taxed the peasants and middle class.
- The poor carried most of the tax burden.
- Louis XIV's France flourished in arts and culture, but he left France in financial despair.

**Looking Ahead**

- Major conflicts between nobles and middle class will lead to the French Revolution.

Louis XIV's tendency to overspend on luxuries, such as the Palace of Versailles, had long term effects for the nation.

Louis appointed Jean-Baptiste Colbert to become his finance minister. Colbert pursued mercantilist policies to help the French economy by encouraging overseas colonies in North America and regulating trade between the colonies and the mother country. He also protected France's manufacturing sector by putting a high tariff, or tax, on goods imported from other countries.

Colbert promoted policies of no taxes on the nobles and large taxes on the peasants and middle class, which helped make France very wealthy. However, it was still not enough for Louis to maintain his luxurious lifestyle and fight his foreign wars throughout Europe. The king was often short of cash, which caused conflict between the nobles and the middle class over taxes and led to the French Revolution in 1789.

[Photo credit: Myrabella.]

## The German States

**Holy Roman Empire**

**Austrian Habsburgs ruled**

**Maria Theresa inherited throne in 1740**

**Pragmatic sanction-** a royal statement that allowed for a woman to inherit all Hapsburg lands.

**Strengthened central government**

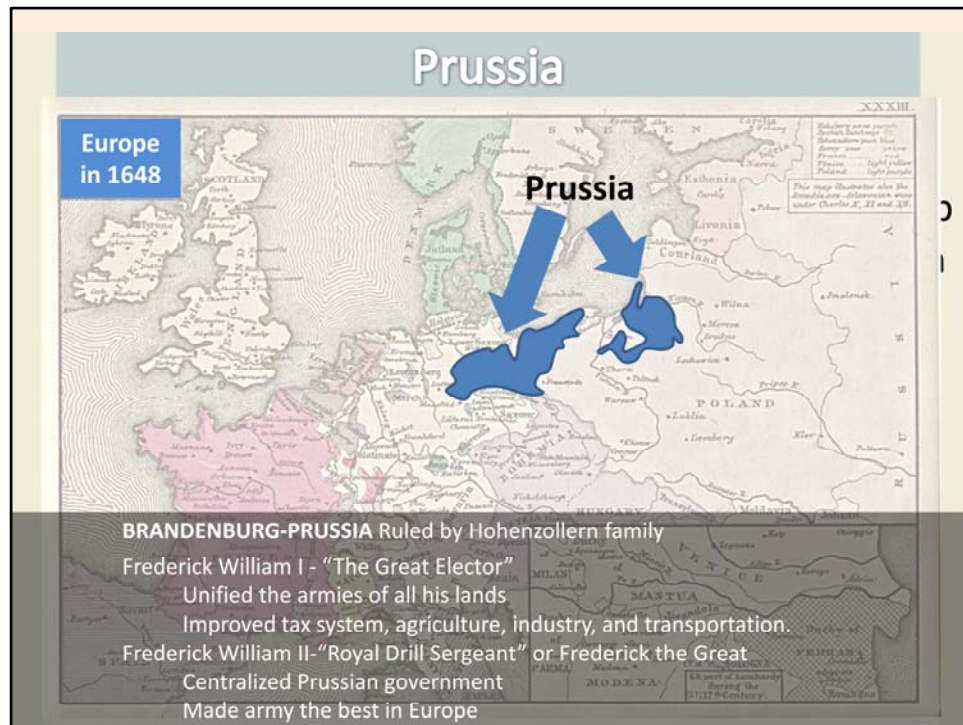
**Increased trade and industry**

**THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR**

- Country or area with a Protestant majority
- Habsburg Spain
- Habsburg Austria

- 1 1620-1623: Defeat of the Catholics and the Electoral Palatinate
- 2 1625-1629: Intervention and defeat of Christian IV of Denmark
- 3 1630-1632: Intervention of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden
- 4 1635: Intervention of France against Spain and the Emperor
- 5 1642: Occupation of Rhineland
- 6 1645-1648: Treaty and Sweden's campaign in Germany

The Holy Roman Empire was weakened by the 30 Years War. The Austrian Habsburgs controlled the remnants of the Holy Roman Empire in what is today modern-day Germany and Austria. In 1740, Maria Theresa inherited the Holy Roman Empire from her father, Charles VI. This was a problem because no woman had ever controlled Hapsburg lands before. Charles VI persuaded other European rulers to accept his daughter Maria Theresa as the Empress of the Holy Roman Empire. During her reign, she was able to centralize the government under her control.



The state of Prussia was in the area of what is modern-day Germany and its surrounding areas. After the 30 Years War, the Holy Roman Empire broke up into individual German states. The first of the Hohenzollern rulers of Prussia was Frederick William I, known as "The Great Elector" because he was elected to the position of king by other northern German princes. Under the leadership of Frederick William II, or Frederick the Great, Prussia was able to expand its territory by using their military to gain power.

[Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.]

## FREDERICK II-“Frederick the Great”

FREDERICK II-  
“Frederick the Great” 1740

Takes Silesia from Austria- starts  
War of Austrian Succession

Maria Theresa did not settle!  
The Seven Years War was between  
Austria and Prussia over Silesia and  
between France and Great Britain  
(known as French and Indian War in  
America)

**RESULT:** Prussia gets Silesia, Britain  
is strongest colonial power in North  
America.



Frederick the Great became the ruler of Prussia the same year as Maria Theresa became ruler in Austria. Sensing that Maria Theresa was weak, Frederick the Great took over the province of Silesia from Austria. This began the War of Austrian Succession. This war was also known as the Seven Years War, and in North America it was called the French and Indian War. This war was a global conflict that resulted in Prussia gaining real control of Silesia and Great Britain gaining control of Canada from France.

## Political Developments in Russia

### Ivan III or “Ivan the Great”

- United Russia from Mongol rule.



### Ivan IV or “Ivan the Terrible”

- 1533-1584-Executed many, including his own son for treason.
- Sought to reduce power of the **boyars**(nobles) who threatened his power.
- Increased trade, introduced the printing press to Russia, gained territory



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Russia freed itself from Mongol rule when Ivan the Great ascended to power in 1480. Ivan took the title of Czar and began to expand Russia’s territory. His son, Ivan the Terrible, ruled through terror and fear and left Russia weak after his death. Ivan the Terrible executed many of his enemies and even his son for plotting to overthrow him. After his death, Russia entered a period known as the “Time of Troubles.”

[Map of Moscow from Civitates Orbis Terrarum published in Cologne in 1572.]

## Russia – Romanov Dynasty

1584-1613

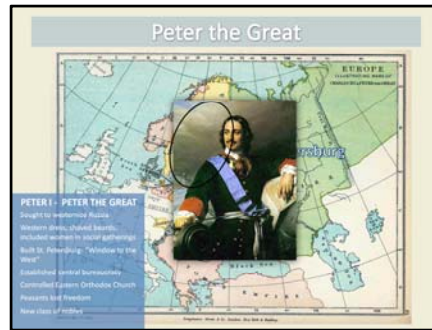
“Time of Troubles” in Russia  
Famine, epidemics, peasant revolts

1613 Michael Romanov elected czar  
Romanov dynasty ruled until 1917



During the “Time of Troubles,” Russia experienced famine because of crop failures and diseases that spread throughout the country. At the same time, the nobility, called boyars, struggled to gain power and eventually elected Michael Romanov to serve as Russia’s Czar.

The Romanov dynasty ruled Russia for over 300 years from 1613 to 1917, ending with the execution of Czar Nicholas during World War I. When Michael Romanov became Czar, Russia was still operating under a feudal system where landowning nobles had great power. Many common people were serfs, a status similar to slavery, where people are forced to remain and work a certain plot of land for their entire life.



Russia became an absolute monarchy under the leadership of Peter the Great, who came into power in 1682. Peter was a towering figure of nearly seven feet tall at a time when the average male height was about five-and-a-half feet.

At a young age, he realized that Russia was behind the rest of Europe in manufacturing, technology, education, and society. He toured different countries in Western Europe learning various customs, ideas, and even shipbuilding techniques. When he returned home, he embarked on a rapid process of Westernizing his country to make it more like Western Europe. Despite resistance from the Russian nobility, he instituted reforms that improved the status of women, introduced a Western European calendar and new agricultural products, increased manufacturing, instituted a newspaper to inform Russia's people of the news, and changed social customs. This made Russia seem more like Western Europe. Some of these social customs included dressing more European and having men shave their beards.

Peter the Great knew that in order to make Russia a world power, he would have to increase Russia's sea power. He waged war against Sweden and Finland to try to gain a port on the Baltic Sea. After years of struggle, Russia finally defeated those two countries in the Great Northern War. Russia secured land in a peace settlement along the Baltic coast, where Peter the Great built the city of St. Petersburg on a swamp. The city of St. Petersburg was to be Russia's window on the West that connected Russia to the rest of Europe.

Peter the Great is also credited with ruling Russia with absolute authority. He was able to do this by strengthening the title of Czar. He eliminated Russia's religious leader, the patriarch, and took control of the Russian Orthodox Church. He reduced the power of the wealthiest boyars by giving power to people in lower ranking families. He also modernized Russia's army and used it as a tool to enforce his authority over the country.



## Peter the Great's Legacy



Peter the Great's accomplishments transformed Russia politically and culturally. For the most part, he was very successful in achieving his goals, although some achievements came at a great cost of human life. For example, thousands of peasants died while building the city of St. Petersburg. The life of the average Russian didn't improve much either, but Russia became a European power by the end of Peter's reign. Because he aligned Russian society and technology more closely to Western Europe, Peter is often given credit for "Westernizing" Russia.