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 roughly around 1650 to 1789—is one which historians of European history have labeled the "Age of Absolutism". 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 protecting 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.

**Directions: Answer all questions completely.**

1. What did European rulers attempt during Absolutism?
2. Why did rulers believe they had a right to rule?
3. In paragraph 3 how did the author justify a need for a king?
4. How did a ruler keep power, so to keep order?
The Age of Elizabeth

The political moves made by King Henry VIII against the Catholic Church during his reign did not ensure England would become a Protestant nation. When Henry died, his son, Edward VI [ruled 1547–1553], came to the throne at the age of 10. Those who helped the young king rule were sympathetic to the Protestant movement. Parliament gave the Protestants further legitimacy by legalizing clerical marriage and adopting a prayerbook of Protestant teachings in 1549. English printers published dozens of Protestant pamphlets. As in France, Protestant mobs destroyed Catholic churches and burned libraries and Catholic books. English replaced Latin in church services.

When Edward died, his half-sister, Mary Tudor [ruled 1553–1558], came to the throne as queen. She was a committed Catholic and tried to restore the power of the Catholic faith in England. To ensure that result, Mary married Philip II of Spain in 1554. At that time, Spain was considered by many in England to be her strongest enemy. For that reason, her marriage was not popular with her subjects. Mary ordered the persecution of Protestants across the land. Approximately 300 people were burned at the stake. Despite this religious campaign, which gave Mary the label of Bloody Mary, Protestants in England emerged stronger than ever. Any question about the religious future of Protestants and Catholics in England was settled with Mary’s death and the rise of her half-sister, Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.

Elizabeth I [ruled 1558–1603] became one of England’s greatest monarchs. She did much to ensure that Protestantism would dominate the Christianity of England. Elizabeth declared herself the supreme governor of the Church of England. She removed from office all of Mary’s bishops, except one. In 1559, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, eliminating all of Mary’s pro-Catholic legislation. Parliament also passed the Act of Uniformity, accepting a modified version of the Protestant prayerbook created during the reign of Edward VI. Catholics made periodic attempts to reverse Elizabeth’s reforms. When the Duke of Norfolk staged a Catholic revolt against the queen in 1569, she had him executed. She did not, however, order the wholesale slaughter of Catholic leaders across her kingdom. In fact, in all the years of Elizabeth’s rule, only four people were executed as heretics, and they were all Anabaptists. Several hundred were jailed for their religious activities, however, and approximately 200 were executed for treason associated with their political and religious activities.

Elizabeth did face serious challenges during her reign. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (not to be confused with Bloody Mary), was Elizabeth’s first cousin once removed. She was a great granddaughter of Henry VII, and therefore had valid claims to the throne of England. Mary was a Catholic. (Her first husband had been King Francis II of France.) When the Scottish lords rebelled against her in 1568, she abdicated her throne and sought refuge in England, which Elizabeth granted her. Once in England (while technically under “house arrest”), Mary cooperated with every plot to remove Elizabeth from the throne. In 1586, Elizabeth ordered Mary’s execution after a letter surfaced in which Mary offered her rights of succession to the English throne to Philip II of Spain. Elizabeth had Mary’s head cut off with an ax.

Following Mary’s beheading in 1587, Pope Sixtus V joined with Philip II in a Catholic crusade to remove Protestant Elizabeth I from her throne and destroy English Protestantism. In 1588, Philip sent a fleet of 130 ships—called the Spanish Armada. As Philip II prepared to launch a massive attack, he counted his navy as one of the largest and most powerful in the world. His great armada, called the armada católica, or Catholic Armada, was ready to sail early in 1588. Altogether, the Spanish Armada included 130 ships, weighing 58,000 tons. On board were 30,000 men, roughly 20,000 of whom were soldiers; the remainder were sailors. They were augmented by 2,400 cannons. This impressive collection of military hardware and personnel made this armada the largest ever assembled on the high seas. Pope Sixtus V officially blessed the ships and their crews. He wholeheartedly supported the expedition. The primary goal of the Spanish attack on Elizabeth I’s England was to stamp out the Protestant movement and to claim England as Philip’s own. Sixtus promised Philip one million gold ducats once the Spanish landed their first troops in England. Facing this great fleet of large, heavily armed Spanish ships was an English fleet of approximately 110 ships, many of them merchant vessels pressed into duty as naval ships.
Ships of both countries met on the high seas for years prior to this 1588 conflict. English sea captains, called sea dogs, began raiding Spanish vessels in the Atlantic and elsewhere in 1570. Many of the Spanish victims were treasure ships laden with gold and silver from Spain’s New World colonies. English raiders such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins frequently plundered the rich cargoes of these Spanish galleons, returning the booty to England and to their queen, Elizabeth. In one three-year period, from 1577 to 1580, Francis Drake sailed completely around the globe, raiding Spanish ships as he went, and returned to England with enough Spanish bullion to equal twice the queen’s annual revenues. Philip’s attack on England would have come earlier than 1588 except for his long struggle with the Spanish Netherlands in which Protestants struggled to free themselves from Spanish control, something they had achieved with help from the English by 1585.

When at last the Spanish Armada set sail, Philip II was assured they would succeed in their mission. However, things began to go wrong almost before the ships had left their Spanish ports. Many of the Spanish ships, such as smaller galleys, were designed for use on the Mediterranean Sea, and were not suited for use in the choppy waters of the Atlantic. The commander of the expedition was a soldier, not a seaman, causing serious doubts about his abilities as a naval leader. The crewmen of the Armada spoke six different languages. Because they were a mixed group of Portuguese, Catalans, Castilians, Irishmen, and English Catholics, communication was difficult from ship to ship. Unused to ocean travel, many of the soldiers became seasick. Much of the food and water on board spoiled, for the barrels and casks in which supplies were stored were made from unseasoned wood.

To make matters worse for Spain, the Spanish government published reports made by the Armada’s commander, Medina Sidonia, which detailed the strengths of the fleet. The English commander acquired a copy of the report. The fighting lasted an entire week beginning on July 21. When the two navies engaged on July 28 at Gravelines, the English completed their defeat of the Spanish. They set fire to ships loaded with gunpowder and sailed them into the Armada. The Spanish navy broke off the fight, fleeing north and sailing completely around the British Isles. Great storms hit the ships, destroying some and crippling others. In all, the Spanish lost approximately 40 ships. Thousands of Spanish troops died. The English lost only 100 men and not a single ship. Philip’s quest to destroy Protestantism in England died at sea.