7 European Political Development during the 17th Century (Part 2): French Absolutism

Unlike England, absolute monarchy became established in France during the 17th century

Limits were placed on the nobility and religious conformity was enforced

The previous rulers in France had provoked a rebellion among the nobility when they tried to impose direct rule throughout France in all levels of government

Louis XIV, however, chose to work through the established social and political institutions commanded by the nobility, rather than attacking and destroying them

He made the monarchy the most powerful institution in France while assuring the nobility and other influential ranks that he and the monarchy posed no threat to their private power and standing

Once the nobility understood that the king would protect their local authority, they supported his central authority

The king and the nobility agreed that they needed each other, but they also agreed that Louis XIV was the senior partner in the relationship

Louis XIV had learned from his predecessors

Henry IV had come to the throne at the end of the French wars of religion in 1589

He tried to reign in the nobility, particularly the regional governors and parlements (courts) and the powerful Parlement (court) of Paris

The chief interests of these institutions was the protection of their privileges

Since the war-weary French sought a restoration of order, Henry IV and his finance minister, the duke of Sully were able to expand royal authority

They established royal monopolies on gunpowder, mines, and salt

They began a canal construction project to integrate France

They introduced the corvée, a labor tax that drafted workers to build and maintain roads

Henry IV was assassinated in 1610 and Sully retired

Henry IV’s son Louis XIII was only 9 years old, so France was governed by his mother, Marie de Médicis

Since Marie did not receive support from the French nobility, she turned to Spain for support and negotiated a ten-year mutual defense pact and a marriage alliance between France and Spain

Perhaps the best move made by Queen Marie was the appointment of Cardinal Richelieu as the king’s chief advisor

Richelieu became the architect of the success that the French monarchy began to experience in the first half of the 17th century

Of course, Cardinal Richelieu was a devout Catholic, but he felt that France’s interests were best served by checking the power of the Catholic Habsburgs

He endorsed the Queen’s treaty with Habsburg Spain, but he was determined to contain Spanish and Habsburg power, even if that meant supporting Protestant forces

Richelieu supported the Protestant forces of Gustavus Adolphus during the 30 Years War

His influence with Protestant Sweden saved Catholic Bavaria from Swedish attack and he won freedom of religion for Catholics in places his Protestant allies conquered

Thanks to Richelieu, France emerged from the 30 Years War with substantial gains in land and political influence in Europe

Domestically, Richelieu implemented a rigorous centralization of royal government

Richelieu was allowed to make most of the decisions of state, and he stepped up the campaign Henry IV had begun against separatist provincial nobles and parlements (courts)

He appointed civil servants called *intendants* to guard against abuses in the sale of royal privileges

Such as the right to collect taxes and sell licenses

He established that there was only one law in France

If the nobility disobeyed the king’s edicts, they were imprisoned or executed

Of course, this heavy-handed imposition of centralized authority didn’t win Richelieu many friends in the nobility

In 1629, Richelieu began a campaign against the Huguenots, and royal armies occupied important Huguenot cities and imposed the Peace of Alais which denied Huguenots the right to maintain garrisoned cities, separate political organizations, and independent law courts

Richelieu’s attempt to curtail religious freedom in France, however, was prevented by his alliance with Protestant powers in the 30 Years War

However, these measures set France on the path to establishing Catholic dominance under Louis XIV

Nevertheless, Richelieu was a modern politician in that he understood the use of propaganda and the importance in mobilizing popular support for government policies

He employed the arts and the printing press to defend his actions and to persuade the people to accept things done for the reasons of the state

Louis XIII survived Richelieu by only five months, and his since heir Louis XIV was only five years old, the government was entrusted to Richelieu’s protégé Cardinal Mazarin

Many members of the nobility and the commercial ranks had deeply resented Richelieu’s efforts to build a strong centralized monarchy

Thus, from 1649 to 1652, Mazarin had to deal with the violent political backlash in the form widespread rebellions known as the *Fronde* (slingshot)

The uprisings were exploited by the nobility and townspeople who wanted to reverse the move towards absolute monarchy in an effort to preserve local autonomy

When the Parlement (court) of Paris initiated the Fronde in 1649 the nobility, “the many” triumphed over the crown, “the one”

Mazarin made a concession to the nobility by releasing some aristocratic prisoners and then he and Louis XIV went into exile

Mazarin left France and Louis XIV fled Paris

When the nobility failed to restore order and anarchy and instability emerged, sentiment for the king’s return materialized among the people

Louis and Mazarin returned in 1652 and the *Fronde* convinced the French that a strong king was preferable to the chaos created by many competing regional powers and nobility

However, Louis XIV and his advisors were now beginning to realize that the heavy-handed policies of Richelieu and Mazarin might endanger the power of the monarchy

Mazarin died in 1661and Louis XIV assumed personal control of the government

Unlike his predecessors, Louis XIV didn’t appoint a single chief minister

This had the advantage of making revolt against royal authority more difficult by removing the rationalization that the rebels were opposing the king’s wicked ministers and not the crown itself

Mazarin had prepared Louis XIV to be a strong leader, and his experiences during the *Fronde* convinced him to be a strong ruler

Louis XIV devised to strategies to enhance the power of the monarchy

First, he became the minister of propaganda and political image making

He never missed an opportunity to remind the French people of the grandeur of the crown

Second, Louis XIV made sure that the French nobles and influential ranks benefitted from the growth of his authority

For example, although Louis XIV was in control of foreign affairs, he conferred informally with regional parlements (courts) before making rulings that would affect them

Also, he rarely enacted economic regulations without consulting local opinion, and local parlements (courts) were given considerable influence in such matters

Louis XIV transformed the traditional French respect for the crown into a belief in the king’s divine right to absolute authority

Louis XIV’s tutor, Bishop Jacque-Bénigne Bossuet, provided the rationale for this concept

Bossuet was a champion of the “Gallican liberties,” which were traditional exemptions that the French clergy claimed from interference in their affairs by the papacy

The divine right theory of Bossuet gave the king spiritual legitimacy as the caretaker of national churches

Bossuet based his theory of divine right on the examples of rulers in the Old Testament who had been appointed and were only answerable to God

Only God could judge kings

Kings was duty-bound to honor God’s will, and as God’s representative on earth they were not accountable to princes and parelements (courts)

As a result of this reasoning, Louis XIV could claim that he was at one with the state. He often exclaimed, “I am the state”

One of the most successful instruments of Louis XIV’s propaganda was the palace he built at Versailles in 1682

The palace was a temple to royalty and a proclamation of the glory of the king of France

It was home to Louis XIV and thousands of his subjects, including:

Important nobles

Royal officials

Servants

The maintenance of Versailles and its expansion continued through Louis XIV’s life, and it consumed over half of the royal income

However, Versailles paid political dividends and proved well worth the investment

By organizing life at court around his personal routine, Louis XIV demonstrated that he alone was the sole source of power and privilege in France

Nobles competed for the honor of being present at intimate moments in the king’s day

They groveled to assist the king in holding his candle or assisting him with the adjustment of his clothes

These duties were organized by an elaborate court etiquette which was designed to domesticate and trivialize the nobility

The nobility was barred by law from high government positions

By being kept busy with elaborate rituals and play, they had little time for or interest in revolt

They were driven to financial dependency on the king as luxurious dress codes and high-stakes gambling drove them into debt

The real business was handled by Louis XIV and members of his council responsible for foreign affairs, domestic relations, and the economy

The members of these councils were talented self-made men or members of families with long histories of loyal service to the crown

Louis XIV trusted these advisors since they had no independent bases of support in the provinces and relied solely on the king for their positions in government and power

Louis XIV believed that political stability required religious conformity

However, the first targets of Louis XIV’s campaign for religious conformity was Catholics called Jansenists

Although Jesuits had been barred from France in the 16th century by Catherine de Médicis during the time of Henry IV due to their close connections to Spain, they were reinstated in 1603

The Jesuits swore an oath of allegiance to the king and acquired licenses to set up colleges and conduct various public activities

The Jesuits soon became royal confessors and dominated the education of the upper ranks

They became committed to the enforcement of the decrees of the Council of Trent, or the Counterreformation, throughout France

Jansenism had appeared in France in the 1630s

It was a movement named for a Flemish theologian and bishop named Cornelius Jansen, who was critical of the Jesuits

Jansen followed the teachings of St Augustine who emphasized the role divine grace played in human salvation

Jansenists objected to the Jesuit’s emphasis on free will and good works, and followed Augustine that original sin had so corrupted humankind that individuals could do nothing good or secure salvation without divine grace

The Jansenist emphasis on salvation without divine grace led the Jesuits to accuse Jansenists of being Protestants

The conflict between the Jansenists and the Jesuits also had political implications

Jansen had ties with a prominent Parisian family, the Arnaulds, who like many believed that the Jesuits arranged the assassination of Henry IV in 1610

In the 1640s the Arnaulds charged that the Jesuits used confession to allow people to easily escape their sins

In 1653, Pope Innocent X declared Jansenist propositions concerning grace and salvation as heresies and banned works by Jansen

In 1660 Louis XIV banned Jansenism and thus eliminated the best hope for peacefully unifying France’s religions since Jansenism appealed to the Huguenots

Louis XIV saw himself as a warrior king and his aggressiveness led to many of France’s neighbors to fear French aggression and to form coalitions against him

Louis XIV’s aggression appears to be guided by his desire to aggressively defend what he regarded as France’s interests

These interests centered on achieving a secure northern border

Frustrating the ambitions of the Habsburgs

Dealing with the problem of succession to the thrones of various states

The economy of France was mostly agrarian and was so skillfully managed by Louis XIV’s financial minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert that France was able to support a huge standing army

Colbert centralized the French economy just as Louis XIV had centralized the government

The economy managed by Colbert had been called mercantilism

Mercantilism was aimed at maximizing exports and minimizing imports to conserve the bullion (gold and silver) foreign sales brought to the exporting nation

Colbert relied on the state supervision of industries and tariffs to regulate the flow of imports and exports

He established new national industries and imposed a strict regimen for workers in state-run factories

He simplified the administrative bureaucracy

He reduced the number of tax-exempt nobles

He increased the direct tax on the peasantry that provided for much of the king’s income

Thanks to Colbert, Louis XIV could afford an army of 250,000 men

Louis XIV’s father-son team of war ministers, Michel Le Tellier and his son created a disciplined professional army, restricted to single men, who served under a system of promotion by merit, and were well paid

The conduct of the military was also monitored by civil servants to make sure they kept in line under the authority of the crown

The French army also employed new technology and concepts

The arts of fortifying and besieging towns were advanced

Trench warfare was invented

The concept of the defensive frontier was developed

Louis XIV’s first foreign war was the War of Devolution (1667-1668)

The war was fought to press the claim of Louis XIV’s wife, Marie Thérèse had to Spain’s Belgian provinces

Louis was confronted by an alliance of England, Sweden, and Holland

In 1668 he was compelled to sign a treaty that ended the war and gave him control of some towns bordering the Spanish Netherlands (Belgium)

In 1670, Louis XIV was able to persuade the English to join in an alliance against the Dutch and in 1672 France attacked Holland

He knew that he had to neutralize Holland before he could acquire the Spanish Netherlands

This attack was countered by William III of Orange and the future king of England

Orange persuaded the Holy Roman Emperor, Spain, Lorraine, and Brandenburg to join him in stopping Louis XIV

In 1676 a French victory over the Dutch fleet gave France control over the Mediterranean

And yet the Dutch lost no territory in the war and the conflict ended with no clear winner

After this war with Holland, Louis XIV turned inward and focused on imposing religious conformity on his subjects

The Edict of Nantes of 1598 had established a legal Protestant minority in France, but relations with the Catholic majority was never good

The French Catholic Church denounced Calvinism as a heresy and declared the persecution of Protestantism as a patriotic duty

Louis XIV banned Huguenots from government offices and the professions

He raided their taxes

Quartered troops in their towns

An in October 1685, he outlawed their faith by revoking the Edict of Nantes

Protestants churches and schools closed, and Protestant clergy went into exile

Those who didn’t convert of Catholicism were enslaved and Protestant children were turned over to Catholic priests for baptism

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes was a foreign policy blunder

It persuaded Protestant countries that Louis XIV had to be stopped at all costs

More than 250,000 French Protestants fled to England, Germany, Holland, and the New World helping stiffen foreign opposition to Louis XIV

Many Huguenots who remained in France formed guerilla bands to fight the king contributing to domestic instability

In 1681, Louis XIV conquered the free city of Strasbourg, thereby prompting a new defensive coalition against him called the League of Augsburg

The League included England, Spain, Sweden, Holland, Bavaria, Saxony, the

Palatinate, and Emperor Leopold of Austria and the Holy Roman Empire

This conflict is known as the Nine Years War (1689-1697) in Europe

The conflict in the New World was known as King Philip’s War and was a struggle over the colonies in New England and Canada

The war ended in 1697 as mutual exhaustion set in and forced a settlement

The treaty that brought the conflict to an end secured the borders of Holland and thwarted Louis XIV’s attempts to expand into Germany

Louis XIV tried a fourth time to win dominance over Europe leading to the War of the Spanish Succession from 1701 to 1714

Charles II of Spain died in November 1700

Louis XIV and Emperor Leopold each claimed the Spanish throne for their grandsons

Louis XIV had the better claim

His grandson, Philip of Anjou’s grandmother and Louis XIV’s wife, Marie Thérèse, was the older sister of the Spanish princess, Margaret Thérèse, who had married Leopold

However, when Marie Thérèse married Louis XIV, she had renounced her claim to the Spanish throne

Thus, the legitimate claim to the Spanish throne went to Margaret Thérèse

Louis XIV feared that the Habsburgs would dominate Europe if they ruled both Spain and the Holy Roman Empire

Most nations, however, feared France more then they did the Habsburgs

However, even before Charles II died, there had been negotiations to divide his inheritance in a way that would preserve the balance of power in Europe

Unfortunately, Charles II upset these negotiations by bequeathing his estate to Philip of Anjou

Surprised, Louis XIV ignored the partition arrangements and sent his grandson to become the king of Spain, and he invaded the Spanish Netherlands

In 1701, England, Holland, and the Holy Roman Empire formed the Grand Alliance to oppose the French thereby starting the War of the Spanish Succession

In this war the French army was poorly finances, equipped, and led

The English forces were superior in weaponry, tactics, and leadership

The English secured important victories in 1704 and 1706, and famine and excessive taxation in France sparked revolts that tore France apart

Still Louis XIV could not accept the stiff terms the alliance demanded for peace, and he continued the war until his forces were so soundly defeated that he sued for an armistice with England in 1712 and with Holland in 1714

Philip V remained king of Spain, but Gibraltar was given to England, thereby setting the stage for England to become an important Mediterranean power

Spain continued its decline after the war

The 16th century belonged to Spain

The 17th century belonged to France

The 18th century would see the rise of Britain

The French monarchy was still strong when Louis XIV died in 1715

However, its finances were insecure, and its debts were great

Its tightly centralized control of political and economic life had suppressed the development of representative institutions and the infantilization and dependency of the French nobility through the use of the palace at Versailles, diminished the capacity of the nobility to provide effective leadership

Louis XIV’s wars also gave the army and the aristocracy the thirst for war and military glory and culminated in the participation in a series of wars throughout the 18th century that doomed the French government from finding solid financial footing for the government

On the positive side, Louis XIV erected magnificent buildings, provided patronage for important artists, and brought a certain majesty to France

He skillfully handled the French nobility and the fractious bourgeoisie

He appointed talented ministers and advisors

And he created a French empire by expanding trade with Asia and by colonizing America in Canada and Louisiana

Louis XIV was an absolute ruler, but he did not establish an oppressive police state

His interests were the traditional responsibilities of kings

Making war and peace

Regulation of religion

Oversite of economic activity

Even at the height of his power, local leaders enjoyed considerable independence as long as they didn’t interfere with his plans on a national level

The French people showed little interest in pursuing a more representative form of government

They simply did not have the traditions upon which to build such form of government or society