Centralization of Power and the Growth of States

In the seventeenth century, France replaced Spain as the most powerful kingdom in Western Europe. An absolute monarchy developed in France. The seventeenth century is sometimes referred to as the Age of Absolutism, when powerful monarchies were the rule throughout much of Europe. European monarchs justified their claims to absolute power by promoting the belief that they had a divine right to rule and that God had chosen kings to rule. Louis XIV became known as the Sun King, or the center of power, and this absolutist power developed into the model for other rulers to emulate. The palace of Versailles came to symbolize the authority of the French monarchy. (see Figure 1)

Cardinal Richelieu served as the chief minister of Louis XIII in the early seventeenth century, wielding great power and enacting policies and administrative reforms that added to the power and prestige of the monarchy. He was succeeded by Cardinal Mazarin who served Louis XIII until his death, and then Mazarin served as the head of the government of the five year-old Louis XIV who had ascended to the throne in 1643. Mazarin further consolidated the power of the monarchy by orchestrating the defeat of the revolt of the French nobles, the Fronde. (see Figure 2)

When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis XIV assumed the reins of power and France emerged as a great power under his leadership. Louis was able to consolidate his political power by enticing the powerful nobles to spend the majority of their time at his court in Versailles and removing them from his royal council. The French aristocracy was entertained and controlled by ceremony and etiquette. The ministers and secretaries of the bureaucracy were now totally dependent upon the good will of Louis as he began to dominate of the policy-making machinery of the government. Louis revoked his grandfather’s Edict of Nantes, and he fought four costly wars, mainly to acquire lands on France’s eastern borders. Louis also changed the religious policy of France when he issued the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685, prohibiting the practice of Protestantism. As a result, as
many as 200,000 Huguenots left France and moved to Protestant nations in Europe. (see Figure 3)

Under the leadership of Louis XIV, France fought four major wars between 1667 and 1713. France maintained a standing army of 100,000 men during peacetime, which rose to 400,000 in wartime.

France invaded the Spanish Netherlands and annexed the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine in 1679. France then fought the War of the League of Augsburg from 1689 to 1697. In this war, France fought against a coalition that included most of the major powers of Europe, including Spain, England, and the Holy Roman Empire. This long, difficult conflict was somewhat indecisive; however, following this conflict, France continued to be a dominant power in Europe. Not long after this war, another even more crucial conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713) was an attempt by the major powers of Europe to prevent the unification of the French and Spanish monarchies under the Bourbon dynasty. Charles II, the Hapsburg king of Spain, had died without a direct heir and had bequeathed his throne to a grandson of his half-sister and Louis XIV of France. (see Figure 4)
At the same time that France was emerging as Europe’s most powerful nation, the kingdom of Spain was experiencing a period of decline. Under Philip II, Spain had to declare bankruptcy in 1596, and under Philip III, the Spanish government declared bankruptcy again in 1607. During the reign of Philip IV, his minister Gaspar de Guzman enacted numerous reforms in an attempt to slow down and reverse the decline of the Spanish kingdom; however, these reforms were not enough and Spain continued its downward spiral, losing territory and prestige in the Thirty Years’ War. (see Figure 5)

In the seventeenth century, two German states emerged as powerful absolute monarchies in Central and Eastern Europe. Brandenburg-Prussia developed into an important monarchy under the leadership of the Hohenzollern Dynasty. Frederick William the Great Elector in the seventeenth century built up a large and well trained army and a system of taxation that ensured that the army would remain a powerful institution. Frederick William gained the support of the Junkers, the wealthy nobles of Prussia, by supporting the domination of the peasantry by the nobility. Frederick III supported the Holy Roman Emperor in the War of Spanish Succession and in return he received the permission of the emperor to assume the title of being the first King of Prussia. (see Figure 6)

The Hapsburg family had played an important role in Europe as the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire; however, they were never able to consolidate their rule over the German states of the empire and in the seventeenth century, they turned their attention to Southeastern Europe. The Austrian Hapsburg family began to expand their personal territories centering on Austria. Under the leadership of Leopold I, the Hapsburgs began to expand eastward, engaging in numerous conflicts with the Turks. The Turks laid siege to the Hapsburg capital city of Vienna in 1683, but after this the Turks were decisively defeated by the Austrians. Austria pushed the Turks out of Hungary and, along with the acquisition of the territories of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Galicia, the Austrians were able to build a multinational empire. At the end of the War of Spanish
Succession, the Austrians also ended up with control of territories in Italy and the Spanish Netherlands. (see Figure 7)

Another powerful kingdom was in the formation process in Eastern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Russia had changed from a fledgling principality into a major power. Ivan IV—The Terrible—was the first Muscovite ruler to declare himself the first Tsar of Russia. Following Ivan IV, a new dynasty, the Romanov Dynasty, emerged in the early seventeenth century. Russia was a very stratified society with powerful nobility, the Boyars. The overwhelming majority of the population consisted of poor peasant farmers who were the serfs of the nobility. (see Figure 8)

During the reign of Peter the Great from 1689 to 1725, Russia emerged as a great power. Peter traveled to the West in 1697-1698. Peter, an unusually tall man of six-feet nine-inches, was a dynamic personality who was determined to bring civilization and prosperity to his underdeveloped Russian Empire. Borrowing ideas from the West, he reorganized his armed forces and the central government. He divided Russia up into provinces and attempted to gain control over the Russian Orthodox Church. Peter also introduced Western customs to Russia, even demanding that the Boyars shave off their beards and adopt Western clothing styles. (see Figure 9)

The Russian Tsar also wanted to “open a window to the West.” He was determined to gain access to the Baltic Sea coast, which at that time was controlled by Sweden. Peter attacked the Swedes but his forces were defeated decisively by the forces of the young Swedish king Charles XII at the Battle of Narva in 1700. This was the beginning of the Great Northern War which lasted from 1701 to 1721. Peter reorganized his forces and won the Battle of Poltava in 1709. The war came to an end with the Peace of Nystadt in 1721. As a result of this conflict Russia gained control of Estonia, Livonia, and Karelia. Peter then set about building a new capital city, St.
Petersburg, on the shores of the Baltic. (see Figure 10)

Poland was also a powerful monarchy in Eastern Europe through much of this era. Poland was united with the Kingdom of Lithuania in the fourteenth century, and this union was not dissolved until the late sixteenth century. The Jagiello dynasty that ruled Poland-Lithuania came to an end in 1572 and after this the Polish nobility assumed the power of electing monarchs to the Polish throne. Polish nobles even adopted the _liberum veto_ in 1652. This gave the power to prevent the government from functioning to any one of the members of the Polish Sejm, the assembly of nobles. As a result, an internally divided Polish kingdom was unable to compete with more powerful neighbors. (see Figure 11)
Another powerful country of this era was the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire reached the height of its power under Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. Suleiman and his predecessors expanded Ottoman rule in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. Even though the empire was governed by Muslims, the Ottomans were viewed as just another European power. When the Ottomans conquered Christian territories in Europe, they captured young boys, converted them to Islam, and forced them to undergo years of training for military service. These Janissaries proved to be a powerful military force. The Ottomans attempted to conquer even more European territory when they attacked Vienna in 1683, and an Ottoman victory was only prevented by the arrival of a large Polish cavalry at the last minute. (see Figure 12)

![Ottoman Empire up to 1683](image)

**Figure 12 – Ottoman Empire up to 1683**

Absolute monarchies were the most common form of government in this era but this was also the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. The Netherlands was recognized as an officially independent nation
by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, but in reality, the Dutch had been independent of Habsburg rule for decades before this. The United Provinces as the Netherlands was then called was faced with internal dissension as the House of Orange attempted to gain control over the country. The opposition to the House of Orange collapsed following war with France and England. In 1672, William III established a monarchical regime; however, William died without an heir and following his death the republican forces in the United Provinces regained control. (see Figure 13)

William III would also lay claim to the title of the King of England; however, this could only happen after a century of internal strife and civil war. In the seventeenth century, a constitutional monarchy began to emerge in England. With the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, James I of the House of Stuart ascended to the throne. James was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and he was also the king of Scotland. James attempted to dominate the English Parliament. He believed in the divine right of kings to rule without interference from anyone. James religious policies favored the Church of England against the growing movement of the Puritans, adding another voice to the growing opposition to James monarchy. (see Figure 14)

James died in 1625 and his son, Charles I, ascended to the throne. The Parliament attempted to reestablish its position of power by passing the Petition of Right in 1628. This petition prohibited taxation without the consent of Parliament. Charles attempted to rule without Parliament from 1629 to 1640. Charles married Maria Henrietta, the Catholic sister of the king of France, angering Puritans and arousing opposition by those who thought he would try to bring back Catholicism. Growing opposition to Charles coalesced and England descended into civil war. The Parliamentary forces were led by Oliver Cromwell who created his New Model Army. Cromwell was eventually victorious and the king was beheaded. Cromwell governed England until his death in 1658. Following his death, the Stuart dynasty was restored when Charles II was acclaimed the king. (see Figure 15)

Religious and political divisions continued to plague England. Charles II was sympathetic to Catholicism and his brother, James II—heir to the throne—was a declared Catholic. Charles began to appoint Catholics to high level positions in the government and issued the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672. This decree suspended any laws that barred Catholics from holding office. In 1685, James II ascended
to the throne. English concerns over the development of a hereditary Catholic monarchy were realized when James wife had a son in 1688. In response, a group of nobles got together and invited Mary and her husband, William of Orange, to invade England. Mary, the Protestant daughter of James II by an earlier marriage, and her husband William III were viewed as means of protecting the Protestant nature of English society. (see Figure 16)

James II, his wife, and son fled to France and in what is known as the Glorious Revolution, Mary and William of Orange ascended to the English throne in 1689. William and Mary also agreed to a Bill of Rights which affirmed Parliament’s right to pass laws and levy taxes. The Toleration Act of 1689 was also passed, guaranteeing the right of Puritans to worship freely, and although Catholics did not enjoy the same guarantees, persecution for religious beliefs and practices disappeared from England after this act was passed.

The civil war and revolution in England prompted very different responses from two leading intellectuals of this era. Thomas Hobbes was unsettled by the uncertainty of his era, and he generally supported the absolute power of the monarchy. In 1651, he published Leviathan. In this work, Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature before organized society was established, humanity lived lives that were “poor, nasty, brutish and short.” He believed that humans were not guided by reason and morality but rather by our animalistic instincts and that in order to prevent humans from destroying one another, people formed governments and that it was better to place power in the hands of a single, sovereign ruler. (see Figure 17)
John Locke had a much different view of humanity. He opposed the absolute rule of one person. Locke believed that in the state of nature that humans had certain unalienable rights, the right to live, liberty, and property. Locke argued that people formed governments to protect these rights and that if government did not fulfill its duties, people have the right to revolt against their government. Locke and Hobbes were both very influential philosophers. Locke’s beliefs later encapsulated much of the thinking of the Enlightenment, and he is viewed as a forefather of this intellectual movement. His ideas also influenced Thomas Jefferson. When Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he stated that all men are entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (see Figure 18)

Figure 18 – John Locke

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