

The Age of Absolute Monarchs

During the period of absolute monarchs (1500-1763), many changes took place throughout Europe. Individual countries were developing and experiencing many conflicts – the biggest of which was between Protestants and Catholics. These notes give you a general overview of the time period and the events taking place.

Spain

By 1500, Spain was very wealthy due to the gold and silver they were collecting from their colonies abroad.

Philip II became the ruler of Spain in 1556. His two main goals were to strengthen his own power and to spread Catholicism throughout Spain. Philip's two main rivals were the Netherlands (a colony of Spain) and England because both places were strongly Protestant. In 1558, Philip sent his Armada (navy) to attack England and try to conquer it to make it a Catholic country under Spanish control. His attack was foiled and the Armada was defeated. Then, in 1581 the Netherlands revolted against Spain and won their independence. Both of these defeats were crushing blows to Spain.

Netherlands

The Netherlands gained their independence from Spain in 1581. The Dutch living in the Netherlands were unique because they practiced religious toleration and allowed all religions to be practiced openly and freely. The Dutch were also unique because they were very innovative in terms of their economy:

The Dutch were the first to use capitalism. Capitalists were people who invested large sums of money into businesses. They hoped to pay all of the costs of running the business PLUS make a profit. The profit was then re-invested into new businesses. As a result, businesses flourished in the Netherlands and they became one of the largest traders in all of Europe.

The Dutch also ran a very successful banking system. People from all over Europe deposited their money into Dutch banks. This made the Dutch very rich because they were able to loan some of this money out and charge interest on the loans.

The Dutch East Indies Company was founded in 1602. This allowed many businessmen to invest in a trading company. The traders would go to Asia and the Caribbean to get spices which they would then take back to the Netherlands and sell. This made the investors in the Dutch East Indies Company very rich!

France

In 1559, Catherine de Medici became the ruler of France (when her husband died). At this time, France was deeply divided over religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics. The majority of France's population was Catholic but Protestants were growing in number. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre only made the conflict between the two groups worse. Catholic mobs hunted down Protestants

and murdered them – over 12,000 Huguenots were killed. Catherine was blamed for allowing this to happen (since she was Catholic and didn't try to stop the killings). Catherine ruled until her death and France stayed in religious conflict.

Henry IV took power of France in 1589. He was a member of the Bourbon family and he was Protestant – this created much conflict with Catholics. As a result, Henry became Catholic. However, he wanted to keep the Huguenots happy as well, so he allowed Huguenots to worship openly and freely in France. This was declared in the Edict of Nantes. He ruled until his death in 1610.

Louis XIII became king when his father, Henry IV, died in 1610. He was not a competent ruler so he turned most of his power over to one of his advisors, Cardinal Richelieu. He revoked many of the Huguenots' rights.

When Louis XIII died, his son, Louis XIV, became king of France. He ruled very lavishly and lived grandly (that's why he was called the Sun King). He partied and built an amazing palace called Versailles.

Louis wanted France to be the most powerful country in Europe so he turned a lot of his power over to his financial advisor, Colbert. Colbert believed in mercantilism or the idea that a country needed to export (selling goods to foreign countries) than it needed to import (buying goods from foreign countries). Colbert gave subsidies or tax benefits to French companies which encouraged them to grow and expand. He also placed high tariffs (taxes) on imported goods – this made them very expensive so most people couldn't afford them. All of this helped France's economy to grow and become prosperous.

Louis made two tragic mistakes, however, which caused him great conflict with his own people. First, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes which meant that Huguenots could no longer freely practice their religion – this rekindled the fighting between Catholics and Protestants in France. Second, Louis tried to capture the throne of Spain in 1700. This began the War of Spanish Succession which was very costly for France. This war almost bankrupted France and left many people suffering.

Germany (then called the Holy Roman Empire)

In 1555, the princes in Germany (then called the Holy Roman Empire) agreed that churches in Germany could be Catholic or Lutheran (but not Calvinist – they didn't want a theocracy so Calvinism was banned). This was all agreed upon in the Peace of Augsburg. By 1618, however, Protestants and Catholics were fighting for control of the empire in the Thirty Years' War.

Ferdinand II became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1619. He was a member of the Hapsburg family and he was Catholic. He began trying to force the entire empire to become Catholic. From 1618 to 1630, the Hapsburg army destroyed Protestant villages throughout the empire. By 1630, however, the Protestants began to receive financial aid from outside countries and they were able to fight back. The war

raged on until 1648. In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia was signed and ended the Thirty Years' War. The Treaty divided up the Holy Roman Empire into independent countries.

England

In 1558, Elizabeth I became queen of England. She was a member of the Tudor family and she faced religious conflict within her country. To resolve the conflict, Elizabeth had Parliament pass the Act of Uniformity and the Act of Supremacy. The Act of Uniformity created one legal church in England – the Church of England. The sermons were delivered in English, not Latin (made the Protestants happy) but the services were still very lavish and formal (made the Catholics happy). The Act of Supremacy made Elizabeth the head of the Church of England.

In 1567, devout Catholics became unhappy with Elizabeth's compromises between Catholicism and Protestantism. They encouraged Elizabeth's cousin, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, to try and dethrone Elizabeth. She went to England and lived with Elizabeth. Elizabeth discovered her plot to dethrone her and she had Mary beheaded.

In 1588, Spain attacked England. Philip II wanted to conquer England and make it completely Catholic. Elizabeth sent Francis Drake and his Sea Dogs (navy) to fight the Spanish and they defeated them.

Russia

In 1613, the Romanovs came to power in Russia. Russia was isolated from the rest of the world and the majority of the population was very poor. Czar Peter I dreamed of modernizing Russia. He traveled throughout Europe in secret looking at how European cities were organized and how the people lived. When he returned to Russia he made many changes. Women were encouraged to attend social gatherings and no longer had to wear veils. The European/Christian calendar was adopted. Farmers were taught how to grow potatoes and new crops. Peter built many factories and he encouraged exporting. He also encouraged the mining of iron ore so that Russia could sell iron to foreign countries and make money. Last, he began the first newspaper in Russia so that Russian citizens could know what was going on in their own country and around the world. Peter then moved the capital of Russia to St. Petersburg.

Austria

After the end of the Thirty Years' War, Austria became an independent region. It was ruled by the Hapsburgs. Maria Theresa spent many years as queen and fought many wars to defend Austria against Prussian attacks.

Prussia

The Hohenzollerns ruled Prussia when it became independent after the Holy Roman Empire was divided. They focused much of their attention on building their military and often went to war with Austria trying to gain more territory.