

## **Absolutism in the Seventeenth Century**

In the latter half of the 1600's, monarchical systems of both England and France were changing. In England, the move was away from an absolute monarch, and toward a more powerful Parliament. In France, the opposite was happening as Louis XIV strengthened his own office while weakening the general assembly of France, the Estates General. Absolutism, the political situation in which a monarch controls all aspects of government with no checks or balances, had been introduced in England by James I and Charles I, but never quite took hold. In France, on the other hand, Louis XIV took absolutism to extremes, claiming to be a servant of God (the "divine right of Kings") and dissolving France's only general assembly. Why absolutism failed in England but flourished in France is due mainly to the political situation in each country when the idea was first introduced.

In England, during the first half of the 17th century, two monarches came to power that attempted to develop royal absolutism in that country. Both James I (James VI of Scotland) and Charles I tried to rule without consenting Parliament, but Parliament had so much control at the time that neither James nor Charles successfully decreased the role of Parliament in English government. The English had been under the combined rule of both the king and the assembly for so long that they weren't ready to give all the power of government to a single person. The merchants and land-owning nobles supported Parliament, where members could be elected and changed in necessary, rather than an absolute monarch with no restraints. In 1642, differences between Charles I and Parliament sparked England's civil war, which was caused partly by royal stubbornness to share control of the country, and partly by Parliament's refusal to give up their power in government. This was the major turning point for absolutism in England. Monarches, beginning with Charles II, realized how much power Parliament had and knew that they had to work with, not against, each other. It is because Parliament was so strongly ingrained into the English process of government, and was so centralized (only one parliament-type assembly in all of England) that Parliament survived while absolute government died miserably. Parliament continued to gain power over the King through the end of the 1600's, and would eventually become the leading governmental body of England.

In France, around the middle of the 17th century, a revolution against the current monarch, Cardinal Mazarin, by the various and scattered parlements, who wanted the right to claim royal edicts unconstitutional, and nobility, who hoped to gain power by sanctioning the monarch or removing him from office, threw France into disarray. Nobles led bands of

fighters around the country, pillaging and terrorizing the lower classes at will in an attempt to weaken the King's power. They eventually hired Spanish troops to carry on their fight, even though France and Spain were currently at war. The movement failed, but it left a lasting impression in the general public as to the value of having a powerful monarch to protect from things such as the revolt. When the Cardinal died in 1661, Louis XIV, whom Cardinal Mazarin had been governing for while he grew up (Louis was only five when he inherited the throne), took power, and became the strong, absolute ruler that France had been looking for to restore order in France. Louis XIV took hold of the country and put himself at the head of government. The Estates General was never called together, and most of the feudal lords were enticed to live in Versailles, a city Louis ordered built strictly for the consolidation of government. Louis managed to control all aspects of government, from economics to foreign policy, as is the definition of an absolute monarch. There were no large parliamentary bodies to challenge him as there had been in England, and Louis had support from the majority of the citizens of France, as opposed to English absolute monarches. In this way, Louis XIV instigated an absolutism that was popular with the citizens of France, almost the opposite of England.

It is because of the differing political systems in place within France and England that led to the acceptance of absolutism in France and its corresponding failure in England. In England, Parliament had had so much power for so long that it was unwilling to give it up, while in France, nothing comparable to Parliament existed to take power away from the monarch. In France, feudal lords fought against the King, while the public supported a strong head of government to keep the peace. In England, a majority of the people supported the Parliament, which had representatives from the middle and low classes, as well as the nobles, and served as a check to the King's power. Had the political institutions of France and England been similar, either a system of parliament or absolutism would have succeeded in both nations.

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