



ABSOLUTISM VERSUS CONSTITUTIONALISM IN EUROPE

SETTING THE STAGE

During the next few centuries, many European monarchs would claim the authority to rule without limits on their power.

Absolutism in Europe

The Theory of Absolutism

These rulers wanted to be **absolute monarchs**, kings or queens who held all of the power within their states' boundaries. Their goal was to control every aspect of society. Absolute monarchs believed in **divine right**, the idea that God created the monarchy and that the monarch acted as God's representative on earth. An absolute monarch answered only to God, not to his or her subjects.

Growing Power of Europe's Monarchs

As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, monarchs grew increasingly powerful. The decline of feudalism, the rise of cities, and the growth of national kingdoms all helped to centralize authority. In addition, the growing middle class usually backed monarchs, because they promised a peaceful, supportive climate for business. Monarchs used the wealth of colonies to pay for their ambitions. Church authority also broke down during the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. That opened the way for monarchs to assume even greater control.

> Analyzing Key Concepts

Absolutism

Absolutism was the political belief that one ruler should hold all the power within the boundaries of a country. Although practiced by several monarchs in Europe during the 16th through 18th centuries, absolutism has been used in many regions throughout history. In ancient times, Shi Huangdi in China, Darius in Persia, and the Roman caesars were all absolute rulers. (See chapters 4, 5, and 6.)

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. **Making Inferences** Why do you think absolute rulers controlled social gatherings? See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R10.
2. **Hypothesizing** Today several nations of the world (such as Saudi Arabia) have absolute rulers. Judging from what you know of past causes of absolutism, why do you think absolute rulers still exist today?

Causes

- Religious and territorial conflicts created fear and uncertainty.
- The growth of armies to deal with conflicts caused rulers to raise taxes to pay troops.
- Heavy taxes led to additional unrest and peasant revolts.



ABSOLUTISM

Effects

- Rulers regulated religious worship and social gatherings to control the spread of ideas.
- Rulers increased the size of their courts to appear more powerful.
- Rulers created bureaucracies to control their countries' economies.

In 1576, Jean Bodin, an influential French writer, defined absolute rule:

PRIMARY SOURCE

The first characteristic of the sovereign prince is the power to make general and special laws, but—and this qualification is important—without the consent of superiors, equals, or inferiors. If the prince requires the consent of superiors, then he is a subject himself; if that of equals, he shares his authority with others; if that of his subjects, senate or people, he is not sovereign.

J

EAN BODIN, *Six Books on the State*

Crises Lead to Absolutism

In response to the crises of warfare and revolts, monarchs tried to impose order by increasing their own power. As absolute rulers, they regulated everything from religious worship to social gatherings. They created new government bureaucracies to control their countries' economic life. Their goal was to free themselves from the limitations imposed by the nobility and by representative bodies such as Parliament. Only with such freedom could they rule absolutely, as did the most famous monarch of his time, Louis XIV of France.

France was not the only absolute monarchy in Europe. Spain practiced absolutism, as well. Without religious freedom, political freedom also could never come to be.

Not all European countries practiced absolutism. Over time many areas that were greatly impacted by the Reformation, allowed for more political freedom. England was one such place. In the next section, you will read about the gradual change from a king to parliamentary control in England.

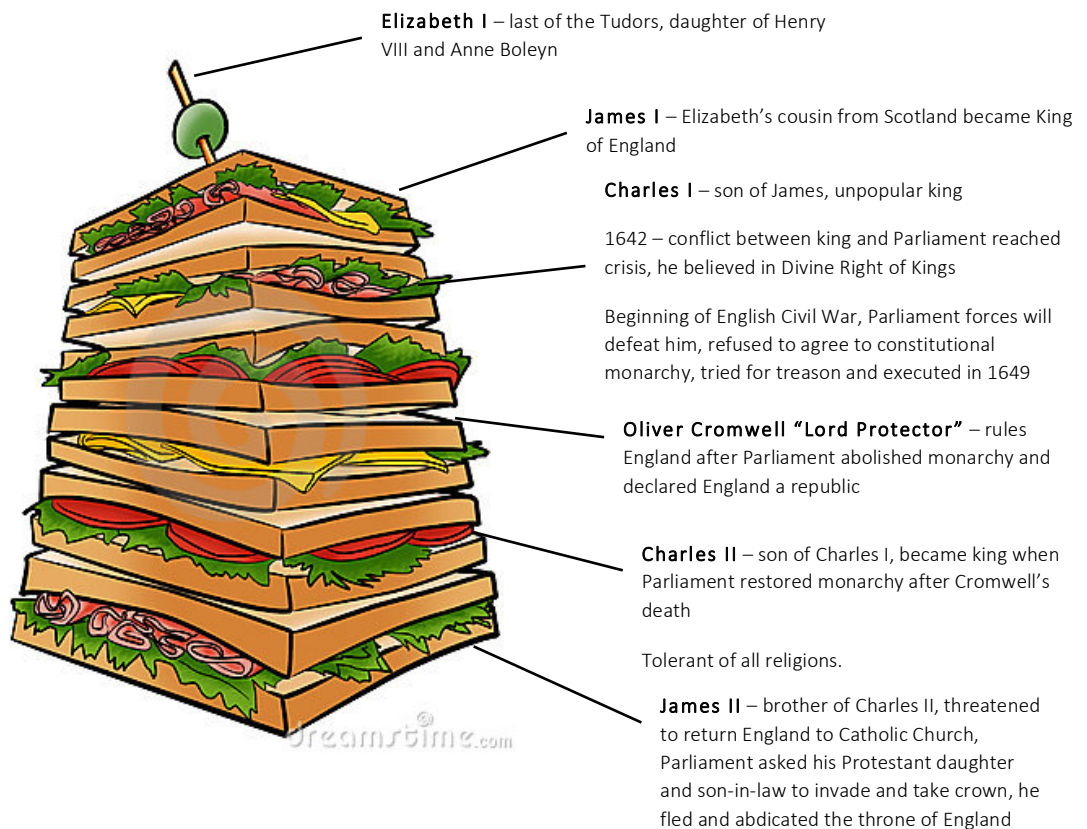
Political Freedom in England

SETTING THE STAGE

During her reign, Queen Elizabeth I of England had had frequent conflicts with Parliament. Many of the arguments were over money, because the treasury did not have enough funds to pay the queen's expenses. By the time Elizabeth died in 1603, she had left a huge debt for her successor to deal with. Parliament's financial power was one obstacle to English rulers' becoming absolute monarchs. The resulting struggle between Parliament and the monarchy would have serious consequences for England.

Development of a Constitutional Monarchy
The next few monarchs continued the feud with Parliament. Below is a "sandwich" of the monarchs that led up to a constitution. Why a sandwich?

Sandwiched in the middle is Oliver Cromwell who was not part of the monarchy. Take a look above:



James II and the Glorious Revolution

In 1685, Charles II died, and James II became king. James soon offended his subjects by displaying his Catholicism. Violating English law, he appointed several Catholics to high office. When Parliament protested, James dissolved it. In 1688, James's second wife gave birth to a son. English Protestants became terrified at the prospect of a line of Catholic kings. James had an older daughter, Mary, who was Protestant. She was also the wife of William of Orange, a prince of the Netherlands. Seven members of Parliament invited William and Mary to overthrow James for the sake of Protestantism. When William led his army to London in 1688, James fled to France. This bloodless overthrow of King James II is called the **Glorious Revolution**.

Limits on Monarch's Power

At their coronation, William and Mary vowed to recognize Parliament as their partner in governing. England had become not an absolute monarchy but a **constitutional monarchy**, where laws limited the ruler's power.

Bill of Rights

To make clear the limits of royal power, Parliament drafted a Bill of Rights in 1689. This document listed many things that a ruler could not do:

- no suspending of Parliament's laws
- no levying of taxes without a specific grant from Parliament
- no interfering with freedom of speech in Parliament
- no penalty for a citizen who petitions the king about grievances

William and Mary consented to these and other limits on their royal power.

Experiments in Self-Government

Meanwhile, Europe's Protestant nations were gaining experience in self-government. Calvin's ideas influenced them. In Geneva, Calvinist church members elected their own leaders. These experiments with elected leadership gave Europeans their first practical experience with self-government.

Protestants also promoted political participation. Both Calvin and Luther emphasized that it was important for individuals to read the Bible for themselves. As people began to voice individual opinions on religious issues, they also expressed views on political issues.

Protestant thinkers also crafted new ideas about how governments should be organized. Some began to experiment with ideas, such as federalism. This was the sharing of power between local and federal levels. An example of this would be how in the United States, both the federal and state governments can collect taxes.

Protestant countries, in general, allowed for more participation in government. These concepts had their start in the ideas of the Reformation that encouraged reform of religion. If people could decide how to worship for themselves, they could decide how to govern for themselves. Protestant countries enjoyed more experimentation and more voices to be heard in government. Catholic countries, in general, remained absolute monarchies until they were overthrown and the people revolted centuries later.