

Rulers, Rebels, Rogues

Acting European History, 1480–1856

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CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA

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Background for Teachers and Students



Louis XIV, "L'Etat, c'est moi"

During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, most European countries were governed by absolute rulers who believed in the concept of divine right absolutism. This was the theory that God had ordained these

monarchs to govern with absolute power. The king or queen's authority was not subject to any earthly power but only subject to the laws of nature and the will of God. James I gave the classical definition of divine right absolutism when he said that "the state of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods."

These monarchs wielded their power with little to no regard for the civil rights—freedom of speech, press, and religion, for example—of their people. The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan* (1651) that only an absolute ruler could prevent his people from lapsing into continual warfare with "every man against every man." Life without the control of a strong monarch would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." For Hobbes, people only obeyed when they feared the consequences of disobedience.³⁴ Louis XIV was typical of all these monarchs, universally placing themselves above the law and freely administering any punishment for any perceived offense. For example, he

34 Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, 243.

decreed that all prostitutes "found with soldiers within five miles of Versailles [his palace] should have their noses and ears cut off."³⁵

Arguably the only real discussion about fundamental civil rights happened between the monarchy and the nobility in England beginning with the Magna Carta and continuing later with the conflicts over the rights of Parliament. In the Age of Absolutism, neither the monarch nor the nobility gave a hoot about the civil rights of their people. A few monarchs, like Frederick II, have been viewed by some contemporary historians as "enlightened" because they recognized some civil rights of their peoples.

Absolute monarchs used territorial expansion and religious divisions (Catholics versus Protestants) to make war on one another. This often led to internal conflicts between the ruler and the noble class who desired to share the power. The monarchs, however, had widespread support that included the established church as well as those individuals whose place in society was maintained by the established ruler—lawyers, bureaucrats, the military, merchants, and newly created nobles.

Practically speaking, however, most monarchs were not capable of effectively running their realms and relied on great ministers like Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin in France, Cardinal Olivares in Spain, and Lords Laud and Strafford in England. In terms of power, these men were potentially as great a threat to royal authority as the old feudal nobility, who saw their privileges and prerogatives either reduced or made dependent on the monarch's largesse.

The Age of Absolutism was also a time of significant artistic and philosophical achievement that included artists like El Greco and Rembrandt, writers like Racine and Moliere, and political theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

35 Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV*, 17.

Image source: *Louis XIV of France*. By Hyacinthe Rigaud, 1701, the Louvre, Paris, 000PE002386

Name _____

Student Choice Form

Directions: List your top ten monarch choices in the numbered list below. In the tables that follow, you must complete the fact and source information for all of your choices.

Monarchs I would prefer to represent in order of interest.

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

France		
Monarchs	Facts	Sources
Henry IV (1553–1610)	1. 2. 3.	
Louis III (1601–1643)	1. 2. 3.	
Louis XIV (1638–1715)	1. 2. 3.	
Louis XV (1754–1793)	1. 2. 3.	
Louis XVI (1754–1793)	1. 2. 3.	

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