The Age of Absolutism

Directions: Read the following summaries of Absolutism across Europe and answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of loose leaf paper.

Spanish Power Grows
In 1519, Charles V, the king of Spain and ruler of the Spanish colonies in the Americas, inherited the Hapsburg empire. This included the Holy Roman Empire and the Netherlands. Ruling two empires involved Charles in constant religious warfare. Additionally, the empire’s vast territory became too cumbersome for Charles to rule effectively. His demanding responsibilities led him to abdicate the throne and divide his kingdom between his brother Ferdinand and his son Philip.

Under Philip II, Spanish power increased. He was successful in expanding Spanish influence, strengthening the Catholic Church, and making his own power absolute. Philip reigned as an absolute monarch—a ruler with complete authority over the government and the lives of the people. He also declared that he ruled by divine right. This meant he believed that his authority to rule came directly from God. Philip was determined to defend the Catholic Church against the Protestant Reformation in Europe. He fought many battles in the Mediterranean and the Netherlands to advance or preserve Spanish Catholic power.

To expand his empire, Philip II needed to eliminate his rivals. He saw Elizabeth I of England as his chief Protestant enemy. Philip prepared a huge armada, or fleet, to carry an invasion force to England. However, the English ships were faster and easier to maneuver than Spanish ships. Several disasters led to the defeat of this powerful Spanish fleet.

This defeat marked the beginning of a decline in Spanish power. Wars were costly and contributed to Spain’s economic problems. However, while Spain’s strength and wealth decreased, art and learning took on new importance. Philip was a supporter of the arts and founded academies of science and mathematics. The arts flourished between 1550 and 1650, a time known as Spain’s Siglo de Oro, or “golden century.” Among the outstanding artists of this period was a painter called El Greco. Famous for his religious paintings and portraits of Spanish nobles, his use of vibrant color influenced many other artists. This period also produced several remarkable writers. One of the most significant was Miguel de Cervantes. His Don Quixote, which mocks medieval tales of chivalry, is considered Europe’s first modern novel.

France Under Louis XIV
In the late 1500s, France was torn apart by religious conflict between French Protestants, called Huguenots, and Catholics. In an event called the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, thousands of Huguenots were slaughtered. In 1598, King Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes to protect Protestants. This granted the Huguenots religious toleration and other freedoms.

After Henry’s assassination in 1610, his nine-year-old son, Louis XIII, inherited the throne. Louis appointed Cardinal Richelieu as his chief minister. Richelieu sought to strengthen royal power by crushing any groups that did not bow to royal authority. In 1643, five-year-old Louis XIV inherited the French throne. When his chief minister died, Louis XIV resolved to take complete control of the government. He believed in his divine right to rule and even called himself the Sun King to symbolize his vital role within the nation.

Louis XIV expanded the royal government and appointed intendants—royal officials who collected taxes, recruited soldiers, and carried out his policies in the provinces. To fuel the country’s economy, Louis’s finance minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert, expanded commerce and trade. Taxes helped finance the king’s extravagant lifestyle.
Outside Paris, Louis XIV transformed a royal hunting lodge into the grand palace of Versailles. The palace represented the king’s great power and wealth. Elaborate court ceremonies were held to emphasize the king’s importance. For example, during the ritual known as the levée, or rising, high-ranking nobles would compete for the honor of handing the king his shoes. The purpose was to keep the nobles in Versailles to gain their support and prevent them from getting too powerful.

Under Louis XIV, France became the strongest state in Europe. However, the country’s prosperity began to erode. This loss of wealth was caused by some of Louis’s decisions. He fought costly wars to extend French borders, but rival rulers resisted in order to maintain the balance of power. Louis also revoked the Edict of Nantes, driving over 100,000 hard-working and prosperous Huguenots out of France.

Parliament Triumphs in England
From 1485 to 1603, England was ruled by the Tudors. While believing in divine right, the Tudors also recognized the value of good relations with Parliament.

This was not the view of the first Stuart king, James I. He inherited the throne after Elizabeth I died childless in 1603. He claimed absolute power. Parliament, however, resisted the king’s claim. James clashed often with Parliament over money. James was also at odds with dissenters—Protestants who disagreed with the Church of England. One such group, the Puritans, wanted simpler services and a more democratic church with no bishops.

In 1625, Charles I inherited the throne. He too behaved like an absolute monarch. Tensions between Charles and Parliament escalated into civil war. The English Civil War lasted from 1642 to 1651. Supporters of Charles were called Cavaliers. The supporters of Parliament were known as Roundheads. Oliver Cromwell, the leader of the Parliament forces, guided them to victory. In January 1649, Charles I was beheaded.

The House of Commons abolished the monarchy and declared England a republic under Cromwell, called the Commonwealth. Many new laws reflected Puritan beliefs. Cromwell did not tolerate open worship for Catholics; however, he did respect the beliefs of other Protestants and welcomed Jews back to England. Eventually people tired of the strict Puritan ways. Cromwell died in 1658. Two years later, Parliament invited Charles II to return to England as king.

Charles II’s successor, James II, was forced from the English throne in 1688. Protestants feared that he planned to restore the Roman Catholic Church to power in England. Parliament offered the crown to James’s Protestant daughter Mary and her husband William. However, William and Mary had to accept the English Bill of Rights. This helped establish a limited monarchy. This bloodless overthrow of James II was known as the Glorious Revolution.

During the next century, Britain’s government became a constitutional government, whose power was defined and limited by law. A cabinet, or group of parliamentary advisors who set policies, developed. In essence, British government was now an oligarchy—a government that was run by a powerful few.

The Rise of Austria and Prussia
By the seventeenth century, the Holy Roman Empire had become a mix of several hundred small, separate states. Theoretically, the Holy Roman emperor, who was chosen by seven leading German princes called electors, ruled these states. Yet, the emperor had little power over the numerous princes. This power vacuum led to a series of brutal wars that are together called the Thirty Years’ War. It began when Ferdinand, the Catholic Hapsburg king of Bohemia, wanted to suppress Protestants and declare royal power over nobles. This led to several revolts and then a widespread European war.

The war devastated the German states. Mercenaries, or soldiers for hire, burned villages, destroyed crops, and murdered and tortured villagers. This led to famine and disease, which caused severe depopulation, or
reduction in population.

It was not until 1648 that a series of treaties known as the **Peace of Westphalia** were established. These treaties aspired to bring peace to Europe and also settle other international problems.

While Austria was becoming a strong Catholic state, a region within the German states called **Prussia** emerged as a new Protestant power. The Prussian ruler **Frederick William I** came to power in 1713. He created a new bureaucracy and placed great emphasis on military values.

In Austria, **Maria Theresa** became empress after her father’s death in 1740. That same year, **Frederick II** of Prussia seized the Hapsburg province of Silesia. This action sparked the eight-year **War of the Austrian Succession**. Despite tireless efforts, Maria Theresa did not succeed in forcing Frederick out of Silesia. However, she did preserve her empire and won the support of most of her people. She also strengthened Hapsburg power by reorganizing the bureaucracy and improving tax collection.

At his father’s insistence, Frederick II endured harsh military training at an early age. After becoming king, he used his military education brilliantly, making Prussia a leading power. By 1750, the great European powers included Austria, Prussia, France, Britain, and Russia. These nations formed various alliances to maintain the balance of power. Often, Austria and Prussia were rivals.

**Absolute Monarchy in Russia**

In the early 1600s, Russia was isolated from Western Europe and had remained a medieval state. It was not until the end of that century that a new tsar, **Peter the Great**, transformed Russia into a leading power.

To modernize Russia, Peter began a new policy of **westernization**—the adoption of Western ideas, technologies, and culture. Many resisted change. To enforce his new policy, Peter became an **autocratic** monarch—one who ruled with unlimited authority.

All Russian institutions were under Peter the Great’s control. He executed anyone who resisted the new order. He forced the **boyars**—landowning nobles—to serve the state in civilian or military positions. Peter also stipulated that they shave their beards and wear Western-style clothes.

Peter pushed through social and economic reforms. He also increased Russia’s military power and extended its borders. However, Russia still needed a **warm-water port**. This would increase Russia’s trade with the West. The nearest port of this kind to Russia was on the Black Sea, but Peter could not defeat the Ottoman empire, which controlled the region.

Determined to expand Russia’s territory, Peter also waged a long war against Sweden to win territory along the Baltic Sea. On this territory, he built a new capital city, **St. Petersburg**. It became the symbol of modern Russia. When Peter died in 1725, he left a mixed legacy. Although he had modernized Russia, he had used terror to enforce his absolute power.

In 1762, **Catherine the Great** ruled as an absolute monarch. She followed Peter’s lead in embracing Western ideas and expanding Russia’s borders. She was an efficient and energetic empress. Under her rule, laws were codified and state-supported education began for both boys and girls. After waging war, she defeated the Ottoman empire and finally won the warm-water port on the Black Sea.

In the 1770s, Russia, Prussia, and Austria each wanted Poland as part of their territory. In order to avoid war, the three kingdoms agreed to **partition**, or divide up, Poland. In 1772, Russia gained part of eastern Poland, while Prussia and Austria took over the West. Poland vanished from the map.
1. What territories were included in the Hapsburg empire?

2. In what ways was Philip II an absolute monarch?

3. How did Philip II try to expand his empire? Was he successful? Explain.

4. What details support the main idea that the period from 1550 to 1650 was a “golden century” in Spain?

5. What action did Henry IV take to end religious conflict?

6. Why did Louis XIV call himself the Sun King?

7. What was the real purpose of the leveé?

8. What caused the English Civil War?

9. How did the English government change under Cromwell’s leadership?

10. Why was James II forced from the throne?

11. What was the Glorious Revolution?

12. What started the Thirty Years’ War?

13. What caused the depopulation in the German states?

14. What two major powers emerged from the weakened Holy Roman Empire?

15. What did Peter the Great do to modernize Russia?

16. Why were warm water ports important to Russia?

17. What were two achievements of Catherine the Great?