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The Rise of Absolutism

I. Introduction

A. The problem of political disintegration in 16-17th Centuries.

- France - Wars of Religion
- England - the English Revolution
- Holy Roman Empire (Germany and Austria) - 30 Years War.

B. Causes of disintegration

- -Competition between the aristocracy and the Monarchy
- -often mainspring behind the religious wars.

C. Ways of Uniting States

Two alternatives evolved

- Constitutionalism and
- Absolutism

- Absolutism formed the immediate background to the French Revolution, but constitutionalism provided many of the ideas.

D. Absolutism and Constitutionalism.

- -Nature of "isms".
- -Both were modernizing in different ways.

1. Definition of Constitutionalism

- Constitutionalism does not require a written constitution, but does require a set of rules about government which government respects - it is not arbitrary.
- It also implies a balance in power between the government and its subjects - this was provided in Britain by power of subjects in Parliament.

2. Definition of Absolutism

- In contrast to Constitutionalism, Sovereignty, the power and right to rule, resides exclusively with the King and not the nobles nor any assembly.
- -Represents a change from medieval reality
- -The importance of the idea of Divine Right in this context.

- -Note that in this period Government did not impinge on many areas at all, for instance social welfare to any great degree. Absolute Monarchs were limited in actual power and were not totalitarian.

Absolutism was very practical - it developed state bureaucracies and standing armies to make its claims work.

II. Poland - A failed state

- Large state in Eastern Europe.
- The Noble republic - Elected kings.
- Any noble could veto any law.
- Complete collapse of central government.
- Enserfment of peasant population.
- Eventual disappearance of Poland from map of Europe.

Result of no Constitutionalism and no absolutism.

III. Spain - Absolutism Attempted

The dominant country of the late 16th Century, based on military power and enormous wealth from the new world.

Philip II. Ruled by himself. One of the first absolute monarchs. It is possible to see many of the later marks of absolutism in his reign.

- -Centralizing control
- -Bureaucratic systems
- -Central source of authority
- -Spain declined after 1600: due to a poor economy and bad government.

IV. France - Absolutism Triumphant

What happened in France provided more of model for Europe than Spain, (or England).

France's importance as a country was based on its wealth and its population, as well as its culture.

A. French Wars of Religion and Henry IV

- The Reformation in France. Calvinist.
- Catholic and Protestant nobles.
- Lax and inefficient rulers.
- Noble wars virtually destroyed the Country

- What was needed was a new approach to government. (If the goal was a stable country).
- Henry VI (1598-1610), formerly King of Navarre. - "Paris is worth a mass"
- Edict of Nantes 1598 quieted country. Allowed toleration to the Huguenots.

B. Louis XIII (1610-43)

Effective ruler Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642)

Richelieu's Actions:

1. He broke power of nobility and made it clear there was only one law - the King's. However still very limited legal unity in the country.
[cf. Stuarts where local law was in hands of JPs.]
Estates General meets for last time in 1615.
2. He began administrative reform and centralized control over regions. He sent out *Intendants*. [cf. the Stuarts lack of local control]
3. He fought Habsburg Dynasty - made France a great power (fought for Protestants in Thirty Year's War)
4. Richelieu also opposed Huguenots - as defiant of King's power and began the road to oppression. Removed their right to fortified towns.

C. Louis XIV (Ruled 1643-1715)

1. **Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661)**
effective ruler at first - continues policies of Richelieu.
2. **The Fronde 1649-52**
- revolt by nobles sick of absolute claims. This had big psychological effect on Louis XIV. He was determined to be powerful
3. **Louis comes to power in 1661.**
His reign is the height of absolutism. "L'etat, c'est moi."
4. **Louis' conception of himself as King** - and of the problems he faced.
Although egotistical he was not a madman. ref. Letter to Heirs - He thought he had to work hard and let good sense act. But his working hard was two hours a day.
5. **Government under Louis XIV**
It is often seen as one of the first modern governments.
- its system of councils to control the real ruling of the country
- Intendants - royal officials in provinces gives central control of the entire country.
- Its establishment of a standing army which Louis used in a series of expensive wars.
This gives him great power.
6. **Versailles and Ritual**
Used to bring all the important nobility to his court." This deprived them of power - as did a very expensive lifestyle. [cf. Philip II and the Escorial]
- Note etail of manners and ritual. Different ways to open a door etcetera. Aim was to impress. Half Louis' income went on Versailles but it gave him power.

7. **Influence of Louis XIV's Government and Style**

Versailles and Louis' government were admired in Europe and it was copied everywhere; French became the language of many courts – e.g. Russia (ref. Tolstoy: *War and Peace*). Copycat Palaces built all over Europe: Vienna/Schonbrunn, St. Petersburg, Berlin.

8. **Fiscal Policy**

Important both in explaining how Europe came to expand overseas, and certain elements in the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1693) - Finance minister. Colbert's aim was to have a trade balance in France's favor.

Mercantilism is name given to this policy.

-It centralizes economy + close government control.

-Relieves the need for direct taxes. Problem was nobles would not pay tax. This was not solved. France remained under-taxed.

-Expansion abroad - emphasis on exports and getting bullion into the country.

-Trade is needed especially by absolutist governments as it enables indirect taxes to be raised - which are necessary without parliaments.

-Expansion of Mercantile empires in India, North America and above all the West Indies. This was encouraged by governments.

9. **Louis XIV and Religion**

The Position of the Church as State within a State

-Divine Right was important in Louis' ideas.

-It is important to realize the power of the Church in France. It was like a state within a state

-largely independent of Rome

-tax free

-Church Courts had power over parts of life, for instance marriage and wills.

-Louis supported the Church fervently.

-Revocation of Edict of Nantes 1685

-1/4 mill Protestants left - (New Rochelle)

10. **Absolutism and Religion**

Absolutism did not allow, in France, freedom of conscience. This effected French Enlightenment thinkers. There was anti-clericalism even from those who support monarchy. [cf.-anti-clericalism in French Revolution]

11. **Elaboration of Absolutism**

Absolutism came into being as a practical way to control the state. But there were theoretical justifications.

- Bishop Bousset (1627-1704) Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Scripture (1679). He was tutor to Louis XIV's heir.
 - His basic justification was Divine Right: God makes a King absolutely sovereign.
- Jean Domat, (1625-1696), Public Law, attempted to set Absolutism in context of law of nature and law of God. [Discuss dangers of such a project]
- Other justifications were offered by later writers.
 - Voltaire praised Louis XIV as being an effective ruler.

-Probably most of the French people accepted him because his type of rule brought peace after decades of civil war.

At this stage Nobility and Monarchy were the only players. It was the emergence of another class which was to be important in 1789.

VII. Absolutism in Other States

The Holy Roman Empire

Fades. So does Poland and Ottoman Turkey. Three new powers occupy central Europe in the 18th century.

1. **Austria**
 - Absolutism without a nation-state. Maria Theresa 1740-
2. **Prussia**
 - Prussia copies France but has its own distinctive character. Prussia becomes an important state under Frederick I (1688-1713). Military emphasis: the upper class become the officers in the army.
 - 300 other states in Germany remain divided.
3. **Russia** - Emerges at this time.

OTHERS

- **Italy**
 - remains divided with inefficient old-fashioned governments and some republics.

England and Holland

- will look at in next class.

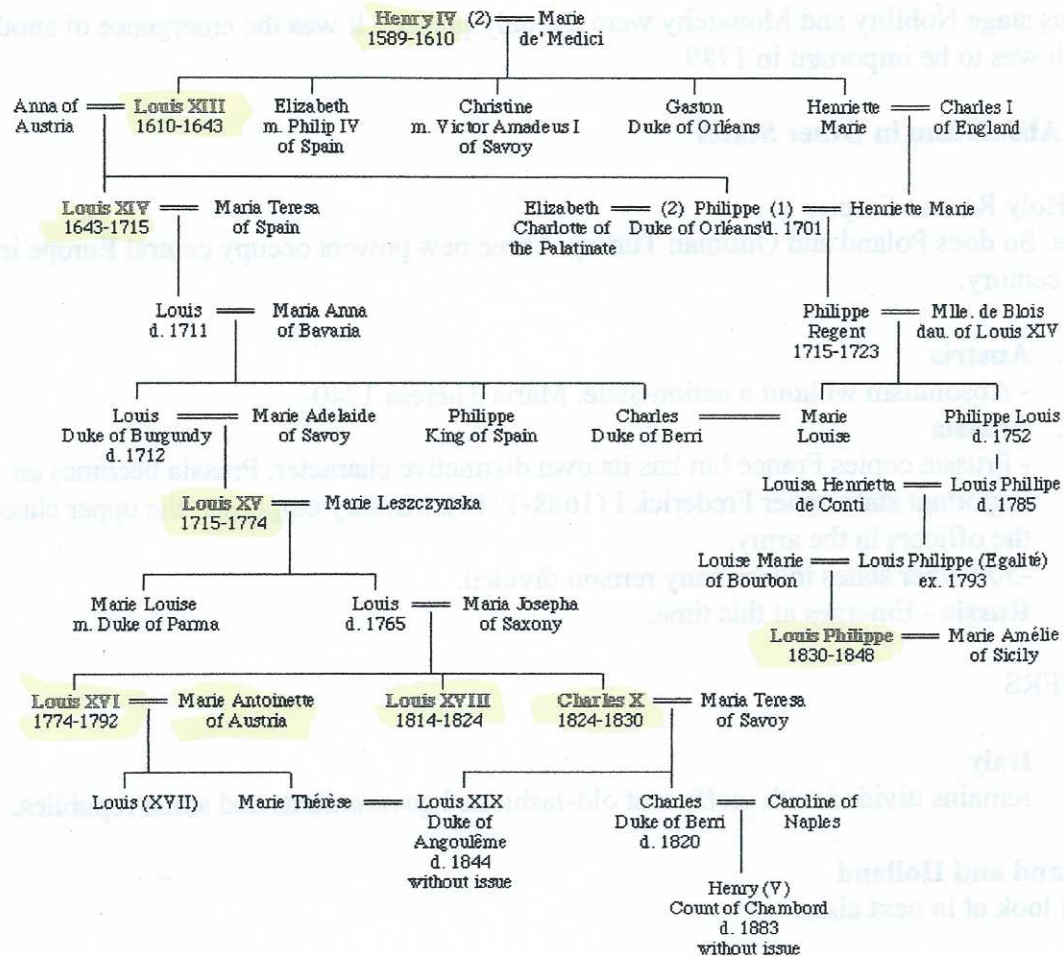
VIII. Conclusion

- Absolutism is the political actuality of the *Ancien (Old) Regime*.
- We have seen it was a development in Early modern, not medieval Europe.

It was background to French Revolution and also to the Enlightenment.

The French Monarchy: the Bourbons

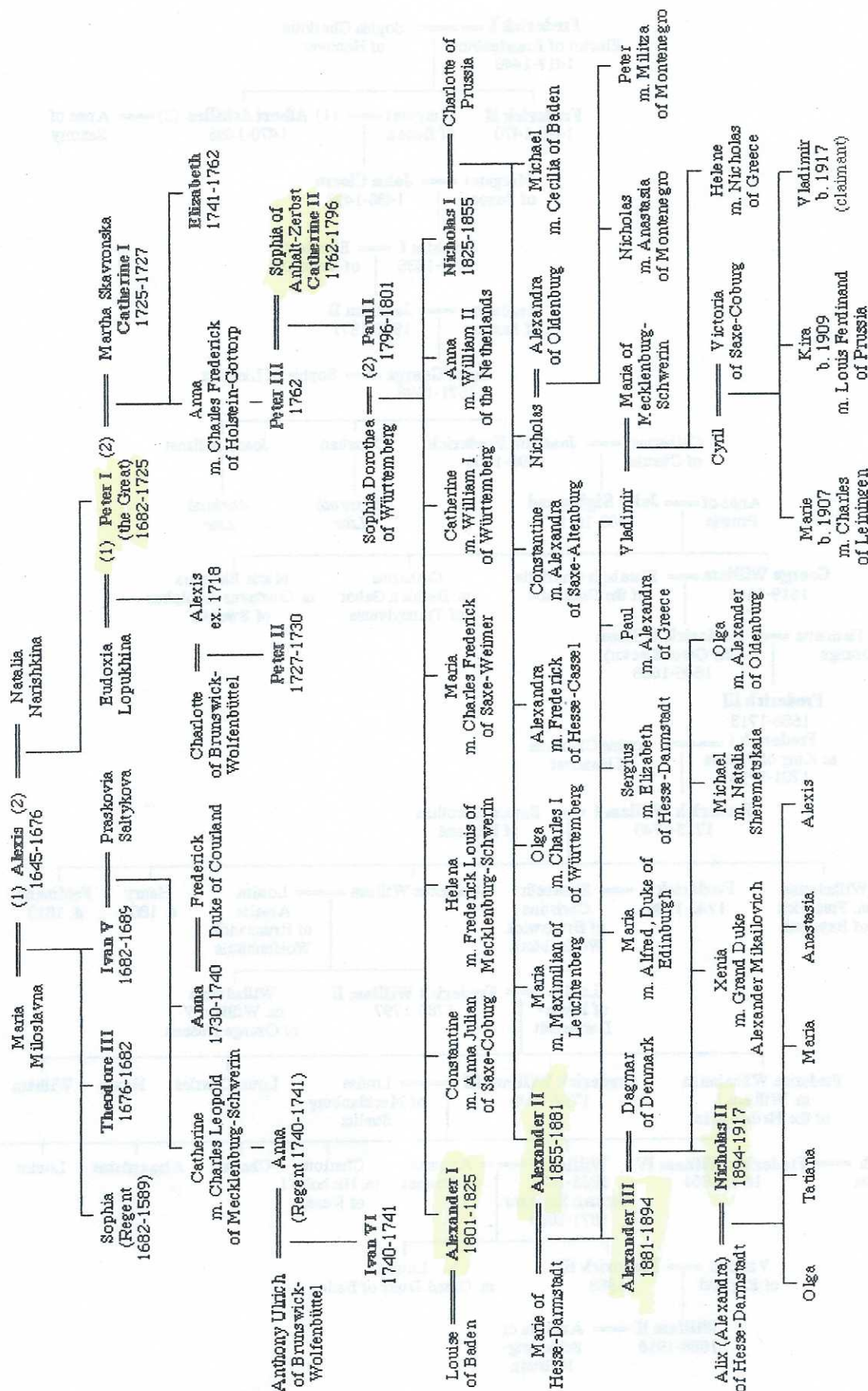
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The House of Hohenzollern

"ABSOLUTISM"

