During the 16th and 17th centuries, much of Europe was ruled by monarchs who enjoyed absolute power over all their dominions. It was generally accepted that it was their divine right to rule.

**Divine Right of Kings**
The divine right of kings was a Christian political doctrine that was integral to the Renaissance theory of monarchy. It held that a hereditary monarchy was the system of government approved by God. Kings ruled because they were chosen by God to do so. In fact, kings were the direct representatives of God. Furthermore, kings were accountable to no person, only to God. As kings ruled by the will of God, to oppose them was to rebel against God. The doctrine of the divine right of kings was accepted in part because it was an effective weapon against the invasive power of the pope. Monarchs were thus able to rule in matters of both church and state.

**Absolutism**
Absolutism prevailed from the 15th century to the end of the 18th century and was often used as a unifying force in the consolidation of nation-states. The doctrine of the divine right of kings gave rise to a system of government known as absolutism. Absolutism in Europe was the monarch (King/Queen) ruled a centralized state with absolute sovereignty (supreme power). As the monarch ruled by virtue of God’s authority, he had to be obeyed in all things. No person or group of people had the right to participate in his rule or to question or oppose him. That meant that the monarch ruled with unshared power with absolute power. The monarch’s power was not subject to any constitutional safeguards or checks, either. For example, an absolute monarch did not rule in conjunction with a parliament. Today, an absolute monarch would be known as a dictator.

Practical reasons also accounted for absolutism. The dominance of Christianity in Europe at this time provided the necessary environment for absolutism to flourish. It was thought to be sanctioned by God. After the disastrous 14th century, people were ready to accept a strong monarch, especially if he restored order from chaos. The Protestant Reformation contributed to absolutism as well. The Pope’s influence had weakened in many states, and secular affairs needed guidance from a powerful ruler. To establish order and control, monarchs required a bureaucracy (administrative system of standardization), which in turn helped to maintain central authority. Bureaucrats were responsible for collecting taxes, enforcing laws and royal decrees, and gathering information. With the taxes collected by bureaucrats, monarchs could establish large, standing armies, which further consolidated their power.

In addition, 15th-century mercantile policies, which produced unimaginable wealth, contributed to the rise of absolutism. The mercantile notion of a national, self-sufficient economy stimulated production and generated surpluses. To maintain that prosperity, monarchs regulated all aspects of economy and industry and built navies to protect their
THOROUGHLY answer questions using the above summary:
Define Absolute Monarchy.

Do you know who is an absolute ruler today?

Describe characteristics of an absolute monarchy (e.g. what do they have power over?)

Why does the absolute monarchy emerge and where do they get their power?

Hapsburgs & Spain
Absolutism first appeared in Spain due to some marriages that significantly increased the territorial holdings of the Habsburg royal family. Holy Roman emperor Charles V ruled over nearly all of Christian Europe in the 16th century. He was also the secular head of the Catholic Church and protector of the Pope. However, the Protestant Reformation threatened to divide his Catholic kingdom.

When Philip II succeeded his father Charles, he firmly applied the divine right theory. Philip made every decision and micromanaged his expansive bureaucracy, which in turn closely supervised his territories. He conquered neighboring Portugal, united the two thrones, and took over Portugal's overseas territories. Substantial income poured into the Spanish treasury.

A devoted Catholic, Philip fought several wars of religion. He won the 1571 Battle of Lepanto against the Islamic Ottoman Empire. He next tried to quell Protestantism in the Netherlands but was unsuccessful; during the Dutch Revolt, the United Provinces declared independence from Philip's rule in 1581.

Philip's successors were weak. Spain was crushed by taxes and huge debts that plunged the country into a stagnation from which it took centuries to recover.
THOROUGHLY answer questions using the above summary:
Where does the absolute monarchy emerge? Why?

What policies/actions of Phillip II make him an absolute monarch? Cite specific examples.

A Prime Example – France
French absolutism became the prototype for all the other European monarchs. Louis XIV ruled France with absolute power from 1661 to 1715. (He was actually crowned in 1643, at the age of five, but did not begin his personal reign until 1661.) He was the third king of the Bourbon dynasty. As a firm advocate of the divine right of kings and absolutism, Louis is said to have proclaimed, "L'état, c'est moi." ("I am the state.") In his view, he and the nation were one and the same. He ruled with unlimited power. He did not have a parliament. Once he was an adult, he did not allow any single minister or adviser to dominate.

France became the dominant power in Europe during Louis' reign. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his minister of finance, revived French trade, industry, and agriculture and established a strong colonial policy. The Marquis de Louvois, his war minister, built France's army into the finest fighting machine in all of Europe. During the reign of Louis XIV, France attained economic, political, and cultural brilliance.

However, that brilliance was short-lived. In 1685, Louis, a devout Catholic, revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had protected the religious freedom of the French Protestants, who were known as Huguenots. Denied the freedom to practice their religion, the Huguenots hundreds of thousands of people fled the nation. With their exodus, France lost many of its skilled workers and business leaders. In addition, the seemingly endless series of unsuccessful expansionist wars that Louis engaged in placed the country in severe economic distress.

Finally, Louis expanded his hunting château at Versailles into a symbol of his power. Its beautiful gardens, lakes, elaborate fountains, and opulent interior exemplified his rule as the Sun King, around which everything revolved. Moreover, he kept the nobles virtually imprisoned at Versailles in order to scrutinize their every action.

Absolutism followed a tortured course in France through the remainder of the 18th century. It finally ended with the French Revolution and the beheading of the last Bourbon king, Louis XVI.

THOROUGHLY answer questions using the above summary:
Which country is the perfect example of an absolute monarchy? Who represents the epitome of absolute monarchy?
Describe the conflict of religion in France and what was the impact of it?

What policies/actions of Louis XIV make him an absolute monarch? Cite specific examples.

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**England – Absolute Monarchy to a Limited Monarchy**

The development of absolutism was entirely different in England. Although absolutist, the Tudor dynasty, which ruled from 1485 to 1603, achieved its objectives through adept and popular rulers. The Tudor monarchs, such as Elizabeth I (think Shakespeare), worked with the British Parliament (a legislative body; representatives of the people) and used it to their advantage to improve their power and the lives of their countrymen.

With the Scottish Stuart dynasty, absolutism became more pronounced. James I asserted his divine right to rule, but his arrogance caused many in England to resent his power. In turn, his son Charles I caused a constitutional struggle. After repeated disputes with Parliament, Charles dissolved the body and ruled alone. In 1642, however, the English Civil War erupted between cavaliers loyal to Charles and roundheads, loyal to Oliver Cromwell. Parliament won the battle, and Charles was tried for treason and beheaded in 1649.

After several years of rule by Oliver Cromwell, the Restoration brought Charles II to the throne in 1660. Realizing that absolutism would fail, Charles used favors to gain parliamentary support for his policies. When Charles died, however, his devoutly Catholic brother James II soon ran into struggles with Parliament. After deeming that James had abdicated, Parliament offered the throne to the Protestant Mary II and William III in what came to be known as the Glorious Revolution (bloodless overthrow). William and Mary had agreed to an English Bill of Rights, limiting their power. The Bill of Rights addressed the fundamental rights and liberties (e.g. trial by jury) that people considered themselves to have, and limited the monarchs’ power. England had the first Parliamentary or Limited Monarchy.
In sum, the British Parliament had won the absolutism battle by deposing and appointing monarchs as it saw fit. The divine right of kings theory had been dealt a devastating blow. John Locke justified Parliament’s actions in 1690 with his publication *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, which argued in favor of legitimate revolt against any type of tyrannical government. Locke’s theory would lead to the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

**THOROUGHLY answer questions using the above summary:**

How are the Tudors and the Stuart Dynasties similar and different in their rules?

Describe the English Civil War (Who, When, Why, Result).

What is a Parliamentary/Limited Monarchy? Describe how England arrived at this type of rule (discuss the Glorious Revolution & English Bill of Rights)?

How does England arrive at this type of rule? -

1. 

2. 

**Russia**

In Russia, absolutism had existed since the reign of Ivan III in the 15th century. His grandson Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible) centralized and expanded Russia. At the turn of the 18th century, Peter I (Peter the Great) entrenched absolutism in Russia. At the helm of a strong, centralized government, Peter fought many expansionist wars (Sweden), opened Russia to the West by establishing a northern trading port at St. Petersburg. He improved
the nation's industries by emphasizing education for the elite and reorganized the army. In keeping with the tradition of absolutism, he also suppressed the power of the church.

Russian empress Catherine II (Catherine the Great) seized power in 1762. An absolutist ruler, she nevertheless considered herself an enlightened despot or monarch. She outwardly showed her reform-minded intentions by inviting an Enlightenment Philosopher – Denis Diderot. She attempted to grant religious toleration and create a more equal law code. However, her reforms never reached beyond the privileged classes. After a serf rebellion, Catherine the Great feared a revolution, thus further limiting the rights of the Serfs (95% of the population). Russian Serfdom remained entrenched in Russian society.

A Brief Reign
A variation of absolutism also existed in Denmark, Sweden, and the Ottoman Empire. Yet after the French Revolution, absolutism began to decline. Other absolutist dynasties like the Russian Romanov dynasty and the Austrian Habsburg dynasty lost their thrones during and shortly after World War I. Overall, absolutism had a short reign in terms of the world's history. It was challenged and eventually defeated by the Enlightenment ideals that sparked both the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

THOROUGHLY answer questions using the above summary:
What makes Peter the Great an absolute monarchy? What policy changes does he bring to Russia?

What makes Catherine the Great an absolute monarchy? Why is she not considered Enlightened (aka create reforms to improve society)?

Why does absolutism come to an end?