Absolutism and Enlightenment

Learning Objectives

Ideas Change the World 1450-1750

At the end of this section the student will be able to:

- Identify major causes and describe the major effects of the following important turning points in world history from 1450 to 1750 and the Renaissance and the Reformation. [WH.1D]
- Identify major causes and describe the major effects of the following important turning points in world history from 1750 to 1914: the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment’s impact on political revolutions. [WH.1E]
- Explain the development of democratic-republican government from its beginnings in the Judeo-Christian legal tradition and classical Greece and Rome through the English Civil War and the Enlightenment. [WH.20A]
- Explain the political philosophies of individuals such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, Charles de Montesquieu, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Thomas Jefferson, and William Blackstone. [WH.20C]
- Explain the impact of the printing press on the Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe. [WH.27C]
- Describe the origins of the Scientific Revolution in 16th century Europe and explain its impact on scientific thinking worldwide. [WH.27D]

Absolutism in Europe

The era of absolutism, exemplified by the "Sun King" Louis XIV Bourbon of France, marks the rise of rulers throughout Europe who had absolute power over their nations. Mercantilism became the primary form of economy of the day, and the issue of religion disappeared in European wars, now replaced by the issue of the balance of power.

Louis XIV (1638-1715), Model of Absolutism

Louis XIV Bourbon of France rose to power in 1643. He was married to Maria Theresa, daughter of Philip IV. His power stemmed from the fact that during his reign he maintained a powerful, unified France. Louis and William III Stuart of Orange were arch-enemies during this time; however, Louis maintained the upper hand and was on the offensive against William during that time.

Louis desired control over the Netherlands because of its economic power as a result of trade, because he wanted to crush Calvinists and Protestants, and because he desired increased territory. Indeed, he advised his heir, Louis XV, "Do not imitate me in my taste for war." His aggressive policy demanded to finance the largest European army of 280,000 men.

Louis’ wars resulted in horrendous results and poverty for the French people, and Protestants despised Louis. His economic policy was headed by Colbert, and his nation was a model in enacting mercantilism. During his reign, France became the dominant country in language, culture, and dress.
Louis allegedly famously declared, "L’état c’est moi," or "I am the state," and his reign exemplifies absolutism. French Bishop Bossuet declared that it was the divine right of monarchs to rule, concluding that kings were God’s anointed representatives on earth. Louis acted upon this belief, governing France as if he were placed on earth by God to rule.

Overall, Louis’ foreign goals were territorial expansion and the spread of Catholicism.

Louis was highly successful in his domestic ambitions to achieve absolute power through centralized bureaucracy. He successfully controlled rebellious nobles and made himself the center of French power and culture. People depended upon him for advancement and thrived on his goodwill. Louis also established the palace at Versailles, which took fourteen years to construct. Versailles was modeled by every other major European country, and it successfully kept nobles occupied, distracting them from the desire to have a say in government. In 1685, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, stripping Calvinists of their rights in France.

**Divine Right of Kings**

Louis, as other monarchs in kingdoms such as Russia and Spain, based his rulership on a concept known as divine right of kings. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the rise of the nation-state and the protestant
reformation, the theory of divine right was used to justify the king’s absolute authority in both political and spiritual matters. This theory came to be used in England under the reign of the stuart monarchs, James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), but never gained traction and was discredited in the aftermath of the English Civil War.

**English Civil War (1642-1651)**

The English Civil War in response to the behavior of the Stuart monarchs, particularly Charles I, in dealing with Parliament as well as the extravagant lifestyle of both monarchs. Furthermore, Charles hoped to unite the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland into a new single kingdom, fulfilling the dream of his father. Many English Parliamentarians had suspicions regarding such a move, because they feared that setting up a new kingdom might
destroy the old English traditions which had bound the English monarchy. As Charles shared his father’s position on the power of the crown (James had described kings as "little gods on Earth", chosen by God to rule in accordance with the doctrine of the "Divine Right of Kings"), the suspicions of the Parliamentarians had some justification. Finally, many members of Parliament, a significant portion of whom were members of reformed Protestant churches such as the Puritans or Calvinists, distrusted Charles’ motives thanks to his religious policies and the fact he was married to a Roman Catholic. His support of the high ecclesiastics, such as Richard Montagu and William Laud, as well as his failure to successfully aid Protestant forces in the Thirty Years’ War further damage his ability to govern.

From 1642, Charles fought the armies of the English and Scottish parliaments in the English Civil War. After his defeat in 1645, he surrendered to a Scottish force that eventually handed him over to the English Parliament. Charles refused to accept his captors’ demands for a constitutional monarchy, and temporarily escaped captivity in November 1647. Re-imprisoned on the Isle of Wight, Charles forged an alliance with Scotland, but by the end of 1648 Oliver Cromwell’s New Model Army had consolidated its control over England. Charles was tried, convicted, and executed for high treason in January 1649. The monarchy was abolished and a republic called the Commonwealth of England was declared. In 1660, the English Interregnum ended when the monarchy was restored to Charles’s son, Charles II.

Thomas Hobbes, a philosopher who lived through the violence and chaos of the English civil war, was alarmed by the revolutionary upheaval in England. He wrote *Leviathan* was published in 1651.

Hobbes claimed that before society was organized humans led a “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” existence. Humans were guided not by reason and morals but instead by a struggle for self-preservation.

To stop people from destroying each other, people created the idea of the social contract and agreed to form a state. Hobbes referred to the state as a great Leviathan that is responsible for peace and defense. Furthermore, Hobbes argued people in the state agreed to be governed by an absolute ruler who possessed unlimited power. Rebellion in his view should be suppressed. Hobbes believed absolute power was needed to preserve the social order.

**The Enlightenment**

The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement in the eighteenth century composed of intellectuals who were greatly impressed with the achievements of the Scientific Revolution. They were very much concerned with the idea of reason, meaning the application of the scientific method to help understand all of life. They hoped that by using the scientific method, they could make progress toward a better society than the one they had inherited. *Reason, natural law, hope, progress*—these were common words to the thinkers of the time.

The Enlightenment was especially influenced by the ideas of two seventeenth-century Englishmen, Isaac Newton and John Locke. To Newton, the physical world and everything in it was like a giant machine (the Newtonian world-machine). If you could discover the natural laws that governed the physical world, then it was possible to discover the natural laws that governed human society.

John Locke’s theory of knowledge also greatly affected eighteenth-century intellectuals. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that every person was born with a blank mind (known as table rasa). Furthermore, he suggested that people were molded by the experiences they gained from the world around them.

**Montesquieu**

Charles-Louis de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu, was a French noble.

His most famous work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was published in 1748. In this study of government he tried to use the scientific method to find the natural laws that govern the social and political relationships of human beings.

Thus, in his work Montesquieu identified three basic kinds of governments: a. republics, suitable for small states; b. despotisms, ideal for large states; and c. monarchies, appropriate for moderate sized states.
Montesquieu believed that England’s government had three branches: the executive (the monarch), the legislative (parliament) and the judicial (the courts of law). This government functioned through what is known as the separation of powers. By separating the powers of each branch, Montesquieu believed that each one would act as a check on the other. Because it prevents any one person or group from gaining too much power, he argued this system provides the greatest amount of freedom and security, not for the people, but for the state.
By the mid-eighteenth century, a new group of philosophers had come of age. The most famous of this later generation was a man named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As a young man he wandered France and Italy holding various jobs. Eventually, he found himself in Paris where he became a member of the circle of philosophes.

In his *Discourse on the Origins of the Inequality of Mankind*, he argued that people adopted laws and government in order to preserve their private property. In the process of doing so, however, they had become enslaved by the government. What then, should people do in order to regain their freedom and throw off the chains of bondage?

In a famous work published in 1762 titled *The Social Contract*, Rousseau presented his concept of the social contract. Through this device an entire society agrees to be governed by the general will. If an individual wishes to follow his/her own self-interest, they must be forced to abide by the will of the majority. “This means nothing less than that [they] will be forced to be free,” said Rousseau. Therefore, according to Rousseau, liberty is achieved by being forced to follow what is best for the general will because it is what is best for the community at large.

### Interactive Notebook Assignments

Create a six-panel storyboard that chronicles how the new ideas introduced in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment changed the world. The first panel of the storyboard should depict scientific reasoning prior to the introduction of new scientific ideas during the sixteen century. Subsequent panels should reflect changes that occurred in scientific and political thought following the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment.

### Review Questions

1. What is absolutism and where did it take place?
2. How was Louis XIV a model of absolutism?
3. What is Enlightenment and how did it affect western societies?
4. Who are the Enlightenment thinkers?
5. How did the Enlightenment thinkers challenge old beliefs and ways of thinking?

### Assessment

Conduct a historical inquiry as a group, partnership, or individually by choosing a historical topic of interest related to the Unit.

Research a chosen topic by:

- creating a compelling question to research
- locating, analyzing, and interpreting primary and secondary sources
- synthesizing information from sources
- drawing conclusions that address the compelling question

Present the research findings in a paper, an exhibit, a documentary, or as a website. The presentation must include:
Vocabulary

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>absolutism</td>
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<td>Blackstone, William</td>
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<td>Constitutional monarchy</td>
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<td>Divine right</td>
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<td>English bill of rights</td>
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<td>English Civil War</td>
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<td>Enlightened despotism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locke, John</td>
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<td>Louis XIV</td>
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<td>Montesquieu, Baron de</td>
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<td>Henry VIII</td>
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<td>Rousseau, Jean-Jacques</td>
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**Internet Resources**

**Charles V and Holy Roman Empire** by Crash Course

- **humanism** - an intellectual and philosophical emphasis on the importance of individuals as creative and critical thinkers
- **Renaissance** - a rebirth or resurgence; has been applied to the time period between 1450-1750 in Europe characterized by the rediscovery of the classical works of Greece and Rome, but can refer to any general cultural resurgence
- **Reformation** - the process of updating an institution or practice; has been applied to refer to the 16th century events in Europe that resulted in the establishment of Protestant churches and changes to the Roman Catholic Church
- **Protestant** - refers to Christian church denominations, teachings, and individuals during the Reformation that rejected Roman Catholic Church doctrines
- **sacraments** - sacred religious practices or ceremonies first introduced by the Roman Catholic Church
- **secularism** - refers to the belief that religion and politics should operate in separate spheres as well as the rejection of religion in the public sphere
- **vernacular** - language used by the common people
**scientific method** -the use of hypothesis, observation and experimentation to reach conclusions about the natural and physical world

**heliocentric theory** -idea that the sun is the center of universe

**Enlightenment** -to gain understanding or knowledge; has been generally applied to an intellectual movement in Europe during the 18th century in which philosophers sought to find natural laws by which to govern societies

**social contract** - political philosophy that argues that the populous and the ruler/government enter into a mutual relationship

**natural rights** - liberties and freedoms inherent to being human

**Related Vocabulary**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>heresy</th>
<th>recant</th>
<th>universal law of gravity</th>
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<tr>
<td>excommunicate</td>
<td>movable type</td>
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**References**

