First used at the end of the eighteenth century, the term “absolutism” is loosely employed by many historians as a synonym for absolute monarchy. It is most commonly associated with the personal rule of Louis XIV of France (1661–1715) and his contemporary rulers: Peter the Great (1682–1725) of Russia; Frederick William, the Great Elector of Brandenburg (1640–1688), and his son Frederick (1688–1713), who became the first king of Prussia in 1701; Charles XI of Sweden (1660–1697) and his son Charles XII (1697–1718). To these names may be added the so-called enlightened despots or absolutists of the eighteenth century, notably Catherine the Great of Russia (1762–1796), Frederick the Great of Prussia (1740–1786), and Joseph II of Austria (1765–1790).

Despite this unavoidable reference to particular monarchs, it is generally understood that absolutism cannot be equated with complete or total control by the ruler. Such a form of rule was beyond the reach of early modern states, where a ruler’s effectiveness was limited by poor communications, constant difficulty in mobilizing adequate resources, and, above all, the need to satisfy the interests and aspirations of the nobility. Continued use of the term “absolutism” can, however, be justified to describe monarchical systems of government that were largely unrestrained by national or local representative institutions. The disappearance or weakening of these institutions, marked by the demise of the French Estates General in 1614–1615, the Castile Cortes after 1665, and the Brandenburg Estates after 1685, was the practical counterpoint to the increasingly powerful idea—clearly articulated and debated at the time—that monarchs were accountable to no one but God.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ABSOLUTIST STATE

In absolutist as opposed to constitutional systems, representative institutions played no part in the lawmaking process; lawmakers was the prerogative of the king, who could override custom and the laws of his predecessors. Nor did absolute monarchs require consent for taxation. The growth of royal authority was frequently accompanied by a decline in municipal autonomy and in the independence of the church, while there was a tendency for seigneurial jurisdictions to be subsumed within a national legal framework. Paradoxically, the elevation of the personal authority of kings went hand in hand with the bureaucratization of their regimes as ever greater numbers of fiscal, judicial, and administrative officers were required to sustain them. Absolute monarchs also had at their disposition armies of ever greater size and firepower—to finance them was the essential reason for the expansion of the machinery of state.

These generalizations should, however, be applied with care. In Castile the disappearance of the Cortes was accompanied by a strengthening of seigneurial jurisdictions together with noble tax-raising powers as the Crown alienated many of its regalian rights. In Sweden, where the members of the Riksdag explicitly recognized in 1680 the Crown’s legislative sovereignty and its powers of taxation, the curiously consensual nature of the process allowed the Riksdag to survive and to reassert its constitutional role within fifty years. Even in Louis XIV’s France the survival of important provincial estates meant that representation and consent to taxation were not entirely emasculated; and in the half century after his death the parlements, although far from representative of anybody except their venal officeholders, were able to resurrect their right to remonstrate against objectionable royal edicts. In doing so, they severely dented the monarchy’s absolute pretensions. Thus while absolute monarchies may be clearly differentiated from those that formally limited the power of the Crown—notably in England, Poland, and Hungary—absolutism was a tendency with considerable variations rather than a defined structure.

Only in France, for instance, had there developed by 1700 a practice of direct ministerial responsibility for the great departments of state (finance, war,
and foreign affairs). Elsewhere a collegial style of administration, largely inspired by Axel Oxenstierna’s reforms in Sweden in 1634, found favor. Between 1717 and 1720 Peter the Great established no fewer than eleven collegial departments falling into three groups: war and foreign affairs, financial affairs, and trade and industry. Each college was theoretically controlled by eleven high officials headed by a president; the presidents came together in the senate, which had earlier replaced the old privy council as the supreme administrative body under the king. There were clear parallels with the emerging structures of the Prussian state, where, at almost the same time, the General Directory was established as an umbrella body for four departments but with a limited degree of functional specialization. Even in France the emergence of functionally defined royal councils did not ensure a clear demarcation between the business brought before them.

Reorganizing the central government, however, was a relatively easy task compared with that of effectively directing local agencies. In Spain the monarchy was dependent on eighty or so corregidores (royal appointees), who presided over town councils and acted as chief magistrates. But because they were not career bureaucrats and were often drawn from the municipal oligarchies they were supposed to control, their commitment to royal interests was uncertain. They did not exist in at least half the country, where primary jurisdiction belonged to the local seigneurs. Not until the following century, with the disappearance of the provincial Cortes and the development of a system of royal intendants on French lines, did the Spanish monarchy begin to remedy this situation. However, as French experience itself showed that intendants were unable to fulfill their responsibilities without subdélegues (subdelegates) drawn from the local office-holders, the significance of their replication in Spain should not be exaggerated. In Prussia coordination of local government was improved by integrating the administration of the royal domains with the military-fiscal administration that had evolved during the wars of the seventeenth century; the resulting provincial chambers were then subordinated to the General Directory. Nonetheless, the regime’s effectiveness continued to depend on the rural commissioners, or Landräte, nominated by the county squirearchy. Under Frederick II they acquired extensive administrative, judicial, fiscal, and military responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, in the vast and growing spaces of the Russian Empire the coordination of local and central administrations posed particular problems. Between 1708 and 1718 Peter the Great introduced a degree of decentralization, by transforming the old military provinces into eight sometimes vast guberniyas headed by governors with a full range of fiscal and judicial powers. Subordinate officials seem to have been displaced by military commandants. The resulting slippage of power in turn led within a decade to a renewed strengthening of upward lines of authority; in theory, all local agencies were subordinated to the new central colleges. However, the governors, appointed by the tsar, retained significant powers, and the military commandants soon gave way to civilian voevodas appointed by the senate. After 1728 Russia was governed by nine governors, twenty-eight provincial voevodas, and about seventy local voevodas. The resulting uncertainty about the chain of command contributed to tensions between local and regional authorities, and from 1764 there was a return to decentralized modes. The number of guberniyas increased while the police and fiscal powers of the colleges were redistributed to provincial chambers. Only in small and homogeneous Sweden was the integration of central and local control effected without noticeable un-
Absolutism

Certainty; but even there, royal governors and judges increased their presence by an accommodation with older, more egalitarian institutions, notably the jury system.

Venality of Office

In contrast to those in central and eastern Europe (with the exception of the Prussian judiciary), institutional structures in France and Spain were dependent on sale of office. By the end of Louis XIV's reign the total number of venal offices, if those in the tax farms, municipalities, and army are included, may have been as high as seventy thousand or more, compared with around five thousand at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Information from Spain is less complete, but by the 1630s the sale of senior administrative offices together with those in the municipalities, which were vital to the financial and social stability of the body politic, was commonplace. It has been suggested that in Castile there were twice the number of offices per head of population as in France. In both countries the resulting patrimonial nature of the system was further reinforced by the practice of using private financiers to sell offices, tax concessions, and alienated regalian rights.

Venality was both a means of getting the bureaucracy to pay for itself and a source of additional revenue. In its absence other means had to be found to sustain expanding civilian and military establishments. The Swedish Crown partly solved the problem through the reduktion, by which, in diametric opposition to French and Spanish practices, it exercised the regalian right of calling in lands alienated to the nobility. This was accomplished in an increasingly comprehensive and aggressive manner in 1655, 1680, and 1682. The most influential of Sweden's reforms, however, was the cantonal, or allotment, system of maintaining an army. The government negotiated contracts with each province for the supply and maintenance of infantry soldiers, who were given either a cottage or accommodation on a farm. The advantages of this practice were considerable, enabling an army to be kept in permanent readiness at minimal cost while reducing more brutal methods of conscription, heavy war taxation, and the billeting of unruly troops on resentful communities; in the short term, at least, it helped a small country compete with, and even inflict military defeats on, their wealthier or more populous rivals.

In 1727 the cantonal system was introduced in Prussia with remarkable results. Although Prussian revenues increased by only 44 percent between 1713 and 1740, the size of the army more than doubled to 83,000. The annexation of Silesia in 1745 and West Prussia in 1772 took the population from 2.2 to 4.76 million. By 1786 it was 5.4 million, and the size of the army had correspondingly grown to 200,000. With about 4 percent of the population in arms Prussia exceeded all its rivals in the militarization of the populace. However, neither Prussia nor Austria, where a similar system was adopted in the 1770s, was able to emulate Sweden's success in controlling costs, for military reform in Sweden had been accompanied by the introduction of an audit department with the aim of adhering to a balanced budget, which placed it decades ahead of its rivals.

The variation in the incidence of venality has encouraged Thomas Ertman to postulate a typological difference between the “patrimonial” absolutisms of Latin Europe and the “bureaucratic” ones of the east. Yet bureaucratic absolutisms also displayed powerful patrimonial characteristics. In Russia the payment of salaries for local government officers was withdrawn in 1727, leaving them to “pay themselves” from the proceeds of their business. Not until 1763 were all officials salaried. The Prussian Landräte were paid a modest salary, but it came from the provincial chamber, not from the king; moreover, these were key positions much sought after by the more powerful nobles, who used them to establish patronage networks, which they deployed in the interests of family and allies. As far as military posts were concerned, no country emulated French practice, which by the 1770s had generated 900 colonels to 163 regiments. Even so, the Prussian officer corps grew dramatically during the reign of Frederick the Great, and many hundreds of captains supplemented their salaries by taking a cut of the company expenses and soldiers' pay made over to them by the state. The patrimonial character of the absolutist regimes was not, therefore, a simple consequence of venality. It might be more accurate to suggest the opposite—that venality was but one expression of the patrimonial dynamics that shaped absolutist regimes.

Absolutism and War

If it is indisputable that the emergence of absolutist regimes was a response to the bellicose turmoil of the seventeenth century, it is equally apparent that this was not the only possible outcome. In Sweden the military difficulties of the 1670s produced a lurch toward absolutism, but those of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), notably the military debacle at Poltava in 1709, led directly to a reassertion of con-
stitutional rule; indeed in 1719 the Riksdag ended the hereditary monarchy established in 1544. During the same period, pressures of the War of the Spanish Succession on England accentuated rather than diminished parliamentary control of the burgeoning bureaucracy, the army, and the navy. The modern state may, in the most generic sense, be a product of warfare, but this is an insufficient explanation for the divergent forms of its development and cannot convey the full array of conditions required to produce a specifically absolutist variant.

Attempts by modern historians to address this problem have largely concentrated on the conditions under which states set about maximizing revenues. According to Charles Tilly early modern states were shaped by the interaction between their coercive capacities and their capital accumulation and concentration. Venice (capital intensive) and Russia (coercive) are positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum, with England, France, and Spain somewhere in the middle. Ertman, noting that Tilly’s model can accommodate neither Hungary nor Poland, which despite being “militarily exposed” produced constitutional rather than absolutist regimes, has offered an explanation based on the prior character of representative and local government. Assemblies encompassing the three estates (nobility, clergy, and commoners), which could easily be divided, were less well equipped to survive than territorial-based assemblies, which tended to be more strongly rooted in local government. Brian Downing, on the other hand, relates the survival of constitutional practices to a plurality of factors: the capacity to exploit foreign territories; the protection offered by difficult terrain; diplomatic skill; or simple good fortune.

THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF ABSOLUTISM

While these modern interpretations reject oversimplified connections between war and absolutism, they confine themselves largely to the dynamics of state finance, giving little weight to socioeconomic matters. This perhaps reflects the fading power of older class-based analyses of absolutism, which, in either Whiggish or marxist terms, fastened on the rise of the middle classes or the bourgeoisie. By the end of the twentieth century most historians, marxists included, had abandoned Friedrich Engels’s notion that an equilibrium between nobles and bourgeoisie allowed the monarchy to rise above both. Indeed the longevity of such ideas is surprising since absolutism was most securely rooted in Prussia and Russia, where the bourgeoisie was insignificant, and positively rejected in the United Provinces and England, where it was most powerful.

If the association of absolutism with the bourgeoisie is to have any credence, one would expect it to be established in western Europe, where the urban populations were larger and commercial activity more vigorous. Yet even there the connection is doubtful. The Spanish monarchy’s dependence on the compliance and resources of privileged urban centers is deceptive, for these towns had effectively become the patrimony of the caballeros (noblemen). State investors also made up the middle and upper cadres of the judiciary, the army, the church, the royal governors of the cities, and the king’s secretaries and councillors. These noble urban oligarchs had little resemblance to a bourgeoisie. The entrenchment of their position was echoed in the countryside, particularly in the south, by the consolidation of seigneurial authority. During Philip IV’s reign (1621–1665) some fifty-five thousand families—no less than 5 percent of the population—were sold into seigneurial jurisdiction, and at least 169 new señores (lords) were created with the right to appoint village magistrates and officials. One telling consequence of this process was a dramatic reduction in appeals to the royal courts at Valladolid and Granada.

Similar observations may be made about the social foundations of absolutism in France, where, despite the intendants, who held office by virtue of revocable commissions and not by purchase, the realm continued to be administered, taxed, and judged by rentier officeholders who at the higher levels formed the ranks of the noblese de robe (judicial nobility). While much of the capital for the purchase of office came from trade, this diversion of merchant wealth into rentier and usurious investments inhibited the progress of capitalism. It is thus not possible, as some historians have suggested, to attribute urban patriciates’ royalism to the support of a bourgeois class for the economic protection offered by the Crown. Such royalism is better explained by the deep social conservatism of urban elites, who aspired to advance their families through the purchase of office, land, and title. In any event, the bourgeoisie played no significant part in formulating the mercantilist policies that Richelieu (Armand-Jean du Plessis) presented to a handpicked assembly of notables (nobles, magistrates, clergy) in 1627. Not until 1700, with the establishment of the Council of Commerce, did the trading bourgeoisie achieve a modest level of influence at the highest levels. Even then, the Council’s proceedings reveal a persistent attachment to local interests, traditional social values, and a corporate mentality.
Traders and manufacturers were frequently hostile or indifferent to government economic initiatives yet without a principled basis for their opposition that might have suggested a developing sense of class interest.

Only about Sweden is it possible to argue that absolutism rested on some equilibrium between classes. But here it was the peasantry, not the diminutive bourgeoisie, that acted as the counterpoise to the nobility. Not only was the Swedish peasantry largely composed of freeholders but, uniquely in Europe, it was recognized as a separate estate of the realm with an autonomous political role. Although diminished as Charles XI gathered power to himself and an inner circle of councillors, the peasants’ influence ensured the nobility would bear the brunt of fiscal retrenchment by relinquishing many of its lands. True, this was not accomplished without consolidating royal support among the lesser nobility, who, reinforced by an influx of newcomers, dominated the reduction commission. But what is remarkable about the recovery of alienated lands was the extent to which it was carried through; even the president of the council was not spared significant losses, despite his personal appeals to the king. However the unusual balance of social forces in Sweden did not, as events were to show, provide the most propitious basis for an enduring absolutism.

**ABSOLUTISM AND THE NOBILITY**

Elsewhere in Europe the absolute state consolidated its position at the expense of the peasants, partly by increasing their tax burden and partly by reinforcing their subordination to landlords. Perhaps the most famous landmark in this process was the Russian law code of 1649, which bound the Russian peasant to the soil, a plight aggravated in 1722 by the imposition of the poll tax, from which the nobility was exempt. By comparison the Prussian peasantry was well-off. Nevertheless, in addition to providing or finding the labor to cultivate the lords’ demesnes—up to sixty days per year in a fifth of cases and twenty-six days in another two-fifths—it also met the largest part of the tax burden. Even in western Europe, where estate ownership and jurisdiction were no longer coterminous, the landed classes retained a remarkable ability to extract taxes, seigneurial dues, and tithes from a legally dependent peasant population. In both Castile and France half the peasants’ product was consumed in payments that sustained non-peasant classes. Inevitably, there was a certain tension between the demands of the central state and landlords for the peasants’ surplus. Indeed during the massive endemic unrest in the 1630s and 1640s it was not unknown for French tax officials to encourage their tenants to resist the demands of the fisc, or royal treasury. Yet this curious situation also indicates that the absolute state was not, as is sometimes suggested, an independent competitor against the seigneurs but a state managed by them.

All this suggests that the dynamics of absolutism were generated by noble society itself. From at least the mid-sixteenth century the European nobility had been badly shaken and divided. In part this was due to the soaring costs of war, but warfare was itself the outcome of internecine conflicts within the nobility. The centuries-long struggle between the Valois and the Bourbon against the Habsburgs was the ultimate expression of noble rivalry. Such rivalry was also manifest in the civil wars that, compounded by religious passions, tore France and Germany apart. In Russia the governing boyar elite was terrorized, depleted, and left reeling by the onslaught of Tsar Ivan IV between 1565 and 1572, and when the ruling dynasty died out in 1598, Muscovy slid into chaos. Claimants to the throne set up rival governments within a few miles of each other, while Sigismund III Vasa of Poland, who had previously been deposed as king of Sweden by his uncle (Charles IX of Sweden), invaded the country in 1610 and had his son elected tsar by a group of boyars. Only the opposition of other nobles finally secured the throne, in 1612, for Michael Romanov, a member of a distinguished but non-titled family related to the previous dynasty. The Russian throne was to remain prey to adventurers, among whom one might count Catherine the Great, who had no claim to it whatsoever. Sweden, too, in the last years of the sixteenth century was destabilized by deep factional rivalries, accentuated by religious division. Having seized the throne, Sigismund’s uncle subsequently ordered the execution of his leading aristocratic opponents.

The assertion of regal authority was accompanied by a growing differentiation within the ranks of the nobility and the emergence of a handful of very powerful and influential families. In Brandenburg, for instance, on the eve of the Thirty Years’ War thirteen families had already achieved an extraordinary concentration of both office and wealth, holding between them one-third to one-half of seigneurial land. As historians have long suggested, this may in part have been due to a decline in noble revenues, a decline compounded for some by the catastrophic effects of decades of war on rural economies. Many lesser nobles found themselves little better off than their tenants, while others consolidated large fortunes. But the po-
larization was also an outcome of the jostling for place and favor, to which monarchs contributed with measures that simultaneously recognized noble aspirations and strengthened their own powers of patronage. As early as 1520 Charles V of Spain created four distinct noble ranks, with a tiny handful of grandees at the top and large numbers of often very poor *hidalgos* (yeomen) at the bottom. All expanded significantly in the 150 years that followed, with the number of titled nobility rising from 69 in 1530 to 212 a century later. In Russia new ranks within the boyar elite were created in the sixteenth century to accommodate pressure from social upstarts, although Ivan IV tripled the number of service gentry, much to the chagrin of some of the magnates. In Sweden the monarchy began to recover from the turmoil of the early seventeenth century by incorporating the nobility as a formal estate of the realm and introducing grants of hereditary status. The order was further divided into three: the titled nobility (twelve families), members of the council of state (twenty-two families), all other untitled nobles. This process, however, excluded four hundred families.

Having consolidated their position, European monarchs were able to exploit divisions between and within noble ranks and deploy their own powers of patronage further to restructure the relationship with the nobility. This process was particularly evident in the last decades of the seventeenth century, when the Brandenburg Junkers, the Swedish inner circle, the Russian boyars, and the overmighty French subjects all had their grips on the levers of power reduced. Between 1640 and the 1670s aristocratic domination of the Russian Duma fell from 70 to 25 percent. Most dramatically, in Denmark the almost overnight establishment of absolutism in 1661 was rapidly followed by the effective dissolution of the old nobility as a distinct social group; not only did it lose its monopoly of important offices, but its numbers and its wealth collapsed. In 1660, 95 percent of privately owned manors were in the hands of the old nobility; by 1710 that had been reduced to 38.5 percent.

However, in every case, these developments were only a phase in the integration of noble and monarchical interests. In Denmark the absolute monarchy almost immediately set about creating a new nobility by introducing in the 1670s the titles of baron and count, expressly designed to enable Crown officials of common origins to acquire noble privileges and status. Their land was also protected from market forces, making it subject to primogeniture and entail. Entailed estates made up one-fifth of agricultural land in 1800. A similar renewal of the nobility took place in Sweden, where the number of noble families rose from 150 in 1627 to 556 in 1700; half of these families owed promotion to Charles XI. In Russia a hereditary nobility did not exist, save for the princes, until the reign of Peter the Great. His extraordinarily elaborate Table of Ranks—with its fourteen grades; 262 functions, from general admiral to court butler; and tripartite classification into military, court, and civil nobility—was intended to create a Western-style noble estate. The process was not complete until 1785, when Catherine the Great’s Charter of Nobility confirmed its legally privileged status. Matters followed a slightly different course in Prussia, where the Great Elector turned to the German imperial nobility to replace the Junkers. However, despite having to contend with an influx of newcomers, the Junker’s never lost their virtual monopoly of the key posts in the provincial administration.

The refashioning of the nobility increased rather than diminished the preoccupation with rank and the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few families. Everywhere access to the highest councils was facilitated by family connections, which were constantly reinforced by the head of the clan, who secured advantageous marriages, offices and pensions, and other favors for kin and clients. Where patronage was bolstered by hereditary officeholding, as in France, the upper echelons of the state became the preserve of dynasties of ennobled officeholders. In Russia the 180 or so nobles who occupied the first four ranks were a self-perpetuating elite collectively described as the *generalität*. Moreover, two-thirds came from old aristocratic families, who showed a remarkable staying power, particularly if connected to the royal family. While power and wealth were not perhaps as closely linked as in France, the political hierarchy was certainly underpinned by economic differentials. In 1797 four-fifths of landowners owned fewer than 100 serfs each, and a mere 1.5 percent of them had over 1,000 each, accounting in aggregate for 35 percent of the serf population. Moreover, as in western Europe, the monarchy was on hand to reward favored and influential families; Catherine the Great gave away 400,000 serfs, three-quarters of whom were acquired by the partition of Poland.

To a greater or lesser extent, nobles, which it is worth stressing rarely exceeded 1 percent of the population except in parts of Castile, were the managers and beneficiaries of the absolute state. But playing the power game could be dangerous. No fewer than 128 Russian nobles had their estates confiscated between 1700 and 1755, and a number of ministers were either executed or exiled. French absolutism was less brutal, but dissent could lead to prison or exile, and financiers
were always vulnerable to the government's periodic investigations into their wealth. In the years before Louis XIV's accession the resentment felt by those who lost out in the intense competition for power and wealth threatened to plunge France back into civil war. The success of Richelieu and Jules Mazarin, both from relatively modest noble backgrounds, in achieving supreme public office, ducal status, and unrivaled fortunes in the process offended old grandees and the new officeholding elite alike. Resistance to ministerial tyranny and corruption erupted in the War of the Fronde (1648–1653). Fortunately for Mazarin, the Fronde largely served to expose the divisions between grandees, lesser nobles, parlements, tax officials, municipalities, and others, all of whom claimed to be the most loyal and suitable servants of the king. The chief minister's clientele also proved, as had that of Richelieu, more resilient and effective than those arrayed against him. However, Louis XIV's decision to dispense with a first minister was perfectly in tune with the public mood. Ironically, in doing so, he inherited not only a governmental machine but also a vast patronage system, which he manipulated with consummate success.

At the same time the French upper classes began to realize that they could ill afford to engage in perpetual conflict and that they might benefit from a king strong and prestigious enough to bring some order. This conviction was reinforced by three decades of tax revolts—themselves facilitated by upper-class rivalries, which both set a bad example and created opportunities for revolt. There is an evident parallel with the situation in Russia, where repeated waves of peasant resistance provoked demands from the service nobility for the suppression of the peasants' right of movement.

Versailles, to which the court moved in 1682, was the ultimate expression of all these pressures. Both the seat of government and the residence of an ever growing royal family, the very building embodied the inseparability of the public and the private. It served also, in the words of Françoise Bertaut de Motteville, as "a great market," made seemly by elaborate rules of etiquette, where courtiers jostled for position, pensions, and marriages. Through its preoccupation with rank and privilege the court gave renewed vigor to the social hierarchy, legitimating the privileged position of those who attended on the king. Not least Versailles created a dazzling stage for the king's deification as a great sun god whose rays brought light and order where there was darkness and confusion, a ruler systematically and consciously portrayed in prose, verse, painting, and music as the bringer of war, peace, abundance, and justice.

**THE LEGITIMATION OF ABSOLUTISM**

As these observations suggest, the absolute state even in the west was hardly a progressive or modernizing force. Despite the growth of centralizing bureaucracies and a degree of functional specialization, the elevation of royal authority reflected its success in recovering control of patrimonial systems that had sometimes appeared to be on the verge of succumbing to their inherent instability. Ideologically, too, the elevation of royal authority was a largely conservative response to the disorders afflicting the body politic. Although some historians have seen in French absolutism a manifestation of the modern idea of legislative sovereignty enunciated by Jean Bodin in 1576, it was largely legitimated by essentially traditional ideas. Bodin himself harnessed the concept of sovereignty to Thomist and neo-Platonic teleologies, which had by no means been vanquished as overarching ideologies by the end of the seventeenth century. Absolute power replicated that of God and was in harmony with the divinely ordained cosmos.

The overriding need, according to Bodin, was to restore the integrity of the monarchical order and...
the social hierarchy on which it depended. In fact his conception of the social hierarchy was not merely idealized but also very French. In most of the countries discussed here, hereditary monarchs and nobilities, titles, and estates of the realm were recent creations, but this did not prevent monarchs and nobles from asserting an ancient and imprescriptible role as the mainstays of a universal order. Heightened religious feelings also bolstered monarchical ideology by encouraging kings to assert their divine authority. If the Protestant kings of Prussia and Sweden did not radiate the sacral aura of Louis XIV, an “austere concept of divine providence” served Charles XI and the Great Elector just as well in imparting a sense of duty to those around them (Melton, p. 87). Protestant and Catholic authorities alike did not doubt that the rebellion and disorder of the age were results of man’s inherent sinfulness, even signs of divine displeasure. Historians have also emphasized the way in which an increasingly neostoical and classical culture put a premium on both general good order and personal self-discipline. This went along with the progressive abandonment of the constitutional ideas and rights of resistance that had been espoused by many nobles in the sixteenth century.

THE LAST STAGE OF ABSOLUTISM: ENLIGHTENED DESPOTISM

After 1760 the equilibrium of the absolutist regimes was once more disturbed. The Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), sparked in part by Prussia’s annexation of Silesia from Austria, ushered in several decades of intense great-power rivalry. Poland was wiped off the face of the map. The French monarchy, debilitated by fighting in Europe and overseas, never recovered. By dint of a massive debasement of the coinage and its plunder of Silesia and Poland, the Prussian regime managed somewhat better. Even so, the war chest bequeathed by Frederick II to his successor was rapidly exhausted in the turbulent years between 1787 and 1794. In 1795 Prussia was forced to sue for peace with France, ceding all territory on the west bank of the Rhine. Russia, while jostling to assert its position as a major European power, was also pushing up against the Turkish Empire in the east with three bouts of open conflict (1768–1774, 1783–1784, 1787–1792). The pressure exerted on rudimentary financial systems, inelastic economies, and a resentful population had a predictable effect. New peaks of unrest were reached in the revolt of the Cossacks under Yemelyan Ivanovich Pugachov in 1773 and in Bohemia two years later, when a forty-thousand-strong army was required to restore order. In France a run of poor harvests brought an end to years of relative calm in the countryside and prepared the way for the peasant uprising in the summer of 1789.

It is difficult to characterize the highly ambivalent and often contradictory responses of the absolute states to the worsening situation as simply enlightened. The administrative centralization of Joseph II, the rigidly mercantilist regime of Frederick II, and Catherine’s Legislative Commission, which for the first time gave the nobility a role as an estate of the realm, are among the many policies of conservative hue. Nor was this surprising, given that the impetus for reform was precipitated by pressures similar to those that had ushered in the absolutist regimes a century earlier. Even Joseph II’s determined attempts to abolish labor services and reduce the burdens of seigneurialism may be construed as efforts to generate more state revenue.

On the other hand, absolutism had brought into being a class of now experienced and educated nobles, state servants who began to see that reform was necessary if their regimes were to survive as great powers. This realization was heightened by an awareness of the immense technical superiority of English agriculture, industry, and commerce, to which these regimes repeatedly turned for expertise and practical assistance. Even in Prussia, where the University of Halle was a bulwark of opposition to physiocratic ideas, Frederick the Great understood that the rural world ought to be freed from its burdens, although he achieved almost nothing outside the royal domains. In this changing intellectual climate, many nobles had by the 1770s absorbed utilitarian assumptions about the origins, purpose, and nature of government that had little in common with the religious teleology of their predecessors. Ideas of natural equality and meritocracy gained ground.

However, there was a self-evident contradiction in absolutist regimes attacking the hierarchical society of which they were so much part. When Joseph II died, his reforming program was in tatters. In France resistance to reform precipitated a chain of events that led to the destruction of absolute monarchy and the entire privileged order. Even then, although revolution and industrialization accelerated the pace of change and hastened the transformation of the nobility and the emancipation of the peasantry, the political superstructures of central and eastern Europe displayed an extraordinary resilience. Not until the 1870s was Prussia absorbed into a quite different type of state, and not until the twentieth century did the Russian regime finally disintegrate under the impact of a classic combination of war and social unrest.
See also The Enlightenment (volume 1); The Aristocracy and Gentry; The Military (volume 3); and other articles in this section.

BIBLIOGRAPHY