Absolute Monarchy: Crash Course European History #13

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course: European History. So, today, we're moving into the second half of the 17th century. The 30 Years War has ended with the Treaty of Westphalia, and the Scientific Revolution is producing amazing new universal laws, but life is still pretty terrible for the vast majority of people. For kings, though, things were changing, with the advent of absolutism, in which the king is said to have a divine right to the throne and the divinest divine right monarch of them all, Louis XIV, led Western Europe's most powerful kingdom for more than 70 years.

(Intro)

So this is a portrait of Louis XIV, the French Sun King, painted when he was 63. Louis XIV looks regal in his massive black wig and swaths of ermine embellished with flours de lis, the symbol of the former French royal house. His high heels show off his shapely legs in white hose, demonstrating the king's perfection. Mens' legs garbed in tightly fitted stockings were a key indication of desirability at the time, and while he may not appear super masculine to us, Louis XIV was the model of powerful kingship and indeed, absolute power.

Louis was four years old when he started his reign in 1643, while Europe was attempting to pull itself out of the 30 Years War. Earlier, under Louis' father, Louis XIII, rebellions abounded in the hundreds across the kingdom, because of increasingly heavy taxation to pay for the war and the famine conditions due to the relentless little ice age.

It seemed almost unthinkable to ordinary people that the king would betray his subjects with rising taxes in a time of famine, so instead, they usually blamed tax collectors and local officials, not the king. After Louis XIII died, his four year old son was a smidge small for France-ruling, so the job was taken over by his regent, his mother Anne of Austria, with help from her sidekick and rumored lover, the Italian-born Cardinal Mazarin.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

The first years of Anne's regency were the last years of the 30 Years War, and she increased French military deployments even amid all these protests with the simple and eventually successful goal of defeating the Spanish (?~2:21) to gain more territory. Alongside increasing the desperation of ordinary people, this constant warfare stretched aristocratic resources, because nobles raised and paid for their own armies in wartime. Louis' mother had to move him several times to keep him safe amid protests from peasants and nobility alike, some of whom even went to the point of plotting coups d'etat, which is after all, a French phrase.

The pieds nus, or barefooted ones, the croquants, or crunchers or crispies, and even judges of Paris were among the people resisting. One judge listed the sacrifices of ordinary people, such as selling all their furniture and sleeping on straw in order to pay rising taxes. He said, "To maintain the luxury of Paris, millions of innocent souls are obliged to live on black bread and oats."

Did the center of the world just open? Is there a pumpernickel bagel in there? It's the closest we could get to black bread. Now, this is a properly great bagel. Mmm. I'm gonna eat that whole thing once this is done. But black bread in 17th century France, not good. For one thing, it was often cut with sawdust, which, you know, isn't ideal for bread making, and also isn't ideal for nutrition. In fact, our contemporary bread is so good that it's hard for us to imagine just how difficult the circumstances were in the 17th century, like, just how desperate you have to be to add sawdust to your dough.

So we're gonna jump back in time for a bit. Earlier in the 17th century, a group of judges managed to undermine the monarchy, if only temporarily. You'll recall that France ended their religious civil war with Henry, 'Paris is well worth a mass' IV ruling.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Henry was Louis XIV's grandfather and to pay for ongoing wars, Henry raised a new tax called the Paulette that was paid by government officials, including judges over a nine-year period, and if you paid the Paulette, you could keep your job for life or even sell your job to a successor and this created a powerful class of bureaucrats who were basically immune from state oversight, but Henry couldn't afford to get rid of the Paulette because he needed the cash to wage wars.

The officials who bought their positions came to be known as the Nobles of the Robe, as opposed to the old school nobles who were called the Nobles of the Sword because they'd gotten their status via military service to the king. Flashforward a few decades, Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin are trying to throw these Nobles of the Robe out of office, which the new Nobles are, of course, not keen on, leading Anne to threaten to arrest them. I mean, after all, they paid a lot of money for those Robes.

All of this pushed the people of Paris to their most menacing protest until the monarchy backed down and released the judges that they had imprisoned, and this triumph over the monarchy made the nobility of the Robe a force to be reckoned with, and also indicated that maybe the absolute power of the monarchy wasn't actually that absolute.

Alongside these protestors, another contender for influence arose. A new Catholic movement, Jansenism, called for a complete purging of the self and a fervent spirituality to replace the insufficient and even deluded practice of the church, like, for instance, being a cardinal who was probably hooking up with the king's Mom. The Jansenists believe only intense and full religious commitment could pull France from its dire straits and they menaced established authority, but the most threatening uprising was the Fronde, a series of opposition movements between 1648 and 1653 in which the old nobility and the courts were like, you can't just raise our taxes willy nilly without asking permission, and Anne of Austria was like, of course we can, it's a kingdom and we are, well, if not exactly the king, at least the king's regent and her sidekick.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Louis XIV was officially crowned king in 1654, when he was 15, and as he grew older, his urgent task became organizing the administration of his kingdom, raising funds, and uniting his subjects in loyalty to him. Part of his brilliance was to divert the nobility and, in fact, a good part of France, with a spectacular court life, rather how a parent might divert a relentless unhappy child with say, an iPad, but Louis' court was even more diverting than, I don't know what kids like, TikTok?

In the 1660s, the king began the task of removing his government from the tumult of Paris by converting a hunting lodge at Versailles outside of Paris into the most spectacular European palace complex of its day. It housed some 15,000 people when the court moved there in the 1680s and further thousands in the many adjacent buildings for servants and smaller chateau built for Louis' mistresses. The nobility was kept busy attending to the king and queen as well as serving the monarch's legitimate and many illegitimate children, they also outdid themselves in the

maneuvering for status, one of the highest honors being to hand the king his nightshirt in the evening or to oversee his use of the commode.

The king also sponsored and sometimes starred in spectacular operas and concerts and plays to add to the feeling of his greatness and power, while the nobility enhanced the scene by behaving as if the king were, in fact, more than humanly powerful. It was almost like the king was a bright sun whose presence warmed all those it graced, and indeed, that's why Louis XIV came to be known as the Sun King.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. In the days of absolutism, monarchs across Europe embraced the idea that they had the divine right to their absolute rule. The bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet preached in the royal chapel of Versailles that, "It is God who establishes kings.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

He vested royalty in the house of David and ordered him to cause Solomon, his son, to reign in his place. Princes thus act as ministers of God," he continued, "This is why we have seen that the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself. To his mind, God has placed in princes something divine and in fact, Bossuet maintained, princes are Gods." The king's divinity allowed for his regime to be free from arbitrariness or the tyranny of anarchy because whatever he did was necessarily correct. Louis XIV probably never said the line most famously attributed to him, "L'etat c'est moi" or "The State is me," but it has endured for a reason. He really was the state's power and authority, and he felt that even if he never said it.

But divine right theory also meant religious conformity. Louis XIV viewed the presence of Protestants in his realm as disorderly and sinful, causing him to revoke the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Thousands of Protestants then fled France, taking their skills and successful businesses to the Netherlands, the German states, North America, South Africa, and other places, and for all the surface grandeur of Louis' regime, it worked mostly because of accomplished bureaucrats, including the Intendants, or Intendants if I'm pretending to be able to pronounce French, whose jobs were regularized to oversee tax collections and the administrations of the various regions of the kingdom.

The most prominent and important of all Louis' officials was Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who oversaw finances and public works, among other things. Despite being of middle class birth, Colbert drove the kingdom's economy, including its merchants, ship builders, and artisans. Colbert also oversaw French expansion into North America, sending out settlers and officials. Traders combed the continent for the desperately needed furs that were in high demand during the intense cold of the little ice age.

Colbert is most famous for his support of mercantilism, a policy that saw economic development and trade as akin to war.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Mercantilist thinkers believed that there was only so much wealth in the world, a finite and fixed amount, and in such a zero sum world, the only way for one kingdom to win would be for other kingdoms to lose. We now know this isn't true, but mercantilism was an important driver of policy and foreign relations at the time. There were many applications of this theory, refusing entry of another kingdom's ships, for instance, or enacting high tariffs on competitors' goods.

We can see one example of this in cotton textiles, which were wildly popular, but Europeans had no idea how to produce such lively and washable fabrics, so they were outlawed in France. Smuggling, however, thrived with women and men alike wearing cotton and even high officials brought them in illegally. In this and other areas of life, people did disobey absolutist rules.

Still, Louis had a lot of power, including the power to wage war. He waged four major ones: first, the war of Devolution, in which France gained territory in the north. Second, the Dutch War, which gained additional land to the north and along the eastern border. Third, the War of the League of Augsburg, in which he lost much of the land won in the Dutch War, and fourth, the War of the Spanish Succession, again with significant losses, including in Canada, this time to Britain, who you might not have expected to be mixed up in the Spanish War of Succession, but everyone wanted in on warring in 17th century Europe. Clearly, like the ideal reality TV contestant, Louis was not there to make friends, but we can see through this exchange of lands through endless war how a zero sum "I can only win if you lose" worldview ends up exhausting the resources rather than expanding them.

By the end of his reign, the idea of absolutist rule was being thrown into question. An English critic called absolutist France a, "state full of boils and wounds and putrid swords." Exiled Huguenots called the French under Louis, "slaves," his rule directed only, "to satisfy both his ambition and his vengeance."

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Again, satisfying one's ambition and one's vengeance makes you a great reality TV contestant but maybe not necessarily the perfect king. So absolutism can be seen as a form of tyrannical rule demanding religious, economic, and social conformity based on a political theory of monarchical divinity. It cost huge amounts in taxation and loss of life in wars to create this system of servility to royal power, and it was pretty disempowering to the French public, but then again, the rise of a political system of power sharing in England called Constitutionalism wasn't really less violent, although it did enshrine certain ideas about human rights.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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