

King Louis XIV



“L’etat, c’est moi,” “I am the state,” said King Louis XIV of France. Louis believed that he was the only one responsible for governing France when he ruled from 1643 to 1715. A tutor to his son once said, “As God’s representative on Earth, the king was entitled to unquestioning obedience. Louis reigned from the most magnificent building in Europe, the palace of Versailles. Full of the finest paintings, statues, chandeliers and

mirrors, and surrounded by millions of flowers and plants, Versailles was the perfect symbol of Louis’ wealth and power. During his 72 year reign the Estates General, the legislative body of France, never met once. Without opposition he revoked the Edict of Nantes and taxed his people in order to wage costly wars against the Dutch and English.



The head alone has the right to deliberate and decide, and the functions of all the other members consist only in carrying out the commands given to them... The more you grant... [to the assembled people], the more it claims.. The interest of the state must come first.

- King Louis XIV, 1660

Peter the Great

After a journey to Western Europe, Peter the Great decided to modernize Russia. To impose his will he became the most autocratic of Europe's monarchs, believing that his right to rule as Tsar came from God. He centralized his power and brought all Russians under his control, including the Russian Orthodox Church. Peter forced the most powerful nobles, known as boyars, to serve in either the military or state government. Peasants and serfs were required to become soldiers or work on roads, canals, and other government projects. He improved the technology, education and the military of Russia, but in the process tortured and executed thousands of people who challenged his power from 1682 to 1725.



.... Peters military reform would have remained an isolated incident in Russian military history had it not left a distinct and deep impression on the social and intellectual composition of all Russian society, and even influenced future political developments. The military reform itself made necessary other innovations, first t maintain the reorganized and expensive military forces, and then to ensure their permanency. The new recruiting methods, by spreading military obligations to classes hitherto [up to this time] exempt, and thus affecting all social classes, gave the new army a more varied composition, and completely altered existing social relationships. From the time that noblemens' serfs and servants joined the new army as ordinary recruits instead of only as menials or valets [servants], the position of the nobility, which had been preponderant [dominant] in the old army, was completely changed...

Source: Vasili Klyuchevsky, translated by Liliana Archibald, *Peter the Great*, St. Martin's Press.

Elizabeth I

Taking power in 1558 after the death of Queen Mary, Elizabeth I quickly moved to resolve the religious problems that afflicted England at the time. She repealed laws that favored Catholics and instated a new Act of Supremacy, which named her as “the only supreme governor” of church and state. The Tudor kings Henry VII and Henry VIII were skillful manipulators of the Parliament, but Elizabeth I was probably more adept. For fear of losing her power or making compromises between the monarchy and the government, parliament rarely was called into session. She made most political decisions on her own. Elizabeth also refused to share power with a man and never married- instead using her marriage prospects as a political tool. She was an immensely popular monarch, under whom the arts, trade and commerce flourished.



*Though the sex to which I belong is
considered weak, you will
nevertheless find me a rock that
bends to no wind.*

- Queen Elizabeth I

Catherine the Great

Catherine II brought Russia into the political and social life of Europe, continuing the work of Peter the Great. She corresponded with learned men, including Voltaire. She wished to be a “defender of oppressed innocence,” to spread education and to otherwise reform Russia. She put together a document called the “Nakaz”, explaining how the legal system should run, and calling for every man to be declared equal. The Legislative Commission was created, which allowed Russians to express their thoughts about the needs of the country. Later she gave up wanting to create an “enlightened” constitution and political reforms. Russian society appeared too chaotic for any sharing of power. She opposed educating common people, believing that if they were educated they would stop obeying. She knew to rule that she had to have the support of a segment of society, and to this end she tried to please the nobility by creating the Charter of the Nobility in 1785. This document gave upper-class more power and forced many citizens into serfdom. After having given the Church their land and property back initially, she decided the wealth of the church should belong to the state.



“Does she permit people to contradict her?”

“As much as they wish.”

“Have you contradicted her?”

“Assuredly.”

“But doesn’t this insult her?”

“She would answer that there can be no insults between equals.”

“That is charming. She must turn the head of all those who had the good fortune to meet her?”

“So she does.”

Source: *Diderot to Catherine II*, October 17, 1774,” translated in *Catherine the Great* by L. Jay Oliva.

Frederick the Great

Frederick II came to power in 1740. Shortly after inheriting the throne, Frederick invaded Silesia, forcing Maria Theresa to cede the province. New fighting broke out and Maria Theresa joined with France and Russia to divide Prussia's territory. This alliance nearly beat Prussia before Russia withdrew troops. By winning wars and expanding his territory, Frederick made Prussia a strong military power. He reformed the military and government, established religious tolerance, and granted a basic form of freedom of the press. He created a uniform criminal code, thus simplifying the legal system and abolished torture. He never relied on Divine Right to justify his reign- although even his reforms had limits. He spoke out against serfdom, however never abolished it. He catered to the nobility, who he considered the best defense in case war broke out. Middle class citizens had no opportunity to rise in government service. His religious tolerance did not extend to Prussia's Jews who were forced into ghettos and excluded from most businesses and professional occupations.



I must enlighten my people, cultivate their manners and morals, and make them as happy as human beings can be, or as happy as the means at my disposal permits.

-Frederick II