

Absolutism in France

Central Historical Question:

If people in a country will only obey a king they respect, then does the king have the right to act in any manner that gains him respect?

Document #1 Cardinal Richelieu, Political Testament (1624)

Cardinal Richelieu was a leader in the Catholic Church in France and also a powerful advisor to the King of France, Louis XIII. He advocated for strengthening the power of the King under the ideas of "Divine Right" and Absolutism.

After your Majesty allowed me to join your council I noticed that some groups, such as the Huguenots (the French Protestants) and the nobles, act like they share the throne with you - not like they are your subjects. In addition, many of the governors act as if they were sovereign in their own offices. They have all endeavored to diminish your royal authority in order to stretch their own powers beyond the limits of reason.

Knowing how much kings may do when they make good use of their power, with confidence I promise you, that you will soon get control of your state. In a short time with your caution, your courage, and the approval of God you will give a new aspect to the realm.

I promise your Majesty to employ all my industry and all the authority you to give me to ruin the Huguenot party, to lower the pride of the nobles, to bring back all your subjects to their duty, and to elevate your name among foreign nations to the point where it belongs.

Document #2 Jean Domat On Social Order and Absolute Monarchy 1697.

Since obedience is necessary to maintain order and peace, all subjects in all places need to obey the prince. The power of princes comes from God. Princes should use this power how God wishes them to use it. How the princes show their authority should reflect the operation of the will of God. The laws give the sovereign the right to display all the signs of grandeur and majesty necessary to make the King's power and authority clear to all his subjects so they admire him.

God shows his own power with splendor on earth and in heaven. Princes should show theirs in a throne and a palace. God shares his power with Kings to arouse respect in their people. This can only be done by the magnificence of their palaces and the other visible signs of grandeur that surround them.

Document #3 Duc de Saint-Simon: describing of the Court of Louis XIV 1697

God gave him all that was needed for him to be a good King, maybe even a great one. All his faults were produced by his surroundings.

Very early in his reign the Court was removed from Paris to Versailles. He believed he would be seen with greater awe and respect when no longer seen every day by the people. The palace had an infinite number of rooms. He loved splendor and magnificence and encouraged similar tastes in his Court. Spending money freely on items, buildings and feasts was a sure way to gain his respect.

By making expensive habits the fashion, he compelled the people around him to live beyond their income. This became a problem for the whole country; it spread far and wide. Any man of position is now judged by how much he spends on luxuries. This folly, sustained by pride and flamboyance, has produced widespread confusion; it threatens to end in nothing short of ruin and a general overthrow.

Source: The Memoirs of the Duke de Saint-Simon, ed. F. Arkwright (New York Brentano's), Vol. V