Absolute Monarchs and the English Civil War (1500s-1800s C.E.)

You Mean They Really Cut off the English Monarch’s Head?

Absolute Monarchies

Due to exploration and trade, European countries became stronger, and the monarchs centralized their power. They claimed to rule by divine right. The kings and queens said that their reign had come directly from the will of God. These strong rulers were called absolute monarchs. Although there were absolute monarchs throughout Europe, the most famous were Louis XIV of France and Peter the Great of Russia.

Louis XIV ruled France from 1643 to 1715. He told his people: “l’etat, c’est moi” (“I am the state”). Louis XIV had the Palace of Versailles built as a symbol of royal power. Peter the Great ruled Russia from 1682 to 1725. He led the westernization of Russia. Peter tried to reform his country by looking to Western Europe as a model for change. For example, he ordered people to give up their traditional clothes for Western fashions. Peter even forced the nobles to cut their beards. The monarch also gained part of the coast on the Baltic Sea. He wanted easy travel to the West. Peter built a new port on the Baltic and made it his capital. He called this city St. Petersburg.

English Civil War

Charles I led England from 1625 to 1649. He thought that his rule should be absolute. However, some laws limited the power of the monarchy. For example, the nobles had forced the king in 1215 to sign the Magna Carta. This document took away some of the monarch’s control and gave privileges to the nobles. Common law and the jury trial had also granted some rights to people other than the king. Charles I, supported by the Royalists, argued with Parliament (legislature) for many years. Both sides thought that they should control taxes, religion, and other main issues. In 1642, the Parliament rebelled against Charles. During the English Civil War (1642-1651) Oliver Cromwell, the leader of Parliament defeated Charles and in 1649, the king was executed. Cromwell ruled England without a monarch until his death in 1658.

Development of a Limited (Constitutional) Monarchy in England

Not everyone was pleased with Cromwell’s strict laws and when he died in 1658, the people and Parliament asked Charles II (son of Charles I) to return to England and restore the monarchy. Charles II ruled from 1660 to 1685, a period known as the Restoration. During this time, two main political parties began. They argued over whether Charles II’s brother, who was a Catholic, should become king when Charles II died. (Remember: England broke from the Catholic Church in the 16th century and since then, the monarch was a Protestant). After Charles II passed away in 1685, his brother James did become king, but he was very unpopular and had to run away to France in 1688 to avoid the same fate as Charles I. His daughter Mary and her husband William, who was from the Netherlands, were invited to rule.

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Development of a Limited (Constitutional) Monarchy in England (cont.)

England. William and Mary took power peacefully in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. These Protestant monarchs agreed to further limits on their power. They signed the English Bill of Rights in 1689. This document outlined rights for Parliament and also gave some freedoms to the people. In this way, England became a constitutional monarchy. During the 1700s and 1800s, Parliament continued to increase its power. By the 1900s, the prime minister of the Parliament held all real power. Today, the English monarch is a figurehead, or a symbol, but has no control over the government.

Key Vocabulary

Divine right: concept that a monarch’s right to rule comes directly from the will of God
Absolute: complete, total, full
Westernization: adoption of Western European culture and practices, which was done by Peter the Great in an attempt to modernize Russia
Restore: to bring back or make complete again
Magna Carta: document that took away some of the English monarch’s power and gave privileges to the nobles
Common law: law formed by decisions made by courts, not by the king or the parliament
Restoration: period from 1660 to 1685, in which Charles II brought back the monarchy to England

Glorious Revolution: 1688 peaceful change of power in England when William and Mary took the throne
Constitutional monarchy: a type or style of government in which the monarch is only a symbol of the country and the legislature makes all the laws. Examples: England, Spain, Japan

Quick Review

1. Who signed this document to give more rights to the English Parliament?
   A. Charles I
   B. Charles II
   C. Oliver Cromwell
   D. William and Mary

2. Which absolute monarch fits the description?
   A. Charles I
   B. Charles II
   C. Louis XIV
   D. Peter the Great

3. Who restored the monarchy to England in 1660?
   A. Charles I
   B. Charles II
   C. Oliver Cromwell
   D. William and Mary

4. What were at least three reasons why England developed a constitutional monarchy?

Connection to Today
The English Bill of Rights limited the power of the English monarchy. What factors limit the power of the President of the United States today?

Resources
Learn 360
- Peter the Great: http://goo.gl/CWCi0W

Library Databases - GALE
- Magna Carta: http://find.galegroup.com/gic/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateDescend&tabId=T004&prodId=GIC&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=&currentPage=1&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3AFOE%3D2%28KE%2CNone%2C11%29Magna%2C%2C%24&userGroupName=fairfaxcps&inPS=true&docId=CJ380240841&contentSet=IAC-Documents&docId=CJ380240841&docType=IAC