CHAPTER 7

THE AGE OF ABSOLUTISM, 1650–1720

In Louis XIV's France, architects and artists were paid to glorify the monarch. In 1662, the king chose the sun as his emblem; he declared himself *nec pluribus impar*—without equal. To Louis, the sun embodied virtues that he associated with the ideal monarch: firmness, benevolence, and equity. Henceforth, Louis XIV would frequently be depicted as Apollo, the Greek and Roman sun god.

The rulers of continental Europe, including Louis XIV (ruled 1643–1715), relentlessly extended their power between 1650 and 1750. The sovereigns of France, Prussia, Russia, Austria, and Sweden, in particular, became absolute rulers, in principle above all challenge from within the state itself. To the east, the power of the Turkish sultan of the Ottoman Empire was itself already in principle absolute. Rulers extended their dynastic domains and prestige, making their personal rule absolute, based on loyalty to them as individuals, not to the state as an abstraction. But at the same time, they helped lay the foundations for the modern centralized state. Absolute rulers asserted their supreme right to proclaim laws and levy taxes, appointing more officials to carry out the details of governance and multiplying fiscal demands on their subjects. They ended most of the long-standing privileges of towns, which had survived longer in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe, such as freedom from taxation, or the right to maintain independent courts.

The absolute state affected the lives of more people than ever before through taxation, military service, and the royal quest for religious orthodoxy. Absolute rule thus impinged directly on the lives of subjects, who felt the extended reach of state power through, for example, more efficient tax collection. A Prussian recalled that in school no child would question "that the king could cut off the noses and ears of all his subjects if he wished to

do so, and that we owed it to his goodness and his gentle disposition that he had left us in possession of these necessary organs."

Absolutism was at least in part an attempt to reassert public order and coercive state authority after almost seventy years of wars that had brought economic, social, and political chaos. England and Spain had been at war in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Wars of religion had raged through much of Europe on and off for more than a century—above all, during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). The Dutch war of independence against Spain began in 1566 and did not officially end until 1648. The tumultuous decade of the 1640s was particularly marked by political crises. Wars had led to often dramatic increases in taxes, which quadrupled in Spain under Philip II, and jumped fivefold in France between 1609 and 1648. During the 1640s, the English Civil War led to the execution of King Charles I in 1649 (see Chapter 6). In France, the period of mid-century rebellion known as the Fronde included a noble uprising against the crown and determined, violent peasant resistance against increased taxation. The multiplicity and seemingly interrelated character of these crises engendered great anxiety among social elites: "These are days of shaking, and this shaking is universal," a preacher warned the English Parliament.

Theories of Absolutism

The doctrine of absolutism originated with French jurists late in the sixteenth century. The emergence of theories of absolutism reflected contemporary attempts to conceptualize the significance of the rise of larger territorial states whose rulers enjoyed more power than their predecessors. France was a prime example of this trend. The legal theorist Jean Bodin (1530–1596) had lived through the wars of religion. "Seeing that nothing upon earth is greater or higher, next unto God, than the majesty of kings and sovereign princes," he wrote in the *Six Books of the Republic* (1576), the "principal point of sovereign majesty and absolute power [is] to consist principally in giving laws unto the subjects in general, without their consent." The ruler became the father, a stern but supposedly benevolent figure. Bodin, who like many other people in France longed for peace and order, helped establish the political theory legitimizing French absolute rule.

Almost a century later, the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) emerged as the thundering theorist of absolutism. Hobbes had experienced the turmoil of the English Civil War (see Chapter 6). In *Leviathan* (1651), he argued that absolutism alone could prevent society from lapsing into the "state of nature," a constant "war of every man against every man" that made life "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." People would only obey, Hobbes insisted, when they were afraid of the consequences of not doing so. Seeking individual security, individuals would enter into a type of social contract with their ruler, surrendering their rights in exchange for