Absolute Monarchs

Ch. 17

**Spain**

Charles V and I

Grandson of Isabella and Ferdinand

Also heir to the Hapsburg throne of Austria and the HRE, including Netherlands and parts of Italy

Two empires is a lot. Charles is almost always at war with someone, somewhere

Luther doesn’t help – Peace of Augsburg in 1555, attempts to settle it all down

Ottoman empire is his biggest worry – not even Christians and spreading fast into

Hungary and the Mediterranean

1556 Charles gives it all up and enters a monastery – Gives Austria and the Holy Roman Empire to his brother Ferdinand, and Spain, Netherlands and southern Italy to his son Philip.

**Philip II** rules Spain for 42 years. During his time the golden age of Spain

Expand influence of Spain

Lots of cash from American silver and gold

Spain uses its power to dominate Europe and keep everyone out of the Americas

Hardworking, doesn’t play, micromanages his kingdom personally.

With complete authority over his people and his lands – absolute monarch.

Also – claims his throne is his by divine right – his power comes directly from God.

Sees himself as the guardian of the RCC and is a fierce proponent of the INquistion as a way to root out Protestantism and heretics in Spain especially, but also in his part of Italy and the Netherlands.

Philip ends up in a lot of wars because of his religious beliefs.

Chases the Ottoman Empire out of the Med in 1571 – they remain powerful in the east though

Netherlands doesn’t like being ruled by Catholics, or Spain. They continually revolt – as the richest part of his empire Philip is determined to keep them in his power. Used to self-government the Netherlands will not submit to high taxes and autocratic rule from some out of towner. 1560 – riots against the Inquisition begin and last on and off for decades. In 1581 the very northern provinces, the most Protestant, declare their independence from Spain – become known as the Dutch Netherlands – officially recognized in 1648. The southern more Catholic provinces stayed in Philip;s control

Philip really hates Elizabeth I. She encouraged the Dutch rebellions against him, she encouraged English sea captains to plunder the Spanish treasure ships from America. (Sea Dogs) Francis Drake even looted Spanish cities in the Americas. Philip was aghast when instead of punishing him Elizabeth made him a knight.

Philip creates a huge fleet of giant ships to fight back, called the Armada. They were off to invade England – 130 ships, 20,000 men. A freak storm came up in the middle of the battle and the big ships were swamped, the smaller lighter English were able to maneuver, the Spanish were doomed. The invasion fails, the few remaining ships limp home. The Spanish never really recover their sea power, and are unable to stop other nations from colonizing the Americas.

The Golden Age of Spain

1550 – 1650 is Spain’s “Renaissance”. Philip is a patron of the arts, and founded academies of science and mathematics.

El Greco the painter

Miguel Cervates the writer – Don Quixote

Economic Decline hits Spain in the 1600’s. Philip’s successors were not as focused and hardworking as he had been. Costly wars overseas drained Spain’s treasury even with the New World wealth. American treasure took the work ethic of the Spanish to a low level, they were prosperous at first because of the flow of silver and gold, so farming and manufacturing and commerce dwindled. The small remaining middle class were heavily taxed to support the government. The Muslims and Jews expelled by Isabella drained away much of the talented artisans and merchants. The flow of treasure caused massive inflation and high prices crippled what trade there was with other nations.

Spain kept most of her American colonies but lost her predominant position as Europe’s most powerful nation. By the end of the 1600’s France had taken the lead.

**France**

From the 1560’s through the 1590’s France was rocked by religious wars between the Huguenots and Catholics. The worst of this was August 24, 1572 when both sides gathered for the royal wedding of Princess Margaret and Henry of Navarre.

3,000 Huguenots were slaughtered in the streets of Paris on the wedding day with thousands more slaughters in the days that followed. The St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre was blamed on the dowager Queen Catherine de Medici, but never really connected directly to her. France was out of control.

Henry IV – in 1589 the Huguenot prince who married the Catholic princess that fateful day after converting to Catholicism. “Paris is well worth a Mass”. He issues the Edict of Nantes to try and protect his protestant friends in 1598 – religious tolerance and allows the Huguenots to fortify their towns and cities in France. Henry tries to reunite France – “a chicken in every pot” is his goal. He built roads, and bridges, revived agriculture, and reestablished a just legal system for all. He also reduced the influence of the nobles, replacing them with the bureaucracy of his government as administrators of the people’s business.

Henry is assassinated in 1610. His 9 year old son Louis XIII replaces him. The nobles try to reassert power but in 1624 Cardinal Armand Richelieu becomes chief minister for the king. He is sly, and clever and soon re-establishes the absolute power of the king.

Richelieu also attacks the Huguenots, who challenged the king’s authority as the nobles did. He removes their walls, outlaws their armies but does not hinder their religious practices. He bribes the nobles with high posts at the king’s court or in the army – all of which keeps them right where he can see them.

Richelieu handpicks Cardinal Jules Manzarin as his successor. Richelieu dies the year before Louis XIII, and the rise of 5 year old Louis XIV to the throne. Manzarin is in place to protect and extend the power of the king.

LOUIS XIV – the Sun King

Disorder sweeps through France after Louis XIV becomes king – the *Fronde* had rebellion from nobles, peasants, urban poor – all for different reasons 1648–53, series of outbreaks during the minority of King Louis XIV, caused by the efforts of the Parlement of Paris (the chief judiciary body) to limit the growing authority of the crown; by the personal ambitions of discontented nobles; and by the grievances of the people against the financial burdens suffered under cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin.

At one point boy king Louis is driven from his palace and it was an experience he remembered for the rest of his life. When Manzarin dies in 1661 Louis decided to take over the government himself at 23. He takes the sun as his symbol to portray that he was the center of the French world, like the sun was the center of the solar system. He often told his ministers – “L’etat, c’est moi.” Or I am the state.

During his entire reign Louis did not call in the Estates General or legislature… they did not meet from 1614 til 1789 – so they had no roll to play in checking the growth of royal power and control.

Louis does run the government, devoting several hours of every day to the task. He took on Richelieu’s policies and appointed intendants to collect taxes, recruit soldiers and enforce his policies in the different provinces. Most of these officials came from the middle classes, wealthy merchants whose loyalty to the king was assured. Bridge between Louis and the middle class.

Louis’ army is huge – 300,000 soldiers to enforce his policies and power at home and abroad.

Louis’ finance minister Jean Baptiste Colbert bolsters the economy by clearing additional lands for farming, encouraging mining and industry , and placing high tariffs on imported goods. He also encourages overseas colonies in N America and opens trading relations with the native nations there.

Colbert generates a lot of cash, France is the wealthiest nation in Europe, but Louis is the biggest spender around and the government is always short of cash despite Colbert’s best efforts. Louis’ court is vastly expensive, and he is always in one foreign war or another. And then there was Versailles……

A royal hunting lodge outside Paris, Louis turned this into the largest and most lavish palace on earth. ¼ mile on each side, 1300 rooms. Cost to build is estimated at 1.5 billion, all skimmed out of the French government treasury. Full of paintings, mirrors and chandeliers, surrounded by millions of flowers, trees and fountains in the royal gardens it was the seat of government and the home of at least 10,000 people – nobles, servants and government officials.

Ceremonies and rituals were created around every aspect of the King’s day. Nobles were assigned to attend and conduct these, and competed to participate in them to display their own importance and social rank. With all of his nobles at Versailles with ‘assingments” Louis could be sure they weren’t off plotting to overthrow him. They became courtiers angling for privileges instead of warriors angling for power. Louis curried their favor by protecting their prestige and protecting them from paying taxes.

Louis was a patron of the arts, and they flowered during his reign. The best music, the best writers and dramatists kept the king and his court entertained. Painting, music, architecture and decorative arts – French style becomes the standard for all of Europe. A new form of dance, ballet, grows because of the support of Louis XIV. Louis also supports the French Academies, which set high standards for research in science and training in the arts.

Louis is king for 72 years. His influence made France the successor to the Italian Renaissance in culture, manners, customs setting the bar for everyone else to meet.

He engaged in wars to expand territory – and at first one a few. As the other nations joined together to keep him in check the wars were no longer effective. The Dutch in particular but also the English alliances were formed to create a balance of power that would prevent Louis from expansionist policies. In 1700 when Louis’ grandson Philip V inherited the Spanish throne Louis decided that he would just merge the two nations and rule them both. England and its allies jumped in and fought until the French gave up – Philip stayed the king of Spain but there would be no joining of the two nations. (Treaty of Utrecht – 1713)

Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and did his best to get rid of the Huguenots – 100,000 fled….but they were the backbone of the French economy and the most hardworking and prosperous of his subjects. Their loss meant that France lost the core of their economic engine….with the same results as Spain after chasing away the Muslims and the Jews. A faltering economy plagued with bad harvests due to natural disasters, high taxes that never covered the bills of wars and the beginnings of social unrest among the middle and lower classes.

Louis outlives nearly his whole family, sons and grandsons. When he finally dies in 1715 his 5 year old great grandson is left with a pile of problems. Louis XV was a weak and pleasure loving king. He lived it up his whole life, devoting himself to pleasure, his mistresses and ignoring all of the problems around him. He is remembered for quoting his favorite proverb “Apres nous, le deluge” – After us, the deluge (disaster). And for Louis XVI it certainly proved to be true.

**And then there’s England – Section 3**

From 1485 to 1603 the Tudors rule England. They talk about Divine Right, but in reality they rule with the cooperation of Parliament. When Henry VIII decides to break with Rome he goes to Parliament for their support, and they make laws to support him. And because he often needed money he had to consult with them often – as the Magna Charta required. So they had a working relationship, and Parliament was used to being consulted about important matters going on in the kingdom.

Elizabeth I also consulted with Parliament. Certain topics, like whether she should be married or not, and foreign policy (whether she should torture Philip II by supporting Dutch rebels) were off limits for discussion but for the most part her relationship with Parliament was a good one, and she was a very popular ruler.

All this ends with the Tudors. When James I, a Stuart from the ruling family of Scotland, takes the throne at the end of Elizabeth’s reign things take a major turn for the worse. The Stuarts were not popular rulers, viewed as out of towners, and they were not diplomatic or skillful with Parliament. To be fair they had a lot to deal with since Henry and Elizabeth both used their charm and diplomacy to suppress issues like the religious dissent (led by dissenters) in the country.

James took the throne agreeing to rule under English law and custom but it didn’t take long before he was up lecturing Parliament about his divine right to rule as he saw fit. The House of Commons took issue with that, and fought him hard about his delusion of absolute power over England.

James had a lavish court which he felt he was entitled to make the English people foot the bill for. He also was a big fan of foreign wars and needed money for those. When Parliament wouldn’t come through he dissolved it and taxed the people directly, violating the Magna Charta and general English laws. The Puritans were gaining ground as well, fighting the fancy services and church hierarchy of the Church of England. James vowed to destroy them, and their popularity grew.

James does call for and support an English translation of the Bible which the Puritans appreciate but soon use against him and his church.

In 1625 James’ son Charles I takes over. He too is a fan of Absolute Monarchy and rules as if his power is limitless. He threw foes in jail without cause, and squeezed money out of the common people. They hate him.

By 1628 he’s out of money and is forced to convene Parliament – they won’t cooperate until he signs a new pact – the Petition of Right which restated that the king had to have their permission to raise taxes and couldn’t imprison anyone without just cause. Charles agrees, get his money and then dissolves Parliament in 1629 again for 11 years. He ignores the Petition of Right. He develops some bitter enemies when he starts to punish dissenters from the church. The Scots refuse to use his prayer book. People begin to believe that he’s trying to bring back the Catholic church. By the time he brings back Parliament in 1640 they are ready to fight. The Long Parliament begins.

They execute the king’s ministers, and declared they could not be dissolved unless they agreed to it. They called for abolishment of bishops in the church. Charles led troops into the House of Commons to arrest its most radical leaders (1642) – the leaders were forewarned and escaped out the back door and raised an army to fight the king.

The English Civil war was on. From 1642 til 1649 the revolutionary forces fought their king and in the end they win. Cavaliers, fancy dressers with fighting skills vs. the Roundheads, country folk and town dwellers who followed the brilliant military leader Oliver Cromwell to victory in 1647.

Parliament sets up court and tries Charles I as a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy. In January 1649 Charles was executed at his own signal. The royal houses of Europe shuddered. The people had confirmed that at least in England no one, not even the King was above the law and that absolute monarchy would not be tolerated there.

The Commonwealth

The House of Commons promptly abolishes the monarchy, the House of Lords, and the official Church of England. It establishes in its place a republic, called a Commonwealth, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell.

Mr. Cromwell has big trouble right off the back. The uncrowned heir to the throne is Charles II and his forces are coming through Scotland and Ireland to attack England. Cromwell banishes Catholics to barren remote areas of western Ireland and says you can kill any Catholic on sight if they aren’t complying.

The Levellers – a group that wants to extend voting rights to poor males stirs up trouble, and frightens the wealthy supporters of the new republic. Cromwell suppressed this group and the others who wanted to end private property ownership and other radical ideas. Cromwell declares himself Lord Protector and uses his army as a tool of government to stop any further nonsense of this sort.

The Puritans decide to root out godlessness in England now that they’ve won control. They passed laws about “profaning the Lord’s day” – nothing but church stuff on Sundays. They outlaw theaters, and try to regulate dancing, gambling, taverns, as they are lewd and sinful. They establish schools for everyone and boys and girls are taught to read (Bible).

The Puritans believed in marriage for love, and some radical groups even allowed women to preach and participate in governance of churches. Roman Catholics were not allowed to worship openly but the various Protestant groups were allowed to worship freely. Cromwell welcomed Jews back to England after 350 years of being exiled.

Cromwell dies in 1658 and the Puritans begin to lose their grip soon after. Without their hero the Puritans can’t hold back the rising tide against their religious based government. The English love a party and when Parliament invites Charles II back to be the king that’s just what they get. The Puritans take their show on the road and heavily influence the English colonies, but never get the upper hand in England again.

The Restoration

Charles II is young, charming, witty and crazy popular from the day he arrives in England – which happened to be his birthday – and the first occasion for celebration in a long era of celebrations that he brought to his people. He reopens the theaters, the taverns and the Church of England but allows the Presbyterians, Quakers and Baptists, secretly he sympathized with the Catholics but did not move to help them, or hurt them publicly. HE accepts the Petition of Right his father signed and turns his charms on Parliament, and does NOT make the same mistakes his father did.

Charles brother takes over in 1685, James II. He develops a habit of suspending laws he doesn’t like and doing just as he pleases. The English people are wary – they’ve seen that behavior before.

And even better…..He is upfront and openly Catholic, and appoints Catholics to high government office – making a lot of people fear he is moving toward bringing back the Roman Catholic Church. His young Italian princess bride is extremely Catholic, (and only four years older than his oldest daughter) and gives birth to a boy in 1688.

The Glorious Revolution

Facing the prospect of a yet another Catholic king the Parliament is rethinking things….they reach out to James II’s oldest daughter with his first (Protestant) wife. Mary and her Dutch Protestant hubby William III of Orange (Netherlands – Orange –Nassau is a district, It’s got to do with the difference between the Dutch rebels and the part of the Netherlands that Spain hung onto) William III’s big goal in life is to keep Louis XIV at home in France, so the prospect of having the English throne is extremely appealing to him. He brings his army to England and James II flees the country for France with his wife and child. Parliament is pleased to install William and Mary as joint and equal rulers of England. This becomes known as the Glorious Revolution.

Before they were installed the new rulers had to sign off on the English Bill of Rights (1689) -- which finally, formally makes the monarchy subject to Parliament. The monarch must summon Parliament regularly, cannot suspend laws or interfere with the debates of the Parliament, especially the House of Commons which retains the power of the purse. The bill also forbids any Roman Catholic from sitting on the throne of England.

AS for the ordinary citizen the Bill of Rights reinstates trial by jury, and habeas corpus (can’t be put in prison without being charged with a specific crime). No excessive fines or cruel or unusual punishments. The later Toleration Act of 1689 grants limited religious freedom to Puritans, Quakers and other dissenters, but not Catholics. And only members of the Church of England could hold office in the government.

By the end of the Glorious Revolution the English did not yet have a democracy, but they did have a **limited monarchy** – where a constitution or legislative body has the ability to limit the powers of the monarch. English monarchs still had a lot of power, but were forced to rule in cooperation with Parliament, and they had to obey the law. In the midst of absolute monarchy running rampant in the rest of Europe the English limited monarchy was considered radical and dangerous by the other kings and queens, emperors and empresses, tsars and tsarinas of Europe.

**Austria and Prussia**

Neither holy, nor Roman nor an empire the HRE finally boils over into full-scale war against itself in 1618. There had been small conflicts and a lot of posturing since Luther got going in 1517 but the top came off in 1618 when two royal officials came to visit the Prague castle district as part of Ferdinand the newly elected (1617) Catholic Hapsburg King of Bohemia’s efforts to suppress the growing Protestant movement in his country. The two Protestant rebel nobles they found meeting that day did not take kindly to their visit and threw them out of the office window. (The stable boys used the area under the window to store what they cleaned out of the stables so the officials landed safely on an enormous pile of horse poo and straw. They scrambled to their feet and fled, finding safety in the house of the only Jewish nobleman in Bohemia, who arranged safe passage for them out of the country. This is known as the Second Prague Defenestration, and is considered the start of the Thirty Years’ War) (For the record there were three Prague Defenestrations, it seems to be the definitive way for the Czechs to tell politicians they don’t like them….) A general revolt turns into The Thirty Years’ War when in 1619 Ferdinand is elected HR Emperor and makes it clear that he will be enforcing the ideals of the Catholic Counterformation. Each side gathers allies and the conflict spreads throughout the Holy Roman Empire with the usual Protestants v. Catholics conflict….but part way through the war things begin to change from religion based alliances to more politically favorable ones. (French Catholics and Lutheran Swedes joining forces against the Catholic Hapsburgs, for example)

The actual fighting during the war was brutal. Villages burned, peasants tortured by invading armies. **Mercenary** soldiers cut a wide band of destruction. Famine and disease spreads as the war depopulates the German states (1/3 of the people are killed or die of starvation) Wolves, not seen in populated areas for a thousand years reappear and roam the streets of formerly bustling towns.

By 1648 everyone is tired of the fighting and a general peace is declared. **The Peace of Westphalia** tried to solve all of the issues brought on by such prolonged warfare…. France, with it’s boy king Louis XIV and his Richelieu trained minister Mazarin are the big winners with territorial gains on the borders with Spain and Germany. The Hapsburgs are the big losers as all of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire gain independence and establish their own sovereign nations, also winners were Switzerland (the Swiss Federation) and the Dutch Netherlands which are recognized as independent states. Germany becomes 360 separate states. – “one for every day of the year” – the nominally recognize the leadership of the Holy Roman Emperor but maintain separate governments, churches, armies and foreign relations. Germany remains in this fragmented condition for the next 200 years.

**Austria and the Hapsburgs**

Down but not out the Hapsburgs fought back after the Thirty Years War. They still held the Holy Roman Emperorship but it didn’t really mean much. They concentrated on expanding their territories adding Bohemia, Hungary and later parts of Poland and Italy.

Gathering lands is one thing, turning the whole thing into a unified nation is more complicated. Germans, Magyars, Slavs and Bohemians had their own laws, customs, languages and religions, and very little love for their neighbors. The Hapsburgs manage to control their territories by installing their representatives as governors and settling loyal Austrians in the lands they confiscated but they never manage to pull together one unified nation with a centralized government.

**Gasp! A WOMAN!!** – then in the early 1700’s the emperor Charles VI creates a new crisis by lacking a proper male heir. His daughter Maria Theresa is intelligent, and capable, well-educated and ready to rule but lacks the correct gender. Before he dies Charles got many European leaders to pledge to honor his daughter’s right to rule, but once he’s gone in 1740 many did not follow through, and forgot all about their pledge.

The most imminent problem was the neighbor to the north Frederick II of Prussia. In 1740 when he comes to the throne he tricks her into letting his troops occupy part of Silesia, a coal and iron ore rich region, in exchange for protection from France, Spain and Bavaria. By 1745 he’s moved into the rest of it and is settling in. Maria Theresa goes to Hungary, Britain and Russia for help and support. She doesn’t really get Silesia back but she does get the respect and support of her allies and her subjects. During her 46 year reign she consolidated Hapsburg power and authority by reorganizing the government, expanding her tax base into the nobles and clergy while giving peasants tax relief and freeing them from many labor services. Joseph II, her son, would be a worthy successor and continue many of her reforms.

Maria Theresa made her capital Vienna a center for music and the art during her 40 years as empress. (1740 – 1780), she has 16 children (11 girls and 5 boys) including Joseph II her successor and Marie Antoinette the last queen of France.

**Prussia**

The Hohenzollern family ruled scattered lands in the 1600s, all across the northern part of Germany and after the Peace of Westphalia they moved to annex the lands between their family’s holdings. Once this region is gathered together they set up an efficient bureaucracy and took power and independence away from the **Junkers**, the noble families.

To keep the new land together the Prussian rulers created the best-trained and equipped army in Europe. Not so much a country with an army but an army with a country. Frederick William I kept his Junkers loyal by giving them important positions in the army. By 1740 this army was strong enough to effectively challenge the Austrians and their empress to the south.

Frederick William I made sure his son had the most rigorous military training available, but the boy was also pulled toward the arts and music by his mother. In the end young Frederick fled Prussia with his life-long best friend to escape his father’s harsh treatment and military service. When captured and returned to his angry father young Frederick was forced to watch his friend be beheaded as a clear message about what his father expected of him. The lesson was learned as Frederick II becomes king in 1740 and sets about using his military might to steal Silesia and sparks the war of Austrian Succession to try to overthrow Maria Theresa. Frederick’s well trained and immaculately equipped army proves to be the greatest in Europe – and he earned the name Frederick the Great.

By 1750 Europe’s great powers included Austria, Prussia, France, England and Russia. They combined and recombined in alliances to try and maintain a balance of power between them. France and England were contending for overseas territories while Austria and Prussia continued to fight over the many German states. Now and then things would blow up into full-scale war. The Seven Years’ War from 1756 – 1763 was fought on four continent – while Austria Prussia France and England fought each other in Europe, Britain and France also fought in India and Africa, while France, England and the Native nations fought in North America. The end of that war – The Treaty of Paris, establishes the beginnings of Britain’s world wide empire which will continue to expand until 25% of the world’s land mass is under British rule.

**Russia – Peter and Catherine**

**Peter the Great**  was 10 years old when his sister Sophie put him and his disabled brother Ivan on the throne of a very medieval Russia as joint rulers. It took him seven years to dispose of his brother and deposit his resisting sister in a nunnery and to take the throne as his own. He set out to educate himself, and his curiosity took him to the foreign quarter of Moscow where he talked with and learned from artisans and soldiers who lived there about the world outside Russia.

At 25 (1697) he set out from Russia to see Europe for himself. Almost seven feet tall he had a booming laugh and a furious temper, distinctive in any setting. He thought he was traveling incognito, in fact he worked for a time as a laborer on a Dutch waterfront as Peter Mikailov, but he left quite an impression on everyone he met. He learned the manners and customs of many countries, studied anatomy with a doctor, learned to pull teeth from a dentist and was most impressed by Parliament and the frank way the English spoke to their king.

Back in Russia Peter brought along a group of technical experts, teachers, soldiers and other learned people from the west determined to pull Russia out of the middle ages and put it on an equal level with the countries of Europe. – westernization. He cut the beards of the boyars (nobles) at this court and chopped the long traditional sleeves off their robes. He held western style balls and forced the nobility to learn dances like the minuet and the waltz and men and women danced together in public at his command -- a brash violation of Russian traditions.

He tied the serfs of Russia to their nobles so the nobles could serve him, and he placed most of the nobles in government jobs. SERfs were also employed to build roads and bridges for Russia, and to create his capital Petersburg on the shores of the Baltic Sea by draining swamps and digging a network of lovely canals.

Peter improved education, simplified the Russian alphabet, and set up academies for mathematics, science and engineering. He established trading policies, encouraging exports to other countries – like textiles and mining – two industries that he developed. Peter had much help and support for his trading ventures and his naval ambitions from William III of England (William and Mary) who wanted to explore Russia as a market for that new Virginia product – tobacco! Not a bad call, the Russians even today are prodigious smokers of tobacco.

Anyone who crossed him was in for trouble. His elite palace guards staged a revolt and he had 1000 of them executed and left outside his palace walls for months as a warning to anyone else who would challenge his power.

Peter’s accomplishments –

A Warm water port – Russia wanted year round access to the sea. Peter wanted a navy – that time in the Netherlands made a big impression on him. But Peter had to fight the Ottoman Empire for land along the Black Sea, and did not succeed. Catherine the Great, however manages to get this land and warm water port for Russia later and build that navy for Russia.

War with Sweden – the Swedish army was only 8000 strong when it took on and defeated the 40,000 man Russian army the first time in 1700. By 1709 Peter was back and this time wins territory along the Baltic Sea.

Petersburg – built on land won from Sweden Peter forces serfs to drain the swampy land and build his new capital. He brings in Italian architects and artisans to create the government buildings and palaces, and designed the parks and boulevards himself. It becomes his window on the west for Russia.

Expansion to the Pacific – Peter sends trades and explorers east through Siberia to blaze a trail to the Pacific Ocean, and sends Vitus Bering to explore what is now the Bering Strait between Russia and Alaska. Russian pioneers cross over and settle as far south as California….Russia was already the largest country in the world, and now it was even bigger.

Peter dies in 1725 when he dives into freezing winter waters and works all night to save sailors from a shipwreck. From the 1700’s on Peter’s reforms and policies push Russia onto the European stage. Many of his ideas die with him, but his exercise of absolute power through threats and terror dragged his nation out of the dark ages into a worthy competitor for the west. The expansion of serfdom in Russia under Peter’s watch is problematic for the west, but allows the labor to achieve his goals.

Catherine the Great –

Peter does not name a successor during his lifetime, and this sets off a struggle for power in the Romanov family. With no strong hand at the helm the boyars roared back to retake power and independence for themselves. It is not until the accession of Catherine the Great that things settle down again. Peter’s daughter Elizabeth sets the stage by naming her nephew Peter as her heir, and finding the feisty princess to be his bride.

Catherine is a German princess by birth, married to Peter III, the grandson of Peter I (the Great) when she was only 15. She learned Russian, adopted the Russian Orthodox Church, and won the loyalty of the Russian people. When she was 33 her unstable, unpopular husband was deposed and imprisoned and then mysteriously murdered by a group of Russian army officers who then supported her as their new Tsarina.

Catherine was a capable leader. She codified the laws, reorganized the government to be more efficient, and began state-sponsored education for girls and boys. She embraced the west, and encouraged the speaking French at court and followed French customs. She wrote histories and plays, corresponded with scholars and philosophers and took lovers openly and freely, bestowing on them land and position when they parted, always leaving on good terms. There is some dispute about the paternity of her oldest son Paul, but none about the other three, none of which were her husband’s.

Catherine gives the boyars exemption from taxes and other rights. She tightens the hold on the serfs, causing several peasant rebellions all brutally put down. During her reign even more people were pressed into servitude. Catherine takes the Black Sea territories from the Ottoman Empire and partitions Poland with Prussia and Austria also getting a share. After partitions in 1772, 1793 and 1795 Poland disappears completely and is absorbed by the nations around it. It returns in 1919 after the end of WWI.

By the mid-1700’s absolute monarchy is the rule in four of the five strongest nations of Europe. Only England had moved on to a less powerful monarch and more powerful Parliament. These five nations fought for control and power but balance each other’s power in the end.

But change is in the wind….soon radical new ideas, and powerful movements will grow and challenge the power of the absolute monarchs. The French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte will transform Europe completely.