

# Absolute Monarchs: The Kings and Queens Who Ruled Europe

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Portrait of King Louis XIV of France, 1701. Image from the public domain Image from the public domain.

Absolutism is the idea that one ruler should have all the power. No other person, group or law can put that power in check.

## The age of absolute monarchies

One kind of absolutism is called absolute monarchy. A monarch is the single ruler of a country. Kings and Queen are monarchs. Absolute monarchs used to rule Europe 300 to 500 years ago. One of the most famous absolute monarchs from this time is King Louis XIV of France.

It may seem like absolute monarchs could do anything they wanted. But this isn't exactly right. The countries they ruled still had laws. The monarchs could just decide not to follow them. They had to say that ignoring the rules was for the good of the kingdom.

## "Enlightened Absolutism"



About 300 years ago, a new way of thinking spread through Europe. It was known as the Enlightenment. Ideas of liberty and science became more important than they were before.

Some absolute monarchs agreed with the ideas of the Enlightenment. One of them was Catherine the Great of Russia. These rulers tried to change their countries for the better.

For example, serfdom was ended in some places. Serfdom is when peasants live and work on a piece of land they don't own. The peasants were known as serfs. Serfs had to work for and obey the owner of the land. This went against the idea of liberty.

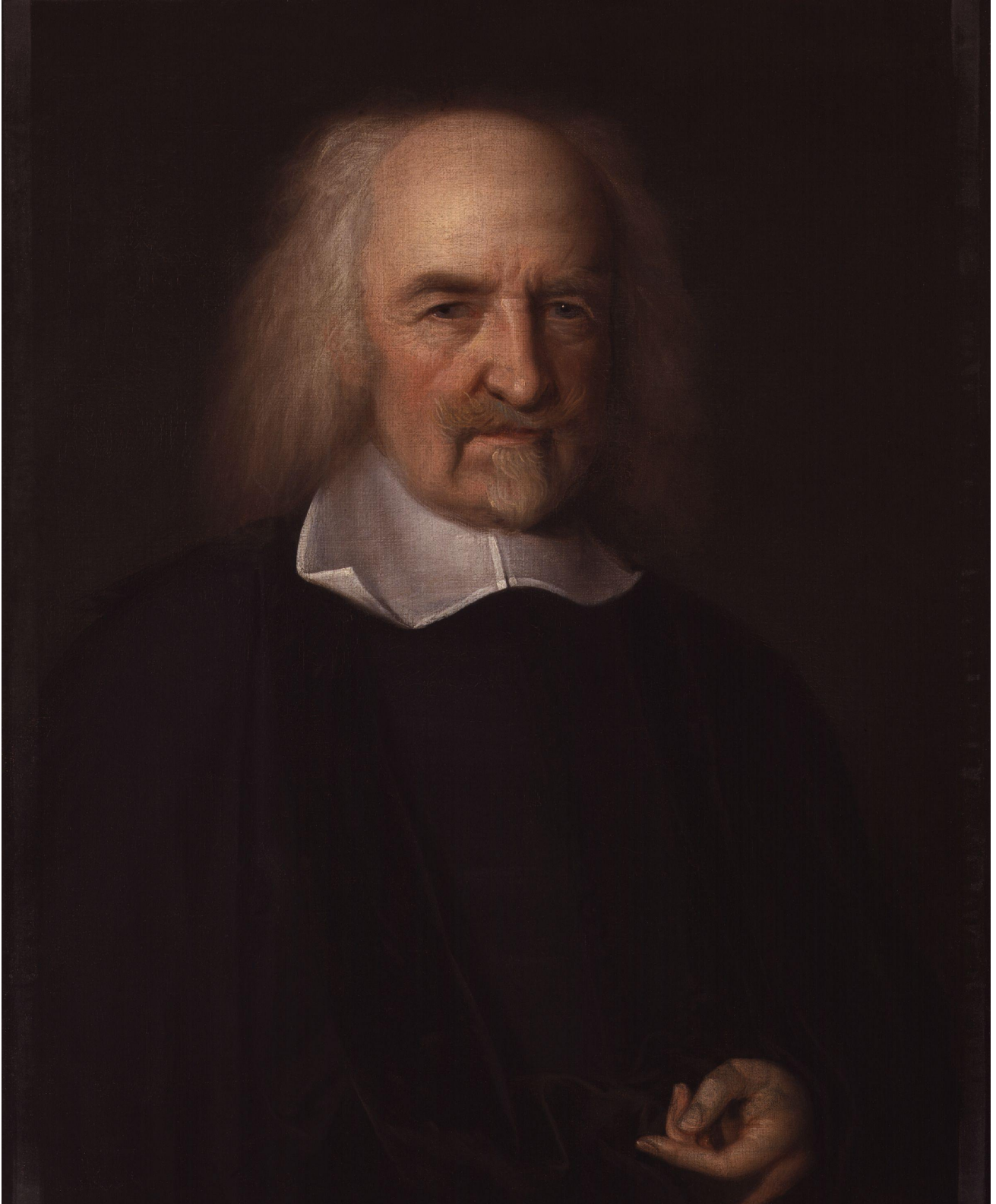
Catherine the Great thought that serfdom was evil. She wanted to end it. But, Catherine also realized that she needed the rich, landowning nobles to help her run Russia. Eventually, she gave the nobles more control over their land and serfs. This made the lives of serfs even worse.

Rulers used the Enlightenment to make themselves look good. They said that they needed to have absolute power. By using this power, they could make people's lives better. This way of ruling was called "Enlightened Absolutism."

### **The ultimate power play**

Several ideas were used to make absolute monarchies seem better. One idea was called the divine right of kings. This was the idea that God gave monarchs the right to have power.





Another idea was called natural law. Thomas Hobbes, a famous thinker, explained what this meant. He said that all people want to live well and in peace. It is natural for them to want this. But in a world without a ruler or government, this would be impossible. The world would be too violent. People would be greedy, so they would take anything they wanted.

Most people would not want to live in a world like that. Hobbes thought the only answer was having a ruler step in. He said that people have to give up some of their freedom and power. In return, rulers keep their lives orderly and safe.

### **The end of absolute monarchy**

Still, the age of absolute monarchy was ended 200 years ago. People were asking for more power to make decisions. They wanted to choose their own leaders. They also wanted their leaders to be fairer.

The Enlightenment had helped the absolute monarchs. But it had also taught everyone else to think for themselves.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Enlightened Absolutism."  
Select the paragraph from the section that explains what serfdom was.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "The end of absolute monarchy" BEST explains WHY people wanted to elect new leaders?
  - (A) Still, the age of absolute monarchy was ended 200 years ago.
  - (B) People were asking for more power to make decisions.
  - (C) They wanted to choose their own leaders.
  - (D) They also wanted their leaders to be fairer.

- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "Enlightened Absolutism."

*This went against the idea of liberty.*

Which word could replace "liberty" WITHOUT changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) serfdom
  - (B) freedom
  - (C) happiness
  - (D) science
- 4 Read the sentence from the section "The age of absolute monarchies."

*A monarch is the single ruler of a country.*

Fill in the blank.

A "monarch" is a \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) servant
  - (B) landowner
  - (C) king or queen
  - (D) religious leader