

# 1. The Ancien Régime

## This chapter

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the **French Revolution** dramatically changed Europe. This chapter is about Europe before those changes. The French revolutionaries called the **political and social system before the revolution** the **Ancien Régime**. The system of government of the *Ancien Régime* was **absolute monarchy**. There was a **traditional economy** based mainly on agriculture, and most people were peasants. The **society was very hierarchical**, and it still had many of the social structures of the feudal system. In this chapter we will look at:

- the background to the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, including the War of the Spanish Succession
- the political organisation, society and economy of the *Ancien Régime*
- other **political systems** in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including constitutional monarchy and republicanism

## Background

### THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES

The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time of **rapid change** in Europe. The **Renaissance** and **Reformation** resulted in **new ideas** and **new religious beliefs**. Meanwhile, the **voyages of discovery** also brought new ideas, as well as **new technology** and **new crops**. Trade increased, and the European population and economy grew rapidly.

Towns became bigger, and the bourgeoisie became much wealthier. This made the **towns more powerful**. Meanwhile, **monarchs tried to gain more control** over their countries by creating their own armies, weakening the position of the nobles, raising taxes and introducing new laws.



### THE CRISIS OF THE 17TH CENTURY

In spite of this progress, Europe experienced a serious crisis in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, caused by a variety of problems:

**Wars:** There were **religious wars between Catholics and Protestants**, including the Thirty Years' War, which was the biggest war that Europe had ever seen. There were also **civil wars** in many countries, including England and France.



**Famine:** There were **poor harvests** due to:

- flooding and drought
- a colder climate
- over-cultivation, which reduced soil fertility



War made the famines even worse: **peasants had to fight**, so they couldn't look after their crops; **soldiers stole food**, which left less for local people; and **armies destroyed crops**, so that their enemies would have no food.

**Disease:** The wars helped to spread diseases, and there were several outbreaks of the **plague**. In 1665-1666, the Great Plague killed 100,000 people in London.



**Economic crisis:** Trade became more difficult, and there was **high inflation**.



The mortality rate increased, and in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the **population fell** in many parts of Europe, including Spain.

### THE DECLINE OF SPAIN, AND THE RISE OF FRANCE

In 1600, Spain was the most powerful country in Europe, but it suffered particularly badly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the reigns of the *Austrias Menores* (the last three Habsburg kings of Spain). **Spain lost parts of its European territory**, including Portugal and the United Provinces, and France also took some areas from Spain.

Meanwhile, **France replaced Spain as the leading European power**. The French king, **Louis XIV**, expanded France's borders and created an empire by founding colonies in America, Africa and Asia.

### Questions

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1. Can you think of any crops that were introduced to Europe from the Americas? Write down at least three examples.
2. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, why did towns become more powerful?
3. How did wars make other problems in Europe worse?
4. Which was the most powerful European country at the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century? And at the end of it?



# The War of the Spanish Succession

In 1700, Charles II of Spain died without an heir. Although Spain had declined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was still a very important country, and all of Europe was interested in who would be the next king. There were two candidates:

## PHILIP OF ANJOU



### *Bourbon dynasty*

Charles II had named **Philip, Duke of Anjou** as his heir. The **French** supported Philip, who was the grandson of Louis XIV.

Most of **Castile** also wanted Philip to be king.

## CHARLES, ARCHDUKE OF AUSTRIA

### *Habsburg dynasty*

Most other European countries supported **Archduke Charles**, the Habsburg heir to the throne. They were afraid that France would become too powerful if Philip became King of Spain.

Most people in **Aragón** wanted Charles to become king.

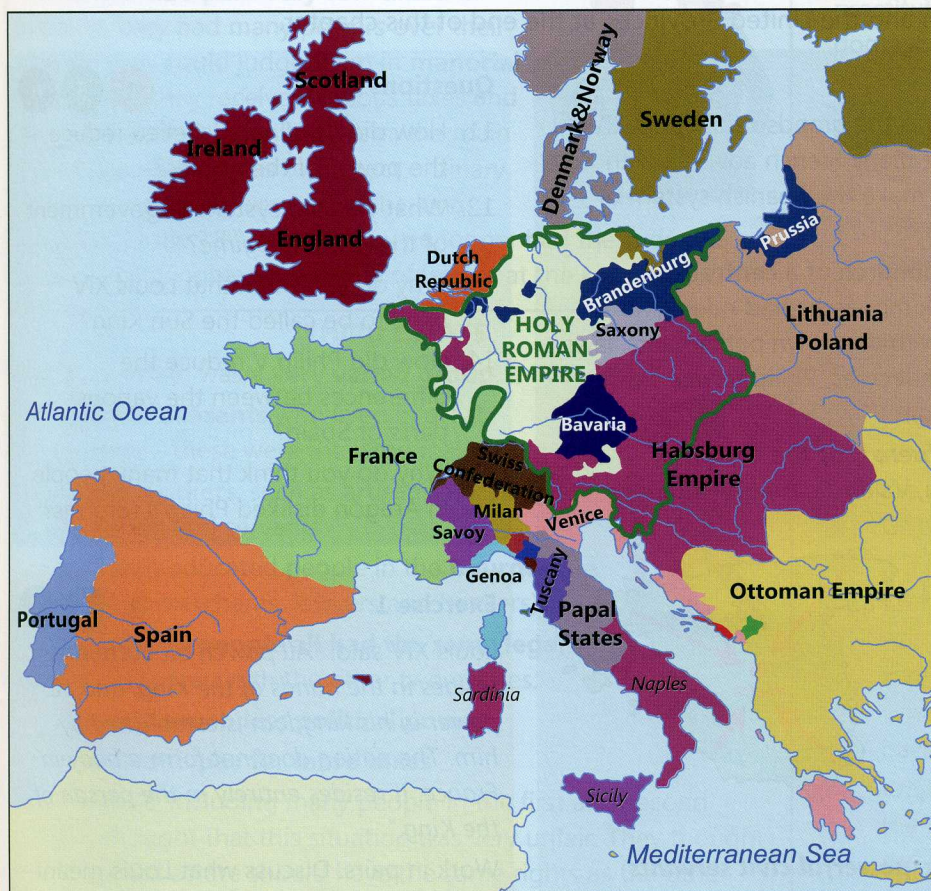


The disagreement over who should be the next king of Spain led to the **War of the Spanish Succession**. The war involved most of Western Europe, and lasted for thirteen years. In the end, **Philip became the first king of the Bourbon dynasty in Spain**, where he was known as **Philip V**.

The **Treaty of Utrecht** (1713), which ended the war, weakened Spain:

- Spain lost the Spanish Netherlands, and all of its Italian territories, mostly to Austria.
- Britain gained control over Gibraltar and Minorca, two important harbours in the Mediterranean.
- Spain gave Britain the **asiento** – **a monopoly over the slave trade between Africa and the Spanish colonies**. This was very valuable, as the slave trade was very profitable.

The war also helped to bring about the **birth of Spain as a single country**. You will learn more about that process on the next page.



Europe after the Treaty of Utrecht. As you can see, many of the borders are similar to the borders of modern European countries.

## Questions

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- What was the cause of the War of the Spanish Succession?
- Why did Philip V becoming king of Spain make France more powerful?
- What was the *asiento*?
- Which countries gained from the Treaty of Utrecht? And who lost? Explain your answers.
- Look at the map:
  - Which countries have similar borders to modern European countries?
  - Which large modern European countries did not exist in 1713? Name at least two countries.
- Why do you think that the British wanted control of Gibraltar and Minorca?



# Absolute monarchy

Starting with the Catholic Monarchs in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, many European rulers increased their own power and weakened the nobles. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Chief Minister of France, **Cardinal Richelieu**, felt that the nobles were still too powerful. He therefore made the king's central government even stronger, by **increasing the number of civil servants** and improving the king's army.

**Louis XIV** (ruled 1643-1715) continued the policies of Richelieu. He also invited nobles to live at his court in Versailles, to give him more control over them. The nobles lived in great luxury, but they had no real power.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, **the king controlled ALL of the important functions of government**. He claimed to rule by **divine right** – he said that God had chosen him, so he **only needed to obey God**:



## THE KING

### Legislation:

The king made new laws, and abolished old ones. Most importantly, he could **create new taxes** to pay for wars and other big projects.

### Justice:

The highest courts were controlled by the king.

### Administration:

The central government sent civil servants (**intendants**) to administer the provinces.

### Foreign policy:

The king made alliances with other countries, or declared war on them. He had a professional **royal army**, so he didn't need help from the nobles to fight wars.

We call this system of government **absolute monarchy**, because **the monarch had absolute control over all aspects of government**. Most countries in Europe became absolute monarchies, and it is the **system of government of the Ancien Régime**. However, a few European countries had different systems of government: we will look at the examples of Britain and the United Provinces at the end of this chapter.

## ABSOLUTE MONARCHY IN SPAIN

**Philip V** of Spain (ruled 1700-1746) was the grandson of Louis XIV, and he grew up in France. He brought many French advisers with him to Spain, and they helped him to make the Spanish system of government more like the French one.

Philip's aim was to be the **absolute monarch** of a **centralised, modern state**. Previously, the Spanish monarchs had ruled over a number of separate kingdoms, each with their own parliaments, laws and customs. With the **Nueva Planta** decrees, Philip turned these kingdoms into **a single country – Spain**:

- He **abolished the special laws (fueros) of the Crown of Aragón**, which included Catalonia, Valencia, Aragón and Majorca.
- He **introduced Castilian law in the whole of Spain**. The Council of Castile also took decisions about the whole country.
- He made **Madrid** the **capital city of the whole of Spain**.
- He **made Castilian Spanish the only official language of Spain**.
- He created **intendentes**, who were **powerful civil servants** named by the king. They controlled the local authorities, collected taxes and introduced economic reforms.



## Questions

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- How did Cardinal Richelieu reduce the power of the nobles?
- What was the system of government of the *Ancien Régime*?
- Why do you think that Louis XIV liked to be called the Sun King?
- How did Philip V reduce the differences between the various parts of Spain?
- Why do you think that many people in Aragón disliked Philip's reforms?

## Exercise 1

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Louis XIV said: "All power, all authority, resides in the hands of the King, and all power in his kingdom is established by him. The nation does not form a body in France. It resides entirely in the person of the King."

Work in pairs. Discuss what Louis meant by this. Think about how he viewed his relationship with France and its people.



# Society in the *Ancien Régime*: the three estates

In the *Ancien Régime*, society was divided into **three estates**:

- The **first estate** was the **clergy**.
- The **second estate** was the **nobility**.
- The **third estate** was **everyone else**. More than 95 per cent of the population was in the third estate.

Everyone was born into one of these estates, and in general they **stayed in that estate for their whole lives**. The only ways to move up from the third estate were to **buy a title**, **marry someone** from the second estate or **join the clergy**.

## USEFUL WORDS

**Tithe**: a tax paid to the Church.

**Vassal**: a person who rented land from a noble and had to obey him.

**Manorial court**: a court in which a noble could try his vassals, and resolve disputes between them.

## MONARCH

The **monarch** had absolute power. He controlled all aspects of government and had most privileges.



## FIRST ESTATE

The Catholic Church had its own courts, it received **tithes** and it also owned large estates. Meanwhile, the **clergy paid very few taxes**. This made the **high clergy** (bishops, abbots and abbesses) rich and powerful. In spite of the wealth of the Church, the **low clergy** (parish priests, monks and nuns) were normally very poor.



## SECOND ESTATE

The **nobles** also **paid very few taxes**. In addition, they had many powers over their **vassals**: they could judge them in **manorial courts**, and they received various taxes and fees from them. Under feudalism, the main role of the nobility was to protect ordinary people and provide armies for the king. However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they no longer had these duties. Instead, many nobles lived a life of leisure at the king's court.



## THIRD ESTATE

The third estate was a **very varied group**. It included:

- illiterate **peasants** who lived in great poverty – these were the large majority
- **urban workers**, such as artisans, unskilled labourers and servants
- rich, well-educated people in the **bourgeoisie** (such as merchants, lawyers and bankers)

However, **these people all had the same legal status**. Compared with the other two estates:

- they had **much less political power**
- they had to **pay far more taxes**

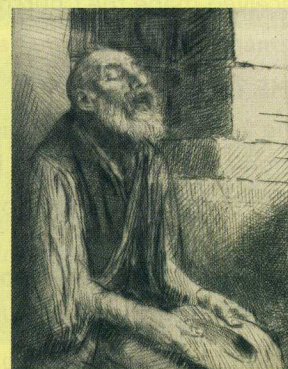
Most people, including many people in the first and second estates, thought that this situation was very unfair. They thought that the third estate should have the same rights as the other two estates. This was one of the **main causes of the French Revolution**.



## URBAN POVERTY

Some people in towns were quite wealthy, but most urban workers lived in great poverty. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, prices rose more quickly than the wages of unskilled workers, so they could hardly

survive. Parents often abandoned their children because they couldn't feed them, and poverty forced many women into prostitution. When bread prices rose, the poorest people starved.



## Questions

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- Which estate(s) paid the most taxes?
- Which estate(s) had the most political power?
- What types of people were in the third estate? Which were there more of?
- What proportion of people were in the first or second estate?
- Why do you think that rich members of the third estate wanted to buy titles? Give at least two reasons.
- If a peasant disagreed with how much tax he had to pay to a noble, the case was heard by the manorial court. Why was this system unfair?
- Which duties did the nobles no longer have in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?
- Which estate do you think members of the low clergy came from before joining the clergy?
- Why did the situation of urban workers become worse in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?



# Society in Spain and the Spanish Empire

After the War of the Spanish Succession, Spain lost most of its possessions in Europe. However, it still had a **huge empire in the Americas**, known as the **Indies**. The societies in peninsular Spain and the Indies were so different that we will look at them separately.

## PENINSULAR SPAIN

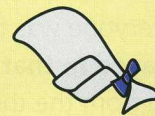
### THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church was not allowed to sell the land that it owned. Many people left land to the Church when they died, so it owned enormous areas, which it rented out to peasant farmers. The **rent** and the **tithes** that it received made the Church very rich and powerful.



### THE NOBILITY

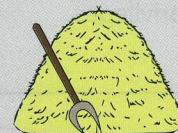
Nobles in Spain were **not allowed to perform manual work**, as it was considered **dishonourable**. Instead, they lived off the income from their land. As the eldest son inherited his father's title and all of his land, younger sons usually became soldiers or joined the Church.



### THE THIRD ESTATE

The vast majority of Spanish people were peasants, who lived in the countryside. Most were very poor, and didn't own any land: they either rented land or worked for a wage on big farms.

When people from the bourgeoisie managed to save money, they normally invested it in land, rather than in a business. Then they could live off the income from their land, and stop working, just like a noble. They could even **buy a noble title**, in order to improve their **social status** and pay **fewer taxes**. As a result, the urban bourgeoisie was quite small, and there was not much commerce.



## THE INDIES

In the Indies, social classes were **based on your race and where you were born**. It was a **caste system**, with different rules for each class. As people from different races married and had children together, the number of castes increased. White people born in Spain had the highest status, while slaves from Africa had the lowest status. In general, the whiter you were, the higher your social status.

### The Criollos

The **Criollos** were **white people born in the Indies**, many of whom were involved in trade and commerce. They were descended from Spanish colonists, so they thought that they deserved exactly the same rights as people born in Spain. However, they actually had fewer rights:

- Spanish people born in Spain were always given the most important government jobs.
- Merchants from Seville and Cádiz had a monopoly on trade between Spain and the Indies.

This made the Criollos feel that they were being treated unfairly. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they protested against Spanish rule on various occasions, and there were even minor rebellions. These rebellions failed, but the Criollos remained unhappy with the political system. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century they played a very important role in the **Wars of Independence** in the Americas.



Mixed marriage in the Indies

### Questions

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25. Give two reasons why the Church owned lots of land in Spain.
26. What did the younger sons of noblemen usually become?
27. Did most Spanish peasants own land?
28. Why did the bourgeoisie choose to invest in land?
29. Why was the urban bourgeoisie relatively small?
30. What were social classes in the Indies based on? Was this the same as in Spain? Explain your answer.

### Exercise 2

1 5 6 8

Work in pairs. Do you agree that the Criollos were treated unfairly? Think about their social position compared with other castes in the Indies. Were they one of the more privileged groups, or less privileged groups? What do you think about the caste system in the Indies?



# The economy and the triangular trade

The economy of the *Ancien Régime* was mainly based on **agriculture**, although manufacturing was also becoming more important. There was **relatively little domestic trade** – roads were very bad and there were taxes on moving goods between regions.

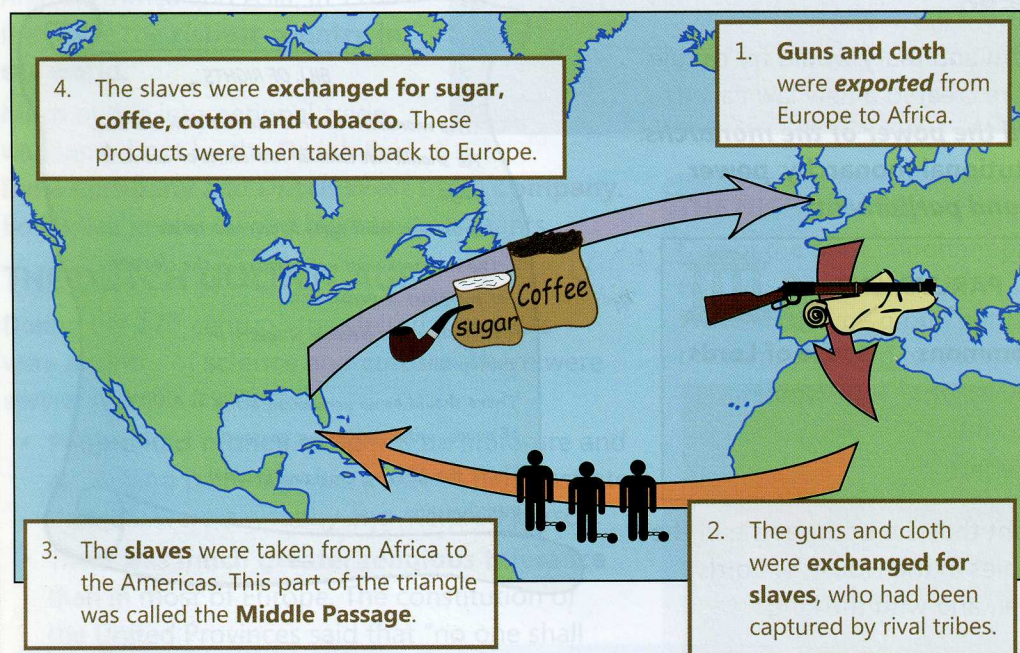
Most countries believed in **mercantilism**, an **economic theory that says countries become rich by accumulating precious metals like gold and silver**. They therefore used taxes to encourage exports and reduce imports.

In the 18th century, there was a growing trade with European colonies in America and Asia. European ships travelled all over the world, carrying spices, gold, silver, sugar, coffee, tea and cotton. They also carried millions of **slaves**, mainly as part of the **triangular trade** (see diagram below).

Great Britain had a monopoly on carrying slaves to the Spanish colonies, which was called the **asiento**. Merchants in British ports like Liverpool, London and Bristol grew rich from trading in slaves, guns and sugar.



Harewood House in Yorkshire was built by a family of rich merchants involved in the slave trade.



## THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

The climate was very hot, and the ship was so crowded that each person had hardly enough room to turn around. The air soon became unfit for breathing, from a variety of loathsome smells. This brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. This wretched situation was made worse by the chains, which became unbearable. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, created a scene of almost unimaginable horror.

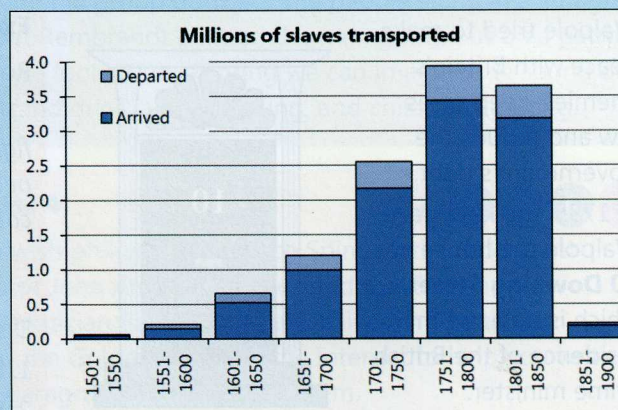
Adapted from the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave who campaigned to stop slavery

## LIFE IN SLAVERY

Many slaves died during the terrible **Middle Passage** (see box). Conditions were not much better when they arrived in America. Most slaves were sent to **sugar plantations**, which needed a lot of workers. Families were split up, and the slave owners generally treated their slaves extremely badly.

## Questions

31. Why was there relatively little domestic trade in the *Ancien Régime*?
  32. Which products were exported:
    - a) from Europe to Africa?
    - b) from the Americas to Europe?
  33. What work did most slaves do in America?
- Use the graph to answer these questions:
34. In which century were most slaves transported?
  35. Approximately what proportion of slaves died on the voyage?
    - a) about 5%    b) about 15%    c) about 30%





# Great Britain: a constitutional monarchy

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain went from being an absolute monarchy to being a constitutional monarchy. **Charles I** (ruled 1625-1649) believed in his **divine right** to rule Britain, and wanted the country to be an absolute monarchy. He therefore ruled without consulting parliament, but this caused a **civil war** (1642-51) between the people who supported Charles and the people who supported the parliament.

After many years of war, **Oliver Cromwell** led parliament to victory, and in 1649 Charles was **beheaded for treason**. Britain now became a **republic ruled by parliament**. However, in 1653 Oliver Cromwell made himself **dictator**, with the help of the army.

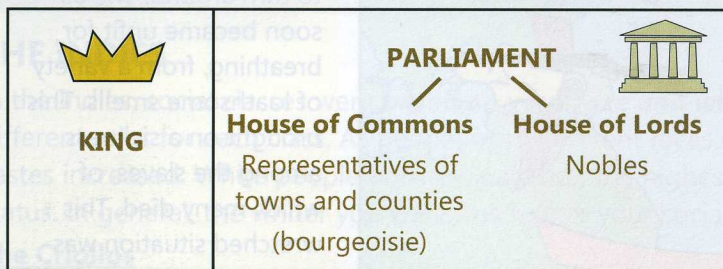
Cromwell's government was very unpopular, so when he died in 1658, many people **wanted the monarchy back**. In 1660 parliament asked Charles I's son to become king. This is called the **restoration**.



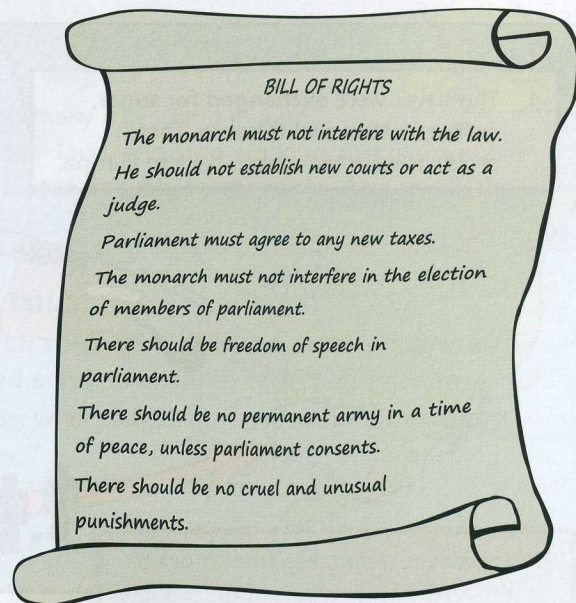
The struggle for power between the monarchs and parliament soon started again. Finally, in 1688, **parliament forced James II to abdicate**, and asked his daughter **Mary** to rule jointly with her husband, **William of Orange**. This is known as the **glorious revolution**, because it was achieved without a war.

## THE BILL OF RIGHTS – 1689

Parliament was afraid that William and Mary would try to rule as absolute monarchs. It therefore created a new law called the **Bill of Rights**, which **limited the power of the monarchs**. This was the start of the **constitutional monarchy**: **power was shared between the king and parliament**.



This system of government meant that the bourgeoisie in the House of Commons and the nobles in the House of Lords had to cooperate with each other, and with the king.

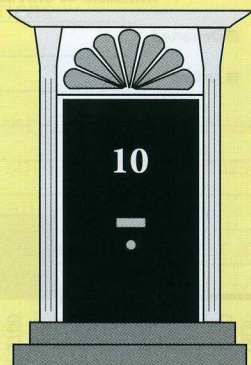


## THE FIRST PRIME MINISTER

**Robert Walpole** became a member of parliament when he was just 24 years old. In 1712 he was accused of corruption and briefly put in prison, but in 1721 he became First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer. This made him the most powerful politician in the country, and he is considered the **first Prime Minister of Great Britain**.

Walpole tried to make peace with Britain's enemies, keep taxes low and reduce the government's debt.

In 1735, the king gave Walpole the house at **10 Downing Street**, which is now the main residence of the British prime minister.



## Questions

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36. Make a timeline of the events in Great Britain between 1642 and 1689.
37. Why did parliament introduce the Bill of Rights?
38. Write down at least four ways in which the Bill of Rights limited the power of the monarch.
39. Who did the House of Commons represent?

## Exercise 3

1 5 6 8

Read the following satirical description of Robert Walpole:

*"This truly great man achieved his aims by making other men fight each other. He did this by using the great arts which vulgar people call treachery, lying and falsehood, but which great men call politics."*

**Adapted extract from *The History of the Life of the Late Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* by Henry Fielding**

Discuss the following questions in pairs:

1. Do you think that the author admired Walpole?
2. What did the author think of politicians in general?



# The United Provinces: a federal republic

The United Provinces (what is now the Netherlands) gained independence from Spain in the **Eighty Years' War** (1568-1648). They **did not have a monarch**, which was very unusual. Instead, they were a **federal republic**:

- There were seven provinces, each with its own assembly, which was called a **State**. These States, which were **controlled by the wealthiest merchants** in the towns, governed the provinces.
- The **States General** was the federal government. Its main purpose was to decide **foreign policy**.

The government represented the bourgeoisie, so its chief aim was to **encourage commerce**. It succeeded in this, and the United Provinces became a centre of **shipbuilding, trading and banking**. They dominated world trade, and established **colonies** in America, Africa and Asia. In 1700 they were the **richest country in the world**.



Much of this international trade was carried out by the **Dutch East India Company** and **Dutch West India Company**. Both were jointly owned by many merchants.

## THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the United Provinces were a centre of **science** and **culture**. There were several reasons for this:

- **People had money to spend** on literature and art. Buying paintings was a way to demonstrate that you were a wealthy and cultured person.
- There was **much greater religious tolerance** than in most of Europe. The constitution of the United Provinces said that "no one shall be persecuted or investigated because of their religion". Protestants, Jews and Catholics from all over Europe therefore came to live in cities like Amsterdam.

This period is called the **Dutch Golden Age**.

### Questions

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40. Which country did the United Provinces gain independence from in 1648?
41. What was unusual about the political system of the United Provinces?
42. What was a "State" in the United Provinces?
43. Which group of people had most influence in the United Provinces? Explain your answer.
44. How did the United Provinces become rich?
45. Why is the 17<sup>th</sup> century called the Dutch Golden Age?
46. Is Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* an example of Gothic, Renaissance or Baroque art?

### THE NIGHT WATCH

One of the most important painters of the Dutch Golden Age was **Rembrandt** (1606-1669). His painting ***The Night Watch*** is a huge group portrait of a militia company, which the company used to decorate its new banquet hall.



In traditional group portraits, the people stand in a straight line, but Rembrandt painted the men going out on a patrol. When we look at his painting we can imagine the sound of drums and guns, a dog barking, and children shouting.

### Exercise 4

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The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, the Protestant educator John Amos Comenius and the Catholic mathematician René Descartes all lived in Amsterdam during the Golden Age. Use the Internet to help you write a short paragraph about one of them.



# THE ANCIEN RÉGIME - SUMMARY

This chapter looked at the **Ancien Régime**: the political and social system before the French Revolution. This included:

- **absolute monarchy**: the system of government of the *Ancien Régime*
- how society was divided into **three estates**
- the economy of the *Ancien Régime*, including the **slave trade**

You also learned about two other systems of government in Europe in the 18th century: **republicanism** and **constitutional monarchy**.

## A. SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT

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A1. Are these statements about absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy or republicanism?

- It was the system of government in the United Provinces.
- Power is shared between the monarch and parliament.
- It was the system of government of the *Ancien Régime*.
- The monarch makes the laws and controls the courts.
- It was the system of government established in Great Britain after the Glorious Revolution.
- There was no monarch.

A2. In which of the three systems did the bourgeoisie have:

- the most power?
- the least power?

A3. Did peasants have more power in one of the three systems than in the other two?

## B. THE THREE ESTATES

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Look at the picture on the right. Work in pairs to answer the questions:

- Identify which figure represents each of the three estates.
- What does the globe with the crown on top represent?
- Which figure is working hardest? What does this represent?
- Copy and complete the table with ticks (✓) and crosses (✗) to summarise the position of the different members of the third estate:



	Peasants	Urban workers	Bourgeoisie
They had no political rights	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
They had to pay high taxes	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Many lived in extreme poverty	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
They thought that their situation was unfair	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

## C. LOUIS XIV

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Read the extract below and then answer the questions.

*"The King liked splendour and magnificence in everything: you pleased him by having luxurious houses, clothes and food. A taste for extravagance and luxury spread through all classes of society. As for the King himself, nobody ever approached his magnificence. His buildings, who could number them? Nevertheless, everyone disapproved of the pride and bad taste seen in them. He built nothing useful or ornamental in Paris, except the Pont Royal."*

**Adapted extract from *Memoirs of Louis XIV*, by The Duke of Saint-Simon**

- According to the Duke of Saint-Simon, did the King want his subjects to live simple lives?
- How did the King live?
- Were his buildings useful to the people? What did people think of them?
- Do you think the Duke of Saint-Simon knew much about the lives of the urban poor? Explain your answer.