
A Study of Totalitarianism in Louis XIV Leadership

Absolutism

Absolutism was a new form of government that was introduced to France during the 17th century. This new change made it so that a single person, the monarch, had complete power over everything. Anything that the king said became law and nobody could change that. This new change made it so that the nobles didn't have any say in politics anymore. The king even had his own private army that would only obey him. During the remainder of King Louis XIII's reign and throughout King Louis XIV's reign, several prominent figures in society included absolutism in their writings such as Cardinal Richelieu, Saint Simon and Bishop Bossuet.

Cardinal Richelieu wrote a political testament to King Louis XIII in 1638. In this document, Richelieu tells King Louis XIII what he needs to do to be a good ruler and establish absolutism. For absolutism to work, all of the citizens needed to take the King seriously and not shrug off what he said. Within the document, Richelieu tells King Louis XIII that, "the nobles conducted themselves as if they were not your subjects" (Richelieu, Absolutism Documents, p. 1). He also tell him, "that you would soon get control of your state, and that in a short time your prudence, your courage, and the benediction of God would give a new aspect to the realm" (Richelieu, Absolutism Documents, p. 2). Both of these quotes go hand in hand with how absolutism was supposed to work. The nobles should not be acting like they are not below the king within absolutism. Just because they are nobles does not make them immune against the King. For the King to have complete power without being overthrown, his subjects must respect him and listen to what he says as his word is law. The second quote furthers the way absolutism is thought about. For it to work, the King needs control of his land. It also shows how God is related to absolutism. Since it was believed that the King had a direct connection to God, it was thought that the complete power the King had would be what God wanted. There weren't any checks or balances in place to stop the King, so the King's work would be also be God's work.

Throughout the years of 1691-1701, Saint Simon wrote memoirs about his time in King Louis XIV's court. Unlike Richelieu's document, these memoirs weren't meant to be seen by the King. A big point that Saint Simon makes is that many of the people found King Louis XIV's weakness. The quote, "His Ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers soon found out his weak point, namely, his love of hearing his own praises" (Saint Simon, Absolutism Documents, p. 3) shows how people were able to take "advantage" of King Louis XIV and is also an example of how absolutism was limited. These people were nice to King Louis XIV so he was more inclined to like them which could equate to them having an influence over his ruling and decisions. The way that royal authority was legitimated was that it was hereditary. Only the King's heir could acquire the power that he had over the state. The biggest factor that affected Saint Simon was that he was a part of King Louis XIV's court for many years. This means that he was personally there for and observed everything that he wrote about. He had a firsthand look at these experiences so his thoughts about what was happening comes directly from him. Saint Simon also included what absolutism was supposed to be on the religious side. A part of absolutism was that God had picked the monarch and that he had divine rule and say over everybody. His quote, "God had given him all that was necessary for him to be a good King, perhaps also to be a fairly great one" (Saint Simon, Absolutism Documents, p. 3) shows that

the citizens of the state understand that the King has a direct connection to God. They get that God and the King work together and that God made everything at that time possible.

The two major components of absolutism are the political side and the religious side. The political side dealing with the King having complete power over the state, and the religious side being that the King is divine and has a direct connection to God. Bishop Bossuet writes a lot on the religious side in his document. The factors that would influence him to do so would be that he is a Bishop and one of his primary concerns is God and religion in general. In his document, he shows a clear meaning of the religious side of absolutism by saying, "It is in this way that we have seen that the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself" (Bossuet, Absolutism Documents, p. 7). This quote shows that the people believe the King and God to be directly related. Bishop Bossuet shows throughout his document how absolutism is supposed to be on the religious side rather than the political side.

In the three documents written by Cardinal Richelieu, Saint Simon and Bishop Bossuet, the meaning of absolutism is made clear. Absolutism is the King having complete control over the state. There are no checks or balances in place to limit the King's power, so he has complete authority over all. That is not all there is to absolutism, as it was also believed that the King was divine and had a direct connection to God. Citizens believed that whatever the King did was God's work and all a part of his plan. Historians can easily use several different documents to define a word that is described in them. For the absolutism documents, all of the documents have similarities when it comes to explaining absolutism. Historians can take those similarities and put them together to create an accurate definition and meaning of absolutism. This can be said for any other word/belief in various other documents. When it comes to these documents specifically, these were useful, but many of them came from religious figures. It would've been interesting if there was something that a normal citizen wrote or someone who had power but lost it due to absolutism. This would let us see further into what different kinds of people were thinking about absolutism. The documents successfully explained what absolutism was and what it entailed.