The political and religious crises of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuri...

Absolutism Throughout the 16th and into the 17th centuries, most of the land comprising Europe was in turmoil as the various large nation-states battled for supremacy. The Hapsburgs had managed to gain control of almost all of the continental land from Germany and westward with the exception of France and some of Italy (Zmora). France, fighting for survival as well as some expansion, actively fought against the Hapsburgs for control over parts of Italy while England solidified its positions on their island and contributed unsteadily to the conflict. Russia grew its power under Ivan the Terrible to make it a threat to the east (Zmora). At the same time, religious control over the people was slipping as more and more of the populace learned to read and as the printing press made things such as translations of the Bible readily available. This caused individuals such as Martin Luther to question what he was taught by a Catholic Church that was suffering from internal schisms in their hierarchy. The political and religious crises of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with their many fears, wars, and rebellions, led philosophers and rulers to consider alternatives to what they considered the insecure and chaotic institutional structures of the day. One such alternative was Absolutism. Absolutism is a political structure in which the power of the monarch is so complete that there are not any other institutions that can interfere in their rulings (Kimmel). Where the powers of today's kings are limited by their legislatures and the kings of the 19th century were increasingly limited by their social elite, the kings in the 16th and 17th centuries enjoyed the kind of power depicted by the Red Queen in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland - capable of ordering the execution of an individual for no other reason than they decided that person should die. The major benefit of this system was that it enabled rulers to consolidate a

nation from a previously feudal system, building the region's strength and unifying its people (Kimmel). This also made it possible to unify the laws of the system, create a standing army and form organized bureaucracies (Zmora). Instead of constantly looking to the fallible and questioned church for answers, people were now directed to look to their kings or queens. To keep this system in place, the nobles depended entirely upon their monarch for their well-being, keeping them from interfering to any great degree in the ruler's intentions. This only became a problem when the kingdom ran out of money, which was often, and remained unable to pull from the wealth of their nobles for fear of causing a revolt (Kimmel). There were several European countries that have been classified as absolutist. These include France, Russia, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Prussio and England. These countries all embraced the absolutist philosophy because of the struggle they were undergoing to survive and dominate against their enemies. It was necessary for the decisions to be focused in the body of one person in order to make the quick changes that were needed to pull it all together. The Netherlands refused to acknowledge Charles V as their king and successfully defended against him until they were finally able to form their own political institution. Because of their experience under an absolutist ruler, their new government was formed specifically to keep a more representative government. Works Cited Kimmel, Michael S. Absolutism and its Discontents: State and Society in Seventeenth Century France and England. New Brunswick NJ: Transaction, 1988. Print. Zmora, Hillay. Monarchy, Aristocracy, and the State in Europe - 1300-1800. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.