

## Louis XIV (1624–1715)

As ruler of France for 72 years, Louis XIV had a tremendous impact on his nation's domestic institutions. Remembered for his probably apocryphal assertion, "I am the state," Louis oversaw an absolutist regime that was the envy of monarchs across the continent, many of whom sought to emulate the French king. His ambitions also sparked an almost continual series of wars beginning in the 1660s and lasting almost to his death in 1715. What policies did Louis XIV implement in order to strengthen the absolutist state? What were his major foreign policy goals?

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The child destined to raise French absolutism to its pinnacle was born in 1638 to parents who cared little for one another. Louis XIII and Anne of Austria had been wed largely out of diplomatic considerations and nurtured a mutual detestation for each other in the twenty-three years of marriage that preceded the birth of their son Louis. Since the mid-1620s, Louis XIII and his powerful chief minister Cardinal Richelieu had striven to lay the foundations for an absolutist Bourbon monarchy. The Cardinal's death in 1642 presaged the death of the king by only a year, and as Louis was only five years old, Anne ruled as regent with the assistance of yet another powerful cleric, Cardinal Mazarin. Though Mazarin assumed responsibility for the education of the future king, Louis was ill served by his tutors and matured with only a marginal familiarity with most subjects. Both contemporary and modern commentators have noted that the one area the otherwise lackadaisical Louis excelled in as a pupil was in his understanding of political power and how it was effectively exercised.

Louis' introduction to the trials of monarchy began in 1648 when the first of a series of aristocratic rebellions known as the *Fronde* broke out. The royal court's hurried efforts to escape from the forces mobilized by the resentful nobles who dominated the Paris *parlement* may have influenced the ten-year-old's later policies aimed at reducing the nobility to political impotence. Louis's opportunity to chart his own destiny came in 1661 with the death of

Cardinal Mazarin. The young king informed his court that henceforth he would act as his own chief minister. For the rest of his lengthy reign, he steadfastly adhered to this approach, rarely entrusting any official with significant authority. He was equally his own man in his personal life. As had been the case with his own parents, Louis' marriage in 1660 to Maria Theresa of Spain was the product of dynastic considerations. Though Louis grudgingly accepted the marriage for state reasons, neither he nor his wife, who bore him only one surviving child, held any affection for each other; the long-suffering Maria Theresa once complained that throughout her married life, she enjoyed only twenty days of happiness and she failed to specify which they were. For his part, Louis sought the comfort of mistresses, sometimes maintaining more than one at a time and eventually marrying the marquise de Maintenon after his wife's death.

Affairs of state clearly had priority over affairs of the heart, however, and Louis busied himself formulating and implementing those policies that would ensure his absolute authority as monarch. Much of the work of administrative centralization and modernization had begun as early as the reign of Henry IV and had been augmented during Louis XIII's monarchy, so there was a solid foundation on which to build. No doubt mindful of the quarrelsome nobles of the *Fronde*, Louis continued his predecessor's policies of reducing the power of the French nobility. The Estates General, the national assembly last convened in 1614, was not called during his reign and provincial estates were scrutinized closely to ensure that they offered no challenges to the ongoing centralization of power. Louis also authorized special tribunals to hear allegations against overly ambitious nobles and several death sentences resulted from the trials of the mid-1660s. The status conferred by nobility was eroded by selling titles of nobility to wealthy commoners, imposing new taxes on the aristocracy, and by excluding nobles from important government offices. Perhaps most famously, Louis sought to subjugate his nobility by compelling their attendance at the new court at Versailles, where construction on new buildings began in 1668. The royal court moved from the Louvre in Paris, with its troublesome

memories of the *Fronde*, to the new site at Versailles in 1682. Eventually, court life there was centered on highly formalized rituals and ceremonies calculated to emphasize the centrality and supremacy of the “Sun King,” as Louis now styled himself. What little residual influence nobles might have come only from their proximity to their king. As one fawning courtier was said to have remarked to Louis, “Sire, away from Your Majesty one is not only miserable but ridiculous.”

Any seventeenth-century monarch aspiring to absolute authority had also to be concerned about the challenges posed by religious authority and those who dissented from the state religion. Though a Catholic monarch, Louis was a staunch defender of Gallicanism, which held that the French monarch controlled the French church and in the 1680s, he saw to it that his bishops affirmed the French monarch’s temporal authority in the face of papal challenges. Later wars against Protestant coalitions led Louis to seek a compromise with the Roman church over this contentious issue. Louis proved less willing to compromise over the issue of dissenting religious creeds, in part because absolute authority was more easily wielded in a nation in which there was religious uniformity. Accordingly, Louis felt compelled to move against the Jansenists, a Catholic movement that advocated a doctrine suspiciously similar to the Calvinist concept of predestination. Jansenism also preached an ascetic lifestyle, which the “Sun King” saw as an indirect rebuke of his personal behavior. Near the end of his reign, he succeeded in winning a papal bull against the increasingly influential creed. His greater effort, however, was directed against the French Protestants, or Huguenots. Though their religious and civil freedoms had been guaranteed by Henry IV’s Edict of Nantes (1598), the Huguenots were a continual reminder to Louis that not all his subject shared his religion, a reality that he found increasingly unpalatable. As of the 1670s, Louis implemented policies calculated to make life in France intolerable for the Huguenots; in 1685, these persecutions culminated with the

revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Several thousand Huguenots fled abroad, taking with them some of the nation's best entrepreneurial, professional and intellectual talent.

Beyond perfecting the absolutist state, Louis focused on strengthening the French nation. This was to be accomplished in part through the implementation of mercantilist policies aimed at building foreign trade, increasing exports and securing state revenues adequate to fund Louis's expansionist ambitions. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, whom Louis entrusted with greater autonomy than any other royal official, oversaw these economic initiatives. Colbert's efforts to organize and invigorate the French economy were ambitious, though they never produced the desired long-term results. Colbert's other major accomplishment was the organization of a modern French navy, part of a broader plan to transform France into the dominant continental power. To create this new military machine, Louis turned to Michel de Tellier, the Marquis de Louvois, who reorganized the French army along modern lines and increased its size tenfold within a decade. Marshal Vauban, a great military engineer, provided additional expertise, designing the fortifications that were so central to seventeenth century warfare. These individuals and others contributed to the creation of a French war machine that was crucial to Louis's territorial and dynastic ambitions.

Earlier in the seventeenth century, much of Europe had feared the emergence of a "universal monarchy," a dynasty dominating the continent through dynastic marriages, diplomacy and military strength, under the Austrian Habsburgs. While the outcome of the Thirty Years' War had ended that possibility, Louis XIV's France emerged to pose a similar threat toward the century's end. Indeed, Louis' ambitions lay behind the long series of conflicts that began in the mid-1660s and ended only in 1713.

Louis' initial objectives were the Spanish Netherlands and Franche-Comté, which claimed by right of the law of devolution. That entitled him, he claimed, as the husband of Maria Theresa, to these territories possessed by the recently deceased Philip IV of Spain. The

tortured legality of the claim only highlighted Louis's baldly expansionist ambitions. Following a French invasion of the two Spanish territories in May 1667, the Dutch quickly ended their war with England and sought instead an alliance in view of probable future French aggression. Faced with opposition from the Netherlands, England and Sweden, Louis returned the Franche-Comté to Spain but retained some smaller Flemish lands. Angered by the diplomatic offensive organized by the Netherlands, Louis next planned a war against the Dutch, whom he derided as "a nation of fishwives and merchants." As preliminary to the Dutch War of 1672-79, Louis arranged for the nonintervention of nearby powers, buying off England's Charles II with subsidies and winning his ostensible military support. The success of French armies in their campaign in the United Provinces, however, awakened fears in the major powers about Louis's burgeoning ambitions. Fearing an anti-French coalition, Louis ended the war, giving up his Dutch conquests while gaining Franche-Comté.

Arguably at the height of his power in the 1680s, Louis cut an imposing figure among European monarchs. His contemporary Saint-Simon most effectively captured the essence of the man, replete as it was with inconsistencies. The Sun King was, according to the French writer, "the very figure of a hero, so impregnated with a natural but imposing majesty that it appeared even in his most insignificant gestures and movements." But unchallenged authority and the sycophancy of courtiers had also had an effect. "Louis XIV's vanity was without limit or restraint," Saint-Simon observed. This enormous royal vanity was fed by "the insipid and sickening compliments that were continually offered him in person and which he swallowed with unfailing relish." Such an ego was unlikely to be satisfied with limited conquests, and by the late 1680s Louis' obvious territorial ambitions had provoked the creation of the League of Augsburg, an anti-French alliance. The war of the same name broke out in 1688 and grew to international dimensions, pulling in England and taking conflict to distant continents. A general

weariness brought peace in 1697, but all involved understood that it was more correctly only a temporary truce at best.

Indeed, Louis' grandest ambition provoked an even greater conflict in 1701 when he sought to put forth his grandson Philip of Anjou as a candidate for the Spanish throne, soon to be vacated by the ailing Charles II. Fears of a Bourbon "universal monarchy" were revived and another anti-Bourbon coalition came together as the War of the Spanish Succession swept parts of Europe, the Americas and even Asia. Long years of warfare ultimately exhausted the combatants and the Treaty of Utrecht ended the last of Louis' wars of expansion. Though Philip was accepted as king of Spain, that throne was not to be merged with the Bourbon throne of France. Both France and Spain ceded numerous distant territories.

Louis XIV's legacy is mixed. France emerged from the War of the Spanish Succession with its extended frontiers largely intact and with its absolutist regime in place. Fifty years of intermittent warfare had brought domestic strains, however. War was a costly endeavor and Louis' subjects as well as his treasury were weakened by the decades of conflict. Louis' most fateful legacies to his five-year-old grandson, who succeeded him in 1715, were the economic and social costs of his conquests. Though Louis was said to have advised his heir to eschew grandiose palaces and war, the damage was done. As monarch, Louis XV was faced with massive financial problems and eroding absolutist structure, both of which laid the groundwork for the French Revolution of 1789.

### **Suggested Readings**

Burke, Peter. *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1992).

Wolf, J.B. *Louis XIV* (1968).