

# Louis, XIV

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*Encyclopedia of World Biography*, December 12, 1998

**Born:** September 16, 1638 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

**Died:** September 01, 1715 in Versailles, France

**Nationality:** French

**Occupation:** King

Louis XIV (1638-1715) was king of France from 1643 to 1715. He brought the French monarchy to its peak of absolute power and made France the dominant power in Europe. His reign is also associated with the greatest age of French culture and art.

After the chaos of the Wars of Religion, the French monarchy had been reestablished by Louis XIV's grandfather, Henry IV. Successive rulers and ministers (Henry himself, Louis XIII, Cardinal Richelieu, and Cardinal Mazarin) had done all in their power to make the king absolute ruler within France and to make France, instead of the Hapsburg coalition of Spain and the empire, the dominant power in Europe. By the time Louis assumed personal control, the groundwork for final success had been laid. It was Louis who brought the work to completion, enforcing his will over France and Europe to an unprecedented extent and establishing the administrative machinery that made France a modern state.

Louis was born at Saint-Germain on Sept. 5, 1638, the son of Louis XIII and his wife, Anne of Austria. His birth was greeted with immense national rejoicing, and he was hailed as *le Dieudonné*, "the God-given." On May 14, 1643, his father died, and Louis became king. As he was only 4, the country was governed by his mother as regent; this meant, in effect, by Cardinal Mazarin, with whom Anne was in love. The successive rebellions known as the Fronde failed to dislodge Mazarin, although they left the boy king with a lifelong horror of rebellion and a resentment of Paris, where the uprising had started. Mazarin remained in power for the rest of his life, and only when he died, on March 9, 1661, did Louis astonish the court by announcing that henceforward he would direct his government himself. He meant what he said. The government remained under Louis's personal control for the next 54 years.

## His Character

Unlike his father, Louis enjoyed excellent health almost all his life. His appetites for food, hunting, and sex were enormous, and he had a passion, unusual in those days, for fresh air and walking. Though not tall, he was extremely impressive in appearance due to his great dignity and royal presence, particularly as he grew older and left his youthful exuberance behind. While he frequently displayed gross and even brutal selfishness, he was courteous, considerate, and good-natured, and he showed great loyalty to his friends and his servants. His concept of his royal position was undoubtedly arrogant, but he was always conscious of his duty as king and sincerely believed that he was devoting himself to the wellbeing of his subjects. He detested inefficiency, corruption, and the abuse of privilege and stamped them out wherever he encountered them. However, his own passion for personal glory led him to drag France into a series of wars, ultimately at appalling cost to his people. On his deathbed he confessed to having loved war too much, but there are no signs that he really understood what his passion had cost his country.

Louis began with a team of excellent ministers inherited from Mazarin, but only now put to full and proper use. The most important were Michel Le Tellier, in charge of military affairs (assisted, and ultimately succeeded, by his son the Marquis de Louvois), and Jean Baptiste Colbert, whose immense sphere included the navy, the royal household, religion, cultural activities, colonies, and the whole direction of the economy. Nicolas Fouquet, who as superintendent of finances had been Mazarin's most important lieutenant, was regarded by Louis as dangerous. He was charged with peculation, found guilty, and imprisoned; Louis intervened to change his sentence from banishment to imprisonment for life. This uncharacteristic act of injustice reveals Louis's fear of another Fronde.

There was no first minister. Louis had resolved to allow no minister primacy after Mazarin, and in fact he preferred to keep his ministers divided into mutually hostile groups. He himself supported his ministers without reservation if he thought them right and never yielded to pressure to get rid of them; but he never allowed them to become presumptuous. Always suspicious of any subject who might grow too powerful, he would not allow any great nobles, even his own brother, onto the council.

## **Military Activities**

For the next 11 years Louis's primary commitment was the restoration of the French economy to health and vigor after the neglect of Mazarin's time. In 1672, however, exasperated at his failure to destroy the economic supremacy of the Dutch, he invaded their country, assisted by England whose king, Charles II, was on his payroll. Instead of the easy triumph he had expected, he found himself faced by dogged Dutch resistance, resolutely led by William of Orange and supported by a growing number of allies. The war lasted for 6 years and ended with Dutch economic ascendancy as strong as ever. France had acquired Franche-Comté from Spain and useful gains in the Spanish Netherlands, but at the cost of permanently abandoning the economic and fiscal progress made by Colbert down to 1672. For the rest of the reign the economic progress of France was first halted and then reversed.

Louis then pursued a policy of deliberate, though limited, aggression, bullying his neighbors and encroaching on their territory. This aroused increasing fear and resentment in Europe, and Louis was finally confronted by a coalition which plunged him into the War of the League of Augsburg. This war, which lasted from 1689 till 1697, left France in possession of Strasbourg, which Louis had seized in 1681, but exhausted and in no shape to meet the still greater war that was about to break out.

This was the War of the Spanish Succession. The last Spanish Hapsburg, Charles II, was certain to die without children and would leave a vast inheritance. To avoid conflict, the two claimants to the inheritance, Louis and the Emperor, had already reached an agreement to divide this inheritance between them. Just before his death, however, Charles offered to make Louis's grandson Philip his sole heir, with the stipulation that if Louis refused, the inheritance was to pass undivided to the Emperor's younger son. Louis considered that this offer made his previous agreement invalid and against the advice of his council accepted it. This inevitably meant war with Austria, but it was owing to Louis's greed and tactlessness that Britain and Holland were brought in as well. Once again France found itself facing an immense coalition, and this time it had only begun to recover from the last war.

This final war lasted from 1701 to 1714 and did France incalculable damage. Thanks to the courage and determination of Louis and his people, the fighting did not end in disaster. Philip retained the Spanish throne, and the only losses of territory France suffered were overseas. But the country had suffered years of appalling hardship; the population was sharply reduced by famine; industry and commerce were at a standstill; and the peasantry was crushed by an unprecedented load of taxation. The King's death the next year was greeted with a relief almost as great as the joy that had welcomed his birth.

## **Domestic Policy**

Louis's religion was a rather unintelligent and bigoted Catholicism. At the same time he regarded himself as God's deputy in France and would allow no challenge to his authority, from the Pope or anyone else. As a result, he was involved in a series of unedifying quarrels with successive popes, which dragged on for years of futile stalemate and gave rise to the probably baseless suspicion that he might be contemplating a break with the Church on the lines of Henry VIII.

To reassure Catholic opinion as to his orthodoxy, Louis kept up a steady pressure against the Protestants in France. Finally, in 1685, he revoked the Edict of Nantes (by which Protestants had been granted toleration in 1598), forbade the practice of the Calvinist religion in France (he was less concerned about Lutherans), expelled

all Calvinist pastors, and forbade lay Protestants, under savage penalties, to emigrate. There was great indignation abroad, even in Catholic circles, but in the intolerant atmosphere then prevailing in Catholic France, Louis's action was very popular.

At intervals throughout his reign Louis mounted a campaign against the Jansenists, a rigorist sect within the Catholic Church. He became so bitter toward them that he ended by reversing his antipapal policy in the hope of enlisting the Pope's support. This was forthcoming, and the Jansenists were condemned by the bull *Unigenitus* in 1713; but this interference outraged French national feeling, and the Jansenist cause gained considerably in popularity as a result.

Neither the government of France by a group of overlapping councils nor the administration of the provinces by intendants (royal agents equipped with full powers in every field) originated with Louis, but he took over these systems, making them more comprehensive and efficient, and extending the system of intendants for the first time to the whole of France. Government became much more efficient in his day, but much of this efficiency was lost after his death. It also became more bureaucratic, and this change was permanent. Increasingly, the affairs of provincial France came to be decided by the council, and local initiative was discouraged. Remembering the Fronde, Louis no doubt believed that anything was better than the semianarchy of the old days; but it can be argued that he carried the spirit of regimentation a good deal too far. Governmental overcentralization is a source of endless friction in France to this day. Louis neither initiated this centralization nor carried it to its final completion, but he certainly accelerated it.

The basic factor in the Fronde had been noble anarchy, and Louis was determined to keep the nobility in line. All through his reign he did his best to undercut the independent position of the nobles and turn them, particularly the richer and more powerful of them, into courtiers. In this he was largely successful. Versailles, which became the seat of government in 1682 (although the palace was still far from completion), became the magnet to which the nobility were attracted. No nobleman could hope for appointment to any important position without paying assiduous court at Versailles. The cult of monarchy, which Louis deliberately strengthened to the utmost of his ability, made them in any case flock to Versailles of their own free will; exclusion from the charmed circle of the court came to be regarded as social death. Louis has been criticized by some historians for turning the French nobility into gilded parasites, but it may be doubted, as the Fronde demonstrated, whether they were fit to play any more constructive role. Although he preferred to select his generals, his bishops, and (contrary to legend) his ministers from the nobility, Louis did not make the mistake of his successors and exclude the Third Estate from all the best positions. He made some of his appointments from the bourgeoisie.

## **Culture and Art**

The reign of Louis XIV is often equated with the great age of French culture. In fact, this age began under Richelieu and was clearly over some years before Louis died. Nor did he do very much to help it. In the 1660s he indulged in some patronage of writers, but his benevolence was capriciously bestowed, frequently on secondrate men, and it dried up almost entirely when economic conditions worsened after 1672. Nevertheless, Jean Racine and Molière were substantially helped by Louis, and it was largely thanks to the king that Molière's plays were performed in spite of conservative opposition. The King's enthusiasm for building (Versailles, Marly, Trianon, and others), while costing the country more than it could afford, certainly furnished artists and architects with valuable commissions, and the King's love of musical spectacles offered a golden opportunity for composers. The flowering of painting, architecture, music, and landscape gardening in France at this time must be largely credited to Louis.

## **Personal Life**

Louis was married to Maria Theresa, daughter of Philip IV of Spain, as part of the settlement by which Mazarin ended the Spanish war. He married her reluctantly (he was in love with Mazarin's own niece at the time) and made no pretense of being faithful to her; but he was fond of her after his fashion, and at her death observed, "This is the first sorrow she has ever caused me." Overcharged with sexual energy practically all his life, he had a number of

mistresses, whose jealousy of each other was a principal topic of court gossip. By the two bestknown, Louise de La Vallière and Athénaïs de Montespan, he had a number of illegitimate children, of whom he was very fond; his fatherly attempts to secure for them, after his death, a position above their station caused a good deal of trouble. His attention was finally caught by Françoise Scarron, who had become the governess of these children; he made her Marquise de Maintenon and settled down in domestic respectability with her. In later life he became very puritanical, and Madame de Maintenon has sometimes been blamed for this, but it seems likely that the change was inherent in Louis's own nature.

Louis did not allow the pursuit of pleasure to interfere with his professional duties; all his life he worked indefatigably at the business of government. He also fancied himself, without justification, as a soldier and derived much pleasure from conducting lengthy sieges of towns that were bound to surrender in any case and giving his generals unsought and unwelcome advice as to how to conduct their campaigns.

The King's last years were darkened not only by the successive disasters of the war and the desperate condition of his people but by a series of personal tragedies. In quick succession his son, the two grandsons still with him, and one of his two infant great-grandsons died. With them died his grandson's wife, the young Duchess of Burgundy, whom Louis adored. Only his other greatgrandson survived, to succeed him at the age of 5 as Louis XV. When Louis died, France had long been sick of him, and his funeral procession was insulted in the streets.

History can see him in a fairer perspective. He was not "Louis the Great," as he was sycophantically hailed in his lifetime; he was a man of average intelligence and human failings who committed many blunders and several crimes. Nevertheless, he did his duty as he saw it, with a quite exceptional conscientiousness and devotion. He saw himself as responsible to God for the well-being of his people, and though his interpretation of this responsibility was often strange, it was always sincere. More than any other man except Richelieu, he was the architect of the French national state. The greatness which France achieved in his lifetime was largely his doing.

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## Further Readings

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- There is no definitive biography of Louis. John B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (1968), is in general satisfactory for Louis himself but leaves gaps in its coverage of the reign. A valuable recent work, with emphasis on France rather than on Louis and with an immensely useful picture of the economic and social situation in his reign, is Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, translated by Anne Carter (1970). W. H. Lewis, *Louis XIV: An Informal Portrait* (1959), does not purport to give the whole picture but brings Louis to life as a man and is written in a delightful style. For background reading on the period, Lewis's *The Splendid Century* (1953) presents a series of fascinating insights into the France of Louis XIV, as well as filling out the picture of Louis himself. A more complete presentation of the entire period is in Geoffrey Treasure, *Seventeenth-century France* (1966).

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