



LOUIS XIV: "THE SUN KING"

1638	Born
1643	Succeeded to throne under a regency
1661	Beginning of Louis's personal government
1667-1668	War of Devolution
1689-1697	War of the Grand Alliance
1701-1714	War of the Spanish Succession
1715	Died

In 1661, on the death of the regent Cardinal Mazarin, the personal reign of Louis XIV of France began. Though he was just twenty-three years old, Louis had already been nominally the king for almost twenty years. And he was to rule for more than another half century, through one of the longest, most brilliant, most eventful, and most controversial reigns in the history of modern Europe.

It had been the aim of Cardinal Richelieu, the great first minister of Louis's father, "to make the king supreme in France and France supreme in Europe." And to an extent Cardinal Richelieu, as well as his successor, Cardinal Mazarin, had been successful. France was the richest and most populous nation in Europe. Its army had surpassed that of Spain as Europe's most formidable military machine. And the two wily cardinals had gained for France a diplomatic ascendancy to match her military might. It remained for Louis XIV to complete their work. In the process he became the archetype of divine-right monarchical absolutism, justifying later historians' labeling of the age that he dominated as the Age of Absolutism. Louis took the sun as his emblem, as he himself wrote, for its nobility, its uniqueness, and "the light that it imparts to the other heavenly bodies," and as "a most vivid and a most beautiful image for a great monarch."¹

¹Louis XIV, . . . *Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, tr. Paul Sonnino (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 103-4.

From the beginning of his personal rule, Louis XIV intended to make the other states of Europe—"the other heavenly bodies"—swing in the orbit of his sun. In 1667 he began the so-called War of Devolution to claim the disputed provinces of the Spanish Netherlands for his Spanish wife. He fought a series of wars with Spain and the Empire, the Dutch, and the English, culminating in the great European conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), to set his grandson on the throne of Spain and create a Bourbon "empire" to dominate the Continent. In the course of these wars, he gained the hostility of most of Europe and was finally brought to terms in 1715 at the Peace of Utrecht. Even though Louis was reported on his deathbed to have said, "I have loved war too much," he had, nevertheless, come closer to making France supreme in Europe than had any ruler before Napoleon.

Louis XIV disliked Paris. From early in his reign, he made increasing use of the royal estate of Versailles, some ten miles out of the city, as his principal residence and the locus of the court. Versailles grew in size and magnificence to become the most visible symbol of and the most enduring monument to Louis's absolutism. An English visitor, Lord Montague, sniffily called it "something the foolishest in the world," and thought Louis himself "the vainest creature alive."² But Versailles was far from foolish and, though vain indeed, Louis XIV was a consummate realist. Versailles was not simply a symbol of his absolutism; it was a working part of it. The function of Versailles was to help make the king supreme in France.

Royal supremacy was, in Louis's reign as before, most clearly threatened by the power and independence of the great nobility. On the very eve of Louis's personal rule, he, his mother, Mazarin, and the court had been faced with an uprising, called the Fronde, led by the great Princes of the Blood. Though it failed, Louis never forgot the Fronde. It became his deliberate policy to keep the great nobility at Versailles, separated from their provincial estates and the roots of their political power, and to redirect their interests and their energies. It may be argued that the elaborate court behavior that developed at Versailles, with its perpetual spectacles and entertainments, its endless adulteries and affairs, its incredible tedium and banality—and its perpetual attendance upon the king—was really a device to neutralize the power of the great nobility while the king governed with the aid of a succession of ministers, appointed by him, answerable to him alone, and capable of being dismissed by him without question. It has

been suggested by more than one scholar that Louis XIV was the archetype not only of the absolute monarch but of the "royal bureaucrat." The court life at Versailles was surely the most glittering side-show ever staged. But it was a show that fascinated the very people who played their parts in it; and it has fascinated—and distracted—observers ever since.

²Quoted in John C. Rule, "Louis XIV, Roi-Bureaucrate," in *Louis XIV and the Craft of Kingship*, ed. John C. Rule (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), p. 42.

The Memoirs

LOUIS, DUC DE SAINT-SIMON

The sources for the reign of Louis XIV are an embarrassment of riches—an enormous volume of public documents and official records, reports, and inventories and such a mass of royal correspondence that it still has not been completely edited. Many of the figures of the court wrote letters as prodigiously as the king, and almost as many wrote memoirs as well. Of these the most important are the memoirs of Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon.

Saint-Simon was born at Versailles in 1675 and lived there for the next thirty years. Through much of that time—and throughout the rest of his long life—he kept his memoirs with a compulsive passion. In one edition, they run to forty-three volumes, and a complete text has yet to be published. Saint-Simon's memoirs are important not only for their completeness but also for the perspective they give on the age of Louis XIV. Saint-Simon fancied himself a chronicler in the tradition of Froissart or Joinville and saw his literary labor as preparing him in the knowledge of "great affairs" "for some high office." But preferment never came. Saint-Simon was never more than a minor figure of the court, moving on the fringes of the affairs that his memoirs so carefully record.

Saint-Simon blamed the king for his neglect—as he quite properly should have, for nothing happened at Versailles without the wish of the king, and the king simply disliked Saint-Simon. Saint-Simon also accused the king of demeaning the old aristocracy to which Saint-Simon so self-consciously belonged. This complaint is the nagging, insistent theme that runs like a leitmotif through the memoirs. Saint-Simon believed that Louis deliberately preferred "the vile bourgeoisie" to the aristocracy for high office and great affairs. Although the claim is somewhat exaggerated, it is indeed true that Louis preferred the lesser nobility for his bureaucrats because they had no separate power base beyond the king's preferment.

But while Saint-Simon hated his king, he was also fascinated by him, for, like it or not, Louis was the center of the world in which Saint-Simon lived. He set the fashion in dress, language, manners, and morals. Even his afflictions inspired instant emulation: after the king underwent a painful operation, no fewer than thirty courtiers presented themselves to the court surgeon and demanded that the same operation be performed on them.

Saint-Simon hated Versailles nearly as much as he hated the king, and he described it with the same malicious familiarity—its size, its vulgarity, its inconvenience and faulty planning. But he also described the stifling, debasing, desperate style of life that it dictated for the court nobility so grandly imprisoned there.

One modern scholar has called Saint-Simon "at once unreliable and indispensable."³ We can correct his unreliability, however, by consulting other sources, and he remains indispensable for the picture he gives us of the "other side" of royal absolutism.

We turn now to *Saint-Simon at Versailles* for Saint-Simon's appraisal of Louis XIV.

He was a prince in whom no one would deny good and even great qualities, but he had many others that were petty or downright bad, and of these it was impossible to determine which were natural and which acquired. Nothing is harder to find than a well-informed writer, none rarer than those who knew him personally, yet are sufficiently unbiased to speak of him without hatred or flattery, and to set down the bare truth for good or ill.

This is not the place to tell of his early childhood. He was king almost from birth, but was deliberately repressed by a mother who loved to govern, and still more so by a wicked and self-interested minister, who risked the State a thousand times for his own aggrandisement. . . .

. . . After Mazarin's death, he had enough intelligence to realize his deliverance, but not enough vigour to release himself. Indeed, that event was one of the finest moments of his life, for it taught him an unshakable principle namely, to banish all prime ministers and ecclesiastics from his councils. Another ideal, adopted at that time, he could never sustain because in the practice it constantly eluded him. This was to govern alone. It was the quality upon which he most prided himself and for which he received most praise and flattery. In fact, it was what he was least able to do. . . .

. . . The King's intelligence was below the average, but was very capable of improvement. He loved glory; he desired peace and good government. He was born prudent, temperate, secretive, master of his emotions and his tongue—can it be believed?—he was born good and just. God endowed him with all the makings of a good and perhaps even of a fairly great king. All the evil in him came from without. His early training was so dissolute that no one dared to go

³Peter Gay, in the introductory note to Louis, Duc de Saint-Simon, *Versailles, the Court, and Louis XIV*, ed. and trans. Lucy Norton (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. vii.

near his apartments, and he would sometimes speak bitterly of those days and tell how they found him one night fallen into the fountain at the Palais Royal. He became very dependent on others, for they had scarcely taught him to read and write and he remained so ignorant that he learned nothing of historical events nor the facts about fortunes, careers, rank, or laws. This lack caused him sometimes, even in public to make many gross blunders.

You might imagine that as king he would have loved the old nobility and would not have cared to see it brought down to the level of other classes. Nothing was further from the truth. His aversion to noble sentiments and his partiality for his Ministers, who, to elevate themselves, hated and disparaged all who were what they themselves were not, nor ever could be, caused him to feel a similar antipathy for noble birth. He feared it as much as he feared intelligence, and if he found these two qualities united in one person, that man was finished.

His ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers learned soon after he became their master that glory, to him, was a foible rather than an ambition. They therefore flattered him to the top of his bent, and in so doing, spoiled him. Praise, or better, adulation, pleased him so much that the most fulsome was welcome and the most servile even more delectable. . . .

Flattery fed the desire for military glory that sometimes tore him from his loves, which was how Louvois⁴ so easily involved him in major wars and persuaded him that he was a better leader and strategist than any of his generals, a theory which those officers fostered in order to please him. All their praise he took with admirable complacency, and truly believed that he was what they said. Hence his liking for reviews, which he carried to such lengths that he was known abroad as the "Review King," and his preference for sieges, where he could make cheap displays of courage, be forcibly restrained, and show his ability to endure fatigue and lack of sleep. Indeed, so robust was his constitution that he never appeared to suffer from hunger, thirst, heat, cold, rain, or any other kind of weather. He greatly enjoyed the sensation of being admired, as he rode along the lines, for his fine presence and princely bearing, his horsemanship, and other attainments. It was chiefly with talk of campaigns and soldiers that he entertained his mistresses and sometimes his courtiers. He talked well and much to the point; no man of fashion could tell a tale or set a scene better than he, yet his most casual speeches were never lacking in natural and conscious majesty.

⁴Michel Le Tellier, Marquis de Louvois (1641–1691), Louis's great minister of war.—Ed.

He had a natural bent towards details and delighted in busying himself with such petty matters as the uniforms, equipment, drill, and discipline of his troops. He concerned himself no less with his buildings, the conduct of his household, and his living expenses, for he always imagined that he had something to teach the experts, and they received instruction from him as though they were novices in arts which they already knew by heart. To the King, such waste of time appeared to deserve his constant attention, which enchanted his ministers, for with a little tact and experience they learned to sway him, making their own desires seem his, and managing great affairs of State in their own way and, all too often, in their own interests, whilst they congratulated themselves and watched him drowning amidst trivialities. . . .

From such alien and pernicious sources he acquired a pride so colossal that, truly, had not God implanted in his heart the fear of the devil, even in his worst excesses, he would literally have allowed himself to be worshipped. What is more, he would have found worshippers; witness the extravagant monuments that have been set up to him, for example the statue in the Place des Victoires, with its pagan dedication, a ceremony at which I myself was present, and in which he took such huge delight. From this false pride stemmed all that ruined him. We have already seen some of its ill-effects; others are yet to come. . . .

The Court was yet another device to sustain the King's policy of despotism. Many things combined to remove it from Paris and keep it permanently in the country. The disorders of the minority⁵ had been staged mainly in that city and for that reason the King had taken a great aversion to it and had become convinced that it was dangerous to live there. . . .

The awkward situation of his mistresses and the dangers involved in conducting such scandalous affairs in a busy capital, crowded with people of every kind of mentality, played no small part in deciding him to leave, for he was embarrassed by the crowds whenever he went in or out or appeared upon the streets. Other reasons for departure were his love of hunting and the open air, so much more easily indulged in the country than in Paris, which is far from forests and ill-supplied with pleasant walks, and his delight in building, a later and ever-increasing passion, which could not be enjoyed in the town, where he was continually in the public eye. Finally, he conceived the idea that he would be all the more venerated by the multitude if he lived retired and were no longer seen every day. . . .

⁵A reference to the Fronde.—Ed.

The liaison with Mme de La Vallière,⁶ which was at first kept secret, occasioned many excursions to Versailles, then a little pasteboard house erected by Louis XIII when he, and still more his courtiers, grew tired of sleeping in a low tavern and old windmill, after long, exhausting hunts in the forest of Saint-Léger and still further afield. . . .

Gradually, those quiet country excursions of Louis XIV gave rise to a vast building project, designed to house a large Court more comfortable than in crowded lodgings at Saint-Germain, and he removed his residence there altogether, shortly before the death of the Queen.⁷ Immense numbers of suites were made, and one paid one's court by asking for one, whereas, at Saint-Germain, almost everyone had the inconvenience of lodging in the town, and those few who did sleep at the château were amazingly cramped.

The frequent entertainments, the private drives to Versailles, and the royal journeys, provided the King with a means of distinguishing or mortifying his courtiers by naming those who were or were not to accompany him, and thus keeping everyone eager and anxious to please him. He fully realized that the substantial gifts which he had to offer were too few to have any continuous effect, and he substituted imaginary favours that appealed to men's jealous natures, small distinctions which he was able, with extraordinary ingenuity, to grant or withhold every day and almost every hour. The hopes that courtiers built upon such flimsy favours and the importance which they attached to them were really unbelievable, and no one was ever more artful than the King in devising fresh occasions for them. . . .

. . . He took it as an offence if distinguished people did not make the Court their home, or if others came but seldom. And to come never, or scarcely ever, meant certain disgrace. When a favour was asked for such a one, the King would answer haughtily, "I do not know him at all," or, "That is a man whom I never see," and in such cases his word was irrevocable. . . .

There never lived a man more naturally polite, nor of such exquisite discrimination with so fine a sense of degree, for he made distinctions for age, merit and rank, and showed them in his answers when these went further than the usual "*Je verrai*,"⁸ and in his general bearing. . . . He was sometimes gay, but never undignified, and never, at any time, did he do anything improper or indiscreet. His smallest gesture, his walk, bearing, and expression were all perfectly becoming, modest, noble, and stately, yet at the same time he always seemed

perfectly natural. Added to which he had the immense advantage of a good figure, which made him graceful and relaxed.

On state occasions such as audiences with ambassadors and other ceremonies, he looked so imposing that one had to become used to the sight of him if one were not to be exposed to the humiliation of breaking down or coming to a full stop. At such times, his answers were always short and to the point and he rarely omitted some civility, or a compliment if the speech deserved one. The awe inspired by his appearance was such that wherever he might be, his presence imposed silence and a degree of fear. . . .

In everything he loved magnificently lavish abundance. He made it a principle from motives of policy and encouraged the Court to imitate him; indeed, one way to win favour was to spend extravagantly on the table, clothes, carriages, building, and gambling. For magnificence in such things he would speak to people. The truth is that he used this means deliberately and successfully to impoverish everyone, for he made luxury meritorious in all men, and in some a necessity, so that gradually the entire Court became dependent upon his favours for their very subsistence. What is more, he fed his own pride by surrounding himself with an entourage so universally magnificent that confusion reigned and all natural distinctions were obliterated.

Once it had begun this rottenness grew into that cancer which gnaws at the lives of all Frenchmen. It started, indeed, at the Court but soon spread to Paris, the provinces, and the army where generals are now assessed according to the tables that they keep and the splendour of their establishments. It so eats into private fortunes that those in a position to steal are often forced to do so in order to keep up their spending. This cancer, kept alive by confusion of ranks, pride, even by good manners, and encouraged by the folly of the great, is having incalculable results that will lead to nothing less than ruin and general disaster.

No other King has ever approached him for the number and quality of his stables and hunting establishments. Who could count his buildings? Who not deplore their ostentation, whimsicality and bad taste? . . . At Versailles he set up one building after another according to no scheme of planning. Beauty and ugliness, spaciousness and meanness were roughly tacked together. The royal apartments at Versailles are beyond everything inconvenient, with back-views over the privies and other dark and evil-smelling places. Truly, the magnificence of the gardens is amazing, but to make the smallest use of them is disagreeable, and they are in equally bad taste. . . .

But one might be for ever pointing out the monstrous defects of that huge and immensely costly palace, and of its outhouses that cost

⁶One of Louis's early mistresses.—Ed.

⁷The Spanish princess Maria Theresa died in 1683.—Ed.

⁸"We shall see."—Ed.

even more, its orangery, kitchen gardens, kennels, larger and smaller stables, all vast, all prodigiously expensive. Indeed, a whole city has sprung up where before was only a poor tavern, a windmill and a little pasteboard château, which Louis XIII built so as to avoid lying on straw.

The Versailles of Louis XIV, that masterpiece wherein countless sums of money were thrown away merely in alterations to ponds and thickets, was so ruinously costly, so monstrously ill-planned, that it was never finished. Amid so many state rooms, opening one out of another, it has no theatre, no banqueting-hall, no ballroom, and both behind and before much still remains undone. The avenues and plantations, all laid out artificially, cannot mature and the coverts must continually be restocked with game. As for the drains, many miles of them still have to be made, and even the walls, whose vast contours enclose a small province of the gloomiest, most wretched countryside, have never been completely finished. . . . No matter what was done, the great fountains dried up (as they still do at times) in spite of the oceans of reservoirs that cost so many millions to engineer in that sandy or boggy soil.

A Rationalist View of Absolutism

VOLTAIRE

Voltaire (1694–1778) was the preeminent figure of what modern scholars call the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. He was also one of the greatest and most influential of early modern historians. Among Voltaire's most important books was *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751), which he conceived as one of the earliest instances of what we would nowadays call "cultural history." His intention in writing this book was to illuminate the great achievements of Louis's "age"—as the title announces—rather than the king himself. Indeed *The Age of Louis XIV* is usually published as part of Voltaire's later *Essay on the Morals and the Spirit of Nations* (1756). But Louis the king was as impossible for Voltaire to ignore as he had been for Saint-Simon, and as he has been for historians of his age ever since.

Voltaire knew and cultivated many of the survivors of Louis's court, some of them important figures. He collected their letters and memoirs and those of other contemporaries—in short, he had much

of the equipment of modern historical research. Although Voltaire also had strong and independent views on the past, as on most other subjects, his portrait of Louis XIV is surprisingly balanced. He does not evade Louis's faults, nor does he exploit them. Indeed, Voltaire seems rather to have admired the king, both as a person and as a ruler. We must remember, however, that, though a rationalist, Voltaire was not a revolutionary. He thought highly of what has come to be called Enlightened Despotism. At the time he completed *The Age of Louis XIV*, for example, Voltaire was in Berlin as the guest, tutor, and "friend in residence" of Frederick the Great of Prussia.

We must remember, too, that Voltaire was a French patriot who shared Louis XIV's love for the glory of France. We do not even find him denouncing Louis's militarism, so often the target of more recent criticism. Voltaire was especially mindful of the unprecedented domination of French culture in Europe during the age of Louis XIV and of the extent to which Louis himself exemplified that culture. Voltaire admired Louis's sound domestic economy and the diligence with which he worked at his craft of kingship, and he had considerable sympathy for his trials as a person. The picture that Voltaire gives us of Louis XIV is altogether a very different one from that created by Saint-Simon.

Louis XIV invested his court, as he did all his reign, with such brilliancy and magnificence, that the slightest details of his private life appear to interest posterity, just as they were the objects of curiosity to every court in Europe and indeed to all his contemporaries. The splendour of his rule was reflected in his most trivial actions. People are more eager, especially in France, to know the smallest incidents of his court, than the revolutions of some other countries. Such is the effect of a great reputation. Men would rather know what happened in the private council and court of Augustus than details of the conquests of Attila or of Tamerlane.

Consequently there are few historians who have failed to give an account of Louis XIV's early affection for the Baroness de Beauvais, for Mlle. d'Argencourt, for Cardinal Mazarin's niece, later married to the Count of Soissons, father of Prince Eugene; and especially for her sister, Marie Mancini, who afterwards married the High Constable Colonne.

He had not yet taken over the reins of government when such diversions occupied the idleness in which he was encouraged by Cardinal Mazarin, then ruling as absolute master. . . . The fact that his tutors had allowed him too much to neglect his studies in early youth, a shyness which arose from a fear of placing himself in a false posi-

tion, and the ignorance in which he was kept by Cardinal Mazarin, gave the whole court to believe that he would always be ruled like his father, Louis XIII. . . .

In 1660, the marriage of Louis XIV was attended by a display of magnificence and exquisite taste which was ever afterwards on the increase. . . .

The king's marriage was followed by one long series of fêtes, entertainments and gallantries. They were redoubled on the marriage of *Monsieur*, the king's eldest brother, to Henrietta of England, sister of Charles II, and they were not interrupted until the death of Cardinal Mazarin in 1661.

The court became the centre of pleasures, and a model for all other courts. The king prided himself on giving entertainments which should put those of Vaux in the shade.

Nature herself seemed to take a delight in producing at this moment in France men of the first rank in every art, and in bringing together at Versailles the most handsome and well-favoured men and women that ever graced a court. Above all his courtiers Louis rose supreme by the grace of his figure and the majestic nobility of his countenance. The sound of his voice, at once dignified and charming, won the hearts of those whom his presence had intimidated. His bearing was such as befitted himself and his rank alone, and would have been ridiculous in any other. . . .

The chief glory of these amusements, which brought taste, polite manners and talents to such perfection in France, was that they did not for a moment detach the monarch from his incessant labors. Without such toil he could but have held a court, he could not have reigned: and had the magnificent pleasures of the court outraged the miseries of the people, they would only have been detestable; but the same man who gave these entertainments had given the people bread during the famine of 1662. He had bought up corn, which he sold to the rich at a low price, and which he gave free to poor families at the gate of the Louvre; he had remitted three millions of taxes to the people; no part of the internal administration was neglected, and his government was respected abroad. The King of Spain was obliged to allow him precedence; the Pope was forced to give him satisfaction; Dunkirk was acquired by France by a treaty honourable to the purchaser and ignominious to the seller; in short, all measures adopted after he had taken up the reins of government were either honourable or useful; thereafter, it was fitting that he should give such fêtes . . . that all the nobles should be honoured but no one powerful, not even his brother or *Monsieur le Prince*. . . .

Not one of those who have been too ready to censure Louis XIV

can deny that until the Battle of Blenheim⁹ he was the only monarch at once powerful, magnificent, and great in every department. For while there have been heroes such as John Sobieski and certain Kings of Sweden who eclipsed him as warriors, no one has surpassed him as a monarch. It must ever be confessed that he not only bore his misfortunes, but overcame them. He had defects and made great errors, but had those who condemn him been in his place, would they have equalled his achievements? . . .

. . . It was the destiny of Louis XIV to see the whole of his family die before their time; his wife at forty-five and his only son at fifty; but a year later we witnessed the spectacle of his grandson the Dauphin, Duke of Burgundy, his wife, and their eldest son, the Duke of Brittany, being carried to the same tomb at Saint-Denys in the month of April 1712, while the youngest of their children, who afterwards ascended the throne, lay in his cradle at death's door. The Duke of Berri, brother of the Duke of Burgundy, followed them two years later, and his daughter was carried at the same time from her cradle to her coffin.

These years of desolation left such a deep impression on people's hearts that during the minority of Louis XV I have met many people who could not speak of the late king's bereavement without tears in their eyes. . . .

The remainder of his life was sad. The disorganisation of state finances, which he was unable to repair, estranged many hearts. The complete confidence he placed in the Jesuit, Le Tellier, a turbulent spirit, stirred them to rebellion. It is remarkable that the people who forgave him all his mistresses could not forgive this one confessor. In the minds of the majority of his subjects he lost during the last three years of his life all the prestige of the great and memorable things he had accomplished. . . .

On his return from Marli towards the middle of the month of August 1715, Louis XIV was attacked by the illness which ended his life. His legs swelled, and signs of gangrene began to show themselves. The Earl of Stair, the English ambassador, wagered, after the fashion of his country, that the king would not outlive the month of September. The Duke of Orleans, on the journey from Marli, had been left completely to himself, but now the whole court gathered round his person. During the last days of the king's illness, a quack physician gave him a cordial which revived him. He managed to eat, and the quack assured him that he would recover. On hearing this news the crowd of people that had gathered round the Duke of Orleans diminished immediately. "If the

⁹Marlborough's great victory (1704) for England and her allies in the War of the Spanish Succession.—Ed.

king eats another mouthful," said the Duke of Orleans, "we shall have no one left." But the illness was mortal. . . .

Though he has been accused of being narrow-minded, of being too harsh in his zeal against Jansenism,¹⁰ too arrogant with foreigners in his triumphs, too weak in his dealings with certain women, and too severe in personal matters; of having lightly undertaken wars, of burning the Palatinate and of persecuting the reformers—nevertheless, his great qualities and noble deeds when placed in the balance eclipse all his faults. Time, which modifies men's opinions, has put the seal upon his reputation, and, in spite of all that has been written against him, his name is never uttered without respect, nor without recalling to the mind an age which will be forever memorable. If we consider this prince in his private life, we observe him indeed too full of his own greatness, but affable, allowing his mother no part in the government but performing all the duties of a son, and observing all outward appearance of propriety towards his wife; a good father, a good master, always dignified in public, laborious in his study, punctilious in business matters, just in thought, a good speaker, and agreeable though aloof. . . .

The mind of Louis XIV was rather precise and dignified than witty; and indeed one does not expect a king to say notable things, but to do them. . . .

Between him and his court there existed a continual intercourse in which was seen on the one side all the graciousness of a majesty which never debased itself, and on the other all the delicacy of an eager desire to serve and please which never approached servility. He was considerate and polite, especially to women, and his example enhanced those qualities in his courtiers; he never missed an opportunity of saying things to men which at once flattered their self-esteem, stimulated rivalry, and remained long in their memory. . . .

It follows from what we have related, that in everything this monarch loved grandeur and glory. A prince who, having accomplished as great things as he, could yet be of plain and simple habits, would be the first among kings, and Louis XIV the second.

If he repented on his death-bed of having lightly gone to war, it must be owned that he did not judge by events; for of all his wars the most legitimate and necessary, namely, the war of 1701, was the only one unsuccessful. . . .

His own glory was indissolubly connected with the welfare of France, and never did he look upon his kingdom as a noble regards

his land, from which he extracts as much as he can that he may live in luxury. Every king who loves glory loves the public weal; he had no longer a Colbert¹¹ nor a Louvois, when about 1698 he commanded each comptroller to present a detailed description of his province for the instruction of the Duke of Burgundy. By this means it was possible to have an exact record of the whole kingdom and a correct census of the population. . . .

The foregoing is a general account of what Louis XIV did or attempted to do in order to make his country more flourishing. It seems to me that one can hardly view all his works and efforts without some sense of gratitude, nor without being stirred by the love for the public weal which inspired them. Let the reader picture to himself the condition to-day, and he will agree that Louis XIV did more good for his country than twenty of his predecessors together; and what he accomplished fell far short of what he might have done. The war which ended with the Peace of Ryswick¹² began the ruin of the flourishing trade established by his minister Colbert, and the war of the succession completed it. . . .

. . . Nevertheless, this country, in spite of the shocks and losses she has sustained, is still one of the most flourishing in the world, since all the good that Louis XIV did for her still bears fruit, and the mischief which it was difficult not to do in stormy times has been remedied. Posterity, which passes judgment on kings, and whose judgment they should continually have before them, will acknowledge, weighing the greatness and defects of that monarch, that though too highly praised during his lifetime, he will deserve to be so for ever, and that he was worthy of the statue raised to him at Montpellier, bearing a Latin inscription whose meaning is *To Louis the Great after his death*.

¹¹Jean Baptiste Colbert, Louis's great minister of finance (d. 1683).—ED.

¹²The War of the League of Augsburg (1688–1697).—ED.

¹⁰A sect named after the Flemish theologian Cornelis Jansen that was, though Catholic, rather Calvinistic in many of its views. Jansenism was bitterly opposed by the Jesuits, who finally persuaded Louis XIV to condemn it.—ED.

Louis XIV and the Larger World

PIERRE GOUBERT

The historiography of Louis XIV is almost as vast as the original sources and almost as intimidating. Few figures in European history have been more variously or more adamantly interpreted. As W. H. Lewis has said, "To one school, he is incomparably the ablest ruler in modern European History; to another, a mediocre blunderer, pompous, led by the nose by a succession of generals and civil servants; whilst to a third, he is no great king, but still the finest actor of royalty the world has ever seen."¹³ And such a list does not exhaust the catalogue of Louis's interpreters.

There is at least one contemporary revisionist school that has turned again to "the world of Louis XIV," not the limited world that Saint-Simon saw—the world of the court and the hated prison of Versailles—but the larger world of economic and social forces beyond the court. One of the best exponents of this school is the French historian Pierre Goubert, from whose *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen* the following selection is taken. Goubert is essentially an economic historian, occupied with such things as demographic trends, price and wage fluctuations, gross national products, and the like. In this book he is concerned with Louis XIV as an able bureaucratic manager rather than as strictly an autocrat; as a king whose foreign policy was often governed not by his own absolutist theories, but by the realities of economics, and whose domestic policies were limited by the dragging, inertial resistance to change of the inherited institutions of his own nation.

As early as 1661, as he declared in his *Mémoires*, Louis meant to have sole command in every sphere and claimed full responsibility, before the world and all posterity, for everything that should happen in his reign. In spite of constant hard work, he soon found he had to entrust the actual running of certain departments, such as finance or commerce, to a few colleagues, although he still reserved the right to

¹³W. H. Lewis, *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 1.

make major decisions himself. There were, however, some aspects of his *métier de roi* to which he clung absolutely and persistently, although his persistence was not invariably absolute. Consequently, it is permissible to single out a kind of personal sphere which the king reserved to himself throughout his reign, although this sphere might vary, while the rest still remained, as it were, under his eye.

As a young man, Louis had promised himself that his own time and posterity should ring with his exploits. If this had been no more than a simple wish, and not an inner certainty, it might be said to have been largely granted.

As a hot-headed young gallant, he flouted kings by his extravagant gestures and amazed them by the brilliance of his court, his entertainments, his tournaments and his mistresses. As a new Augustus he could claim, for a time, to have been his own Maecenas. Up to the year 1672, all Europe seems to have fallen under the spell of his various exploits and his youthful fame spread even as far as the "barbarians" of Asia. For seven or eight years after that, the armies of Le Tellier and Turenne¹⁴ seemed almost invincible while Colbert's youthful navy and its great admirals won glory off the coast of Sicily. Then, when Europe had pulled itself together, Louis still showed amazing powers of resistance and adaptability. Even when he seemed to be ageing, slipping into pious isolation amid his courtiers, he retained the power to astonish with the splendours of his palace at Versailles, his opposition to the Pope and the will to make himself into a "new Constantine," and later by allying himself with Rome to "purify" the Catholic religion. When practically on his death bed, he could still impress the English ambassador who came to protest at the building of a new French port next door to the ruins of Dunkirk. . . .

For precisely three centuries, Louis XIV has continued to dominate, fascinate and haunt men's minds. "The universe and all time" have certainly remembered him, although not always in the way he would have wished. From this point of view, Louis' personal deeds have been a great success. Unfortunately, his memory has attracted a cloud of hatred and contempt as enduring as that which rises from the incense of his worshippers or the pious imitations of a later age.

In his personal desire to enlarge his kingdom, the king was successful. The lands in the north, Strasbourg, Franche-Comté and the "iron belt"¹⁵ are clear evidence of success. In this way Paris was better

¹⁴Le Vicomte Henri de Turenne (d. 1675), one of Louis's generals. A holdover from Louis's father's reign, Turenne was the French hero of the Thirty Years' War and the war against Spain.—Ed.

¹⁵A reference to the fortifications—the *frontière de fer*—of the Marquis de Vauban (1663–1707), Louis's master military and siege engineer.—Ed.

protected from invasion. But all these gains had been made by 1681 and later events served only to confirm, rescue or reduce them. . . .

As absolute head of his diplomatic service and his armies, from beginning to end, he was well served while he relied on men who had been singled out by Mazarin or Richelieu but he often made a fool of himself by selecting unworthy successors. He was no great warrior. His father and his grandfather had revelled in the reek of the camp and the heady excitement of battle. His preference was always for impressive manoeuvres, parades and good safe sieges rather than the smoke of battle, and as age grew on him he retreated to desk strategy. Patient, secretive and subtle in constructing alliances, weaving intrigues and undoing coalitions, he marred all these gifts by ill-timed displays of arrogance, brutality and unprovoked aggression. In the last analysis, this born aggressor showed his greatness less in triumph than in adversity but there was never any doubt about his effect on his contemporaries whose feelings towards him were invariably violent and uncompromising. He was admired, feared, hated and secretly envied. . . .

More often than not, and permanently in some cases, administrative details and the complete running of certain sectors of the administration were left to agents appointed by the king and responsible to him. Louis rarely resorted to the cowardly expedient of laying the blame for failure on his subordinates. Not until the end of his life, and notably in the case of the bishops, did he indulge in such pettiness. Everything that was done during his reign was done in his name and Louis' indirect responsibility in matters he had delegated was the same as his direct responsibility in his own personal spheres. Moreover, the two sectors could not help but be closely connected.

A policy of greatness and prestige demanded an efficient and effective administration as well as adequate resources, both military and financial. . . .

In order to disseminate the king's commands over great distances and combat the complex host of local authorities, a network of thirty intendants had been established over the country. These were the king's men, dispatched by the king's councils and assisted by correspondents, agents and *subdélégués* who by 1715 were numerous and well organized. By this time the system was well-established and more or less accepted (even in Brittany). It met with reasonable respect and sometimes obedience. Sometimes, not always, since we only have to read the intendants' correspondence to be disabused swiftly of any illusions fostered by old-fashioned textbooks or history notes. The difficulties of communications, the traditions of provincial independence, inalienable rights and privileges and the sheer force of inertia,

all died hard. Lavoisier used to say this was a period of absolutism tempered by disobedience. In the depths of the country and the remote provinces, the formula might almost be reversed. Nevertheless, there is no denying that a step forward had been made and that the germ of the splendid administrative systems of Louis XV and of Napoleon was already present in the progress made between 1661 and 1715. . . .

In one adjacent but vital field, ministers and jurists laboured valiantly to reach a unified code of French law, giving the king's laws priority over local custom and simplifying the enormous tangled mass of statute law. . . .

The navy, rescued from virtual oblivion by Colbert who gave it arsenals, shipwrights, gunners, talented designers, its finest captains and fresh personnel obtained by means of seaboard conscription, distinguished itself particularly from 1672 to 1690. . . .

The greatest of all the king's great servants were those who helped him to build up an army, which in size and striking force was for the most part equal to all the other armies of Europe put together. They were first Le Tellier and Turenne and later, Louvois and Vauban. Many others of less fame, such as Chamlay, Martinet, Fourilles and Clerville would also deserve a place in this unusually lengthy roll of honour if the historian's job were the awarding of laurels, especially military ones. The fighting strength was increased at least fourfold, discipline was improved, among generals as well as officers and men, and a civil administration superimposed, not without a struggle, on the quarrelsome, short-sighted and in many cases incompetent and dishonest military one. New ranks and new corps were introduced; among them the artillery and the engineers, as well as such new weapons as the flintlock and the fixed bayonet, and a new military architect, Vauban, all helped to make the army more efficient. Most important of all, the army at last possessed a real *Intendance* with its own arsenals, magazines, and regular staging posts. Uniforms became more or less general, providing employment for thousands of workers. The first barracks were an attempt to put an end to the notorious custom of billeting troops on civilian households. The Hôtel des Invalides¹⁶ was built, on a grand scale. The instrument which these invaluable servants placed at their master's disposal was almost without parallel in their time, a genuine royal army, growing ever larger and more diversified, modern and disciplined. . . .

¹⁶Now a military museum and the site of Napoleon's tomb but originally intended as an old soldiers' home.—Ed.

An ambition to astonish the world with magnificence and great armies is all very well so long as the world is prepared to be astonished.

At the beginning of his reign, when Louis surveyed the rest of Europe, he saw nothing but weakness and decline. Some of his observations, as regards Spain and Italy, were perfectly correct. In others, he was mistaken. He stupidly underestimated the United Provinces, as though a small, bourgeois and Calvinist population were an inevitable sign of weakness. Yet another observation was swiftly belied by the changes which occurred in two highly dissimilar entities: England and the Empire.

Louis XIV found himself baulked at every turn by the diplomacy and dogged courage, as well as by the seapower and the immense wealth of the United Provinces. It is no longer fashionable to believe that the "Golden Age" of the Dutch was over in 1661. For a long time after that, their Bank, their Stock Exchange, their India Company, their fleets and their florins remained as powerful as ever. The invasion of 1672 weakened them only temporarily and even in 1715 . . . their wealth, currency and bankers remained powerful and respected and often decisive. Their policy was not yet tied directly to England's. It was simply that they no longer enjoyed undivided supremacy: another nation's economy had reached the same level and was about to overtake them.

Louis XIV always did his best to ignore economic factors but they would not be denied and they took their revenge. . . .

Louis found other forces of opposition within the borders of his kingdom . . . the ancient, traditional and heavily calculated weight of inertia possessed by that collection of "nations," *pays, seigneuries*, fiefs and parishes which together made up the kingdom of France. Each of these entities was accustomed to living independently, with its own customs, privileges and even language, snug in its own fields and within sound of its own bells. The king consecrated at Rheims was a priest-king to be revered and almost worshipped, but from afar. . . .

If, dazzled by the splendours of Versailles, we let ourselves forget the constant presence of these seething undercurrents, we will have understood nothing of the France of Louis XIV and of the impossible task which the king and his ministers had set themselves, or of the massive inertia which made it so difficult. . . .

For some years now, younger historians of a certain school have tended to ignore the bustle of individuals and events in favour of what they call revealing, measuring, defining and illustrating the great dominant rhythms which move world history as a whole. These rhythms emerge as largely economic. . . . From 1600 onwards, the quantities of silver reaching Spain from America grew less and less until by 1650 the imports were only a fifth of what they had been in 1600. A probable

revival of the mines of central Europe was insufficient to make up the deficit. First gold, and then silver, grew scarce, giving rise to hoarding. Copper from Sweden or Japan (via Holland) tended to take their place but it was a poor substitute. The whole age of Louis XIV was an age that Marc Bloch has called "monetary famine." . . .

Historians and economists have long been aware that the seventeenth century as a whole and the period from 1650–90 in particular, or even 1650–1730, was marked by a noticeable drop in the cost of basic foodstuffs as well as of a great many other things—a drop quite separate from annual "accidents." Landed incomes, offices and possible moneylending, all seem to have been affected by the same general reduction. . . .

There remains a strong impression that the period of Louis' reign was one of economic difficulties, suffering both from sudden, violent crises and from phases of stagnation and of deep depression. It is not easy to govern under such conditions especially when, like the king and most of his councillors, one is unaware of them. But what they tried to do and sometimes, despite such obstacles, achieved, remains nonetheless worthy of interest and even admiration.

It is possible, therefore, that France under Louis XIV may have been unconsciously subject to powerful economic forces which are still much disputed and not fully understood. Social, demographic, mental and other factors, wholly or partly incomprehensible to the rulers, may have played their part also. . . .

About the great mass of French society and its slow, ponderous development we know almost nothing, only a few glimmers here and there. . . .

It is true that Louis XIV, like most men who grew up between 1640 and 1660, was incapable of rising beyond the limits of his education, let alone of taking in, at one glance, the whole of the planet on which he lived, to say nothing of infinite space. A king to the depths of his being, and a dedicated king, he had a concept of greatness which was that of his generation: military greatness, dynastic greatness, territorial greatness and political greatness which expressed itself in unity of faith, the illusion of obedience and magnificent surroundings. He left behind him an image of the monarchy, admirable in its way, but already cracking if not outworn at the time of his death.

Review and Study Questions

1. In Saint-Simon's account of Louis XIV, how do his own prejudices show themselves?

2. Is Voltaire admiring or critical of Louis XIV? Explain.
3. Is Pierre Goubert admiring or critical of Louis XIV? Explain.
4. In what respects was Louis XIV a great king?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The best biography of Louis XIV is John B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (New York: Norton, 1968), a comprehensive, analytical, and persuasive book. Another work, by an eminent French historian, Pierre Gaxotte, *The Age of Louis XIV*, tr. Michael Shaw (New York: Macmillan, 1970), can also be recommended, but it is not as readable as Nancy Mitford, *The Sun King* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), a handsome book on Louis and the daily life at Versailles, the court intrigues and decisions of government—a lively and witty, if somewhat superficial, book by a popular British novelist and biographer. Three brief biographies can also be recommended: Maurice Ashley, *Louis XIV and the Greatness of France*, “Teach Yourself History Library” (New York: Macmillan, 1948), Vincent Buranelli, *Louis XIV*, “Rulers and Statesmen of the World” series (New York: Twayne, 1966), and Oliver Bernier, *Louis XIV: A Royal Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

Louis XIV, no matter how he is judged, is the central figure in seventeenth-century Europe. Some works on that century and the age of Louis XIV are therefore necessary to an understanding of the Sun King. David Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, 8th rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1961) and G. N. Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) have long been the standard works of respectively, the narrative and institutional history of the period. A famous interpretive book, somewhat like Clark, is W. H. Lewis, *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1957 [1953]), but it is more lively and entertaining. More comprehensive and much more far-ranging in subject is Maurice Ashley, *The Golden Century: Europe 1598–1715* (New York: Praeger, 1969). Of the same sort, but more popular, is Ragnhild Hatton, *Europe in the Age of Louis XIV* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969). J. B. Wolf, *Toward a European Balance of Power, 1620–1715* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970), deals almost entirely with the central role of Louis XIV’s France in the evolution of that important political-diplomatic concept. Students interested in the intellectual history of Louis’s France should consult the small but well-done work by Edward John Kearns, *Ideas in Seventeenth-Century France: The Most Important Thinkers and the Climate of Ideas in Which They Worked* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979).

Through the last generation or so, seventeenth-century studies, and the study of Louis XIV, have passed through a major crisis of revision. One of the early works reflecting this is J. B. Wolf, *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685–1715*, “Rise of Modern Europe” series (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), a brilliant synthesis of narrative, analysis, and modern research. Students should read more extensively in the important work by Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, tr. Anne Carter (New York: Pantheon, 1970), excerpted in this chapter. Students interested in this sort of work might be interested in the vast, two-volume compendium of French institutional history by the great French authority Roland E. Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598–1789*, vol. 1 *Society and the State*, tr. Brian Pearce (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), vol. 2 *The Organs of State and Society*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). There are four sets of readings that represent much of the newer research and interpretation of Louis XIV: *Louis XIV and the Craft of Kingship*, ed. John C. Rule (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), *Louis XIV and Absolutism*, ed. Ragnhild Hatton (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), *Louis XIV and Europe*, ed. Ragnhild Hatton (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), and *Sun King: The Ascendancy of French Culture during the Reign of Louis XIV*, ed. David Lee Rubin (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library and Associated University Presses, 1992). An important revisionist book is Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), which argues that Louis was actually an ineffective king in terms of his domestic policy. Finally, students may be interested in an important thesis book on the so-called general crisis of the seventeenth century: Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), in which Rabb argues that the crisis was a search for a principle of authority.