



# Louis XIV—France's "Sun King"



## Louis XIV—France's "Sun King"

The most powerful absolute monarch of all French kings was Louis XIV, who ruled France from 1661-1715. He believed that all power to make and change laws was his and that he answered to no one but God. Governments with absolute monarchies believe in what historians call the *divine right of kings*, which means that the king is believed to have been given the right to rule by God. Louis took the sun as the symbol of his power. The sun is the center of the solar system, and Louis believed that he was the center of the French nation. Louis was known to say, "*L'etat'est moi*"... "*I am the state.*"

Louis XIV became king in France when he was four years old. Since he was not old enough to make decisions, a Roman Catholic cardinal and French statesman named **Jules Mazarin** was asked to help rule France. He served as principle minister and advisor to the young king's mother. Mazarin was the most important person in France until his death in 1661. By this time, Louis XIV was old enough to take full command of the French government. The way in which Louis XIV ran the government was begun by his father Louis XIII and his father's chief minister **Cardinal Armand Richelieu**.

Cardinal Mazarin continued the policies of Richelieu, who had two goals for France. The first goal was to make the French king as strong a ruler as possible. The second goal was to make France the most powerful country in Europe. Both of these goals were accomplished.

Therefore, Louis XIV had a very solid base from which to run his government. He did not allow nobles, aristocrats, or the wealthy to take part in running France because he was afraid that they would take power away from him. Throughout his 72 year reign, Louis XIV never once called a meeting of *The Estates General* (Representative body of France). Louis XIV wanted the people of France to know that he, and he alone, was their leader.

Louis XIV spent large amounts of money. Most of the income of the French people was paid to the government in taxes. To enhance his prestige, he built a gigantic palace, the Palace of Versailles, near Paris. Louis required hundreds of nobles to live with him at the palace in order to prevent them from organizing against him. He entertained them lavishly and rewarded the most loyal with honors and high offices.

Louis XIV chose rich businessmen to help him run the government. One of these men was **Jean Baptiste Colbert**. Colbert started a government policy called *mercantilism*. Mercantilism means that the government controls the economy by acquiring foreign trade, setting up colonies, and acquiring lots of gold and silver. Anything the people did was taxed by the government. The middle class and the peasants paid heavy taxes to support Louis XIV's expensive lifestyle and many wars.

## Life in France

The three classes of people in French society were the First Estate (Roman Catholic clergy), the Second Estate (nobles), and the Third Estate (commoners, middle class, and peasants). The First and Second Estates or about two percent of the people owned about 70 percent of the land of France. In other words, about 98 percent of the French people—those of the Third Estate—were mainly peasant and very poor. They were poor because of fees, land taxes, and payments they had to pay to the other estates. Although members of the Third Estate worked hard to pay the government, they had no voice in government. They could be arrested, put in jail, or sent away from France for any reason.

Under Louis XIV, the official religion of France became Roman Catholicism. Louis XIV no longer allowed Protestants to worship in France. He revoked the Edict of Nantes, an order which protected French Huguenots, who were Protestants. Many French Protestants were put in prison, tortured, and even killed. Many more Protestants left France forever. Facing persecution, more than 100,000 Huguenots fled France. The Huguenots had been both hard-working and wealthy, so the loss was a serious blow to France's economy, just as the expulsion of Jews and Muslims had been to Spain. Louis outlived both his sons and grandsons. When he died in 1715, the staggering debts and resentment over the royal abuse of power would plague his heirs, and would eventually lead to revolution.

## Louis XIV: Reading Questions & Evidence Table

### Reading Questions:

1. Why was Louis XIV known as the Sun King?
2. Describe Louis XIV's ascension to the throne.
3. What was the role of Cardinal Mazarin?
4. Describe the economic policy favored by Louis XIV.
5. Explain the quote "L'etat c'est moi" or "I am the state". Be sure to discuss the Estates General in your answer.
6. What were the religious policies of Louis XIV?
7. Explain how this quote relates to Louis XIV: "Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer."

### Was Louis XIV a good or bad leader?

**Directions:** As you read the article on Louis XIV, collect evidence to support that Louis XIV was a good leader and collect evidence to support that he was a bad leader. Each piece of evidence must have a quote from the article!

Bad Leader Evidence	Good Leader Evidence

**Directions:** Explain how each of the situations below strengthened (S) or weakened (W) the position of Louis XIV as an absolute monarch and did they strengthen or weaken the position of France.

Situation	S	W	Explain your response
1. Louis XIV spent a fortune to surround himself in luxury. For example, each meal was a feast. Nearly 500 cooks, waiters, and other servants worked for him.			
2. Louis had the nobles leave their homes to live with him at the palace of Versailles.			
3. Louis and his finance minister, Colbert, supported mercantilism to make France as self-sufficient as possible.			
4. Louis wanted France to acquire as many overseas colonies as possible.			
5. The debt of the royal family quintupled between 1643 and 1715.			
6. Louis XIV canceled the Edict of Nantes which had protected the religious freedom of the Huguenots (French Protestants). Many left France for colonies in America.			
7. Louis made sure that local officials in France communicated directly with him.			
8. Louis excluded nobles from his councils.			
9. In 1667, Louis unsuccessfully invaded the Dutch Netherlands. The Dutch saved their country by opening the dikes and flooding the land.			
10. Louis XIV was a patron of the arts in France. He made opera and ballet popular.			
11. By the end of the 1680's, a European-wide alliance had formed. England joined with the Hapsburg emperor, the Kings of Sweden and Spain, and the leaders of several European states to attain a balance of power in Europe by checking the power of France.			
12. From the 1660s on, Louis regularly imposed new taxes to pay for his wars.			
13. Louis XIV was blamed for a series of poor harvests in France in the 1680s.			