

French Absolutism

Henry IV

In 1589, a Bourbon prince and Huguenot leader inherited the throne of France, Henry IV. He was a Protestant and converted to Christianity. He issued the Edict of Nantes in 1598. This document gave the Protestants the right to practice their religion freely, also known as religious tolerance and let them fortify their towns and cities. But most importantly it ended the Wars of Religion in France.

Henry wanted to ensure that every peasant to every noble had a decent meal. He said, "If God allows me to live, I will see that there is not a single laborer in my kingdom who does not have a chicken in his pot every Sunday." Henry IV proved to be a man of vision and courage. Instead of waging costly wars to suppress opposing nobles, Henry simply paid them off. As king, he adopted policies and undertook projects to improve the lives of all subjects that would make him one of the country's most popular rulers.

He planned to regularize state finance, promote agriculture, drain swamps to create productive crop lands, undertake many public works like improving roads. He also encouraged education, as with the creation of colleges and universities. He built a new system of tree-lined highways, and constructed new bridges and canals. He ordered the planting of pines, elms and fruit trees. Henry's government reached into every area of life. He set the foundation for absolutism in France.

King Henry's vision extended beyond France, and he financed several expeditions to North America that saw France laid claim to Canada. Although he was a man of kindness, compassion, and good humor, and much loved by his people, Henry IV was assassinated in 1610. He left his empire to his nine-year-old son Louis XIII.

1. What was the Edict of Nantes?
2. How did Henry IV help improve France?

After Henry IV's death his son Louis XIII took over. It was at this time that the nobles tried to reassert power but the king had Cardinal Armand Richelieu to protect him. He was able to protect royal authority by weakening the nobles, something that would help strengthen royal authority for years to come.

The brilliant and energetic Cardinal Richelieu played a major role in Louis XIII's administration from 1624 until his death. As a result Louis became an absolute monarch. The Cardinal trained his apprentice to protect the next king Louis XIV. Louis XIV became king when he was four-years-old. Again the nobles, merchants and peasants began to rebel but the king maintained his power. For the next eighteen years Cardinal Mazarin helped Louis XIV rule.

The first twenty years of the king's personal reign were the most brilliant. With his minister, he carried out the administrative and financial reorganization of the kingdom, as well as the development of trade and manufacturing. He reformed the army and racked up military victories. Finally, Louis encouraged an extraordinary blossoming of culture: theatre, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, and all the sciences which meant the founding of the royal academies. These accomplishments would be depicted on the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors, which is located in the Palace of Versailles. The palace was his most remarkable feat. He improved the grounds with lavish gardens, sculptures, terraces, a lake, a zoo, and 1,500 fountains. It also had 2143 windows, 1252 fireplaces, and 67 staircases.

Louis XIV chose the sun as his emblem. The sun was associated with Apollo, god of peace and arts, and was also the heavenly body which gave life to all things, regulating everything as it rose and

set. The warrior-king Louis XIV brought peace, and was a patron of the arts. Because of this Louis XIV was known as the Sun King.

He tried very hard to tend to every government affair. He wanted to strengthen the state, and he did it by using Cardinal Richelieu's policies. He expanded the bureaucracy, which is a system of managing government through departments run by officials. He also appointed intendants that were royal officials that collected taxes, recruited soldiers, and carried out the king's policies in the provinces. These jobs went to wealthy middleclass men who had strong relationship with the monarchy. Under Louis, the French army became the strongest in Europe. The state paid, fed, trained and supplied up to 300,000 soldiers.

1. How did Louis XIV strengthen France?

2. How did he govern his empire?

Louis XIV believed in divine right and that he was the representative closest to God. This belief made him an absolute monarch. The king is entitled to absolute obedience by all. Louis XIV ruled France for 72 years, longer than any other monarch in European history. During that time, French culture, manners, and customs replaced those of Renaissance Italy as the standard for European taste. In both foreign and domestic affairs, however, many of Louis's policies were costly failures.

The wars of Louis XIV were very costly. He poured vast resources into expanding French borders and to dominate Europe. At first, he did gain some territory, but his later wars were disastrous. Rival rulers joined forces to control French ambition. Led by the English and the Dutch these alliances fought to maintain the balance of power in Europe. This effort was to prevent any one nation from dominating Europe. Because of their efforts France was never able to conquer Europe.

Another huge mistake was the persecution of the Huguenots. Louis was extremely Catholic and saw the Protestants as a threat to religious and political unity. In 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes. Facing persecution, more than 100,000 Huguenots fled France. These men and women that fled were a vital part of French life. They were hard-working artisans and merchants who were loyal to the king. Their loss was a terrible blow to the French economy.

Louis XIV was also drawn into the disastrous War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), in which he defended his grandson Philip V's inheritance of Spain and its empire on the death of Charles II. By the Peace of Utrecht France retained most of its earlier conquests, and the Spanish empire was divided between Philip V, who received Spain and its overseas colonies, and Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, who acquired the Spanish Netherlands and Spain's Italian possessions. Louis was forced to agree that the crowns of France and Spain would remain separate despite the dynastic connection.

Louis XIV outlived his children and even his grandchildren. When he died he left the throne to his great grandchild Louis XV. He was too weak a ruler to deal with the problems that Louis XIV had created. France was slowly crumbling and would not become strong again until its next king.

1. What were some problems with Louis XIV's reign?

2. What happened because of the Spanish War of Succession?

Louis XIV Primary Source

“Unlike his father, Louis enjoyed excellent health throughout the course of 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 by nature courteous, considerate and good-natured, and he showed great loyalty to his friends and 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 devoting himself to the well being of his subjects. He detested inefficiency, corruption, and the abuse of privilege and stamped them out whenever 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 the country.

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 also by a series of personal tragedies. In quick succession his son, the two grandsons still with him, and one of his infant great-grandsons died. With them died his grandson’s wife, the young Duchess of Burgundy, whom Louis adored. Only his other great-grandson 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 through 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.”

Louis XIV’s Secretary, Jean Jacques LaFlour

1. What were Louis XIV’s hobbies?
2. What led to his downfall?
3. How did France react to him after his death?
4. How does history view Louis XIV?