



The Reign of Louis XIV



No French monarch more embodied Absolutism than did Louis XIV. By the end of his reign in the 18th century, Louis XIV had completely centralized his government, even lowering the nobility of power.

Louis was only four years old when he became France's king. Too young to rule directly, Louis' mother, Ann of Austria, served as his regent (representative). Anne often let Louis' chief minister, Cardinal Mazarin, to make the day-to-day decisions on the young king's behalf.



When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis was ready to rule. Intending to become a diligent and conscientious ruler, Louis created a reign which brought him great power. The French government centered around him. Louis XIV became known as the "Sun King", for he was the light which directed the state.

To solidify his power, Louis progressively weakened the French nobility. He had developed a fear of the aristocracy since childhood. The nobility supported a rebellion against the French government when Louis was a child. At one point, the royal family had to escape from the revolutionists. Prior to that, the royal family had been terrorized by mobs, with one breaking into the palace and frightening the young Louis. Although the threat had been suppressed by Cardinal Mazarin, it left Louis psychologically scarred for life.



Louis made several moves to limit the power of the nobility. He did not allow aristocrats to hold the highest state offices. He also sold aristocracy titles to those willing to pay, thus bringing non-aristocrats into the aristocracy. This irritated the nobility, but there was little they could do.

After eliminating the aristocrats from high public office, Louis began selecting capable middle-class men as his advisors. One of his greatest ministers was Jean Baptiste Colbert. Chose as Louis' Finance Minister following Cardinal Mazarin's death, Colbert was able to double France's income within ten years. He did so by eliminating government waste and inefficiency, not by raising taxes. Colbert also developed a system called mercantilism, which allowed France to be less reliant on foreign imports and generated income by exporting French-made goods.

During the reign of Louis XIV, France's population grew to 17 million people, by far the largest in Europe. No other nation could rival the power of the French state under Louis. With the help of efficient ministers such as Mazarin and Colbert, Louis continued to consolidate his power. Louis XIV is said to have described his singular importance to France with the phrase, *"I etat, c'est moi"* ("I am the state").

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