

The Sun King



He was called the Sun King and the Grand Monarch. He lived in a palace with enough rooms to house 10,000 people. Everything in it was either made of gold, covered with gold, painted gold, or embroidered with gold.

Gold was the color of the sun, and the sun was the symbol of France's most powerful king, Louis XIV. The palace, called Versailles (ver-SY), took 47 years to build. It may have cost as much as \$100 million. But Louis would spare no expense. "Let it be done to accord with our greatness," he told the architects.

Versailles was a fitting home for a king who claimed that he was chosen by God to rule France. Louis was thought to be responsible to God alone for his actions. It was believed that God had given Louis the right to rule. This was called *divine right*.

When his grandson became king of Spain in 1700, Louis told him, "You must be master. Never have a favorite nor a prime minister. Consult your council [of ministers] and listen to what they have to say, but decide for yourself. God, who has made you a king, will give you the necessary wisdom. . . ."

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many European monarchs claimed they ruled by divine right. But none played the role better than Louis XIV. One writer called him "the greatest actor of royalty the world has ever seen." Even as a boy, he impressed everyone with his kingly manner.

The Sun King was born September 5, 1638, to Queen Anne and King Louis XIII of France. From his mother Louis got both a strong Catholic faith and a belief in *autocracy* (government by one ruler).

She told him that resisting a king's will was a sin against God, as well as against the king.

From the time he was a child, Louis always seemed to know what to say. When it appeared, in May 1643, that his father was dying, Louis was asked, "Do you want to reign?" Louis, who was not yet five, replied with tears in his eyes, "No, I do not want my good Papa to die." Yet Louis XIII was anything but a "good Papa." He was, in fact, a cruel, suspicious man who made his family miserable.

Four days after his father's death, Louis made his first official appearance as king. Of course, Louis was much too young to rule France. Cardinal Jules Mazarin, acting as prime minister, had the real power.

Young Louis disliked books. He preferred fencing and dancing lessons to studying. But he listened carefully when Jules Mazarin began to teach him about politics. Distrust everybody, especially ministers, Mazarin said, for they will try to deceive you. Don't let any other member of the royal family become powerful. Keep your business secret. Be stern with those who ask for favors. Take the people's money, but spare their lives.

When Mazarin died in March 1661, Louis showed how well he had learned his lessons. He immediately announced he would rule France without a prime minister. He would control the government personally. "I am the state," he declared.

The young king was extremely ambitious. He wanted his reign to be glorious. There were two paths that led to glory, Louis believed. One was to build great palaces. The other was to increase his country's territory by military conquests. Louis decided to try both.

Life at Versailles. The palace of Versailles was located about 10 miles from Paris. It was meant to dazzle and impress everyone. Priceless paintings by the world's greatest artists hung on the walls

of the Throne Room. Other walls were paneled with mirrors that reflected huge crystal chandeliers.

Yet it would have been hard for visitors not to notice that the palace also had some drawbacks. The chimneys smoked too much. There was too little heat. In severe winter weather, bottles of wine froze.

The most striking problem was the tiny size of the rooms housing the members of the nobility. But the nobles could hardly complain. They stayed at Versailles at King Louis' expense. In reality, of course, the French taxpayers paid for their upkeep. More than half of all the money collected in taxes was used to maintain the court.

How did the nobility spend their time at Versailles? One noble woman described a typical day in a letter to a friend. From early in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon she hunted. Then she went to her apartment and changed into full court dress. Afterward she gambled until seven. From the card tables she went to the theater to see a play. That was followed by supper at 10:30. Finally she went to a dance that lasted until three o'clock in the morning.

Both Louis and his queen, Marie Thérèse (teh-REHZ), participated in these activities. For example, they both gambled heavily. In fact, the queen often lost thousands of dollars before noon. The queen also spent much of her time with her dogs. The dogs shared her meals and had their own servants.

At Versailles, the nobles had little to do but serve and amuse the Grand Monarch. They also flattered and imitated him. When Louis began to wear a wig to hide his baldness, all the nobles shaved their heads and wore wigs. When he had indigestion after dinner, they made the same complaint. They listened breathlessly to his remarks, no matter how unimportant. If the king looked on any one of them, that man or woman was the envy of all.

So much flattery was bound to affect Louis. As time went on, he became more and more proud and boastful. Yet he also had good qualities. He was a kindly man who could be generous even toward his enemies. Once, for example, a court priest named Francois Fénelon (fran-SWAH fain-ul-OWN) wrote a pamphlet attacking Louis. Fénelon criticized the Sun King's great wealth. He pointed out that many French people were poor and starving. He even called Louis' devotion to his religion "superficial."

Did Louis put the outspoken clergyman in prison? Not at all. He promoted him to the rank of archbishop in one of the richest cathedral towns in France.

Too Much Spending. Court life was luxurious, but Versailles was draining France's wealth. So too were the almost constant wars that Louis fought. During his long reign, France became involved in four expensive conflicts that spanned almost 50 years. Louis saw himself as a great warrior-king and military planner. He was indeed a brave man who often stood in the line of fire to show his courage. But he often embarrassed his generals, who had to find easy targets for Louis during combat. Like his ministers, his generals flattered him.

Louis' attacks on neighboring states made some of Europe's most powerful rulers unite against him. In 1702, England, the Netherlands, the Holy Roman Empire and others allied against France. They wanted to keep Louis' grandson off the throne of Spain. From then on, the French army suffered a series of disastrous defeats.

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Soon the costs of the war brought France close to *bankruptcy*, or financial collapse. Raising taxes did not help because the people had no more money. Louis had to beg for loans to keep his government going. He even tried to sell his jewels, without success.

Then, in 1709, an unusually cold winter and spring brought even more suffering to France. The number of deaths from cold and starvation in the area of Paris alone was estimated at 24,000. Yet the government had no money to buy and import grain for bread. The once-great army had no food, arms, or uniforms. It was ready to quit.

The People React. Revolution was threatening the French government. That August a mob of hungry Parisians marched on Versailles. From his window, the king could hear the crowd shouting in the streets. People made bold speeches against the government and Louis. The king could do nothing to halt them.

At the last moment, Louis and France were saved by a change of government in England. Exhausted by the war, England was as eager as Louis for peace. So the new English government signed a secret truce with France. England dropped out of the conflict. When a general peace treaty ended the war in 1713, France escaped complete defeat. But France was now poor and in debt. It had been reduced to the rank of a second-rate power.

Louis lived to be almost 77. His reign of 72 years was the longest in European

history. In his lifetime he made France the center of western European life. He also made many enemies along the way. But even his enemies admired his accomplishments. When he died, someone said, "When I heard of the death of Louis XIV . . . it had the same effect upon me as if I had heard of a splendid old oak [tree] . . . laid flat upon the ground by a storm. He had stood upright for so long."

But there were more people who resented Louis XIV for his abuses and excesses. Long after Louis died, the French would remember how his lavish lifestyle and needless wars harmed their country. They would remember the absolute power of the Sun King when evaluating later French rulers. These harsh memories would lead to a new movement among the French to replace the monarchy with a republic.