

Louis XIV and Domestic Policies

1. Explain in general how Louis ran the government of France:
2. What group of people did he exclude from his advisors and why?
3. How did Louis feel about Intendants and why?
4. What did Louis need to enforce his rule? What was his like?
5. What was the fundamental weakness of the French economy? How was this kind of amazing for France?

Louis XIV and Religion

1. What do you think control of the Catholic Church might have had to do with Louis as an absolute ruler?
2. Why was Louis so interested in religious uniformity?
3. How did Louis deal with the church in the same way he ran his government?
4. Why did Louis start to persecute the Huguenots during his reign?
5. What impact did this policy have on France and the rest of Europe?
How was this policy ironic?

Louis XIV and Domestic Policies

Louis XIV's domestic policy was to transform France. Louis XIV built on Louis XIII's policy of extending absolute royal rule (centralised absolutism) to all parts of the kingdom. Louis was the archetypal absolutist monarch. Aided by politicians such as Jean-Baptiste Colbert, and more especially, Jules Mazarin, Louis stamped his rule on his kingdom. It was Louis who had said "L'état, c'est moi." (I am the state) and few doubted that he meant it.

Louis dominated the central government of France and consulted with hand-picked ministers. On three or four occasions a week, Louis would meet with his Chief Council. This consisted of three to five men who were all loyal to the king and hand-picked by him to serve him. Some of the minister who served Louis are still some of the most distinguished in French history. The most prominent were: Jean-Baptiste and Jules Mazarin

In the latter parts of Louis's reign, these men were succeeded by men from the same families that allowed for a continuation of policy and loyalty. Those who rose to prominence were career minded men - men of the Robe - and not princes. In fact Louis deliberately excluded the Princes of the Blood and the established nobility in general. He believed that he could best work with men who relied on him for their position in both French society and politics - the educated middle class - and not those who had a history of rebelling against the monarchy.

In previous years, kings of France had used men called Intendants to establish royal power in the provinces. Areas that were remote from Paris, had developed a culture of governing themselves and paying only lip service to royal authority. The role of the Intendants was to change this. The Intendants went, frequently with royal protection, to these remote areas and stamped royal authority on them. Louis XIV realized their importance and extended them in both numbers and functions. Their task was difficult in that they had to overcome a culture in these regions that had existed for centuries - and were frequently feudal in origin. Another group that the Intendants crossed were men who had bought positions in the regions at times when the king had to raise funds. These men were wealthy but frequently ill-equipped to run these offices competently. Their sole purpose was to run them so that they themselves benefited - something Louis would not tolerate. Intendants were used to reform local/regional financial systems, judicial systems and policing the law. In this sense, they trod on the toes of the local nobility in most, if not all, areas of their life. A successful Intendant was suitably rewarded with promotion - this depended on pleasing the king. If an Intendant had done well it was at the expense of the local nobility and to the advantage of Louis XIV.

Louis ensured that the legal system of France was modernized. In fact, what he introduced was used in France to the time of the Napoleonic reforms. Civil law

was reformed in 1667; criminal law was reformed in 1670; a Maritime Code was introduced in 1672 and a Commercial Code in 1673.

To enforce his rule, Louis needed a large army. By the time of his death in 1715, the army of France stood at 350,000. Not only was it large in size, but it was also a modern army completely controlled by the state. Such an army ensured that the people were well controlled within France. Any hint of rebellion could be suitably dealt with. The army was answerable to the Secretary of State for War and the Intendants who worked for him. These men all relied on Louis for professional advancement and it served their cause to take on one of the throwbacks to the feudal days of France - local nobles controlling their armies in an independent manner. Their armies were taken over by the state which served a two-fold purpose - it reduced the local power of the nobility and it increased royal absolute power at the same time. To avoid a regional governor becoming too powerful and building up too great an influence in any one region, they were moved from one province to another with a degree of regularity. Their work also became more and more ceremonial as their real work was taken over by Lieutenant-Generals appointed in Paris. By doing this, any chance they had of developing some form of regional power was all but ended.

The credit for finding the modern French Navy went to Jean-Baptiste Colbert. In 1643, at the start of Louis's reign, France had about three serviceable naval boats. For Colbert, this represented a weakness that other nations might exploit. Therefore, a great deal of time and effort went into developing a modern navy. This allowed France to follow an aggressive expansionist policy in both colonization and commerce. Both added to the wealth and prestige of France.

The economy relatively prospered in the early years of Louis' reign. Under the guidance of Colbert, the French economy did well. Colbert realized the importance of a sound commercial policy and he viewed that overseas trade was the way ahead. France did well in this area and her economy benefited as a result as more tax revenue was raised. However, the fundamental weakness of the French economy was never tackled. Those who could afford to pay the most tax paid the least as a result of out-dated tax clauses and posts bought by the wealthy nobility. Those who could afford to paid the least. Such a system kept many in poverty. Therefore, the greatest number of people were the poor who paid the most tax. This left them with barely enough to live off let alone buy goods that were taxed. Those who had the money to spend were the least in number and their total tax liability would have been completely disproportionate to their wealth. In one sense, the success of Colbert was such that this obvious problem was suitably disguised so that future politicians would have to solve it.

Louis XIV and Religion

Louis XIV held simple views regarding religion that dated back to Francis I - that the king controlled the Catholic Church and that the Church should do his bidding. This brought Louis into clashes with various popes but they could not take on one of Europe's most powerful monarchs and Louis got his way regarding religion. To Louis, what was good for him was good for France - he saw no difference in the two and a Church that was subordinate to Louis was good for him.

Historically, France had experienced a great deal of turmoil regarding religion. The French Wars of Religion had torn France apart and had threatened the monarchy as an institution. Louis himself was a strong believer that the Roman Catholic Church was an essential tool within France of maintaining control over the people. Louis wanted religious uniformity enforced. This was especially true in the second part of his reign when he became more and more influenced by Jesuits. Louis viewed unorthodoxy as divisive and a possible/probable source of rebellion.

Louis used a similar policy in the Church as he did in political appointments. Louis ignored the Noblesse de Blood when it came to church appointments and appointed men from the Noblesse de Robe. Once again, these men came to rely on the king for their position and they backed him in full in the General Assembly of the Clergy. The Church backed Louis financially and took his side when he clashed with the pope in Rome - even over the vexed question of who actually controlled the Catholic Church in France - the king or the pope.

During the bulk of his reign, Louis ordered the persecution of the Jansenists. Those who followed Jansenism believed in predestination - which was against what the Catholic Church preached. Predestination was also a fundamental part of the beliefs of the Calvinist faith. Jansenists were openly hostile to the Jesuits and as the Jesuits became more and more influential in the life of Louis, the king tolerated them less and less.

Louis was less tolerant of the Huguenots. When Louis became king in 1643, there may have been as many as 2 million Huguenots in France. Therefore, in simple numeric terms they represented a far greater threat to French stability than the Jansenists did and previous French history had shown that the Huguenots could be less than loyal to the crown. However, in the reign of Louis, the Huguenots had been a loyal and industrious group that had done a great deal for France with regards to modernizing her economy. In every sense they were a benefit to France - so why did Louis decide to persecute them?

The Assembly of Clergy had been pressing him for a number of years to take action against the 'heretics'. In his later life, Louis also came under the influence of Madame de Maintenon who was a fervent Catholic and had Jesuit confessors

who soon had the ear of the king. Both groups wanted action taken against the Huguenots.

To start with Louis embarked on a policy to bring the Huguenots back to the Catholic Church. The terms of the Edict of Nantes were strictly enforced (for decades they had not been) and decrees were issued which made it more and more difficult for a Huguenot to get a job in any of the professions. This effectively excluded them from government posts. Those who did revert back to Catholicism, were given cash payments in an effort to attract others to do the same. This policy had only a limited impact. In some areas, the Huguenots had troops billeted on them - the 'deal' being that they would be removed if those in that region reverted back to the Church. Finally in October 1685, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes and introduced the Edict of Fontainebleau. This made Protestantism illegal. As a result, 200,000 Huguenots fled the country. Their loss was badly felt as many of these people had a great deal to offer the economy of France. They took their talents to Brandenburg-Prussia, the United Provinces or Britain. Such an influx of refugees did a great deal to anger the respective governments of those countries that took in the refugees. The governments were not angry with the refugees - but with Louis. To them, what he did to the Huguenots showed what a tyrant he had become and what a potential danger he was to Europe. Ironically, a policy that was meant to bring more stability to France, brought increased instability to Europe with powerful nations siding with one another against Louis.