**Definition: Louis XIV from Philip's Encyclopedia**

King of France (1643-1715). Cardinal Mazarin dominated the early part of his reign. From 1661, Louis was the epitome of absolute monarchy and was known as the 'Sun King' for the luxury of his court. As ministers, he chose men of low rank or the junior nobility, such as Colbert. Louis' wars of aggrandisement in the Low Countries and elsewhere drained the treasury. His revocation of the Edict of Nantes drove Huguenots abroad, weakening the economy. In the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), a European coalition decisively defeated the French armies.

**Summary Article: Louis XIV, king of France**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1638–1715, king of France (1643–1715), son and successor of King Louis XIII.

**Early Reign**

After his father's death his mother, Anne of Austria, was regent for Louis, but the real power was wielded by Anne's adviser, Cardinal Mazarin. Louis did not take over the government until Mazarin's death (1661). By then France was economically exhausted by the Thirty Years War, by the Fronde, and by fiscal abuses. But the centralizing policies of Richelieu and Mazarin had prepared the ground for Louis, under whom absolute monarchy, based on the theory of divine right, reached its height.

**Domestic Policy**

Louis's reign can be characterized by the remark attributed to him, “L'état, c'est moi” [I am the state]. Louis continued the nobility's exemption from taxes but forced its members into financial dependence on the crown, thus creating a court nobility occupied with ceremonial etiquette and petty intrigues. The provincial nobles also lost political power. Louis used the bourgeoisie to build his centralized bureaucracy. He curtailed local authorities and created specialized ministries, filled by professionals responsible to him. Under his minister Jean Baptiste Colbert industry and commerce expanded on mercantilist principles and a navy was developed. The war minister, the marquis de Louvois, established the foundations of French military greatness.

**Religious Affairs**

Louis increasingly imposed religious uniformity. His persecution of the Huguenots in the 1680s culminated (1685) in the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (see Nantes, Edict of). The resultant exodus of Protestants, many of whom were merchants and skilled artisans, intensified the kingdom's economic decline and further alienated the Protestant powers. Louis also suppressed Jansenism (see under Jansen, Cornelis). Despite this concern with religious orthodoxy, he favored Gallicanism, and controversy with the popes approached schism (1673–93) before Louis abandoned this position.

**Foreign Policy**

Louis strove vigorously for supremacy in foreign affairs. His marriage (1660) to the Spanish princess Marie Thérèse served as a pretext for the War of Devolution (1667–68), which netted him part of Flanders, although the Dutch then moved against him with the Triple Alliance of 1668. Relations with the Dutch were exacerbated by commercial rivalry and in 1672 Louis, determined to crush Holland, began...
the third of the Dutch Wars, which depleted his treasury.

For the next ten years the king limited his policies to diplomacy. He set up “chambers of reunion” to unearth legal grounds for claims on a number of cities, which Louis promptly annexed. Fear of Louis’s rapacity resulted in a European coalition (see Augsburg, League of; Grand Alliance, War of the), which confronted him when he attacked the Holy Roman Empire in 1688. This war ended with the Treaty of Ryswick (1697), through which Louis lost minor territories. Louis’s last war, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), left France in debt and greatly weakened militarily; nevertheless, Louis’s grandson retained the Spanish throne.

The Court

Although he had a series of mistresses, Louis XIV finally came under the influence of Mme de Maintenon, whom he married morganatically (1684) after the queen’s death. A great supporter of the arts, Louis patronized the foremost writers and artists of his time, including Molière, Jean Racine, Jean de La Fontaine, and Charles Le Brun. The architect Jules Mansart supervised the building of the lavish palace of Versailles. Because of the brilliance of his court, Louis was called “Le Roi Soleil” [the Sun King] and “Le Grand Monarque.” He was succeeded by his great-grandson, Louis XV.

Bibliography

For contemporary sources see the incisive memoirs of the Cardinal de Retz; the extremely prejudiced but indispensable memoirs of the duc de Saint-Simon; and the letters of Mme de Sévigné, which brilliantly portray the social life of the time.

See also biographies by J. B. Wolf (1968) and P. Erlanger (tr. 1970); studies by P. Goubert (1972), O. Bernier (1987), and P. Sonnino, ed. (1990).