LOUIS XIV: PRIMARY SOURCES PART ONE

As you read this section highlight information that answers the following questions:

1. What were Louis XIV’s most important characteristics as he saw them?
2. What evidence does St. Simon provide that supports or contradicts Louis’ claims?

Louis XIV: Description of Kingship

In 1666 Louis wrote a memorandum to his son describing the functions and conduct of a king. This selection is an excerpt from that memorandum.

Without any doubt, two things were absolutely necessary for ruling: very hard work on my part, and a wise choice of persons who were capable of carrying out my work. I set a rule for myself to work regularly twice each day for two or three hours at a time. Each time I worked with different persons. This regular work did not include the hours which I spent privately working on matters of state, or the time I was able to give on particular occasions when special problems arose and I permitted people to talk to me about urgent problems at any time.

I cannot tell you how important my resolution to work was. I felt myself, as it were, uplifted in thought and courage. I found that I was a new man, and joyfully scolded myself for not having been aware of work’s importance earlier. My timidity, especially on occasions when I had to speak in public, disappeared in no time. I felt that I was king and born to be one. I experienced a delicious feeling which you will not know until you are king.

A king must be guided by his own good sense, which is natural and effortless. A king, however skillful and enlightened his ministers are, is the principal cause of good work being done. He cannot act without seeing his effect on the state. Success, even in small matters, gratifies us as well as success in great affairs. There is no satisfaction equal to that of noting every day some progress you have made in glorious and lofty enterprises and in the happiness of your people which comes from the work you have done yourself.

My son, the work of a king is agreeable. One must have his eyes open to the whole earth. He must endeavor to learn each hour the news concerning every province and every nation, the secrets of every court, the moods and weaknesses of every prince and every foreign minister. He must be well informed on all matters from commerce and science to art and philosophy. He must find out the secrets of his subjects, and discover the selfish interests of those who approach him with their real motives disguised. I know of no other pleasure I would take in place of the work of a king.

Saint-Simon: A Noble’s Appraisal of Louis XIV

The Duc de Saint-Simon was a member of one of the most prominent noble families of France. His memoirs record the manners and customs of Louis’ court and life at Versailles in vivid detail.

Louis XIV made for a brilliant court. His figure, his grace, his beauty, his grand bearing, even the tone of his voice and his majestic and natural charm set him apart from other men as the king. Even if he had been born a simple private gentleman, he still would have excelled in all social festivities. However, intrigues against the king during his childhood made Louis suspicious of intelligent, educated, noble, and highly principled men, and as he advanced in years, he began to hate them. He wished to reign by himself, and his jealousy on this point soon became a weakness. The superior ability of his early
ministers and generals soon wearied him. He liked no one to be in any way superior to him. He chose his ministers, therefore, not for their knowledge, but for their ignorance; not for their capacity, but for their want of it. He liked to teach them even the most trivial things. He unceasingly concerned himself with the smallest details of his troops, his minor household officials, and the way his mansions were built and maintained. He would even instruct his cooks, though he taught them things they had known for years.

His vanity, his unreasonable desire to be admired, ruined him. His ministers, his generals, his mistresses, his courtiers soon understood this fatal weakness. They praised him and spoiled him, for it was the one way they could approach him. This is why his ministers, drawn from the non-noble class, had so much authority. They had better opportunity to flatter him and tell him that all good works came from his actions.

At eight o’clock the chief valet de chambre, who alone had slept in the royal chamber awoke the king. The chief physician, the chief surgeon, and the nurse entered at the same time. The nurse kissed the king; the others rubbed [him] and often changed his shirt. At the quarter, the grand chamberlain drew back the curtains, which had been closed, and presented the holy water from the vase at the head of the bed. The same officer gave him his dressing gown; immediately after, other privileged courtiers entered in time to find the king putting on his shoes and stockings.

As soon as he was dressed, Louis prayed to God, at the side of his bed; the captain of the guards came to the balustrade during the prayer, after which the king passed into his cabinet. He found there a very numerous company, for it included everybody in any office. He gave orders to each for the day; thus within half a quarter of an hour, it was known what he meant to do; and then this entire crowd dispersed. This was then a good opportunity for talking with the king, for example, about plans of gardens and buildings; and conversation lasted more or less according to the person engaged in it. While he was going to and returning from mass, everybody spoke to him who wished.

The king, upon returning from mass, asked almost immediately for the council. On Sunday, and often on Monday, there was a council of state; on Tuesday a finance council; on Wednesday a council of state; on Saturday a finance council. Rarely were two held in one day or any on Thursday or Friday. Once or twice a month there was a council of dispatches on Monday morning. Thursday morning was almost always blank. It was the day for audiences that the king wished to give. On Friday after the mass, the king was with his confessor, and the length of their audiences was limited by nothing. At Fontainebleau on the mornings when there was no council, the king usually passed from mass to Madame de Maintenon’s. It was the time of their tête-à-tête without interruption.

Typically after the noon meal, the king immediately entered his cabinet. That was the time for distinguished people to speak to him. He stopped at the door a moment to listen and then entered; very rarely did anyone follow him, never without asking for permission; and for this few had the courage.

Upon returning from the afternoon walk or drive anybody might speak to the king from the moment he left his coach until he reached the foot of the staircase. He then changed his dress and rested in his private chamber until the major social event of the evening.

At ten o’clock his supper was served. This supper was always on a grand scale, the royal household at table, and a large number of courtiers and ladies present, sitting or standing.

After supper the king stood some moments encircled by all his court; then, with bows to the ladies, passed into his cabinet, where on arriving, he gave his orders. He passed a little less than an hour there, seated in an armchair. The king, wishing to retire, went and fed his dogs; then said good night, passed into his bed chamber where he said his prayers, as in the morning, then undressed. Then commenced what was called the petit coucher, at which only the specially privileged remained. They did not leave until he got into bed.
As you read this section highlight information that answers the following questions:

1. How does Princess Palatine characterize life at Versailles?
2. How does Archbishop Fenelon describe Louis XIV’s ministers and their affect on France?
3. How do these views contrast with Louis XIV’s descriptions of his life at Versailles and his manner of ruling? (See the first set of documents for Louis’ views)

**Princess Palatine: A Visitor’s Viewpoint**

*Princess Palatine, a frequent visitor at the court, wrote the following letter home describing conditions at Versailles.*

The *appartement* [two large rooms at Versailles where the King played billiards and served refreshments] is an absolutely intolerable experience. We all troop into the billiard room and lie on our stomachs or squat, no one uttering a word, until the King has finished his game. Then we all get up and go to the music room where someone is singing an aria from some old opera which we have heard a hundred times already. After that, we go to the ball, which lasts from eight to ten o’clock. Those who, like me, do not dance have to sit there for hours without budging for an instant, and can neither see nor hear anything except an endless minuet. At a quarter to ten, we all follow one another in a quadrille [a dance popular at the time], like children reciting a lesson, and then the ball is finally over.

**Archbishop Fenelon: Letter to Louis**

*The following selection is adapted from a letter written by Fénelon, a French archbishop, to Louis XIV. Archbishop Fénelon served as tutor to one of the king’s children. This letter was sent anonymously.*

For nearly thirty years, your principal Ministers have destroyed and reversed all the ancient customs of the state in order to raise your authority to its highest level. They no longer speak of France and its constitution; they only speak of the King and of his royal pleasure. They have pushed your revenues and your expenses to unprecedented heights. They have raised you up to the sky in order, they say, to outshine the grandeur of all your predecessors. They have impoverished the whole of France with the introduction of monstrous luxuries of court. Your ministers have been harsh, haughty, unjust, and violent. They have recognized no other rule but to threaten, to crush, and to destroy all who resist them. They have rendered your name odious, and the whole French nation intolerable to all our neighbors. They have caused almost twenty years of bloody wars.

Meanwhile, your people die of hunger as the cultivation of the soil is not producing enough food. All business enterprise is stagnant, and no longer offers employment to working men. Instead of taking money from these poor people, one should give them alms and feed them.

The people themselves, it should be said, who hitherto have loved you, are beginning to lose confidence and even respect. Your victories and conquests no longer cause them to rejoice; they are full of bitterness and despair. They believe that you love only your authority and your glory. There, Sire, is the state of things. You live as one whose eyes are fatally blinded.