

## Biographical Briefing on Louis XIV

**Directions:** The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Louis XIV and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Louis XIV became King of France in 1643 at the age of five. However, Cardinal Mazarin, the head of the Catholic Church in France, controlled the government until Louis was 23. At that time France was the most populated country in Europe and the most prosperous. Wealthy nobles with great estates, who had for many years held the most control in the country, were now being forced to share that power and influence with a middle class of merchants. These merchants began to trade throughout the rest of the world and became increasingly wealthy. Louis XIV's lifestyle symbolized the prosperity of the times in his country. He built himself a whole new city known as Versailles near the country's capitol of Paris. Gigantic in size, his palace was full of polished mirrors, gleaming chandeliers and fountains. Versailles was the wonder of Europe and Louis was envied by many other kings. He has been called the "Sun King" because it seemed that his power and influence radiated out to the entire world.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **At what age did Louis XIV become the acting king of France?**
- **Who controlled the wealth and prosperity of France at this time?**
- **How did Louis XIV symbolize the times in which he ruled?**

Louis XIV believed in his right to have "absolute" power of the country that he ruled. He was considered an "absolute" ruler because he was not legally controlled by any other persons or institutions in the country. He had the power to rule in whatever way he saw fit. This philosophy of "absolutism" actually originated within the Catholic Church, which had a great influence on Louis XIV's thinking. The church taught that all power comes from God, and that all who hold power are responsible to God for the way they use it. Therefore, the law was whatever the King wanted—free from the influences of parliaments, other elected officials, or even the people themselves. This idea became known as the "divine right of kings"—that kings had the power to rule because they, through birth, were chosen by God to rule.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **What is "absolute" power?**
- **How did "absolutism" originate?**
- **To whom are kings responsible for their decisions?**

Louis XIV ensured his "absolute" control of France by strengthening the central government. France had long been a country of smaller territories ruled by wealthy landowning nobles who fought among themselves. The Estates General composed of these nobles had been the

ruling parliament in France at one time but had not met since 1615. Louis XIV abolished the Estates General and gave many of the nobles positions at Versailles to keep them under his control. While they were waiting on the King at the palace and drinking and eating to excess, others were doing the job of running the real affairs of government according to Louis XIV's wishes. These were the quickly rising middle-class merchants and professionals. Louis XIV wanted them to administer his affairs because they had more loyalty to him. Louis XIV also controlled the army and made sure all armed persons in France fought only for him.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **What did Louis XIV do to ensure his “absolute” control?**
- **How did Louis XIV make sure the nobles in France stayed loyal to him?**
- **What advantage was there for Louis XIV in controlling the army?**

The “absolute” control of France reached its high point in Louis XIV's policies toward religion. He supported the Catholic Church as the national church and punished any movements to break away from this faith. He considered religious unity necessary to the strength and dignity of his rule. His Catholic advisors encouraged him in his actions. In 1685 Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had traditionally given Protestants—a Christian group opposed to Catholicism—the right to freedom of religion. After this Protestants in France were persecuted by having soldiers stationed in their homes to ensure that they did not practice their religions. Many fled to Holland, Germany, and America during this time. Their loss was hard on the French economy because some of the most wealthy and successful businessmen were Protestants.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **What were Louis XIV's policies on religion?**
- **How did he treat subjects of different religions?**
- **In what ways do you think this policy really affected France?**

Louis XIV ruled France for over 60 years. His reign is remembered as the grandest in France's history. His belief in his own greatness and divine right to rule encouraged him to use his military to expand the boundaries of France. In the beginning the people of France loved these military exploits, as it made France seem all the more strong, and new territory meant new income. The battles increased the people's love for him and therefore his power. However, other countries in Europe feared the King's greed and began wars of their own to stop him. The string of conflicts left France weakened and in debt. It was the strain of these wars that finally turned his people against him. Louis XIV died in 1715.

Stop here  
and discuss



- **Why did Louis XIV want to expand his kingdom militarily?**
- **Why did the people support this idea?**
- **How did the foreign wars eventually erode Louis XIV's popularity?**