

AN EVALUATION OF LOUIS XIV: PRIMARY SOURCES

DIRECTIONS: As you read these primary sources, evaluate the rule of Louis XIV. Consider how each document describes Louis XIV's life at Versailles and his manner of ruling. Write your answers to the questions and notes on a separate sheet of paper.

Document 1: 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.

Consider: What were Louis XIV's most important characteristics as he saw them?

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.

Document 2: 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.

Consider: What evidence does St. Simon provide that supports or contradicts Louis' claims?

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.

*****Continue Reading:** Saint-Simon, “Memoires: The Aristocracy Undermined in France.” P. 217 (Sherman Text)

Document 3: Princess Palatine: A Visitor’s Viewpoint

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

Consider: How does Princess Palatine characterize life 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.

Document 4: 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.

Consider: How does Archbishop Fenelon describe Louis XIV’s ministers and their effect on France?

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.

Document 5: Hyacinth Rigaud, “Portrait of Louis XIV in Coronation Robes,” 1701.

At the request of his grandson, Philip V, Louis XIV commissioned the French painter Hyacinthe Rigaud to paint this portrait in 1701. Louis XIV kept it at Versailles and it became the “official portrait of Louis XIV.”

Consider: What does this portrait reveal about Louis XIV’s character and how he wanted his people to remember him?



SUMMARY/EVALUATION:

1. How do these views (documents 2-5) contrast with Louis XIV’s descriptions of his life at Versailles and his manner of ruling? What were his strengths? Weaknesses?