

Louis XIV Decline

For Louis XIV, the path has now become sheer and rigid. The “sun”, of the king seems to be replaced by darkness as he faces a row of unfortunate events that ultimately led to his end. The starting point of his reign was followed by a series of successes, however by now Louis XIV starts loosing grip of what he had maintained in the past. Anticidentally, he was capable of overcoming obstacles along the way that distracted him from reaching his goals, yet now his supremacy becomes no longer visible. Instead, each circumstance and occurrence encountered slowly induced his downfall. It is a distinct period from the one before it, as it portrays the weakness of Louis XIV. Somewhere between the 1682 and 1688, the king’s destiny becomes uncertain. His capability in mastering the military and financial stability, all seem to fail. Earlier, the Sun King as explained by Voltaire, “was at this time at the height of his greatness”, hence one inevitably questions; what had consequently advanced his unforeseen decline?

Misfortune for Louis XIV was triggering the collapse of French stability and thus his reign. In both cases, it was not a sudden decline, but one which had progressed by time. French stability in finance and economy started to set back due to failure in wars, the introduction of new systems and partly taxation. Hereafter, Louis’s reign ultimately reached its end by the death of some of his relatives and finally his own.

Nevertheless throughout the historic background of Louis, other minor factors arise regarding his downfall. Here, I am referring to two particular characters, that of Colbert a French statesman and Madam de Maintenon who was Louis XIV 2nd mistress. Both individuals attributed somehow to his end, as they greatly influenced both his social and personal life which thus reflected his governorship. Colbert, was largely responsible for the industrial and commercial development of the seventeenth century France and for the creation of an effective navy. He became Louis’s XIV chief minister and served a highly important purpose in the administration of France as regards to reforms and war. As it was, the king relied heavily on his statesman, and in fact Colbert’s death (1683) may have led to the instability of France. Louis XIV was now every inch a king –*Nec Paribus*

Impar (V.M.Milanes, *Louis XIV and France*, London) but certainly this did not support his reign. On the other hand, after the death of Queen Maria Theresa, Louis opted once more to re-marry. By 1684, Madame de Maintenon who was a nurse and a widow, become Louis's second mistress. Such marriage however was conducted secretly and the bride was not given the status of Queen as she owned the disparity in her social status. To an extent this might have insulted the public, since she was not crowned as Queen she did not compliment the "god like figure" of the king. However, as illustrated by David Ogg "she had a refinement and a sympathetic understanding, and she influenced her royal consort by her qualities of mind and character" (D. Ogg, *Louis XIV*, London 1933) It may be observed that Madame de Maintenon substituted the role of Colbert who had been recently gone. Hence, Louis filled the void of his statesman ideas regarding the governorship of France with that of his wife. In fact she may be seen responsible for the insensible measures taken by the King in the following years, mostly that of the revocation of "Edict of Nantes".

Yet the actual decline sets off by the introduction of new laws, systems and mostly the involvement in wars. By doing so, Louis ought to enhance his prestige and popularity, but was this the outcome? Perhaps if things proceeded the way he planned he could have reached his aim, but this time fortune turned its back on him and the King was no longer considered *Le grand Roi*; The great king (V. M.Milanes, *Louis XIV and France*, London)

The Revocation of The Edict of Nantes was in fact his "primer" error. It all started in 1661, when the King began a severe persecution of the French protestants known as the Huguenots. Such tyranny over the Huguenots continued, and ultimately Edict of Nantes which preserved the liberties of the French protestants, was abolished. More than 400,000 Huguenots, many of them leaders in trade, industry, and the professions opted to flee from France. It was not the intention of Louis's government to expel the Huguenots but wanted them to stay in France to guarantee their enforced Catholicism. However, results for France were not as predicted. Economically, the Revocation meant the ruin of Colbert's enterprises and lack of capital in France, since the Protestants played a significant part in such matters. Persecution of the Huguenots did not however concern only France but the rest of European powers.

The Grand Alliance between the powers was in fact steered to halt Louis XIV of France's expansions. By 1686, Spain, Holland, Sweden, the Holy Roman Empire, England and several smaller states formed a European coalition against France. Originally such alliance was known as the League of Augsburg but after Britain joined in, it was renamed as the Grand Alliance. War started when Louis XIV opted to invade the Palatinate (Rhineland; region of Germany) and "*reduce the country to ashes*" (Voltaire, op cit, p 149). He later also aided the unsuccessful attempt of James II to regain the English throne from William III. Both actions altered agitation for those part of the Grand Alliance, which inevitably ended in war. As it was, Louis seems to be quite confident in over riding the supremacy of the rest of the powers as he was after all the "Sun King". But sometimes the past does not guarantee the future. Following a series of battles Louis by time became out of money, which thus made him unable to sustain his armies. Now, the only option was to surrender. Consequently, the peace treaty of Ryswick took place amongst the powers, including France. By such Treaty, France lost several territories across the Holy Roman Empire and the Duchy of Lorraine but was granted Saint-Domingue. (Later to become Haiti). Moreover, Louis was forced to not assist James II of England and thus to recognize William III as king of England. Issues seemed to settle, but will this hinder Louis XIV from seeking power? Or was this "*a preliminary armistice of vigilance and preparation*" ? (H.Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II*, London, p 700)

The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-04) reveals the King's persistence for sovereignty. The principal claims to succeed the childless Charles II of Spain, last of the Spanish Habsburg line, were those of Louis XIV and of Holy Roman Empire Emperor Leopold I of the Austrian Habsburg. Both monarchs were grandsons of Philipp III of Spain. Since other nations looked upon a union of Spain with either France or Austria as a threat to balance of power, both claimants promised to keep Spain Independent. Despite such opposition, Louis opted to transfer the Spanish throne to his grandson Philip, duke of Anjou, whereas Leopold sponsored his second son, Archduke Charles. Both were greedy for power, and reluctant to let it slip away. Yet the final decision was in the hands of Charles II. Eventually Charles II died in 1700, leaving his throne to Philip, who as Philip V established the Bourbon line in Spain. Choice of the French successor aroused the Austrian Habsburgs, who wanted to keep Spain and its possessions in the family. In 1701 Austria, England,

Prussia, and the most of the German principalities formed the Grand Alliance to support the Austrian claim to the Spanish throne. On the other hand, France was joined by Spain and Bavaria. War erupted and took place mostly in the Spanish Netherlands and in Germany. Both the Grand Alliance and France, experienced a series of victories and defeats throughout wartime. Agitation however started to lessen as from the crowning of Archduke Charles as king of the Holy Roman Empire. Austria's allies feared that the Habsburgs would dominate Europe if Charles made it to the Spanish throne. It is meant that the allies were as much opposed to the union of Spain and Austria as to that of Spain and France. As a result, the Grand Alliance was dissolved and peace negotiations began in 1712 between Austria and France and with the rest of the powers. (Treaty of Utrecht, 1713) Under the treaties , the European powers, acquiesced to Philip as King of Spain but divided the Spanish European Empire.

At this point, one must not overlook life in France. Blinded by wars, Louis XIV ignored the state in which his "hometown" was in. The monarchy was slowly shattering in terms of finance and economy due to the King's expenditure throughout war time. Tax demands were already prevailing, and as the king imposed new taxes for military costs, distress amongst the French increased. It is crucial to mention that it took several years until the crown started to tax not only the peasants but also the rich through the *capitation* tax. The situation continued to worsen with the natural disasters known as the "the Great Winter", which had further caused famine and misery. Consequently, *"Here, men, women and children suffered, rioted, groaned and starved or froze to death. Louis had become a stranger to his people."* (V.M.Milanes, *Louis XIV and France*, London) Louis XIV is now haunted by failure in wars, famine amongst the French and France's financial and economic instability. His reign has almost disintegrated, yet he managed to survive. Still at this point, misfortune attacks him deeper than ever. This time it is not France but his Family. The King was "crushed with grief, and his eyes were flooded with tears" as he faced the death of his loved ones. Firstly his son, the Duke of Burgoyne dies and later one of his two infant great-grandsons died too. Shortly afterwards, his grandson's wife, the young Duchess of Burgundy was poisoned by means of a snuff that was given to her. Louis adored her so much, that her agony and death effected him strongly and deeply.

It was then, that death turned his way. Just four days before his 77th birthday, Louis died of gangrene (an illness which deteriorates the body tissue) at Versailles. The French “*drank and sang and laughed*” (Voltaire), *many of them [pouring] forth insults on seeing the hearse pass by*” (Duclos), as they were still “stuck” in misery. The last thirty years of his triumphs were all forgotten and so were the genius characteristics of the “Sun king”. Despite the victories and the great mastering, his reign ended into a steep decline. Perhaps, he was too adventurous. If he had acknowledged that fortune tend to not always come in our way, he would have not be blinded by achievements. His ambitious character was responsible for his glories, but yet can be blamed for his decline. Overall, at such century Louis may have not retained his dignity but he has surely engraved his name in history- *Le Roi Soleil*.

Bibliography

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