



## Biographical Briefing on King 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 King 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 5. Until Louis was 23, Cardinal Mazarin, the head of the French Catholic Church, controlled the government. At that time, France was the most populated and prosperous country in Europe. Wealthy nobles with great estates, who had been powerful for many years, were now being forced to share their power and influence with a new middle class of merchants who were becoming wealthy through international trade. Louis's own grandiose (extravagant) life-style symbolized the grandeur (magnificence) and wealth of his country. At only 5 feet 4 inches in height, Louis was a charismatic leader who built himself a glorious new city named Versailles near Paris. The enormous Palace of Versailles was full of polished mirrors, gleaming chandeliers, and gardens with fountains. Versailles was marveled at throughout Europe and envied by many other kings. He came to be called the "Sun King" because it seemed that his power and influence radiated from Versailles out to the entire world.



- **What was France like when Louis assumed the throne?**
- **What did Louis' rich life-style symbolize?**
- **Describe Versailles.**

Louis XIV believed in his right to exercise absolute power over France. He was considered an absolute ruler because no other persons or institutions in France could exercise control over him. Louis believed that, as the king, he should be informed about everything in his country; he should have sole power to decide France's foreign policy; he should control how French money was spent; and he should have the right to keep his actions secret if he so chose. This philosophy of absolutism was supported by the Catholic Church, an institution that was very influential in Louis' thinking. The church taught that kings were chosen by God and thus had divine (God given) right to rule. Since all power came from God, the king was only responsible to God—not to the people—for the way in which he exercised that power. Louis believed that "however bad a king may be, the revolt of his subjects is criminal." The doctrine of Divine Right taught that only God had the power and right to punish a bad ruler. Louis' court preacher, Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, was a staunch defender of Divine Right. Bossuet wrote, "As all perfection and all strength are united in God, so all the power of individuals is united in the person of the [king]. What grandeur that a single man should embody so much!"



- **What is “absolute” power?**
- **What did the Catholic Church teach about Divine Right?**
- **According to Divine Right, to whom is the king responsible?**

Louis XIV ensured his absolute control of France by strengthening royal power over the nobles and French provincial governments. To do this, Louis sent royal officials to the provinces to ensure that local governments were obedient and ordered that all local mayors had to be approved by the king. At one time, the Estates General, composed of nobles, had been a powerful political body in France that monarchs consulted for advice. Louis abolished the Estates General and stripped the nobles of all political authority. To observe and control the nobles, he provided many of them with positions at the beautiful Versailles palace, the center of elite (upper class) social life in France. Instead of nobles, Louis employed middle-class merchants and church leaders to run the real affairs of government because these people had more loyalty to him. Louis also felt that religious unity contributed to the strength of his rule. During Louis’ rule, Protestants (non-Catholic Christians) were persecuted (oppressed) more and more. In 1685 he revoked (abolished) the Edict of Nantes, a law that had ensured freedom of religion for Protestants. After this, soldiers were stationed in Protestant homes to ensure that the families did not practice their religion. Many Protestants fled France for Holland, Germany, and America during this time. The loss of successful Protestant businessmen damaged the French economy.



- **How did Louis increase royal power over the provinces?**
- **How did Louis treat the nobles?**
- **How did Louis treat the Protestants?**

Louis XIV is famous for saying of himself, “I am the state [government].” His reign of over 60 years was the longest rule by a king in French history. His immense confidence in his own greatness and Divine Right to rule encouraged him to use his control over the military to expand the boundaries of France. In the beginning, the French people loved these military exploits, as it made France seem even stronger, 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 Louis’ greed and went to war against France. Continual fighting eventually left France weakened and in debt. On his deathbed in 1715, Louis confessed that he “loved war too much.”



- **What did Louis mean when he said, “I am the state”?**
- **What did Louis’ confidence lead him to do?**
- **What condition was France in by the time Louis died?**