



FOURTH EDITION

Makers of the Western Tradition

Portraits from History

VOLUME 2

Edited by J. KELLEY SOWARDS

Makers of the Western Tradition

**PORTRAITS FROM HISTORY
VOLUME 2
Fourth Edition**

To my parents, in love and gratitude

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Louis XIV:

“The Sun King”

1638	born
1643	succeeded to throne under a regency
1660	beginning of Louis' personal government
1667–1668	War of Devolution
1689–1697	War of the Grand Alliance
1701–1714	War of the Spanish Succession
1715	died

In 1661, on the death of the regent Cardinal Mazarin, the personal reign of Louis XIV of France began. Though he was just twenty-three years old, Louis had already been nominally the king for almost twenty years. And he was to rule for more than another half century, through one of the longest, most brilliant, most eventful, and most controversial reigns in the history of modern Europe.

It had been the aim of Cardinal Richelieu, the great first minister of Louis' father, “to make the king supreme in France and France supreme in Europe.” And to an extent Cardinal Richelieu, as well as his successor, Cardinal Mazarin, had been successful. France was the richest and most populous nation in Europe. Her army had surpassed that of Spain as Europe's most formidable military machine. And the two wily cardinals had gained for France a diplomatic ascendancy to match her military might. It remained for Louis XIV to complete their work. In the process he became the archetype of divine-right monarchical absolutism, justifying later historians' labeling of the age that he dominated as the “Age of Absolutism.” Louis took the sun as his emblem, as he himself wrote, for its nobility, its uniqueness, and “the light that it imparts to the other heavenly bodies,” and as “a most vivid and a most beautiful image for a great monarch.”¹

From the beginning of his personal rule, Louis XIV intended to make the other states of Europe—“the other heavenly bodies”—swing in the

¹ Louis XIV, . . . *Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, Paul Sonnino, trans. (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 103–4.

orbit of his sun. In 1667 he began the so-called War of Devolution to claim the disputed provinces of the Spanish Netherlands for his Spanish wife. He fought a series of wars with Spain and the Empire, the Dutch, and the English, culminating in the great European conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), to set his grandson on the throne of Spain and create a Bourbon “empire” to dominate the continent. In the course of these wars, he gained the hostility of most of Europe and was finally brought to terms in 1715 at the Peace of Utrecht. Even though Louis was reported on his deathbed to have said, “I have loved war too much,” he had, nevertheless, come closer to making France supreme in Europe than had any ruler before Napoleon.

Louis XIV disliked Paris. From early in his reign, he made increasing use of the royal estate of Versailles, some ten miles out of the city, as his principal residence and the locus of the court. Versailles grew in size and magnificence to become the most visible symbol of and the most enduring monument to Louis’ absolutism. An English visitor, Lord Montague, sniffily called it “something the foolishest in the world,” and thought Louis himself “the vainest creature alive.”² But Versailles was far from foolish and, though vain indeed, Louis XIV was a consummate realist. Versailles was not simply a symbol of his absolutism; it was a working part of it. The function of Versailles was to help make the king supreme in France.

Royal supremacy was, in Louis’ reign as before, most clearly threatened by the power and independence of the great nobility. On the very eve of Louis’ personal rule, he, his mother, Mazarin, and the court had been faced with an uprising, called the Fronde, led by the great Princes of the Blood. Though it failed, Louis never forgot the Fronde. It became his deliberate policy to keep the great nobility at Versailles, separated from their provincial estates and the roots of their political power, and to redirect their interests and their energies. It may be argued that the elaborate court behavior that developed at Versailles with its perpetual spectacles and entertainments, its endless adulteries and affairs, its incredible tedium and banality—and its perpetual attendance upon the king—was really a device to neutralize the power of the great nobility while the king governed with the aid of a succession of ministers, appointed by him, answerable to him alone, and capable of being dismissed by him without question. It has been suggested by more than one scholar that Louis XIV was the archetype not only of the absolute monarch but of the “royal bureaucrat.” The court life at Versailles was surely the most glittering side-show ever staged. But it was a show that fascinated the very people who played their parts in it; and it has fascinated—and distracted—observers ever since.

² Quoted in John C. Rule, “Louis XIV, Roi-Bureaucrate,” in *Louis XIV and the Craft of Kingship*, ed. John C. Rule (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), p. 42.

The Memoirs

LOUIS, DUC DE SAINT-SIMON

The sources for the reign of Louis XIV are an embarrassment of riches—an enormous volume of public documents and official records, reports, and inventories and such a mass of royal correspondence that it still has not been completely edited. Many of the figures of the court wrote letters as prodigiously as the king, and almost as many wrote memoirs as well. Of these the most important are the memoirs of Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon.

Saint-Simon was born at Versailles in 1675 and lived there for the next thirty years. Through much of that time—and throughout the rest of his long life—he kept his memoirs with a compulsive passion. In one edition, they run to forty-three volumes, and a complete text has yet to be published. Saint-Simon's memoirs are important not only for their completeness but also for the perspective they give on the age of Louis XIV. Saint-Simon fancied himself a chronicler in the tradition of Froissart or Joinville and saw his literary labor as preparing him in the knowledge of "great affairs" "for some high office." But preferment never came. Saint-Simon was never more than a minor figure of the court, moving on the fringes of the affairs that his memoirs so carefully record.

Saint-Simon blamed the king for his neglect—as he quite properly should have, for nothing happened at Versailles without the wish of the king, and the king simply disliked Saint-Simon. Saint-Simon also accused the king of demeaning the old aristocracy to which Saint-Simon so self-consciously belonged. This complaint is the nagging, insistent theme that runs like a leitmotif through the memoirs. Saint-Simon believed that Louis deliberately preferred "the vile bourgeoisie" to the aristocracy for high office and great affairs. Although the claim is somewhat exaggerated, it is indeed true that Louis preferred the lesser nobility for his bureaucrats because they had no separate power base beyond the king's preferment.

But while Saint-Simon hated his king, he was also fascinated by him, for, like it or not, Louis was the center of the world in which Saint-Simon lived. He set the fashion in dress, language, manners, and morals. Even his afflictions inspired instant emulation: after the king underwent a painful operation, no fewer than thirty courtiers presented themselves to the court surgeon and demanded that the same operation be performed on them.

Saint-Simon hated Versailles nearly as much as he hated the king, and he described it with the same malicious familiarity—its size, its vulgarity, its inconvenience and faulty planning. But he also described the stifling, debasing, desperate style of life that it dictated for the court nobility so grandly imprisoned there.

One modern scholar has called Saint-Simon "at once unreliable and indispensable."³ We can correct his unreliability, however, by consulting other sources, and he remains indispensable for the picture he gives us of the "other side" of royal absolutism.

We turn now to Saint-Simon at Versailles for Saint-Simon's appraisal of Louis XIV.

HE WAS A prince in whom no one would deny good and even great qualities, but he had many others that were petty or downright bad, and of these it was impossible to determine which were natural and which acquired. Nothing is harder to find than a well-informed writer, none rarer than those who knew him personally, yet are sufficiently unbiased to speak of him without hatred or flattery, and to set down the bare truth for good or ill.

This is not the place to tell of his early childhood. He was king almost from birth, but was deliberately repressed by a mother who loved to govern, and still more so by a wicked and self-interested minister, who risked the State a thousand times for his own aggrandisement. . . .

. . . After Mazarin's death, he had enough intelligence to realize his deliverance, but not enough vigour to release himself. Indeed, that event was one of the finest moments of his life, for it taught him an unshakable principle namely, to banish all prime ministers and ecclesiastics from his councils. Another ideal, adopted at that time, he could never sustain because in the practice it constantly eluded him. This was to govern alone. It was the quality upon which he most prided himself and for which he received most praise and flattery. In fact, it was what he was least able to do. . . .

. . . The King's intelligence was below the average, but was very capable of improvement. He loved glory; he desired peace and good government. He was born prudent, temperate, secretive, master of his emotions and his tongue—can it be believed?—he was born good and just. God endowed him with all the makings of a good and perhaps even of a fairly great king. All the evil in him came from without. His early training was so dissolute that no one dared to go near his apartments, and he would sometimes speak bitterly of those days and tell how they found him one night fallen into the fountain at the Palais Royal. He became very

³ Peter Gay, in the introductory note to *Louis, Duc de Saint-Simon, Versailles, the Court, and Louis XIV*, ed. and trans. Lucy Norton (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. vii.

dependent on others, for they had scarcely taught him to read and write and he remained so ignorant that he learned nothing of historical events nor the facts about fortunes, careers, rank, or laws. This lack caused him sometimes, even in public to make many gross blunders.

You might imagine that as king he would have loved the old nobility and would not have cared to see it brought down to the level of other classes. Nothing was further from the truth. His aversion to noble sentiments and his partiality for his Ministers, who, to elevate themselves, hated and disparaged all who were what they themselves were not, nor ever could be, caused him to feel a similar antipathy for noble birth. He feared it as much as he feared intelligence, and if he found these two qualities united in one person, that man was finished.

His ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers learned soon after he became their master that glory, to him, was a foible rather than an ambition. They therefore flattered him to the top of his bent, and in so doing, spoiled him. Praise, or better, adulation, pleased him so much that the most fulsome was welcome and the most servile even more delectable. . . .

Flattery fed the desire for military glory that sometimes tore him from his loves, which was how Louvois⁴ so easily involved him in major wars and persuaded him that he was a better leader and strategist than any of his generals, a theory which those officers fostered in order to please him. All their praise he took with admirable complacency, and truly believed that he was what they said. Hence his liking for reviews, which he carried to such lengths that he was known abroad as the "Review King," and his preference for sieges, where he could make cheap displays of courage, be forcibly restrained, and show his ability to endure fatigue and lack of sleep. Indeed, so robust was his constitution that he never appeared to suffer from hunger, thirst, heat, cold, rain, or any other kind of weather. He greatly enjoyed the sensation of being admired, as he rode along the lines, for his fine presence and princely bearing, his horsemanship, and other attainments. It was chiefly with talk of campaigns and soldiers that he entertained his mistresses and sometimes his courtiers. He talked well and much to the point; no man of fashion could tell a tale or set a scene better than he, yet his most casual speeches were never lacking in natural and conscious majesty.

He had a natural bent towards details and delighted in busying himself with such petty matters as the uniforms, equipment, drill, and discipline of his troops. He concerned himself no less with his buildings, the conduct of his household, and his living expenses, for he always imagined that he had something to teach the experts, and they received instruction from him as though they were novices in arts which they already knew by heart. To the King, such waste of time appeared to deserve his

⁴ Michel Le Tellier, Marquis de Louvois (1641-1691), Louis' great minister of war.—Ed.

constant attention, which enchanted his ministers, for with a little tact and experience they learned to sway him, making their own desires seem his, and managing great affairs of State in their own way and, all too often, in their own interests, whilst they congratulated themselves and watched him drowning amidst trivialities. . . .

From such alien and pernicious sources he acquired a pride so colossal that, truly, had not God implanted in his heart the fear of the devil, even in his worst excesses, he would literally have allowed himself to be worshipped. What is more, he would have found worshippers; witness the extravagant monuments that have been set up to him, for example the statue in the Place des Victoires, with its pagan dedication, a ceremony at which I myself was present, and in which he took such huge delight. From this false pride stemmed all that ruined him. We have already seen some of its ill-effects; others are yet to come. . . .

The Court was yet another device to sustain the King's policy of despotism. Many things combined to remove it from Paris and keep it permanently in the country. The disorders of the minority⁵ had been staged mainly in that city and for that reason the King had taken a great aversion to it and had become convinced that it was dangerous to live there. . . .

The awkward situation of his mistresses and the dangers involved in conducting such scandalous affairs in a busy capital, crowded with people of every kind of mentality, played no small part in deciding him to leave, for he was embarrassed by the crowds whenever he went in or out or appeared upon the streets. Other reasons for departure were his love of hunting and the open air, so much more easily indulged in the country than in Paris, which is far from forests and ill-supplied with pleasant walks, and his delight in building, a later and ever-increasing passion, which could not be enjoyed in the town, where he was continually in the public eye. Finally, he conceived the idea that he would be all the more venerated by the multitude if he lived retired and were no longer seen every day. . . .

The liaison with Mme de La Vallière,⁶ which was at first kept secret, occasioned many excursions to Versailles, then a little pasteboard house erected by Louis XIII when he, and still more his courtiers, grew tired of sleeping in a low tavern and old windmill, after long, exhausting hunts in the forest of Saint-Léger and still further afield. . . .

Gradually, those quiet country excursions of Louis XIV gave rise to a vast building project, designed to house a large Court more comfortably than in crowded lodgings at Saint-Germain, and he removed his residence there altogether, shortly before the death of the Queen.⁷ Immense numbers of suites were made, and one paid one's court by asking for one,

⁵ A reference to the Fronde.—ED.

⁶ One of Louis' early mistresses.—ED.

⁷ The Spanish princess Maria Theresa died in 1683.—ED.

whereas, at Saint-Germain, almost everyone had the inconvenience of lodging in the town, and those few who did sleep at the château were amazingly cramped.

The frequent entertainments, the private drives to Versailles, and the royal journeys, provided the King with a means of distinguishing or mortifying his courtiers by naming those who were or were not to accompany him, and thus keeping everyone eager and anxious to please him. He fully realized that the substantial gifts which he had to offer were too few to have any continuous effect, and he substituted imaginary favours that appealed to men's jealous natures, small distinctions which he was able, with extraordinary ingenuity, to grant or withhold every day and almost every hour. The hopes that courtiers built upon such flimsy favours and the importance which they attached to them were really unbelievable, and no one was ever more artful than the King in devising fresh occasions for them. . . .

. . . He took it as an offence if distinguished people did not make the Court their home, or if others came but seldom. And to come never, or scarcely ever, meant certain disgrace. When a favour was asked for such a one, the King would answer haughtily, "I do not know him at all," or, "That is a man whom I never see," and in such cases his word was irrevocable. . . .

There never lived a man more naturally polite, nor of such exquisite discrimination with so fine a sense of degree, for he made distinctions for age, merit and rank, and showed them in his answers when these went further than the usual "*Je verrai*,"⁸ and in his general bearing. . . . He was sometimes gay, but never undignified, and never, at any time, did he do anything improper or indiscreet. His smallest gesture, his walk, bearing, and expression were all perfectly becoming, modest, noble, and stately, yet at the same time he always seemed perfectly natural. Added to which he had the immense advantage of a good figure, which made him graceful and relaxed.

On state occasions such as audiences with ambassadors and other ceremonies, he looked so imposing that one had to become used to the sight of him if one were not to be exposed to the humiliation of breaking down or coming to a full stop. At such times, his answers were always short and to the point and he rarely omitted some civility, or a compliment if the speech deserved one. The awe inspired by his appearance was such that wherever he might be, his presence imposed silence and a degree of fear. . . .

In everything he loved magnificently lavish abundance. He made it a principle from motives of policy and encouraged the Court to imitate him; indeed, one way to win favour was to spend extravagantly on the table, clothes, carriages, building, and gambling. For magnificence in such things he would speak to people. The truth is that he used this means

⁸ "We shall see."—ED.

deliberately and successfully to impoverish everyone, for he made luxury meritorious in all men, and in some a necessity, so that gradually the entire Court became dependent upon his favours for their very subsistence. What is more, he fed his own pride by surrounding himself with an entourage so universally magnificent that confusion reigned and all natural distinctions were obliterated.

Once it had begun this rottenness grew into that cancer which gnaws at the lives of all Frenchmen. It started, indeed, at the Court but soon spread to Paris, the provinces, and the army where generals are now assessed according to the tables that they keep and the splendour of their establishments. It so eats into private fortunes that those in a position to steal are often forced to do so in order to keep up their spending. This cancer, kept alive by confusion of ranks, pride, even by good manners, and encouraged by the folly of the great, is having incalculable results that will lead to nothing less than ruin and general disaster.

No other King has ever approached him for the number and quality of his stables and hunting establishments. Who could count his buildings? Who not deplore their ostentation, whimsicality and bad taste? . . . At Versailles he set up one building after another according to no scheme of planning. Beauty and ugliness, spaciousness and meanness were roughly tacked together. The royal apartments at Versailles are beyond everything inconvenient, with back-views over the privies and other dark and evil-smelling places. Truly, the magnificence of the gardens is amazing, but to make the smallest use of them is disagreeable, and they are in equally bad taste. . . .

But one might be for ever pointing out the monstrous defects of that huge and immensely costly palace, and of its outhouses that cost even more, its orangery, kitchen gardens, kennels, larger and smaller stables, all vast, all prodigiously expensive. Indeed, a whole city has sprung up where before was only a poor tavern, a windmill and a little pasteboard château, which Louis XIII built so as to avoid lying on straw.

The Versailles of Louis XIV, that masterpiece wherein countless sums of money were thrown away merely in alterations to ponds and thickets, was so ruinously costly, so monstrously ill-planned, that it was never finished. Amid so many state rooms, opening one out of another, it has no theatre, no banqueting-hall, no ballroom, and both behind and before much still remains undone. The avenues and plantations, all laid out artificially, cannot mature and the coverts must continually be restocked with game. As for the drains, many miles of them still have to be made, and even the walls, whose vast contours enclose a small province of the gloomiest, most wretched countryside, have never been completely finished. . . . No matter what was done, the great fountains dried up (as they still do at times) in spite of the oceans of reservoirs that cost so many millions to engineer in that sandy or boggy soil.

A Rationalist View of Absolutism

VOLTAIRE

Voltaire (1694–1778) was the preeminent figure of what modern scholars call the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. He was also one of the greatest and most influential of early modern historians. Among Voltaire's most important books was The Age of Louis XIV (1751), which he conceived as one of the earliest instances of what we would nowadays call "cultural history." His intention in writing this book was to illuminate the great achievements of Louis' "age"—as the title announces—rather than the king himself. Indeed The Age of Louis XIV is usually published as part of his later Essay on the Morals and the Spirit of Nations (1756). But Louis the king was as impossible for Voltaire to ignore as he had been for Saint-Simon, and as he has been for historians of his age ever since.

Voltaire knew and cultivated many of the survivors of Louis' court, some of them important figures. He collected their letters and memoirs and those of other contemporaries—in short, he had much of the equipment of modern historical research. Although Voltaire also had strong and independent views on the past, as on most other subjects, his portrait of Louis XIV is surprisingly balanced. He does not evade Louis' faults, nor does he exploit them. Indeed, Voltaire seems rather to have admired the king, both as a person and as a ruler. We must remember, however, that, though a rationalist, Voltaire was not a revolutionary. He thought highly of what has come to be called Enlightened Despotism. At the time he completed The Age of Louis XIV, for example, Voltaire was in Berlin as the guest, tutor, and "friend in residence" of Frederick the Great of Prussia.

We must remember, too, that Voltaire was a French patriot who shared Louis XIV's love for the glory of France. We do not even find him denouncing Louis' militarism, so often the target of more recent criticism. Voltaire was especially mindful of the unprecedented domination of French culture in Europe during the age of Louis XIV and of the extent to which Louis himself exemplified that culture. Voltaire admired Louis' sound domestic economy and the diligence with which he worked at his craft of kingship, and he had considerable sympathy for his trials as a person. The picture that Voltaire gives us of Louis XIV is altogether a very different one from that created by Saint-Simon.