

King Louis XIV: French Mastermind

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Under the direction of King Louis XIV, France achieved unprecedented dominance in Europe, and her culture flourished. Louis' court was renowned for its splendor and sophistication. He helped advance the arts in every field through his enlightened patronage. Everything French was in vogue on the Continent.

The Sun King's legacy was no less martial than cultural. Three of every five years during his reign were troubled by wars. Louis yearned to be a great king—another Charlemagne; yet historians continue to debate whether he deserved the epithet 'great.' Did he rescue France, embroiled as it was in the civil strife known as the Wars of the Fronde, or did his absolute rule hasten the Revolution of 1789? What cannot be disputed is that Louis and the formidable military machine he commanded elevated France to a position of pre-eminence during his lifetime and for a century thereafter.

Louis' military excursions can be neatly separated into four distinct conflicts: the War of Devolution with Spain, the Dutch War, the War of the Palatinate and the War of the Spanish Succession—the last of which might be called the first truly global conflict of the modern age. His most spectacular successes came early, while he was still blessed with a handful of brilliant ministers (Jean-Baptiste Colbert and François-Michel le Tellier, *marquis de Louvois*) and marshals (Henri de la Tour d'Auvergne, *vicomte de Turenne*; Louis II de Bourbon, *prince de Condé*; and François-Henri de Montmorency, *duc de Luxembourg*).

When 4-year-old Louis ascended the throne in 1643, France already possessed an excellent army, but Louis and his minister of war, Louvois, raised its standards of professionalism still further. From the time he was appointed in 1666, Louvois introduced uniforms, improved equipment such as flintlock muskets and socket bayonets, and a revised organization with a fixed-rank system. After 1668, the army was increased to 170,000 men. (France was then Europe's most populous country, with about 18 million people.) Under his finance minister, Colbert, the French navy grew from a squadron of 20 ships to a fleet of 270 by 1677. Louis also had at his disposal the era's greatest military engineer, Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban, designer of the star-shaped bastion.

Internationally, the time was ripe for a change in the balance of power. The once global power of Spain was in rapid decline. Germany and Italy were still patchwork collections of minor principalities. The Ottoman Turks were active again, keeping Hapsburg Austria's forces tied down in the Balkans. England was ruled by the House of Stuart, which had French blood and was not poorly disposed toward its neighbor across the Channel. From 1668 on, Louis XIV worked hard to keep England neutral, if not allied with France.

When Philip IV of Spain died in 1665, Louis seized the opportunity to invade the Spanish Netherlands (present-day Belgium) and the Franche-Comté (now Burgundy). Both provinces were more French than Spanish. Louis cited his wife's 'claim' to those lands, since she was the daughter of the deceased Spanish king. In May 1667, the French army, commanded by Turenne, advanced into the region and, by August, had captured the Flemish towns of Charleroi, Armentières, Tournai, Douai and Lille. At Lille, Louis put in a personal appearance at the front lines.

Europe was stunned. Spain had been the dominant power for so long that nobody thought so easy a victory against her was possible. But Louis knew better. He believed that battles are won before they begin; consequently, his campaign had been thoroughly thought out before it was launched. Secret treaties had been made with Austria and Portugal, and German princes were bribed to stay out of the conflict. The campaign set the Sun King's pattern for the future—far from being a bombastic or passionate warrior, he ran his wars by careful, deliberate calculation.

After the French marched into Franche-Comté on February 2, 1668, and then swiftly overran it, the powers of Europe

began conspiring against Louis. Spanish hegemony might have been receding, but nobody was anxious to see France supplant Spain. On February 7, the Netherlands, England and Sweden concluded an alliance directed against France. In the face of that threat, Louis prudently accepted the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, whereby he returned Franche-Comté to Spain, retaining only a slice of Flanders. The territory Louis did acquire was valuable, however, because it provided France with a defensible northern border. It also provided him with a springboard from which to attack the Netherlands, the most prominent of the powers compelling him to sign the treaty.

England, still stinging from defeats at the hands of the Dutch at sea and eager to reduce the commercial dominance of the Netherlands, agreed to an alliance with France. Louis then confidently invaded the Netherlands on April 29, 1672. The Dutch, however, proved to be tougher opponents than the Spanish had been.

On June 12, Turenne and Condé crossed the Rhine River and defeated the Dutch, sending the French military's reputation soaring and causing celebrations in France. On June 20, Utrecht surrendered. A few days later, the French were poised outside Amsterdam. The Dutch government tried to sue for peace, but French demands were so exorbitant that, on August 27, a popular uprising overthrew the government and Prince William II of Orange was installed in power. William's desperate response to the French threat was to order the dikes opened up, literally turning Amsterdam into an island.

A stalemate ensued, with the French engaged in a cruel guerrilla war in the Dutch countryside. The Hapsburg emperor joined the Dutch, as did Brandenburg and Spain. Louis' armies retook Franche-Comté—making it the French province of Burgundy once and for all—and defeated the Austrians in Lorraine. On January 5, 1675, Turenne defeated imperial forces at Turckheim, again permitting the French to cross the Rhine. But on July 27 Turenne was killed at Sasbach, and Condé retired. Still, the French continued to win victories, with their king still occasionally participating in battles and sieges, such as the taking of Valenciennes on March 17, 1677.

In August 1678, the war finally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Nijmegen. Again, it was largely a French triumph at Spain's expense—Louis acquired Lorraine, Alsace, Burgundy, Freiburg and Brisach, as well as more of Flanders.

Louis now devised a new plan of conquest. He created the Chambers of Reunion, a committee whose task was to comb archives for any claim France might ever have had to the territories of Alsace-Lorraine. If France once controlled a region, Louis was determined that she would do so again. Once the list was compiled, he began the slow process of annexing lands. Most acquisitions were small, belonging to minor German princes—hardly worth a declaration of war. However, when Louis annexed the imperial city of Strasbourg in 1681, followed by Luxembourg in 1684, he again went too far. In 1686, a coalition, known as the League of Augsburg, began to form against him. In 1688, to Louis' dismay, his implacable Dutch adversary, William of Orange, overthrew King James II of England and subsequently added England to the League of Augsburg, alongside the Netherlands, Spain, Savoy, Sweden and the Hapsburg Empire.

Aware of impending war, Louis struck first, invading the Palatinate. Again, fortresses fell quickly before the French army, but no matter how many battles the French won, the League of Augsburg fielded another army. For the League, this was a war with no palpable objectives except to reduce French power.

The most important event came on July 10, 1690, when the French navy, under Admiral Anne Hilarion de Costentin, *comte* de Tourville, scored a victory over an Anglo-Dutch fleet at Beachy Head. The way was then opened for an invasion of England and an attempt to restore James II to the English throne, but that opportunity was lost when Tourville lost 12 ships in the wake of the battles of Barfleur and La Hougue in May and June 1692.

With the fall of Namur in 1695, the myth of French invincibility began to erode. By then Louis' greatest marshals were dead—as was his minister of war, Louvois, who died in 1691—and the aging Sun King's own judgment was beginning to show signs of decline.

By 1697, Louis had had enough and concluded the Treaty of Rijswijk, in which France returned everything she had taken since the Treaty of Nijmegen—Lorraine, Catalonia, Flanders, Luxembourg, the Rhine fortresses—with the

exceptions of Strasbourg and the Alsatian territories. At home, the French people who had decried the 10-year war now complained that too much had been given away. Nevertheless, France remained the premier power in Europe, and Louis may already have been thinking about the possibilities that the political situation in Spain offered.

Carlos II of Spain, known as 'Carlos the Bewitched,' was a congenitally impaired king without an heir. There were three possible successors to the Spanish crown, and the one from Bavaria died before Carlos did. The two remaining candidates were from Hapsburg Austria and Bourbon France. Whoever succeeded Carlos stood to gain Spain's vast domains, which stretched from Sicily to Belgium and from South America to the Philippines.

Spain had been under the dominion of Hapsburg kings before, and their days of dominance over France were less than a century in the past. Louis XIV did not want to see France surrounded by the Hapsburgs again. Neither did King William III of England, whose native Netherlands had once been under direct Spanish domination. Therefore, the two former enemies conspired to seek a compromise. Austria, however, adamantly rejected their proposal for a partition of Spanish holdings.

The Spaniards, equally adverse to the idea, turned to Carlos II's will, composed a month before his death on November 1, 1700. It clearly designated his successor to be 'the second son of the Dauphin of France, the successor to all his Kingdoms, without any exception'—that is, Philippe de Bourbon, *duc d'Anjou* and the grandson of Louis XIV. If Philippe died, the Spanish throne would pass to the Austrian House of Hapsburg.

Louis XIV faced the greatest decision of his life, but he saw no choice but to put his 16-year-old grandson on the throne, grandly declaring the elimination of boundaries between France and Spain by saying, 'Henceforth, there are no Pyrennees.' The result, predictably, was another war, pitting France and Bavaria against a Grand Alliance of Austria, Prussia, Hanover, Portugal, the Netherlands and England, soon joined by the Duke of Savoy.

Louis tried the usual aggressive opening moves, but his army no longer had a single great leader, whereas England had Sir John Churchill, later the Duke of Marlborough, and the Austrians were commanded by the equally brilliant Prince Eugene of Savoy. The French lost a succession of battles, most notably at Blenheim on August 13, 1704—their worst land defeat in centuries—which permanently removed them from Bavaria, and at Ramillies on May 22, 1706, which drove them from Flanders.

After Blenheim, the war seemed as good as over. Louis tried to sue for peace, but the terms were unacceptable. England, at the behest of the Portuguese, became involved in an invasion of Spain, in an attempt to install the Austrian candidate on the throne. That proved to be a costly mistake, because the Spanish, firmly behind the 'rightful' King Philip, resisted bitterly.

Then, in 1711, the Austrian emperor—who was also the Hapsburgs' candidate for the Spanish throne—died. England, never enthusiastic about a melding of the Austrian and Spanish crowns, made a separate peace with France. Prince Eugene was outmaneuvered in Flanders following the victory of French Marshal Claude Louis Hector, *duc de Villars*, at Denain on July 24, 1712, eliminating the direct threat Prince Eugene had posed to Paris.

In 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht was signed, recognizing Philip as king of Spain and the West Indies and leaving France in possession of the left bank of the upper Rhine. The Spanish Netherlands was parceled out to the Austrians, along with Naples and Milan. The fortresses in Flanders were given to the Dutch. Sicily and Nice were given to Savoy. England made extensive gains in French Canada, as well as retaining Gibraltar.

In truth, France fared well, losing little land. By the time of his death in 1715, Louis XIV could claim to have irrevocably broken the Hapsburg ring around his kingdom and transformed France from a struggling, politically divided entity into the premier power on the European continent.

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