



PRIMARY SOURCE

Louis XIV's Advice to His Son

When he was in his twenties, Louis XIV began writing down his thoughts about being a ruler. His Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin illuminated how he became the strongest king of his time. In this excerpt from his book, Louis XIV shares his recipe for absolute rule with his son. What steps did he take to consolidate his power after the death of Mazarin?

I commanded the four secretaries of state not to sign anything at all any longer without discussing it with me, the superintendent likewise, and for nothing to be transacted at the finances without being registered in a little book that was to remain with me, where I could always see at a glance, briefly summarized, the current balance and the expenditures made or pending.

The Chancellor received a similar order, that is, not to seal anything without my command, except for letters of justice. . . .

I announced that all requests for graces of any type had to be made directly to me, and I granted to all my subjects without distinction the privilege of appealing to me at any time, in person or by petitions. The petitions were initially very numerous, which did not discourage me, however. The disorder into which my affairs had fallen produced many of them, the idle or unjustified hopes which were raised by this novelty hardly stimulated a lesser number. . . . But even in these apparently useless things I discovered much that was useful. I learned thereby many details about the condition of my people. They saw that I was concerned about them, and nothing did so much to win me their hearts. . . .

As to the persons who were to support me in my work, I resolved above all not to have a prime minister, and if you and all your successors take my advice, my son, the name will forever be abolished in France, there being nothing more shameful than to see on the one hand all the functions and on the other the mere title of king.

For this purpose, it was absolutely necessary to divide my confidence and the execution of my orders without entirely entrusting it to anyone, assigning these various persons to various functions in keeping with their various talents, which is perhaps the first and foremost talent of princes.

In order to concentrate the entire authority of a master more fully in myself—even though there

are all sorts of details into which our occupations and our very dignity do not usually permit us to go, I resolved to enter into these with each of the ministers whom I would choose, and when he would least expect it, so that he would realize that I might do the same on other subjects and at any time. . . .

It is not so easy for me to tell you, my son, how to go about the choice of the various ministers. Fortune always plays, in spite of us, at least as much of a part in it as wisdom; and in the part that wisdom plays, intelligence can do far more than counsel. Neither of us, my son, is going to seek for these sorts of positions those whom distance and obscurity remove from our view, whatever qualifications they may have. It is necessary to decide from a small number which chance presents to us, that is, those already in office or whom birth and inclination have attached to our personal service.

And as for this art of knowing men, which will be so important to you not merely on this but also on every other occasion of your life, I shall tell you, my son, that it can be learned but that it can not be taught.

from Paul Sonnino, trans., Louis XIV: Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 30–32.

Activity Options

- 1. Recognizing Point of View** With a partner, role-play a conversation between Louis XIV and his son in which the king advises how to rule absolutely.
- 2. Writing for a Specific Purpose** List the steps that Louis XIV took to consolidate his power as king of France after the death of Cardinal Mazarin. Then share your list with classmates and compare Louis XIV's approach to governing with that of his father, Louis XIII.