

# THE END OF LOUIS XIV'S REIGN AND THE REGENCY

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## Part 1 – Louis XIV's personal reign (1661-1715)

To understand the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we can't simply start in 1701, since there is obviously a political continuity that does not change with the calendar. Louis XIV's reign, straddling the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, from 1661 to 1715, was very brilliant both politically and culturally and had a lasting influence throughout Europe. His reign marks the entire French 18<sup>th</sup> century, which refers to it as the "Century of Louis XIV", to use the title of the book Voltaire devotes to him, both as a reference and as a foil. A reference and a foil, because this reign of Louis XIV is an unprecedented political experience, absolutism the French way, and because it leaves an economic, cultural and ideological heritage with which all the 18<sup>th</sup> century will have to debate.

Louis XIV's personal rule lasts 54 years, which is very long. After the brilliant beginnings and the permanent installation of the Court at Versailles, in 1682, the end of the reign, marked by the influence of Madame de Maintenon, is darkened by religious persecution and intellectual censorship.

In 1685, Louis XIV revokes the Edict of Nantes and abolishes the liberties enjoyed by the Protestants since Henry IV, which results in the exile of many families and the very harsh repression of those who remain in France. Even within the Catholic Church, all thoughts that deviate from the religious line recognised by the power in place are repressed; Jansenism, Quietism, etc.

Louis XIV's absolutism, the policy by which the king reduces the powers of anyone who might oppose him, notably the nobility and parliaments, is accentuated. The many wars in which the Sun King engages himself contribute to the kingdom's ruin and the financing of his prestige policy by taxation makes the poorest people's economic situation very complicated and difficult. For example, in 1709 a harsh winter causes a great famine.

But this dark period is also a great moment of intellectual bubbling that sees the development of often-new forms of bold critical thought that will feed Enlightenment writers. Fontenelle thus publishes his *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* in 1686, which portrays, in the style of a gallant conversation, a marchioness and a philosopher conversing on Cartesian world's system. Pierre Bayle starts publishing his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in 1695, paving the way for the Encyclopaedists generation. Lastly, in 1699, Fenelon's *Adventures of Telemachus* comes out, all at once a great fiction inspired by ancient epics, a great educational novel, a model of poetic prose and, above all, a work of political philosophy condemning all of Louis XIV's politics faults.

## Part 2 – The Regency (1715-1723)

In 1715, after the death of Louis XIV, his great-grandson inherits the crown. The great-grandson, now named Louis XV, is only five years old at that time. Until he is old enough to reign, Philippe d'Orléans becomes the regent. After the dark years of the end of Louis XIV's reign, it feels like a relief.

On a political level, the regent gives back to the Parliament some of the powers lost under the previous regime and provides for the various intermediary bodies, the nobility in particular, thus giving a temporary sense of moderation to the French monarchy absolutism.

On an intellectual level, we know the regent was interested in libertine thought and his power is characterised first by a much greater permissiveness in the circulation of ideas and works of literature.

Exchanges with England and Holland, a great place for intellectual innovation since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, are multiplying.

On a cultural level, it is like a party after the dark years of the end of Louis XIV's reign. The regent's tastes become the official tastes. He loves theatre, and he brings back in 1716 the Italian actors who had been driven out under the previous reign. He likes opera. He is interested in new painters influenced by Italy and Holland.

In short, it is the beginning of what has been called the "Rocaille age", of which Watteau's painting, with his "gallant feasts", could be like a kind of emblem. We will recall that *The Embarkation for Cythera*, his reception piece to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, dates from 1717.

But that time is also characterised by difficult economic circumstances, Louis XIV having left to his successors a highly indebted State. John Law proposes in 1716 to create a Royal Bank, which issues paper money, a novelty, against gold. Then he creates the Company of the Occident, which became the French East India Company in 1719.

It is a moment of intense speculation and, if we use today's language, a kind of speculative bubble. A lot of money is flowing. People dream of large and quick profits but unfortunately on too weak foundations. John Law is appointed Controller-General of Finance in 1720, which is like today's Minister for the Economy and Finance. But that same year, the system collapses. The shares prices fall, the bank can no longer reimburse paper money holders wanting to withdraw their gold, and there is an intense financial panic. John Law is forced to go into exile hastily, leaving many people reduced to total ruin.

On a literary level it is a wonderful time, which testifies to the liberation from previous constraints and an appetite for critical and joyful speech. The most remarkable testimonies of the period are in Lesage's *Gil Blas*, published between 1715 and 1735. It is a picaresque-inspired novel in which the sympathetic hero recounts his journey through all layers of Spanish society. Also worthy of mention is Robert Challe's *Illustres françaises* in 1713, which features a group of characters who tell their skilfully intertwined stories. And above all, it is necessary to name Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, in 1721. It is a collection of polyphonic letters with a double narrative weave: on the one hand, the main characters, two Persians exiles, Usbek and Rica, are astonished by what they discover of Parisian life and, on the other hand, the seraglio's novel, which recounts the havoc wreaked in Usbek's harem by time and space distancing. Above all it is a harsh assessment of Louis XIV's reign and of the first years of the regency.