

Louis XV

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(1710-1774)

Louis XV, byname Louis The Well-Beloved, French Louis Le Bien-Aimé, king of France from 1715 to 1774, whose ineffectual rule contributed to the decline of royal authority that led to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789.

Louis was the great-grandson of King Louis XIV (ruled 1643-1715) and the son of Louis, duc de Bourgogne, and Marie-Adélaïde of Savoy. Because his parents and his only surviving brother had all died in 1712, he became king at the age of five on the death of Louis XIV (Sept. 1, 1715). Until he attained his legal majority in February 1723, France was governed by a regent, Philippe II, duc d'Orléans. In 1721 Orléans betrothed Louis to the infanta Mariana, daughter of King Philip V of Spain. After the death of Orléans (December 1723), Louis appointed as his first minister Louis-Henri, duc de Bourbon-Condé, who cancelled the Spanish betrothal and married the King to Marie Leszczyńska, daughter of the dethroned king Stanisław I of Poland. Louis's tutor, the bishop (later cardinal) André-Hercule de Fleury, replaced Bourbon as chief minister in 1726; and the dynastic connection with Poland led to French involvement against Austria and Russia in the War of the Polish Succession (1733-38).

Louis XV's personal influence on French policy became perceptible only after Fleury's death in 1744. Although he proclaimed that he would henceforth rule without a chief minister, he was too indolent and lacking in self-confidence to coordinate the activities of his secretaries of state and give firm direction to national policy. While his government degenerated into factions of scheming ministers and courtiers, Louis isolated himself at court and occupied himself with a succession of mistresses, several of whom exercised considerable political influence. Already Pauline de Mailly-Nesle, marquise de Vintimille, Louis's mistress from 1739 to 1741, had sponsored the war party that brought France into the inconclusive War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) against Austria and Great Britain. In September 1745 the king took as his official mistress (maîtresse en titre) Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour, whose political influence lasted until her death in 1764.

Louis was not, however, a totally passive monarch. His desire to determine the course of international affairs through intrigue caused him to set up, about 1748, an elaborate system of secret diplomacy known as le Secret du roi. Secret French agents were stationed in major European capitals and ordered by the king to pursue political objectives that were frequently opposed to his publicly announced policies. At first Louis employed his secret diplomacy in an unsuccessful attempt to win the elective Polish crown for a French candidate (a goal he officially renounced). Soon he expanded the network of agents, intending to form an anti-Austrian alliance with Sweden, Prussia, Turkey, and Poland. Because his official ministers knew nothing of le secret, Louis's foreign policy became paralyzed with confusion. In 1756 the king, prompted by Madame de Pompadour, temporarily abandoned the objectives of his secret diplomacy and concluded an alliance with Austria. France and Austria then went to war with Great Britain and Prussia (Seven Years' War, 1756-63), but Louis's continental commitments to the Austrians prevented him from concentrating his country's resources on the crucial colonial struggle with Great Britain, a country with greater maritime power and overseas resources. As a result, by 1763 France had lost to the British almost all her colonial possessions in North America and India. Although Madame de Pompadour's favourite, Étienne-François, Duke de Choiseul (foreign minister from 1758 to 1770), restored France's military strength, the failure of Louis's secret diplomacy in Poland enabled Russia, Austria, and Prussia to partition Poland (1772) and virtually eliminate French influence in central Europe. Although Louis had been

popular as le Bien-Aimé (the Well-Beloved) in his youth, he had gradually earned the contempt of his subjects.

During the later years of Louis XV's reign, an attempt was made to strengthen the waning authority of the crown by withdrawing from the Parlements the privilege of obstructing royal legislation. This privilege, which had been suspended by Louis XIV, had been restored to the Parlements during the regency. The judicial magistrates had later consolidated their position as opponents of the crown by claiming, in the absence of the States General, to be defenders of the fundamental laws of the kingdom and by uniting the provincial Parlements in a close union with the Parlement of Paris. In this manner they had overthrown the financial system of John Law, had helped to procure the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1764, and had, for a time, disrupted the provincial administration of Brittany. The Parlements also stood resolutely in the way of financial reform. In 1771 the chancellor, René de Maupeou, determined to strike at this abuse by restricting the Parlement of Paris to purely judicial functions and by abolishing the sale of judicial offices. In spite of some popular opposition, the new judicial system functioned effectively until the king's death and might have saved the Bourbon monarchy from the path that led to revolution if his successor had not gratuitously abandoned the reform. Apart from this reform, Louis XV's long reign had been marked by a decline in the crown's moral and political authority, as well as by reverses in foreign and military affairs. The king died in 1774, hated as much as Louis XIV had been.

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