

Louis XVI

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(1754-1793)

Louis XVI, also called (until 1774) Louis-Auguste, Duc (duke) de Berry, the last king of France (1774-92) in the line of Bourbon monarchs preceding the Revolution of 1789. The monarchy was abolished on Sept. 21, 1792; later he and his queen consort, Marie-Antoinette, were guillotined on charges of counterrevolution.

Early life and accession

Louis was the third son of the dauphin Louis and his consort Maria Josepha of Saxony. At first known as the Duke de Berry, he became the heir to the throne on his father's death in 1765. His education was entrusted to the Duke de La Vauguyon (Antoine de Quatzen de Caussade), who made little effort to ensure that he should be properly trained for his responsibilities. Louis nevertheless possessed an excellent memory, acquired a sound knowledge of Latin and English, and took an interest in history and geography. In 1770 he married the Austrian archduchess Marie-Antoinette, daughter of Maria Theresa and the Holy Roman emperor Francis I.

On the death of his grandfather Louis XV, Louis succeeded to the French throne on May 10, 1774. At that time he was still immature, lacking in self-confidence, austere in manner, and, because of a physical defect (later remedied by an operation), frigid in his relations with his young wife. Well-disposed toward his subjects and interested in the conduct of foreign policy, Louis had not sufficient strength of character or power of decision to combat the influence of court factions or to give the necessary support to reforming ministers, such as Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot or Jacques Necker, in their efforts to give great stability to the tottering finances of the ancien régime. The prestige of the monarchy was also compromised early in his reign by the decision in August 1774 to restore the powers of the Parlements (judicial bodies supporting the interests of the aristocracy) whose political authority had been withdrawn in 1771. Louis XVI's reign before 1789 coincided with the increasing strength of the aristocratic reaction. It was aristocratic opposition to the fiscal, economic, and administrative reforms of the controller general of finance, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, in 1787 that forced the king, in July 1788, to summon the States General, the representatives of the clergy, nobility, and commoners, for the following year and thus set in motion the Revolution.

Louis's reaction to the Revolution

After 1789 Louis XVI's incapacity to rule, his irresolution, and his surrender to reactionary influences at court were partially responsible for the failure to establish in France the forms of a limited constitutional monarchy. Louis had at first rightly regarded the Revolution as the product of aristocratic intransigence and should, therefore, have grasped the opportunity of forming an alliance between the crown and the middle-class reformers. Instead he allowed himself, in the spring of 1789, to be dominated by the reactionary court faction surrounding his younger brother Charles, Count d'Artois (later King Charles X) and to be converted to the policy of defending the privileges of the clergy and nobility in the States General. He continued to believe, even after the increasingly radical trend of popular movements in Paris and the provinces during the summer had demonstrated the futility of such hopes, that the Revolution would burn itself out.

By this time the fundamental weakness of the king's character had become evident: lethargic in temperament, lacking political insight and therefore incapable of appreciating the need to compromise, Louis continued to divert himself by hunting and with his personal hobbies of making locks and doing masonry. He dismissed Necker in early July 1789 and showed his reluctance to sanction the achievements of the National Assembly (as the States General was now called) such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the destruction of the feudal regime in August."

Attempt to flee the country

Louis's resistance to popular demands was one of the causes of the forcible transfer of the royal family from Versailles to the Tuileries Palace in Paris on October 6. Yet he made still more mistakes, refusing to follow the secret advice tendered to him after May 1790 by the royalist deputy, the Count de Mirabeau, abdicating his responsibilities, and acquiescing in the disastrous attempt to escape from the capital to the eastern frontier on June 21, 1791. Caught at Varennes and brought back to Paris, he lost credibility as a constitutional monarch. Thenceforward he seems to have been completely dominated by the queen, who must bear the chief blame for the court's subsequent political duplicity.

From the autumn of 1791 the king tied his hopes of political salvation to the dubious prospects of foreign intervention. At the same time he encouraged the Girondin faction in the Legislative Assembly in their policy of war with Austria, in the expectation that French military disaster would pave the way for the restoration of his authority. Prompted by Marie-Antoinette, Louis rejected the advice of the moderate constitutionalists, led by Antoine Barnave, to implement faithfully the constitution of 1791, which he had sworn to maintain, and committed himself to a policy of subterfuge and deception.

The outbreak of the war with Austria in April 1792, the suspected machinations of the queen's Austrian committee," and the publication of the manifesto by the Austrian commander, the Duke of Brunswick, threatening the destruction of Paris if the safety of the royal family were again endangered, led to the capture of the Tuileries by the people of Paris and provincial militia on Aug. 10, 1792. It also led to the temporary suspension of the king's powers by the Legislative Assembly and the proclamation of the First French Republic on September 21. In November proof of Louis XVI's secret dealings with Mirabeau and of his counterrevolutionary intrigues with the foreigners was found in a secret cupboard in the Tuileries. On December 3 it was decided that Louis, who together with his family had been imprisoned since August, should be brought to trial for treason. He himself appeared twice before the Convention (December 11 and 23)."

Condemnation to death

Despite the last-minute efforts of the Girondins to save him, Citizen Capet, as he was then called, was found guilty by the Convention and condemned to death on Jan. 18, 1793, by 387 votes (including 26 in favour of a debate on the possibility of postponing execution) against 334 (including 13 for a death sentence with the proviso that it should be suspended). When a final decision on the question of a respite was taken on January 19, Louis was condemned to death by 380 votes against 310. He was guillotined in the Place de la R+volution in Paris on Jan. 21, 1793. Louis XVI's courage on June 20, 1792, when the royal palace was invaded by the Paris mob after his dismissal of the Girondin ministry, and his dignified bearing during his trial and at the moment of execution did something to redeem, but did not reestablish, his reputation.

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