In the last half of the fifteenth century, France enjoyed a period of peace. After driving out the English, the French kings were able to solidify their power within their own realm. But in the 1500s, rivalry with Charles V of Spain and then religious conflict plunged the kingdom into turmoil.

**Henry IV Restores Order**

In the late 1500s France was torn apart by turbulent wars of religion. A century later, France was a strong, unified nation-state ruled by the most powerful monarch in Europe.

**Religious Strife** From the 1560s to the 1590s, religious wars between the Catholic majority and French Protestants, called Huguenots (HYOO guh nahts), tore France apart. Leaders on both sides used the strife to further their own ambitions.

The worst incident began on St. Bartholomew’s Day (a Catholic holiday), August 24, 1572. While Huguenot and Catholic nobles were gathered for a royal wedding, a plot by Catholic royals led to the massacre of 3,000 Huguenots. In the next few days, thousands more were slaughtered. For many, the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre symbolized the complete breakdown of order in France.

**Bringing Peace to a Shattered Land** In 1589, a Huguenot prince inherited the French throne as Henry IV. For four years Henry fought against fierce Catholic opposition to gain control of France. Finally, to end the conflict, he converted to Catholicism. “Paris is well worth a Mass,” he is supposed to have said. To protect Protestants, however, in 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes granting the Huguenots religious toleration and other freedoms.
Henry IV then set out to repair France. His goal, he said, was not the victory of one sect over another, but “a chicken in every pot”—a good Sunday dinner for every peasant. Under Henry, the government reached into every area of French life. Royal officials administered justice, improved roads, built bridges, and revived agriculture. By building the royal bureaucracy and reducing the influence of nobles, Henry IV laid the foundations on which future French monarchs would build absolute power.

**Cardinal Richelieu Strengthens Royal Authority** When Henry IV was killed by an assassin in 1610, his nine-year-old son, Louis XIII, inherited the throne. For a time, nobles reasserted their power. Then, in 1624, Louis appointed Cardinal Richelieu (ree shul YOO) as his chief minister. This cunning, capable leader devoted the next 18 years to strengthening the central government.

Richelieu sought to destroy the power of the Huguenots and nobles—two groups that did not bow to royal authority. Although he allowed the Huguenots to practice their religion, he smashed their walled cities and outlawed their armies. Likewise, he defeated the private armies of the nobles and destroyed their fortified castles. While reducing their independence, Richelieu tied the nobles to the king by giving them high posts at court or in the royal army.

Richelieu also handpicked his able successor, Cardinal Mazarin (ma za RAN). When five-year-old Louis XIV inherited the throne in 1643, the year after Richelieu’s death, Mazarin was in place to serve as chief minister. Like Richelieu, Mazarin worked tirelessly to extend royal power.

**Checkpoint** What rights did the Edict of Nantes extend to Huguenots?

**An Absolute Monarch Rises**

Soon after Louis XIV became king, disorder again swept France. In an uprising called the *Fronde*, nobles, merchants, peasants, and the urban poor each rebelled in order to protest royal power or preserve their own. On one occasion, rioters drove the boy king from his palace. It was an experience Louis would never forget. When Mazarin died in 1661, the 23-year-old Louis resolved to take complete control over the government himself. “I have been pleased to entrust the government of my affairs to the late Cardinal,” he declared. “It is now time that I govern them myself.”

“I Am the State” Like his great-grandfather Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV firmly believed in his divine right to rule. He took the sun as the symbol of his absolute power. Just as the sun stands at the center of the solar system, he argued, so the Sun King stands at the center of the nation. Louis is often quoted as saying, “L'état, c'est moi” (lay TAH seh MWAH), which in English translates as “I am the state.”

During his reign, Louis did not once call a meeting of the Estates General, the medieval council made up of representatives of all French social classes. In fact, the Estates General did not meet between 1614 and 1789. Thus, the Estates General played no role in checking royal power.

**Biography**

Cardinal Richelieu

Armand Richelieu’s (1585–1642) parents expected great things from him. They even invited the king of France to attend Armand’s christening, promising that someday he would be a leader of France.

The young boy also aspired to greatness as he was growing up. At first, he received training to become a disciplined and authoritative military officer. Then, at his family’s request, he switched direction. At age 17, he began training to become a bishop in the Catholic Church. The path was different but the purpose was the same: to become a leader and to serve the monarch.

Over the next 40 years, Armand Richelieu rose to the highest levels of authority in both religious and political circles. He became the true power behind the throne of King Louis XIII. **What characteristics of Richelieu does the artist portray in this painting?**
Louis XIV Strengthens Royal Power  Louis spent many hours each
day attending to government affairs. To strengthen the state, he followed
the policies of Richelieu. He expanded the bureaucracy and appointed
intendants, royal officials who collected taxes, recruited soldiers, and
carried out his policies in the provinces. These and other government
jobs often went to wealthy middle-class men. In this way Louis cemented
his ties with the middle class, thus checking the power of the nobles and
the Church. The king also built the French army into the strongest in
Europe. The state paid, fed, trained, and supplied up to 300,000 soldiers.
Louis used this highly disciplined army to enforce his policies at home
and abroad.

Colbert Builds France’s Finances  Louis's brilliant finance minister,
Jean-Baptiste Colbert (kohl behr), imposed mercantilist policies to
bolster the economy. He had new lands cleared for farming, encouraged
mining and other basic industries, and built up luxury trades such as
lacemaking. To protect French manufacturers, Colbert put high tariffs on
imported goods. He also fostered overseas colonies, such as New France
in North America and several colonies in India, and regulated trade with
the colonies to enrich the royal treasury. Colbert’s policies helped make
France the wealthiest state in Europe. Yet not even the financial genius
of Colbert could produce enough income to support the huge costs of
Louis’s court and his many foreign wars.

Checkpoint  Why did Louis XIV choose the sun as his symbol?

Versailles: Symbol of Royal Power  In the countryside near Paris, Louis XIV turned a royal hunting lodge
into the immense palace of Versailles (ver SY). He spared
no expense to make it the most magnificent building in
Europe. Its halls and salons displayed the finest paintings
and statues, and they glittered with chandeliers and mir-
rors. In the royal gardens, millions of flowers, trees, and
fountains were set out in precise geometric patterns. Ver-
sailles became the perfect symbol of the Sun King’s wealth
and power. As both the king’s home and the seat of govern-
ment, it housed nobles, officials, and servants.

Conducting Court Ceremonies  Louis XIV perfected
elaborate ceremonies that emphasized his own importance.
Each day began in the king’s bedroom with a major ritual
known as the levée (luh VAY), or rising. High-ranking
nobles competed for the honor of holding the royal washba-
sin or handing the king his diamond-buckled shoes. At
night, the ceremony was repeated in reverse. Wives of
nobles vied to attend upon women of the royal family.
Rituals such as the levée served a serious purpose.
French nobles were descendants of the feudal lords who
held power in medieval times. At liberty on their estates,
these nobles were a threat to the power of the monarchy.
By luring nobles to Versailles, Louis turned them into court-
iers angling for privileges rather than rival warriors battling
for power. His tactic worked because he carefully protected
their prestige and left them exempt from paying taxes.
Patronizing the Arts The king and his court supported a “splendid century” of the arts. The age of Louis XIV came to be known as the classical age of French drama. In painting, music, architecture, and decorative arts, French styles became the model for all Europe. A new form of dance drama, ballet, gained its first great popularity at the French court. As a leading patron of culture, Louis sponsored the French Academies, which set high standards for both the arts and the sciences.

✔ Checkpoint How did Louis XIV secure support from the nobility?

A Strong State Declines
Louis XIV ruled France for 72 years—far longer than any other monarch. At the end of Louis’s reign, France was the strongest state in Europe. However, some of Louis’s decisions eventually caused France’s prosperity to erode.

Waging Costly Wars Louis XIV poured vast resources into wars meant to expand French borders. However, rival rulers joined forces to check these ambitions. Led by the Dutch or the English, these alliances fought to maintain the balance of power. The goal was to maintain a distribution of military and economic power among European nations to prevent any one country from dominating the region.

In 1700, Louis’s grandson Philip V inherited the throne of Spain. To maintain the balance of power, neighboring nations led by England fought to prevent the union of France and Spain. The War of the Spanish Succession dragged on until 1713, when an exhausted France signed the Treaty of Utrecht (yoo’trekt). Philip remained on the Spanish throne, but France agreed never to unite the two crowns.

Persecuting Huguenots Louis saw France’s Protestant minority as a threat to religious and political unity. In 1685, he revoked the Edict of Nantes. More than 100,000 Huguenots fled France, settling mainly in England, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and the Americas. The Huguenots had been among the hardest working and most prosperous of Louis’s subjects. Their loss was a serious blow to the French economy, just as the expulsion of Spanish Muslims and Jews had hurt Spain.

✔ Checkpoint How did Louis’s actions weaken France’s economy?

Terms, People, and Places
1. What do each of the key terms, people, and places listed at the beginning of the section have in common? Explain.

Note Taking
2. Reading Skill: Identify Supporting Details Use your completed concept web to answer the Focus Question: How did France become the leading power of Europe under the absolute rule of Louis XIV?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking
3. Draw Inferences How did Henry IV’s conversion to Catholicism help France unite?
4. Identify Central Issues What was the purpose of Louis XIV’s extravagant palace and daily rituals?
5. Recognize Ideologies Why did other European nations form alliances to oppose France’s plans to expand?

Writing About History
Quick Write: Support Opinions With Evidence Choose a topic from the section, such as whether or not you think Louis XIV’s reign was good for France. Make a list of evidence from the text that supports your opinion.