

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **BOURBON FRANCE**

### **4.1 FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY**

France was the dominant European power from 1660 to 1713. Louis XIV, however, was unable to extend French boundaries to the Rhine River – one of his chief objectives.

From 1713 – 1789 no one European power dominated international politics. Instead, the concept of the Balance of Power prevailed. A readjustment of power was necessary in central and eastern Europe as a result of the decline of Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. This period was characterized by a power struggle between France and England for colonial supremacy in India and in America.

### **4.2 FRANCE UNDER LOUIS XIV (1643 – 1715)**

Louis XIV was vain, arrogant, and charming to the aristocratic ladies of his court. He was five feet five inches tall and wore shoes with high heels.

The king had great physical endurance for long hours of council meetings and endless ceremonies and entertainments. He seemed indifferent to heat and cold and survived a lifetime of abnormal eating.

Moreover, he aspired to be an absolute ruler with no one challenging his dictatorial powers.

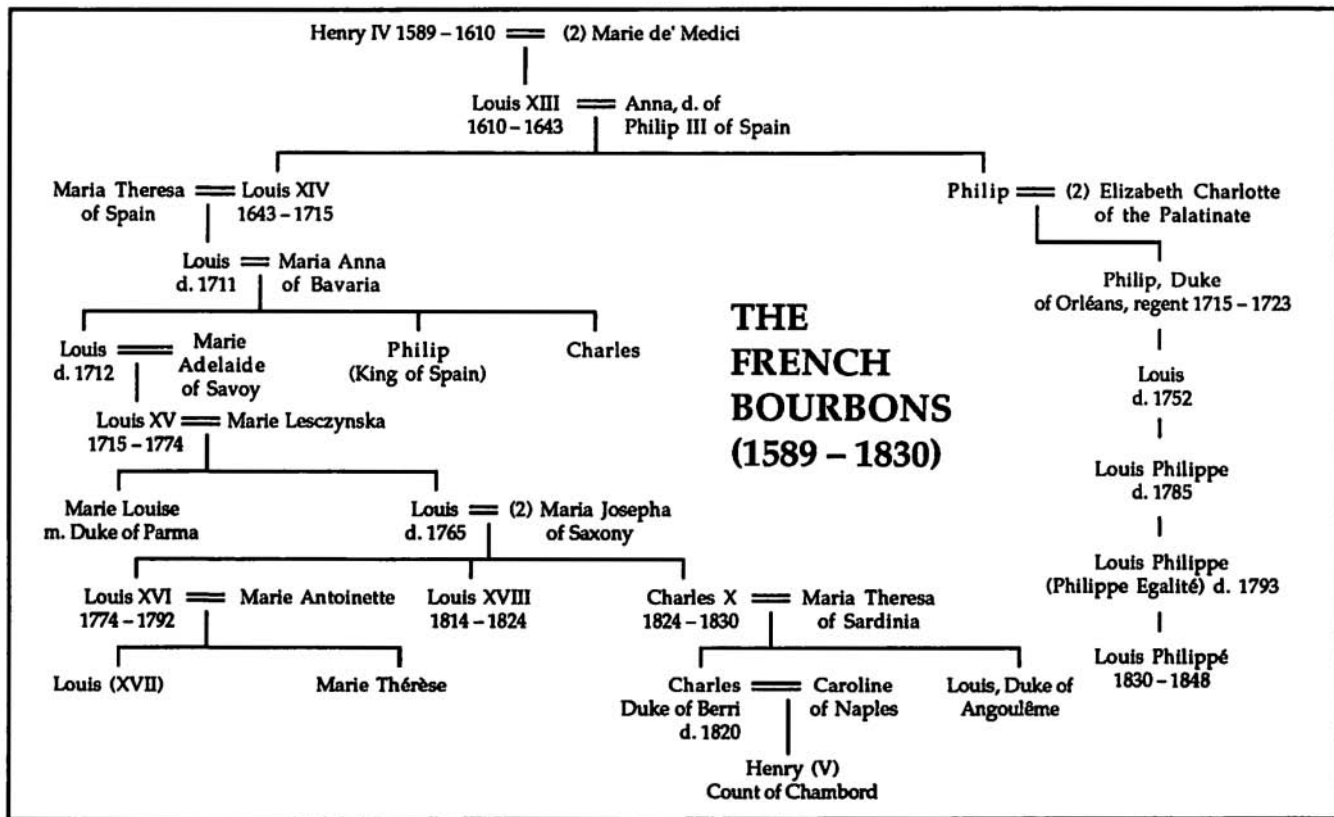
The most significant challenge to royal absolutism in France in the 17th century was a series of three revolts (called *Frondes*, meaning “a child’s slingshot”) by some of the nobility and judges of the *parlements* or courts of Paris. Competition among the nobility, however, enabled the government to put down the revolts. All three of these occurred when Louis XIV was very young (ages 5 – 11) and made a lasting impression on him; he was determined that no revolt would be successful during his reign.

#### **4.2.1 Government of France Under Louis XIV**

The king believed in absolute, unquestioned authority. Louis XIV deliberately got his chief ministers from the middle class in order to keep the aristocracy out of government. No members of the royal family or the high aristocracy were admitted to the daily council sessions at Versailles, where the king presided personally over deliberations of his ministers.

Council orders were transmitted to the provinces by *intendants*, who supervised all phases of local administration (especially courts, police, and the collection of taxes). Additionally, Louis XIV nullified the power of French institutions which might challenge his centralized bureaucracy.

Louis XIV never called the Estates-General. His intendants arrested the members of the three provincial estates who criticized royal policy; and the *parlements* were too intimidated by



the lack of success of the Frondes to offer further resistance.

Control of the peasants, who numbered 95% of the French population, was accomplished by numerous means. Some peasants kept as little as 20% of their cash crops after paying the landlord, the government, and the Church. Peasants also were subject to the *corvée*, a month's forced labor on the roads. People not at work on the farm were conscripted into the French army or put into workhouses. Finally, rebels were hanged or forced to work as galley slaves.

Colbert, finance minister from 1661 to 1683, improved the economy and the condition of the royal treasury. He reduced the number of tax collectors; reduced local tolls in order to encourage domestic trade; improved France's transportation system with canals and a growing merchant marine; organized a group of French trading companies (the East India Company, the West India Company, the Levant Company and the Company of the North); and paid bounties to ship builders to strengthen trade.

#### 4.2.2 *Palace of Versailles*

Louis XIV moved his royal court from the Louvre in Paris to Versailles, twelve miles outside of Paris. The facade of his palace was a third of a mile long with vast gardens adorned with classical statuary, 1400 fountains, and 1200 orange trees.

In Paris, the court included six hundred people. At Versailles it grew to ten thousand noblemen, officials, and attendants. Sixty percent of the royal tax revenue was spent on Versailles and the upkeep of the court of Louis XIV.

The splendour of the court was in the beautiful gardens and Baroque architecture of the palace, in the luxurious furnishings of the apartments, and in the magnificent dress of men and

women who went there. Often half of the income of nobles and their ladies was spent on clothing, furniture, and servants.

Fantastic amusements occupied the time of the aristocratic court: tournaments, hunts, tennis, billiards, boating parties, dinners, dances, ballets, operas, concerts, and theater. In order to celebrate the birth of his son in 1662, the king arranged a ball attended by 15,000 people who danced under a thousand lights before massive mirrors, the Palace of the Carrousel.

#### **4.2.3 *Louis XIV's Policies Toward Christianity***

***Catholics.*** The king considered himself the head of the French Catholic Church and claimed that the Pope had no temporal authority over the French Church. Louis XIV sided with the Jesuits against the Jansenists, Catholics like Blaise Pascal who reaffirmed St. Augustine's doctrine of inherent depravity, i.e., that man is born by nature a sinner and salvation is only for the elect of God.

***Protestants (Huguenots).*** About a million French citizens were Protestant. Louis XIV attempted to eradicate Protestantism from France by demolishing Huguenot churches and schools, paying cash rewards to Protestants to convert to Catholicism, and by billeting soldiers in homes of those who refused to convert. In 1685 the king revoked the Edict of Nantes that had given many religious freedoms to Protestants at the time of Henry IV. The revocation took away civil rights from Protestants. Their children were required by law to be raised as Catholics. French Protestant clergymen were exiled or sent to the galleys. As many as 200,000 Huguenots fled from France – to England, Holland, and to English colonies in America. Protestantism did survive in France, but was greatly weakened.

## **4.3 FRANCE UNDER LOUIS XV (1715 – 74)**

### **4.3.1 *Problems and Grievances***

French people of all classes desired greater popular participation in government, rejecting royal absolutism. There was high resentment towards special privileges of the aristocracy. All nobles were exempt from certain taxes. Many were subsidized with regular pensions from the government. The highest offices of government were reserved for aristocrats. Promotions were based on political connections rather than merit. Life at Versailles was wasteful, extravagant, and frivolous.

There was no uniform code of laws, and a lack of justice in the French judicial system existed. The king had arbitrary powers of imprisonment. Government bureaucrats were often petty tyrants, many of them merely serving their own interests. The bureaucracy had become virtually a closed class within itself.

Vestiges of the feudal and manorial systems continued to upset the peasants, particularly when they were taxed excessively in comparison to other segments of society. The *philosophes* gave expression to these grievances and discontent grew.

Louis XV was only five years old when his great-grandfather died. Fifty-nine years later he too died, leaving many of the same problems he had inherited. Corruption and inequity in government were even more pronounced. Ominously, crowds lined the road to St. Denis, the burial place of French kings, and cursed the king's casket just as they had his predecessor.

## **4.4 FRANCE UNDER LOUIS XVI (1774–1792)**

Louis XVI was the grandson of Louis XV. He married

Marie Antoinette (1770), daughter of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa.

Louis XVI was honest, conscientious, and sought genuine reforms, but he was indecisive and lacking in determination. He antagonized the aristocracy when he sought fiscal reforms.

One of his first acts was to restore to the French *parlements* their judicial powers. When he sought to impose new taxes on the under-taxed aristocracy, the *parlements* refused to register the royal decrees. In 1787 he granted toleration and civil rights to French Huguenots (Protestants).

In 1787 the King summoned the Assembly of the Notables, a group of 144 representatives of the nobility and higher clergy. At Versailles Louis XVI asked them to tax all lands, without regard to privilege of family; to establish provincial assemblies; to allow free trade in grain; and to abolish forced labor on the roads. The Notables refused to accept these reforms and demanded the replacement of certain of the king's ministers.

The climax of the crisis came in 1788 when the king was no longer able to achieve either fiscal reform or new loans. He could not even pay the salaries of government officials. By this time one-half of government revenues went to pay interest on the national debt (at 8%).

For the first time in 175 years the king called for a meeting of the Estates General (1789). When the Estates General formed itself into the National Assembly, the French Revolution was under way. Later in the radical phase of the revolution the National Convention voted 366 to 361 to execute the king, January 21, 1793.

## FRENCH ACQUISITIONS, 1660 – 1766

