

The Reign of Louis XIV: Analyzing a Primary Source

The following selection is adapted from a letter written by Fénelon, a French archbishop, to Louis XIV. Archbishop Fénelon served as tutor to one of the king's children. This letter was sent anonymously—that is, it was unsigned. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

For nearly thirty years, your principal Ministers have destroyed and reversed all the ancient customs of the state in order to raise your authority to its highest pitch. They no longer speak of the state and its constitution; they only speak of the King and of his royal pleasure. They have pushed your revenues and your expenses to unprecedented heights. They have raised you up to the sky in order, they say, to outshine the grandeur of all your predecessors; that is to say, in order to impoverish the whole of France for the introduction of monstrous luxuries of court. Your ministers have been harsh, haughty, unjust, violent, of bad faith. They have recognized no other rule but to threaten, to crush, and to destroy all who resist them. They have rendered your name odious, and the whole French nation intolerable to all our neighbors. They have kept none of our ancient allies because they only want slaves. They have caused almost twenty years of bloody wars.

Meanwhile, your people die of hunger. The cultivation of the soil is almost abandoned; all business enterprise is stagnant, and no longer offers employment to working men. All commerce is destroyed. Instead of taking money from these poor people, one should give them alms and feed them.

The people themselves, it should be said, who hitherto have loved you, are beginning to lose love, confidence, and even respect. Your victories and conquests no longer cause them to rejoice; they are full of bitterness and despair. Sedition is kindled little by little everywhere. They believe that you love only your authority and your glory.

There, Sire, is the state of things. You live as one whose eyes are fatally blinded.

1. Why was this letter sent anonymously? _____

2. What did Fénelon criticize about the rule of Louis XIV? _____

3. According to Fénelon, how did the French people feel about the rule of Louis XIV? _____

4. What reforms do you think Fénelon would have welcomed? _____

