The Thomas Hardye School

Summer Preparation Task

History A Level (Early Modern: European Unit)

Purpose of task:
To gain greater understanding of France by the 1770s by looking at the impact of the reigns of Louis XVI's two predecessors.

Task: You are going to produce a research project exploring the background to Louis XVI's reign by looking at that of Louis XIV and Louis XV. Research the below questions and write notes (in full sentences). Use sub-headings and write your notes in bullet point form. Aim to write around 3 sides of A4.

1. **Louis XIV 'The Sun King' – how did his reign change France in the Seventeenth Century?**

Use the internet (suggested links opposite) to answer the following questions:

a) How did Louis XIV create an absolute monarchy in France? (consider: taxation, army, wars)

b) The Palace of Versailles:
   i. How did Louis change it during the reign of Louis XIV?
   ii. What did it show about the French monarchy?

2. **Louis XV – to what extent did his reign damage the monarchy in France in the mid Eighteenth Century?**

Read the attached article from T.C.W Blanning 'Louis XV and the decline of the French Monarchy' (NB. You may have to google some of the language/ unfamiliar words but try not to worry if you don't understand it all, just try to get a general impression.)
Then write a set of notes looking at the impact of the following in Louis's reign:

- Foreign Policy / Wars
- Clashes with *Parlements* over the law
- The Royal Court
- Mistresses
- Overall argument of the article?

Recommended resources:

Useful Websites include:

BBC History site – Louis XIV
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/louis_xiv.shtml

http://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history

Article on Louis XV:
https://www.historytoday.com/archive/louis-xv-and-decline-french-monarchy
(username: thomashardye
Password: history123)

BBC Biography of Louis XV
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/louis_xv.shtml

Films/ TV:

'Versailles from Louis XVIII to French Revolution'
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X235vpOToVU)

'Versailles' TV series (available on iPlayer)

Recommended:

- Watch 'Marie Antoinette' on BBC iPlayer https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0dlytvb/marie-antoinette-series-1-7-the-ostrich-bitch?seriesId=p0dlx309-structural-1-p0dlx3fx – this gives a good flavour of court politics and issues surrounding the royal family for the first part of the course

- Read (or listen to via Audible) *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel (1992) https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/A-Place-of-Greater-Safety-Audiobook/B00CEF576G – covers the key events from the perspective of the key figures involved.

Deadline for Task: First lesson in week commencing 14th September 2026

Published on *History Today* (https://www.historytoday.com)
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Louis XV and the Decline of the French Monarchy

T.C.W. Blanning argues that royalty in France undermined itself through mismanagement, despotism and sleaze.

Louis XV at the Battle of FontenoyThe reign of Louis XV witnessed the delegitimation of the French monarchy as a result of what contemporaries believed to be the wilful neglect of the national interest in foreign policy and the despotic conduct of the king. The inability of Louis to make the 'Versailles system' work, together with the 'sleaze factor', completed the process.

Foreign humiliation

The apex of Louis XV's reign was reached on 11 May 1745. On that day a French army achieved a decisive victory at Fontenoy in the Austrian Netherlands over a multi-national army of British, Hanoverians, Austrians and Dutch, commanded by the duke of Cumberland, younger son of George II. Although Louis did not command his army in person – that was left in the capable hands of Maurice de Saxe – not only was he present at the battle, but he also made a contribution to its successful outcome. Together with his eldest son, the fifteen-year old Dauphin, he took up an exposed position from which to observe the conflict, resolutely refusing entreaties to withdraw when he came under fire. No less a person than Napoleon later observed that his courage had a decisive influence on French morale: 'Victory at Fontenoy should be credited to the King for remaining on the field of battle. If he had withdrawn beyond the river Scheldt, as Marshal de Saxe had wanted, the battle would have been lost. When the hard-fought battle had been won Louis and the Dauphin went from one regiment to another, to be acclaimed with rapture.

He was never to be so popular again. Despite Fontenoy and other victories on the northern front, when the war finally ground to a halt three years later France had nothing to show for almost eight years of fighting. Defeats in Italy at the hands of the Austrians and Piedmontese and at sea at the hands of the British forced acceptance of the peace of Aachen (or Aix-la-Chapelle) which restored all the hard-won conquests in the Low Countries. Opinion in France was outraged. It seemed that France had done all the fighting but her allies, most notably the Spanish Bourbons, had received all the benefits. A topical simile entered everyday speech – 'as stupid as the peace' (bete comme la paix).

This was nothing compared with the storm of disapproval which greeted the outcome of the next war of Louis XV's reign – the Seven Years War (1756-63). With the advantage of hindsight, we can see that this was a truly 'world-historical' conflict, for by destroying the burgeoning French empire in North America it decided that in the long run the world would become Anglophone. If contemporaries did not grasp that momentous implication, they could certainly appreciate that France’s position in Europe and the world was at stake. Perhaps even more painful than the multiple defeats by the British in Canada, the Caribbean, India and on the high seas was the catastrophe suffered at the hands of Frederick the Great at Rossbach on 5 November 1757. Not for the first time, a French army went east to chastise an upstart German prince, but this time it was routed – in the space of half-an-hour and by a Prussian army half its own size. A story was soon making the rounds that, on the eve of the battle, French officers had observed loftily that they were doing 'great honour' to the 'margrave of Brandenburg' by condescending to fight him. So Voltaire was not alone in thinking that Rossbach represented a greater humiliation for his country than Crecy, Poitiers or Agincourt.

Deadline for Task: First lesson in week commencing 15th September 2025

From the point of view of the stability of the French monarchy, the most serious aspect of the Seven Years War was the manner in which it had begun. The treaty of Versailles of 1 May 1756 concluded an alliance between France and the Habsburg Monarchy and set in motion a sequence of events which was to end in Frederick the Great's preemptive invasion of Silesia in August of the same year. By bringing to an abrupt end two-and-a-half centuries of conflict between the two countries, it carried out a veritable 'diplomatic revolution' in the European states-system. So sudden a rupture of tradition was bound to arouse bitter hostility. The new system might just have won acceptance if it had been followed by a successful war in which France established control of the world overseas while retaining her domination of the European continent. In the event, the military and naval disasters convinced French public opinion that the country's foreign policy was fundamentally at odds with its real interests.

This was the responsibility of Louis XV. Although he had reservations about certain aspects of the new policy (especially the implications for France's traditional allies in eastern Europe), he remained true to it until the end of his days. It was his desire to perpetuate the alliance which prompted him to marry the Dauphin (the future Louis XVI) to the Austrian arch-duchess Marie Antoinette in 1770. This change of' direction was possibly fatal for the French monarchy, for it convinced contemporaries that the sharp decline in their country's power and prestige was due to the fundamentally misguided policies being pursued by the king and his ministers. Yet the assertion of the country's position in the world at large was at the heart of kingship. If the king wilfully ignored the national interest, with disastrous consequences, then the king's very position was called into question. As one observer remarked, the treaty of Versailles was 'the disgrace of Louis XV' which 'transformed France from being a great and victorious power into being the auxiliary of Austria'. The war declared on Austria by the French Revolutionaries on 20 April 1792 in part represented the desire for revenge.

Despotism

The other main attribute of' kingship was justice. In an age which seeks safeguards against tyranny in representative constitutions and democratic institutions, it is difficult for us to appreciate just how much importance was attached to the rule of law. It was held to be what distinguished the civilised countries of western Europe from 'oriental despotisms' such as Russia and the Ottoman Empire, whose wretched inhabitants were subject to the arbitrary caprice of their rulers. The King of France may have been the sole legislator, but he was as much subject to the law of the land as anyone else. His theoretical legislative monopoly was limited by the 'fundamental laws' (lois fondamentales) of the kingdom, which governed the all-important question of royal succession and royal possessions, and by the 'maxims of the kingdom' (maximes du royaume), a package of traditions, conventions and principles none the less binding for not being codified'.

It proved to be deeply damaging for the French monarchy that during the reign of Louis XV a dispute developed which led many contemporaries to conclude that France was degenerating into a despotism. The main point at issue was 'Jansenism', which took its name from Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), bishop of Ypres in what was then the Spanish Netherlands. His exposition of the theology of St Augustine, published posthumously in 1640, made a deep and lasting impact on all Catholic Europe. In France, however, the movement which came to bear his name had political overtones from the start, because Jansen had been critical of Cardinal Richelieu's foreign policy and because many of his sup- porters took an active part on the side of the opposition in the Frondes, the French civil wars of 1648-1653. Louis XIV referred to the Jansenists as 'republicans' and towards the end of his life launched a vigorous campaign against them. In 1713 he obtained a papal bull – 'Unigenitus' – condemning Jansenism as heretical.

That the king of France should seek the assistance of the Pope in Rome to persecute a group of French men and women, who always vehemently denied that they were heretics, was found

deeply disturbing even by non-Jansenists. Defence of 'Gallican liberties' was always calculated to strike a responsive chord. Their opposition found vital institutional support from the Parlements, many of whose members were Jansenist sympathisers. Moreover, when Louis XIV died two years later, in 1715, the Parlements regained the right to remonstrate before registering royal legislation which they had lost in 1673. So when the infant Louis XV came to the throne, trouble was already brewing. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the theological dispute may have been, it was most unfortunate from a political point of view that the opportunity was not taken to reverse Louis XIV's policy. Aided and abetted by Cardinal Fleury, his first minister from 1726 until 1743, Louis XV continued the anti-Jansenist line.

In doing so, he wilfully discarded the most powerful card in the royal pack – the association of the monarchy with the defence of national integrity. By perpetuating the unnatural alliance with Rome, he allowed the Parlements to pick up the nationalist card and play it for all it was worth. The result was a series of bruising encounters between king and Parlements, as the latter repeatedly sprang to the defence of the Jansenists. In this struggle, the Parlements developed two crucial weapons: promoting solidarity between all thirteen of their number, so that they could not be played off against each other; and appealing to public opinion by printing and publicising their remonstrances. The king and his advisers proved to be much less adaptable. Their increasingly strident declarations of royal absolutism made them seem unresponsive, insensitive, dictatorial – in a word 'despotic'. A gulf began to open up between the interest of the king and what was perceived to be the interest of the nation, a gulf enhanced of course by the disastrous foreign policy described in the previous section. As J.S. Bromley has written: 'national sovereignty was the most dynamic concept that was crystallised out of the parliamentary struggle...parliamentary Jansenism, and with it what d'Argenson called Jansenist nationalism, did more to shake the fabric of French absolutism, in its theory and its practice, than the philosophers.'

The expulsion from France in 1764 of the Jesuits, the arch-enemies of the Jansenists, seemed to symbolise the victory of the Parlements. In 1771, however, Louis XV took advantage of a long-running secular dispute over the conduct of the royal governor of Brittany, the duc d'Aiguillon, to abolish the Parlements altogether and to replace them with a new judicial structure more directly under royal control. For most contemporaries, this intervention confirmed their growing suspicion that the French monarchy was turning into a despotism. If the Parlements could no longer defend the national interest and national liberties against encroachment, a sterner remedy would be needed. So not the least alarming feature of the uproar caused by the 'Maupeou revolution' (named after the minister in charge of the coup against the Parlements) was the increasingly numerous and insistent calls for the summoning of the Estates General, last convened in 1614. When Louis XV died suddenly from smallpox in 1774, his successor could recall the Parlements. But he could not repair the fissures in teh delicate fabric of trust in the monarchy rent by hi grandfather's long anf unhappy reign.

Representational culture

At the great palace of Versailles Louis XIV had created a monarchical culture which established a European standard. Every branch of' the arts was enlisted to create an image of majesty which was both distanced from the ordinary observer and highly conspicuous. This was not just a monarch ruling by divine right; it was also a monarchy legitimised by spectacle. As Peter Burke has written, Louis XIV 'was charismatic in every sense – the original sense of having been anointed with chrism, a symbol of divine grace, as well as the modern sense of a leader surrounded by an aura of authority'.' In its heyday, that is during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Versailles system combined political authority with social control and European hegemony.

But even before Louis XIV's death, its glamour was beginning to fade. As his foreign policy went badly wrong in the War of the Spanish Succession and death approached, the old king became increasingly morose and his court correspondingly gloomy. The aristocratic world of fashion decamped for Paris, returning to Versailles only when unavoidable duty called. This cultural shift from court to capital was symbolised by the decision of the duc d'Orleans, who acted as regent for the infant Louis XV, to establish his court at the Tuileries palace in the centre of Paris. It is tempting but pointless to speculate what might have happened to the French monarchy if it had stayed there. In 1722 the decision was taken to move back to Versailles, perhaps because the now adolescent king had happy memories of his early childhood there, more likely because Orleans had been upset by his personal unpopularity with the Parisians.

Back at Versailles, Louis proved to have many of the qualities necessary to operate successfully in a 'representational culture' (representational in the sense that it relied on representing or making present the values of the regime). He was tall, strong, athletic, good-looking and imposing. He was also intelligent, the most intelligent of all the Bourbons according to his most recent biographer. Unfortunately, he also had a weak, high-pitched voice and was a very poor public speaker. Partly for that reason, he was also very timid, secretive, elusive, indecisive and prone to long periods of complete silence. On the great stage built by his predecessor, he appeared with growing reluctance and diminishing confidence. He kept the palace open to the public and continued to observe the great royal festivals, but he appeared at the regular court functions ever more seldom. What he liked was to withdraw to his private apartments (as opposed to the ceremonial state apartments), where he could relax with his intimate friends. Indeed, he began to spend long periods away from Versailles altogether, preferring smaller secluded chateaux such as La Muette, Choisy and the Trianon. In 1750, for example, he spent only 52 nights at Versailles and only 63 the following year. But when he was absent, the court was dead. Gradually, the system created by Louis XIV fell apart.

One of Louis XV's favourite private residences was the chateau of Choisy, which he had given to his most famous mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Many French kings had maintained mistresses. Indeed, the most popular of all the Bourbons – Henry IV – had been a fornicator on a legendary scale and Louis XIV had also fathered several illegitimate children. Sexual potency was and remains a highly desirable attribute of kingship, as any anthropologist will confirm. So when the fifteen year-old Louis XV supplied his twenty-two year-old bride with 'seven tokens of his love' on their wedding-night (as the official report decorously put it) he was establishing his credentials to be head of the herd in no uncertain fashion. Alas, what had been thought permissible in the past was increasingly frowned on in the eighteenth century, often depicted as an age of sexual licence hut in reality a distinctly priggish period.

Louis made matters much worse by the scale of his promiscuity. After he had debauched in turn three daughters of the marquis de Nesle, the wags asked: 'To select an entire family – is that being unfaithful or constant?'

The 'sleaze' factor

If he had confined his attentions to the daughters of aristocrats, he would have caused less disapproval. In the event, he went ever further down the social scale in his endless search for gratification. The marquise de Pompadour had been born plain 'Jeanne Poisson' ('poisson' means 'fish', which of course gave rise to some unpleasant metaphors), and her bourgeois origins were only accentuated by her parvenu airs and graces. Worse was to come. At a house in Versailles known as the 'Parc aux Cerfs' (the deer-park) Louis established what was in effect his private brothel, one of whose residents – Louise O' Murphy – was immortalised in Boucher's celebrated painting Girl on a couch (also known as The sprawling O' Murphy). The titillating stories of scandalous orgies were exaggerated if not untrue, but of course most people chose to believe that

the king had sired ninety illegitimate children, that he bathed in the blood of virgins, and so on. Louis' last official mistress – Madame du Barry – was also the most disreputable. If she had not actually been a public prostitute, as the pornographic pamphlets maintained, her past had certainly been chequered, to put it mildly.

When Louis XV died, on 10 May 1774, the French monarchy was in dire straits. What seemed to be wilful failure in foreign policy and a despotic assault on the rule of law bad stripped it of its main sources of legitimacy. The reek of decadence which hung about the king's well-publicised 'private' life completed a bleak picture of decay not so very unfamiliar to us today. If the monarchy were to survive, the next king would need to be able to reassert French power and prestige, regain a reputation for legality and reinvigorate and modernise the monarchy's image. All that Louis XVI could bring to this task was an impeccable reputation for marital fidelity, so impeccable indeed that he was commonly supposed to be impotent. Despite a brief moment of popularity when he restored the Parlements and a fleeting revival of French power in the War of American Independence, it turned out that the legacy of his grandfather was too crushing a burden for his broad but flabby shoulders.

Further reading

- W Doyle, *The Old European Order 1660-1800*, Oxford 1978
- D McKay & H Scott, *The Rise of the Great Powers 1648-1815*, Longman 1983
- J Shennan, *France Before the Revolution*, Lancaster 2nd edn 1995
- J Bromley, 'The decline of absolute monarchy' in J Wallace-Hadrill & J McManners *France, Government and Society* (eds), London 2nd edn, 1985
- D Echeverria, *The Mapeou Revolution: A study in the history of libertarianism, France 1770-1774*, Baton Rouge 1985
- M Antoine, *Louis XV,* Fayard 1989

T.C.W. Blanning is a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College and the British Academy. His books include *Joseph II* and *The French Revolutionary Wars*

Source URL: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/louis-xv-and-decline-french-monarchy

Deadline for Task: First lesson in week commencing 15th September 2025