Justification For The Immorality Of Louis Xiv’s Absolutism Essay, Research Paper

The rationalism and efficiency of Louis XIV s absolute monarchy is historically undermined by the oppressive social circumstances that prevalently result from the practice of absolute rule. There were restrictions on the individual rights and liberties of people living in the absolute French regime, however, the political, economic, and cultural benefits that developed from Louis XIV s absolutism justify the restrictions put on human rights in France. Louis XIV implemented several political reforms, challenging the old feudal system of government, and bringing French politics into eighteenth century. In addition to advancing political policies, French absolutism stimulated the French economy, strengthening commerce inside France, while protecting the nation from a flood of European exports. As well, supported by the absolute reign of Louis XIV, French culture rose to a new level of prominence, and French customs spread throughout Europe. Several esteemed philosophers that lived in the era of Louis XIV, including Hobbes and Voltaire, have written about the benefits and need for absolutism. These commentators praise Louis XIV for his political, economic, and cultural reforms. It is because of these reforms that Ragnhild Hatton, a professor of International History in the University of London, teaches her students that the reign of Louis XIV spanned a period during which France grew in power, politically and militarily, while achieving a pre-eminence in the arts of civilization which has rarely been equaled.

French government and bureaucracy, preceding the absolutism of Louis XIV, had been seriously eroded by the royal minority and the destructive tendencies of feudalism. The era of Louis XIV marked the first time in Modern Western Civilization that a king effectively became his own first minister, ruling the kingdom of France personally. While the king considered himself the absolute ruler of France, he was not a foolish leader, and understood that he could not efficiently control every aspect of French politics by himself. No important decision concerning France was made without his endorsement, yet the king still worked with a team of experienced and competent ministers. He tolerated no interference by selfish aristocratic prerogatives, working instead with representative bodies, attempting to safeguard his subjects rights. Through the centralization of government, and the employment of Versailles as the headquarters for French politics, the king was able to control feuding nobles, and establish himself as the sole ruler in France. Internationally, Louis XIV s absolutism distinguished France as a powerful and admirable nation. By 1680, France was considered by many nations as . . . the dominant power in Europe. Louis encouraged colonies in North America, building a strong navy for their protection. The armies of Louis XIII and Mazarin were a hard bitten, hard-fighting, undisciplined, ill-fed, badly paid rabble, held together by the prestige of famous generals and colonels, living by loot and extortion, things of horror and terror to the civilian population, friend and foe alike. In 1682, the system of enlistment consisted of attaching a youngster to a regiment, . . . to pick up what he could (usually bad habits) whilst the family lawyer haggled over a company for him. Louis XIV s reign abolished this system, creating nine cadet companies, each with an instructional staff for the benefit of the cadets. He built up the strongest army in Europe and produced the best generals. At the same time, beside from expanding French borders, the king succeeded in unifying his country, creating an aura of French nationalism. Louis XIV assembled the various French states, unifying them into the strong, independent nation of France. Critics of Louis XIV s absolute governing argue that the king restricted religious freedom, and was arrogantly in opposition to the doctrines of the Pope. In 1685, the king revoked the Edict of Nantes, which gave Protestants the right to practice their religion freely, without the threat of persecution. This action angered many people, compelling people to label Louis XIV as a contemptuous and pious oppressor. However, in reality, the king was only attempting to unite the French people, who were all essentially Roman Catholic, under a state religion. The fact remains that French absolutism was very practical, developing effective state bureaucracies and standing armies to carry out evolutionary reforms. Hence, through the abolishment of feudal customs, and institution of new political reforms, the government of Louis XIV is frequently viewed as one of the first modern governments.

Louis XIV s absolute rule carried through his bureaucracy, allowing him to stabilize the French economy. The government of Louis XIV made a variety of economic reforms, increasing revenue, and strengthening French economics. One such policy was that all lace sold in France had to be made in France. In Louis XIV s Letter s to his Heirs, he explains how his use of absolution helped the French lace industry: I was determined to cut short by my authority all the trickery that [lace importers] might use. In this fashion, Louis XIV increased the production of French exports, limiting imports through the practice of Mercantilism. The Minister of Finance for France, Colbert, ended local taxes on products moving within French borders, allowing internal trade to move freely and grow rapidly. This new economic policy led to a favorable balance of trade within France, stimulating regional manufacturing and agriculture. The Thirty Years War wrecked royal finances, yet Louis s absolutism gave Colbert the opportunity to reduce royal debt by 60%, reform taxation, and manage crown lands efficiently. Revenues had trebled by 1683, making Louis the richest king in Europe. The economy was also stimulated by absolutism through the elimination of the French freight tax. Voltaire explains this policy in his The Age of Louis XIV: In 1662 the king began to exempt his subjects from a duty called the freight tax, which all foreign vessels had to pay, and he gave the French merchants every facility for transporting their goods themselves more cheaply. It was then that our maritime trade began to develop. Pierre Gaxotte, an eminent French historian, has noted the value of the economic reforms practiced under the absolute government of Louis XIV: Applying a systematic and practical intelligence to the theories [of Bodin, Laffemas, and Montchretien], [Colbert] developed a program and policy which he carried out . . . with unrivaled brilliance. Thus, by applying the principles of Mercantilism, and instituting other economic improvements, Louis XIV s absolute sovereignty stimulated the French economy.

In the prevalence of an absolute bureaucratic structure and new economic stability, bringing the French government tax revenue, Louis XIV raised France to the pinnacle of high civilization in the seventeenth century. Under the absolute rule of Louis XIV, the French government provoked several achievements in the arts. The culmination was the Palace of Versailles, virtually a shrine to the Sun King s greatness. French culture became the dominant force in Europe – everywhere monarchs built their own versions of Versailles. At the same time, French became the language of many courts and copycat Palaces were built all over Europe, including Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. In 1686, the Abb de F nelon published a short pamphlet entitled Traite de l Education des Filles, and in April of the same year, Louis XIV opened the first French boarding school for girls. The government of Louis XIV provided scientists with the resources, the equipment, and the facilities that other nations lacked. The absolutism of Louis XIV allowed for . . . the establishment of The Academy of Sciences, the Journal des Savants, the Observatory, [and] the Jardin du Roi. These [institutions] were the principal parts of the scientific establishment [during the 18th century]. In short, Louis XIV employed the funds produced from his absolute kingdom to stimulate cultural advancement in France, elevating French art, architecture, education, and science.

The political, economic, and cultural advances produced by Louis XIV s absolute government have been commended by several esteemed philosophers. Thomas Hobbes, a respected commentator of politics and society, describes a natural world that is void of any form of government or society. In his extraordinary work of political and social theory, the Leviathan, he explains how . . . everyone in this natural world lives in a state of constant fear and war. In order for humanity to escape this anarchy, an absolute monarch must prevail. The philosopher believes that humans need to leave the state of nature, entering social contracts. These contracts would result in all people giving up their rights and liberties to an absolute sovereign. Another point, which Hobbes makes in support of having an absolute sovereign, is that all people are incapable of agreeing on a common set of rules and regulations. Hobbes argues that it is better to fear only one person rather than everyone. In his opinion, a sovereign may be forced to injure his subjects, yet he must be harsh for worthy reason. In order for absolutism to function properly, the sovereign must up hold his law, and will have to injure or kill those who disobey him. France, under feudal rule, is an example of the anarchy in Hobbes s natural world, which could only cease through the harshness of an absolute ruler. The writings of Voltaire sternly criticized French government, yet he still saw the need for absolutism, and praised Louis XIV for his actions. In The Age of Louis XIV, Voltaire openly praised Louis XIV as being . . . an effective ruler, whose rule brought peace after decades of civil war. Considering the loss of individual liberty present in an absolute government, Louis XIV s achievements are best summarized by Voltaire: This then in general terms, is what Louis XIV did or tried to do to make his country more flourishing . . . [either way], Louis XIV did more for his people than twenty of his predecessors put together. . . . In summary, esteemed philosophers and political commentators have written about the need for an absolute sovereignty in the evolution of a society, and have praised Louis XIV for his accomplishments as an absolute ruler.

The lack of individual rights caused by Louis XIV s absolute governing pale in comparison to the political, economic, and cultural advances that the Sun King brought to France. The absolutism of Louis XIV substituted the archaic customs of feudalism with new political reforms, stimulated the French economy through the application of mercantilism, and used state funds to heighten cultural advancement in France. Hobbes and Voltaire, respected philosophers, defend the principles of absolutism, and applaud Louis XIV for his system of government. Without absolute power, Louis XIV could not control the destructive tendencies of greedy French nobles, and would not have been able to implement his political, economic, and cultural reforms. Louis XIV s absolute rule was a necessary stage in the evolution of French society, a fact that remains solid no matter what moral injustices occurred in France during the era of the Sun King.

Endnotes

1 Ragnhild Hatton, Louis XIV and His World (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1972) 1.

2 Louis XIV: Model Answer. 20 Dec. 1999 .

3 William Lewis, The Splendid Century. (New York: Doubleday, 1953) 125.

4 William Lewis, The Splendid Century. (New York: Doubleday, 1953) 134.

5 Early modern Europe. 28 Dec. 1999 .

6 Paul Halsall, Modern Western Civilization Class 4: The Rise of Absolutism. 15 Dec. 1999 .

7 Louis XIV and Absolutism was Positive for France. 01 Jan. 2000 .

8 Louis XIV: Model Answer. 20 Dec. 1999 .

9 Pierre Gaxotte, The Age of Louis XIV (New York: Macmillam, 1970) 45.

10 Louis XIV and Absolutism was Positive for France. 01 Jan. 2000 .

11 Louis XIV: Model Answer. 20 Dec. 1999 .

12 Paul Halsall, Modern Western Civilization Class 4: The Rise of Absolutism. 15 Dec. 1999 .

13 Pierre Gaxotte, The Age of Louis XIV (New York: Macmillam, 1970) 221.

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