Peter The Great Essay, Research Paper

There have been many very influential people throughout European history. Louis XIV of France, Frederick William of Prussia, Ivan the Great and Peter the Great of Russia, Charles I and James I all made great impacts in the development and progression of their countries. However, if you had to name one person who was the most influential person in all of European history, who would it be? I believe that it can be narrowed down to Peter the Great and Louis XIV. Although Peter the Great was possibly the most magnificent Russian Czar of all time, I believe King Louis XIV of France had the greater impact upon European history.

Under the direction of King Louis XIV, France achieved unprecedented dominance in Europe, and her culture flourished. Louis court was renowned for its splendor and sophistication. He helped advance the arts in every field through his enlightened patronage. His seventy-two year reign was longer than any other ruler in modern European history.

Louis XIV brought France to its peak of absolute power. His absolutism brought him into conflict with the Huguenots and the papacy resulting with some damaging repercussions. His many foreign wars became a financial burden, yet his long reign is associated with the greatest age of French culture, symbolized by the Palace of Versailles. His influence was paramount to all other monarchs prior to him and the glorification of France was his ruthless priority. The legacy of The Man with the Iron Mask told of a ruthless side of him that would not even allow his own brother to interfere, if in fact it was his brother in the mask.

Although Peter the Great was equally ruthless and he laid the foundations of a centralized Russian state, his overall impact on the rest of Europe did not equal that of Louis XIV (Tierney, p.29). Peter the Great was an imposing figure estimated at six foot seven and is credited with modernizing Russia. He built St. Petersburg, moving the Russian capital closer to continental Europe, and captured ports on the Black Sea as well as the Baltic Sea. However, he was more instrumental in modernizing Russia than impacting the rest of Europe as Louis XIV did.

Peter the Great borrowed many of his ideas from the rest of Europe. Three hundred years ago Peter I of Russia made a visit to London that lasted for nearly four months. Always eager to learn about Western ways, especially those that might help to modernize Russia, the young Czar found much in England to admire such as Greenwich Hospital and Greenwich Observatory, which seemed to him to be models of scientific progress. His enthusiasm for Western practices extended even to fashions in dress (Tierney, p.31). Indeed, Peter is recorded as saying, The English island is the best and most beautiful in the world. Therefore, the point becomes obvious that Peter the Great wasn t so much an influence upon Europe. Rather, Europe was an influence upon him. Additionally, according to Robert K. Massie s book, Peter the Great, when Peter returned to Russia, he was accompanied by dozens of Englishmen, engineers, mathematicians and even barbers to shave the beards of Russian Nobles. Europe impacted him more than he impacted Europe.

Louis XIV, however, took on Spain, which had been the major world power since building an army financed by the gold from the Americas. Europe was stunned. Spain had been the dominant world power for so long that nobody thought so easy a victory against her was possible. Louis knew better. He believed that battles are won before they begin. Consequently, his campaign had been thoroughly thought out before it was launched. Secret treaties had been made with Austria and Portugal, and German princes were bribed to stay out of the conflict. Also, Louis was the first to introduce uniforms to any military (Voltaire in Tierney, p.22). The campaign set the Sun King s pattern for the future – far from being a bombastic or passionate warrior, he ran the wars by careful, deliberate calculation.

Louis military excursions can be neatly separated into four distinct conflicts: the War of Devolution with Spain, the Dutch War, the War of Palatinate, and the War of the Spanish Succession the last of which might be called the first truly global conflict of the modern age. In truth, France fared well, losing little land. By the time Louis death in 1715, Louis XIV could claim to have irrevocably broken the Hapsburg ring around his kingdom and transformed France from a struggling, politically divided entity into the premier power on the European continent.

From early on, Louis XIV proved himself as a force to be respected. The early personal reign of Louis was highly successful in both internal and foreign affairs. At home the parliaments lost their traditional power to obstruct legislation, the judicial structure was reformed by the codes of civil procedure (1667) and criminal procedure (1669, urban law enforcement was improved by creation (1667) of the office of lieutenant general of police for Paris, later imitated in other towns. Also after Mazarin s death in 1661, Louis astounded his court by becoming his own chief minister and ending the long reign of the cardinal ministers. The king thereafter controlled his own government until his death, acting through his high state council and a few select ministers, whom he called or dismissed at will.

Throughout European history, countries progressed due to their influential leaders. Peter the Great and Louis XIV both made great impacts on their countries, however, King Louis XIV went above and beyond the normal great leader. He not only affected his country of France with his great reign, he also made a great impact on ALL of Europe s history