

# Louis xiv foreign policy assignment

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‘ Louis XIV’s foreign policy was entirely driven by his personal quest for gloire’. To what extent do you consider this statement to be true? Upon the coronation of Louis XIV on the 7th of June 1654, Mazarin informed Louis in fatherly tones that “ It is up to you to become the most glorious king that has ever been”. Although Louis’ personal reign did not truly begin until 1661, he took this advice to heart and for the early part of his reign his foreign policy was almost entirely based upon his desire to become a renowned warrior king and win honour for himself and his kingdom.

After 1674 and the withdrawal of French troops from Dutch soil, however, Louis seemed to mellow and become less hot-blooded, with security being the dominant factor in his foreign policy. In addition, two other factors helped dictate his policy during the later years. Firstly, the desire to create a mercantile sector in his economy by competing with the maritime powers colonially; secondly, on occasion religion played a part, although this is slightly dubious.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to say that ‘ gloire’ played no part after the Dutch War, as Louis was still a proud and aggressive monarch albeit a monarch who had learned some statesmanship. Louis was not by nature a religious man, preferring to use religion for his own ends and only when it suited him; therefore the view that he was a ‘ most Christian king’ and was motivated by religious zeal is fairly untenable. It must be pointed out, however, that occasionally it did prick him to action, notably when faced with Protestantism.

During the Dutch war he made it clear that he wished to restore Catholicism to Utrecht, and when he took Strasbourg in 1681 Louis insisted the Cathedral be returned to Catholic worship. Nevertheless, Louis' actions with regard to the Turk threat in 1683 were highly cynical and politically motivated and argue strongly against any religious conviction Louis may have had. Indeed, Louis actively sought the downfall of the Habsburgs by trying to keep Sobieski from coming to the aid of Vienna. Had the Turks succeeded, Louis would have been free to gain dominion of a weak Empire, making him an undisputed superpower in Europe.

The fact that Louis was willing to see the heathen Turk triumph over fellow Christians in reward for political gains is highly, if not completely, damning of any view that Louis was driven in his foreign policy by religion. Economic motives with regard to trade also influenced Louis on occasion though they were secondary to other, more central intentions. First, it made sense for Louis to give thought to trade as France possessed a long sea coast, perfectly placed on both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Statistics support this view as well: the French navy expanded phenomenally under Colbert and by 1670 it even surpassed the Royal navy in terms of sheer numbers. Economic motives played a part in persuading Louis to go to war with the Dutch in 1672: the rising tariff war and Colbert's obsessive commercial manoeuvring certainly influenced Louis. All of this, however, must be qualified by saying that from Louis' point of view, trade and mercantile interests would always come second to more important policy aims.

The Dutch war was more than anything a territorial war, and Louis tended to support Le Tellier and Louvois over Colbert, perhaps seeing him as little more than a glorified bean counter and organizer. For Louis, the proper prize of war was land, quantifiable territorial gains which would enhance his legacy and provide him with his much vaunted ‘ gloire’. Indeed, this view is evidenced by the fact that when, during the War of Spanish Succession financial crisis forced the government to choose between the army and the navy, it was the navy that suffered.

Having said all this, neither the religious nor the economic motives can be completely disregarded as they did occasionally influence Louis’ foreign policy. More than anything, certainly for the first part of Louis’ reign at least, it was the pursuit of ‘ gloire’ that drove Louis in his foreign policy. When Louis was asked to justify his attack on the Dutch in 1672 Louis replied, “ I shall not attempt to justify myself. Ambition and glory are always pardonable in a Prince. ” Historian Joel Cornette argues convincingly that it was more than just a factor in his foreign policy; it was a fundamental attribute of Louis’ sovereignty.

War justified his regal authority and defined the relationship between the King and the nobility, so in his view unless he portrayed himself as a warrior King, he was not King at all. Both the war of Devolution and the Dutch war were wars of gloire and little else; John Lynn argues that this view is supported by the fact that Louis was the instigator of both wars as he made the first aggressive moves. On both occasions, he led the army personally, in order to maximize the glory potential of each war, as if harking back to an Alexandrian time when rulers charged into the fray, leading from the front.

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Moreover, Louis brought members of the court, his wife and his children along on numerous campaigns, perhaps in an attempt to appear all the more virile. Even in his later years, Louis still retained some of the old fire that led him to war for war's sake and he never lost that sense that his life was part of a glorious epic. At the siege of Namur in 1692, Louis' entourage was comprised of leading courtiers, including ladies, and more importantly the poet Racine, evidencing Louis' pursuit of gloire was not extinguished through the accruing of wisdom.

It would not, however, be true to suggest that Louis was entirely driven by gloire as after the Dutch war Louis undeniably mellowed. Lynn argues that the withdrawal of French troops from Dutch soil marked the beginning of the end of Louis' volatile youth and the beginning of his defense aggressive policy. After 1676, Louis' strategies were more defensive, and security became the primary aim in his foreign policy. This volte-face in Louis thinking was crucially marked by the death of Turenne in 1675 and the retirement of the equally war mongering Conde in the same year.

Thus, French strategy fell into the hands of less brash men such as Louvois and Vauban, the unequalled master of defence and fortress architecture. The switch came about because of a maturing of Louis and was not achieved overnight. It took Louis some time to realise that the Dutch could not be crushed by the military forces he had, and that the Spanish Netherlands were out of his reach; Louis had to learn this the hard way. In addition, Louis came to realise the vulnerability of his situation as he was, in his own words, "equally in range of blows from Spain, Germany, the Low Countries and England".

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Lynn concludes that for all his obsession with gloire, Louis' fear of invasion overcame his natural lust for conquest as other powers proved to be tougher conquests than they at first appeared. Further evidence for Louis' increasing concern for security comes in the form of the fortification of the northern and eastern frontiers by Vauban with a spate of fortress renovation and construction- from 1682, the budget for fortifications quadrupled to 8, 000, 000 livres per annum.

Louis XIV never fully understood how threatening his quest for absolute security was and consequently never lost his image of a war loving tyrant; this was vital in later years as Louis found he had few allies in the War of Spanish Succession as he had alienated everyone, including one of the greatest military geniuses of the age, Prince Eugene of Savoy, whose joint command with Marlborough was a thorn in Louis' side. To see Louis as essentially a defensive and placatory monarch after the Dutch war is to misunderstand everything that the most tempestuous monarch of the era stood for.

The 9 years' war was arguably of his own making, through his seizure of Philipsburg and his devastation of the Palatinate which were undeniably aggressive moves even if Louis did not see them as such. Even though it was not Louis' intention by any means to spark war at the outset of the Spanish Succession crisis, it is easy to see how acts such as the recognition in 1701 of James Edward as King of England, or the French occupation of the Dutch barrier fortresses could be construed as Louis bent on securing the Spanish throne for the Bourbon dynasty leaving him as the power in Europe.

Although Louis gained some measure of statesmanship and diplomacy as his reign matured, he never lost the fire that made him the terror of his neighbours and the pursuit of gloire was never far from Louis mind, although it was tempered by his fear of becoming a lightning rod attracting invasion from all sides. To conclude, Louis XIV's foreign policy was not by any means entirely driven by his pursuit of glory.

A number of other factors influenced him in his policy making, including religious motives on occasion, mercantile and colonial considerations, and more than anything during his later years, the desire to secure France on every frontier; Clausewitz highlights this last point, pointing out that Louis aimed to “ defend the frontiers of the Kingdom from all insult, as insignificant as it might be” and Livet further supports this view, “ he marked France [with fortresses] like a peasant sets out boundary stones on his land”.

Nonetheless, gloire did not cease to motivate him later in his reign; he simply constrained it by pursuing more realistic policies than before and by being more diplomatic about it, an iron fist concealed by a velvet glove. It is unlikely that Louis had no thought to gloire after the Dutch war, he simply sought it via protecting France rather than attracting the enmity of all Europe, although this is nevertheless what he achieved.