

European History Readings

Document 1:

“Louis XIV Writes to His Son.” In *Louis XIV, A King's Lessons in Statecraft: Letters to His Heirs*. Edited by Jean Longnon and translated by Herbert Wilson. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970, pages 39-40, 48-51.

During the seventeenth century, England was moving toward a system which was a balance between royal and parliamentary power. In contrast, France was developing a strong, centralized absolute monarchy, where the king's position was not limited in any way. Louis XIV, who ruled from 1643 to 1715, became the model of the absolute monarch. Because ruling over and maintaining an absolutist system required great care and attention, Louis XIV wrote a series of letters in 1661 to his son, the dauphin, who was also named Louis. However, the dauphin died before his father (in 1711), and it was Louis's great-grandson who became Louis XV in 1715.

Many reasons, all very important, my son, have decided me, at some labour to myself, but one which I regard as forming one of my greatest concerns, to leave you these Memoirs of my reign and of my principal actions. I have never considered that kings, feeling in themselves, as they do, all paternal affection, are dispensed from the obligation common to fathers of instructing their children by example and by precept.

I have even hoped that in this purpose I might be able to be more helpful to you, and consequently to my subjects, than anyone else in the world; for there cannot be men who have reigned of more talents and greater experience than I, nor who have reigned in France; and I do not fear to tell you that the higher the position the greater are the number of things which cannot be viewed or understood save by one who is occupying that position.

I have considered, too, what I have so often experienced myself – the throng who will press round you, each for his own ends, the trouble you will have in finding disinterested advice, and the entire confidence you will be able to feel in that of a father who has no other interest but your own, no ardent wish but for your greatness.

I have given, therefore, some consideration to the condition of Kings – hard and rigorous in this respect – who owe, as it were, a public account of their actions to the whole world and to all succeeding centuries, and who, nevertheless, are unable to do so to all and sundry at the time without injury to their greatest interests, and without divulging the secret reasons of their conduct.

[*After talking about his own reign*] Two things without doubt were absolutely necessary: very hard work on my part, and a wise choice of persons capable of seconding it.

As for work, it may be, my son, that you will begin to read these Memoirs at an age when one is far more in the habit of dreading than loving it, only too happy to have escaped subjection to tutors and to have your hours regulated no longer, nor lengthy and prescribed study laid down for you.

There is something more, my son, and I hope that your own experience will never teach it to you: nothing could be more laborious to you than a great amount of idleness if you were to have the

misfortune to fall into it through beginning by being disgusted with public affairs, then with pleasure, then with idleness itself, seeking everywhere fruitlessly for what can never be found, that is to say, the sweetness of repose and leisure without having the preceding fatigue and occupation.

I laid a rule on myself to work regularly twice every day, and for two or three hours each time with different persons, without counting the hours which I passed privately and alone, nor the time which I was able to give on particular occasions to any special affairs that might arise. There was no moment when I did not permit people to talk to me about them, provided that they were urgent; with the exception of foreign ministers who sometimes find too favourable moments in the familiarity allowed to them, either to obtain or to discover something, and whom one should not hear without being previously prepared.

I cannot tell you what fruit I gathered immediately I had taken this resolution. I felt myself, as it were, uplifted in thought and courage; I found myself quite another man, and with joy reproached myself for having been too long unaware of it. This first timidity, which a little self-judgment always produces and which at the beginning gave me pain, especially on occasions when I had to speak in public, disappeared in less than no time. The only thing I felt then was that I was King, and born to be one. I experienced next a delicious feeling, hard to express, and which you will not know yourself except by tasting it as I have done. For you must not imagine, my son, that the affairs of State are like some obscure and thorny path of learning which may possibly have already wearied you, wherein the mind strives to raise itself with effort above its purview, more often to arrive at no conclusion, and whose utility or apparent utility is repugnant to us as much as its difficulty. The function of Kings consists principally in allowing good sense to act, which always acts naturally and without effort. What we apply ourselves to is sometimes less difficult than what we do only for our amusement. Its usefulness always follows. A King, however skilful and enlightened be his ministers, cannot put his own hand to the work without its effect being seen. Success, which is agreeable in everything, even in the smallest matters, gratifies us in these as well as in the greatest, and there is no satisfaction to equal that of noting every day some progress in glorious and lofty enterprises, and in the happiness of the people which has been planned and thought out by oneself. All that is most necessary to this work is at the same time agreeable; for, in a word, my son, it is to have one's eyes open to the whole earth; to learn each hour the news concerning every province and every nation, the secrets of every court, the mood and the weaknesses of each Prince and of every foreign minister; to be well-informed on an infinite number of matters about which we are supposed to know nothing; to elicit from our subjects what they hide from us with the greatest care; to discover the most remote opinions of our own courtiers and the most hidden interests of those who come to us with quite contrary professions. I do not know of any other pleasure we would not renounce for that, even if curiosity alone gave us the opportunity.

I have dwelt on this important subject longer than I had intended, and far more for your sake than for my own; for while I am disclosing to you these methods and these alleviations attending the greatest cares of royalty I am not unaware that I am likewise depreciating almost the sole merit which I can hope for in the eyes of the world. But in this matter, my son, your honour is dearer to me than my own; and if it should happen that God call you to govern before you have yet taken to this spirit of application and to public affairs of which I am speaking, the least deference you can pay to the advice of a father, to whom I make bold to say you owe much in every kind of way, is to begin to do and to continue to do for some time, even under constraint and dislike, for

love of me who beg it of you, what you will do all your life from love of yourself, if once you have made a beginning.

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Document 2:

“Letters of Peter the Great and His Son Alexis.” In *The Present State of Russia*, volume 2. Edited by Friedrich Christian Weber. London: W. Taylor, 1722, pages 97–105.

Peter I, also known as Peter the Great, was the czar, or emperor, of Russia from 1682 to 1725. During his reign, Russian territory was expanded, the military modernized, manufacturing bolstered, and the government strengthened. Despite this prosperity, Peter struggled with the problem of succession. His son, Alexis, was his natural successor, but he had poor relations with his father as well as had no desire to rule. The following letters show the division between Peter and Alexis, who did not succeed his father. Rather, after a brief exile in the Holy Roman Empire, Alexis returned to Russia where he imprisoned on charges of high treason. He died in prison before a formal death sentence could be carried out, and Peter was followed by his second wife, Catherine I, in 1725.

Peter’s Declaration to Alexi, October 11, 1715

At the time that I am viewing the prosperity which God has heaped on our native country, if I cast an eye upon the posterity that is to succeed me, my heart is much more penetrated with grief on account of what is to happen, than I rejoice at those blessings that are past, seeing that you, my son, reject all means of making yourself capable of well-governing after me. I say your incapacity is voluntary, because you cannot excuse yourself with want of natural parts and strength of body, as if God had not given you a sufficient share of either; and though your constitution is none of the strongest, yet it cannot be said that it is altogether weak.

But you even will not so much as hear warlike exercises mentioned; though it is by them that we broke through that obscurity in which we were involved, and that we made ourselves known to nations, whose esteem we share at present.

I do not exhort you to make war without lawful reasons; I only desire you to apply yourself to learn the art of it; for it is impossible well to govern without knowing the rules and discipline of it, was it for no other end than for the defense of the country.

I could place before your eyes many instances of what I am proposing to you. I will only mention to you the Greeks, with whom we are united by the same profession of faith. What occasioned their decay but that they neglected arms?

Idleness and repose weakened them, made them submit to tyrants, and brought them to that slavery to which they are now so long since reduced. You mistake, if you think it is enough for a prince to have good generals to act under his orders.

Everyone looks upon the head; they study his inclinations and conform themselves to them: all the world owns this. My brother during his reign loved magnificence in dress, and great equipages of horses. The nation were not much inclined that way, but the prince’s delight soon became that of his subjects, for they are inclined to imitate him in liking a thing as well as disliking it.

If the people so easily break themselves of things which only regard pleasure, will they not forget in time, or will they not more easily give over the practice of arms, the exercise of which is the more painful to them, the less they are kept to it?

You have no inclination to learn the war, you do not apply yourself to it, and consequently you will never learn it: And how then can you command others, and judge of the reward which those deserve who do their duty, or punish others who fail of it? You will do nothing, nor judge of anything but by the eyes and help of others, like a young bird that holds up his bill to be fed. You say that the weak state of your health will not permit you to undergo the fatigues of war: This is an excuse which is no better than the rest. I desire no fatigues, but only inclination, which even sickness itself cannot hinder. Ask those who remember the time of my brother. He was of a constitution weaker by far than yours. He was not able to manage a horse of the least mettle, nor could he hardly mount it: Yet he loved horses, hence it came, that there never was, nor perhaps is there actually now in the nation a finer stable than his was.

By this you see that good success does not always depend on pains, but on the will. If you think there are some, whose affairs do not fail of success, though they do not go to war themselves; it is true: But if they do not go themselves, yet they have an inclination for it, and understand it. For instance, the late King of France [*Louis XIV*] did not always take the field in person; but it is known to what degree he loved war, and what glorious exploits he performed in it, which made his campaigns to be called the theatre and school of the world. His inclinations were not confined solely to military affairs, he also loved mechanics, manufactures and other establishments, which rendered his kingdom more flourishing than any other whatsoever.

After having made to you all those remonstrances, I return to my former subject which regards you. I am a man and consequently I must die. To whom shall I leave after me to finish what by the grace of God I have begun, and to preserve what I have partly recovered? To a man, who like the slothful servant hides his talent in the earth, that is to say, who neglects making the best of what God has entrusted to him?

Remember your obstinacy and ill-nature, how often I reproached you with it, and even chastised you for it, and for how many years I almost have not spoke to you; but all this has availed nothing, has effected nothing. It was but losing my time; it was striking the air. You do not make the least endeavors, and all your pleasure seems to consist in staying idle and lazy at home: Things of which you ought to be ashamed (forasmuch as they make you miserable) seem to make up your dearest delight, nor do you foresee the dangerous consequences of it for yourself and for the whole state. St. Paul has left us a great truth when he wrote: If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?

After having considered all those great inconveniencies and reflected upon them, and seeing I cannot bring you to good by any inducement, I have thought fit to give you in writing this act of my last will, with this resolution however to wait still a little longer before I put it in execution, to see if you will mend. If not, I will have you to know that I will deprive you of the succession, as one may cut off a useless member.

Do not fancy, that, because I have no other child but you, I only write this to terrify you. I will certainly put it in execution, if it please God; for whereas I do not spare my own life for my

country and the welfare of my people, why should I spare you who do not render yourself worthy of either? I would rather choose to transmit them to a worthy stranger than to my own unworthy son.

Peter

Alexei's Reply:

Most Clement Lord and Father,

I have read the paper your Majesty gave me on the 27th of October, 1715, after the funeral of my late consort.

I have nothing to reply to it, but, that if your Majesty will deprive me of the succession to the Crown of Russia by reason of my incapacity, your will be done; I even most instantly beg it of you, because I do not think myself fit for the government.

My memory is very much weakened, and yet it is necessary in affairs. The strength of my mind and of my body is much decayed by the sickness which I have undergone, and which have rendered me incapable of governing so many nations; this requires a more vigorous man than I am.

Therefore I do not aspire after you (whom God preserve many years) to the succession of the Russian Crown, even if I had no brother as I have one at present, whom I pray God preserve. Neither will I pretend for the future to that succession, of which I take God to witness, and swear it upon my soul, in testimony whereof I write and sign this present with my own hand. I put my children into your hands, and as for myself, I desire nothing of you but a bare maintenance during my life, leaving the whole to your consideration and to your will.

Your most humble servant and son,
Alexei

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Document 3:

“Letters between Friedrich Wilhelm I and his son Friedrich.” In *Readings in European History*. Edited by J. H. Robinson. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1906, pages 319-322.

Friedrich Wilhelm I was the second King of Prussia as well as the Elector of Brandenburg within the Holy Roman Empire. During his reign from 1713-1740, he sought to strengthen Prussia, and to that end, he made a series of administrative changes designed to reform the bureaucracy and the civil service. He was also extremely dedicated to building up Prussia's army. He was succeeded by his son, Friedrich II, also known as Friedrich the Great. The first reading is instructions from Friedrich Wilhelm for the education of his son, with the following letters an exchange between father and son when the son was just sixteen years old.

Friedrich Wilhelm's instructions to his son:

...Above all else, it is important that his character – and it is character which governs all human action – should be, from earliest youth, so formed that he will love and delight in virtue and feel horror and disgust for vice. Nothing can so greatly contribute to this end as to implant the true fear of God so early in the young heart that it shall take root and bear fruit in the time when there is no longer any guidance or oversight. For other men are guided toward virtue and away from evil by the rewards and punishments dealt out by those who are set above them, but the prince must rely on the fear of God alone, since he is subject to no human law, punishment, or reward.

My son and all his attendants shall say their prayers on their knees both morning and evening, and after prays shall read a chapter from the Bible.

He shall be kept away from operas, comedies, and other worldly amusements and, as far as possible, be given a distaste for them. He must be taught to pay proper respect and submission to his parents, but without slavishness.

His tutors must use every means they can devise to restrain him from puffed-up pride and insolence and to train him in good management, economy, and modesty. And since nothing is so harmful as flattery, all those who are about the person of my son are forbidden to indulge in it on pain of my extreme displeasure.

As to the further studies that become a prince, his progress must depend upon his years and growth, but it must be looked to that he is taught the most important things first, and all without inspiring distaste or disgust. As this will depend largely on the adroitness of his preceptor [*his tutor Jacques Egide Duhan de Jandun*], the latter must consult from time to time with the head tutor as to the course to be pursued, which must then be presented to me for my approval.

As for the Latin language, his is not to learn it, and I desire that no one shall even speak to me on this subject; but his tutors shall see to it that he acquires a terse and elegant style in writing French as well as German. Arithmetic, mathematics, artillery, and agriculture he must be taught thoroughly, ancient history only superficially, but that of our own time and of the last one hundred and fifty years as accurately as possible. He must have a thorough knowledge of law, of international law, of geography, and of what is most remarkable in each country; and above all, my son must be carefully taught the history of his own house.

His tutors must take the greatest pains to imbue my son with a sincere love for the soldier's profession and to impress upon him that nothing else in the world can confer upon a prince such fame and honor as the sword, and that he will be despised by all of the world if he does not only love it but seek in it his only glory; and his chief tutor shall provide for his being taught the practice of arms as play in his recreation hours.

Nothing is more becoming or more necessary in a prince than the ability to speak well under all circumstances; therefore my son's tutors must look to it that he accustom himself betimes to this art by practice....

Friedrich's letter to his father:

Wusterhausen, September 11, 1728.

I have not ventured for a long time to present myself before my dear papa, partly because I was advised against it, but chiefly because I anticipated an even worse reception than usual and feared to vex my dear papa still further by the favor I have now to ask; so I have preferred to put it in writing.

I beg my dear papa that he will be kindly disposed toward me. I do assure him that after long examination of my conscience I do not find the slightest thing with which to reproach myself; but if, against my wish and will, I have vexed my dear papa, I hereby beg most humbly for forgiveness, and hope that my dear papa will give over the fearful hate which has appeared so plainly in his whole behavior and to which I cannot accustom myself. I have always thought hitherto that I had a kind father, but now I see the contrary. However, I will take courage and hope that my dear papa will think this all over and take me again into his favor. Meantime I assure him that I will never, my life long, willingly fail him, and in spite of his disfavor I am still, with most dutiful and childlike respect, my dear papa's Most obedient and faithful servant and son,

Friedrich

Friedrich Wilhelm's reply to his son:

A bad, obstinate boy, who does not love his father; for when one does one's best, and especially when one loves one's father, one does what he wishes not only when he is standing by but when he is not there to see. Moreover you know very well that I cannot stand an effeminate fellow who has no manly tastes, who cannot ride or shoot (to his shame be it said!), is untidy about his person, and wears his hair curled like a fool instead of cutting it; and that I have condemned all these things a thousand times, and yet there is no sign of improvement. For the rest, haughty, offish as a country lout, conversing with none but a favored few instead of being affable and popular, grimacing like a fool, and never following my wishes out of love for me but only when forced into it, caring for nothing but to have his own way, and thinking nothing else is of any importance. This is my answer.

Friedrich Wilhelm