I commanded the four secretaries of state not to sign anything at all any longer without discussing it with me, the superintendent likewise, and for nothing to be transacted at the finances without being registered in a little book that was to remain with me, where I could always see at a glance, briefly summarized, the current balance and the expenditures made or pending.

The Chancellor received a similar order, that is, not to seal anything without my command, except for letters of justice. . . .

I announced that all requests for graces of any type had to be made directly to me, and I granted to all my subjects without distinction the privilege of appealing to me at any time, in person or by petitions. The petitions were initially very numerous, which did not discourage me, however. The disorder into which my affairs had fallen produced many of them, the idle or unjustified hopes which were raised by this novelty hardly stimulated a lesser number. . . . But even in these apparently useless things I discovered much that was useful. I learned thereby many details about the condition of my people. They saw that I was concerned about them, and nothing did so much to win me their hearts. . . .

As to the persons who were to support me in my work, I resolved above all not to have a prime minister, and if you and all your successors take my advice, my son, the name will forever be abolished in France, there being nothing more shameful than to see on the one hand all the functions and on the other the mere title of king.

For this purpose, it was absolutely necessary to divide my confidence and the execution of my orders without entirely entrusting it to anyone, assigning these various persons to various functions in keeping with their various talents, which is perhaps the first and foremost talent of princes.

In order to concentrate the entire authority of a master more fully in myself—even though there are all sorts of details into which our occupations and our very dignity do not usually permit us to go, I resolved to enter into these with each of the ministers whom I would choose, and when he would least expect it, so that he would realize that I might do the same on other subjects and at any time. . . .

It is not so easy for me to tell you, my son, how to go about the choice of the various ministers. Fortune always plays, in spite of us, at least as much of a part in it as wisdom; and in the part that wisdom plays, intelligence can do far more than counsel. Neither of us, my son, is going to seek for these sorts of positions those whom distance and obscurity remove from our view, whatever qualifications they may have. It is necessary to decide from a small number which chance presents to us, that is, those already in office or whom birth and inclination have attached to our personal service.

And as for this art of knowing men, which will be so important to you not merely on this but also on every other occasion of your life, I shall tell you, my son, that it can be learned but that it can not be taught.


Activity Options

1. Recognizing Point of View With a partner, role-play a conversation between Louis XIV and his son in which the king advises how to rule absolutely.

2. Writing for a Specific Purpose List the steps that Louis XIV took to consolidate his power as king of France after the death of Cardinal Mazarin. Then share your list with classmates and compare Louis XIV’s approach to governing with that of his father, Louis XIII.
A Decree on a New Calendar

The Great Sovereign has ordered it declared: the Great Sovereign knows that many European Christian countries as well as Slavic peoples are in complete accord with our Eastern Orthodox Church— all these peoples number their years from eight days after the birth of Christ, this is from January 1, and not from the creation of the world. There is a great difference in those two calendars. This year is 1699 since the birth of Christ, and on January 1 it will be 1700 as well as a new century. To celebrate this happy and opportune occasion, the Great Sovereign has ordered that henceforth all government administrative departments and fortresses in all their official business use the new calendar beginning January 1, 1700. To commemorate this happy beginning and the new century in the capital city of Moscow, after a solemn prayer in churches and private dwellings, all major streets, homes of important people, and homes of distinguished religious and civil servants should be decorated with trees, pine, and fir branches similar to the decoration of the Merchant Palace or the Pharmacy Building—or as best as one knows how to decorate his place and gates. Poor people should put up at least one tree, or a branch on their gates or on their apartment [doors]. These decorations are to remain from January 1 to January 7, 1700. As a sign of happiness on January 1, friends should greet each other and the New Year and the new century as follows: when the Red Square will be lighted and shooting will begin—followed by that at the homes of boyars, courtiers, and important officials of the tsar, military and merchant classes—everyone who has a musket or any other fire arm should either salute thrice or shoot several rockets or as many as he has. . . .

Decrees on Compulsory Education of the Russian Nobility

Send to every gubernia [region] some persons from mathematical schools to teach the children of the nobility—except those of freeholders and government clerks—mathematics and geometry; as a penalty [for evasion] establish a rule that no one will be allowed to marry unless he learns these [subjects]. Inform all prelates to issue no marriage certificates to those who are ordered to go to school. . . .

The Great Sovereign has decreed: in all gubernias children between the ages of ten and fifteen of the nobility, of government clerks, and of lesser officials, except those of freeholders, must be taught mathematics and some geometry. Toward that end, students should be sent from mathematical schools [as teachers], several into each gubernia, to prelates and to renowned monasteries to establish schools. During their instruction these teachers should be given food and financial remuneration . . . from gubernia revenues set aside for that purpose by personal orders of His Imperial Majesty. No fees should be collected from students. When they have mastered the material, they should then be given certificates written in their own handwriting. When the students are released they ought to pay one ruble each for their training. Without these certificates they should not be allowed to marry nor receive marriage certificates.


Discussion Questions

Clarifying

1. When did the new Russian calendar go into effect and how did Russia celebrate?
2. What penalty did children of Russian nobles face if they did not learn mathematics?
3. Drawing Conclusions What advantages do you think Russia gained by these reforms? What disadvantages, if any, do you see?