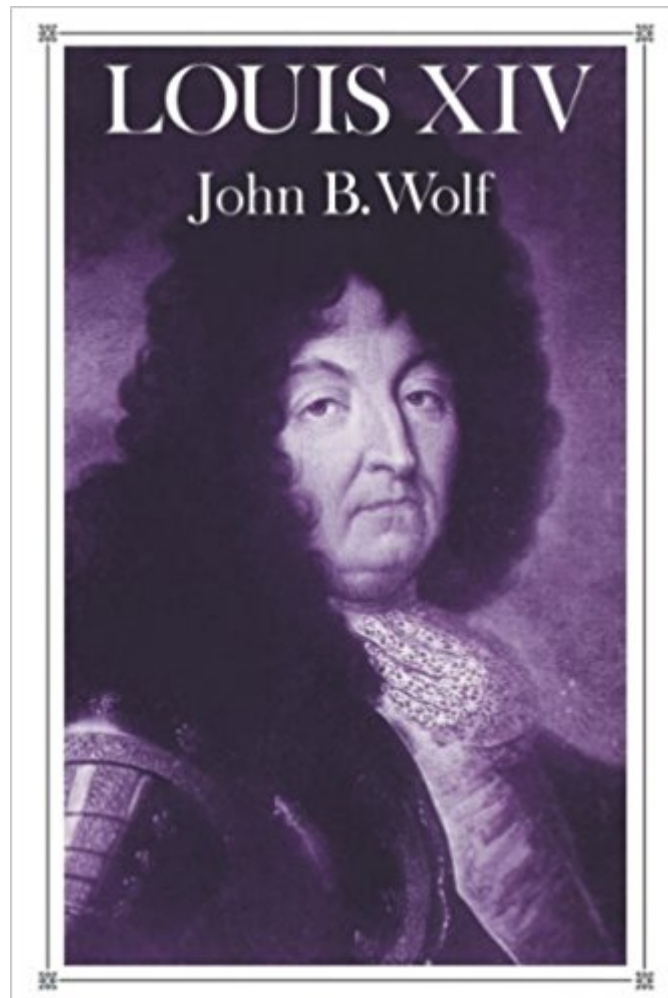


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Louis XIV



Synopsis

Professor Wolf focuses on the problems of high politics and war, which intrigued Louis and were his instruments of power. Without ignoring the fact that Louis was also a son, husband, lover, and father—as well as king—he gives us a striking new image of Louis as a soldier administrator and a vivid, accurate picture of the king's impact on the military machine after 1691, his part in the drama of war and in the emergence of a new Europe. Although Louis XIV was a vitally important figure in European history, he has found no satisfactory biographer until now. The memorists, particularly Saint-Simon, have fixed the traditional image of Louis so firmly it is difficult to see him in any other light. John B. Wolf, challenging the myths and biases, has based this important study on Louis's own documents, his diaries, decrees, and hundreds of the king's letters from the archives at Vincennes (heretofore almost unexploited). He presents the king as he appeared to his ministers, his diplomats, and his soldiers, rather than to the gossips of his court.

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Customer Reviews

John B. Wolf was, during his lifetime, one of the best American historians of the age of Louis XIV. He worked long and hard producing this book which is magnificent on the early life of Louis XIV and his first twenty-five years as king and ruler from 1661 to 1685. However, the book begins to flag in the last thirty years of Louis XIV's life. That is why I gave it four stars. Wolf himself admitted that he could not continue his research on the latter part of the reign due to failing eyesight. Wolf's work on the first years of Louis XIV's life is splendid, well-written, and even ground-breaking. However, this period has been plowed before. Wolf had many predecessors to guide him and help him form his

argument. However, the last 30 years of Louis XIV's life (as well as the first 25 years of his successor's reign) are known as the black hole of French history. There have been many generalizations but not much published research into this period. In this respect, Wolf's biography is the best of the breed, but it is like so many other biographies of the greatest king of his age. It breaks no new ground on the latter part of the reign. The original review in the AHR pointed to a chapter where the footnotes do not match. One of the king's most important ministers is unmentioned. Major reforms undertaken at the end of the reign are also skipped. Instead, we are presented with the standard picture of a king in decline surrounded by sycophants, buffeted by circumstances beyond his control, and unable to do anything to resist the changing world outside the court. This is a good book. Don't misunderstand me. It is just not as good as it could have been nor the definitive book on Louis XIV. That book has yet to be written.

Louis XIV is one of those figures of history who attract a variety of biographers and who can blame them? He was king at 5 years, set France on the road to being the leading power in Europe, built Versailles, waged war against the "Grand Alliance" (led by Winston Churchill's ancestor) and died following the deaths of most of his family. Two contemporaries, his sister-in-law, the Duchess of Orleans and the Duc de Saint Simon wrote extensively about what it was like to live within the orbit of the sun king. The gossip-packed writings of both have served to create cottage industry (at least in the UK and America) in which Louis XIV is remembered as a great figure, with a great story. However, few dwell on any of Louis's achievements (other than the construction of Versailles). This is what sets Professor Wolf's book apart from the others, for it is Louis the soldier, not Louis the lover that is explored here. If one wants to understand the workings of 17th and 18th century France and indeed Europe, one can not do better than this outstanding book. Unfortunately, this book is not widely available and this is tragic, since it is one of the best works of scholarship in the 20th century. I would recommend, if one is seeking to understand the dynamics of France and Louis (and the two were much the same during the period in question), to seek out a second hand version of this book. While the text can at times be demanding, it is well worth the effort.

I had to select a text on Louis XIV to read, and chose this one based on the fact that it simply appeared to be the most authoritative. My hunch turned out to be correct. This book is filled with surely close to every detail on the Sun King, yet provides such information in a context that makes for a very interesting read. Every aspect of the monarch's life is considered, every stereotype of his absolutist reign analyzed. John Wolf leaves no stone unturned in his quest to uncover the true Louis

XIV and the environment that made him.

John Wolf's book on Louis XIV has been noted as THE book on Louis XIV. Overall I feel this is strongly the case. The book is a combination of a biography of Louis and a history of France at the time. The writing style throughout the book is very strong and consistent making the read entertaining. Wolf uses visual representations at points to make the book have the feel of a novel than a nonfiction story. The book covers everything you can think of about Louis from the day of his birth to the day that he died. He talks about the military conflicts Louis got his nation involved in as well as economy and social structure of France. Louis' love life is also included with much information about his mistresses and wives. The downside is that the book seems more rushed for the second half of Louis' life, notable from the Nine Years War until his death. I thought I heard somewhere that Wolf was ill when he was writing the book and therefore rushed in the end, but I do not know that to be fact. Therefore the second half of the reign is given far less attention than the first half although it probably should have been given more! Another thing I did not like was that he did not give any statistics regarding army sizes, casualties, economics, population etc. I may just be nit picking, but I always liked having numbers to back something up. Overall though this book is one of the best and I recommend it.

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