

Louis XVIII

On November 17, 1755 at the royal palace of Versailles just outside of Paris, Louis-Stanislas-Xavier, the Count of Provence was born. He was the son of the heir to the French throne and of Maria Josepha of Saxony. Educated by a devout Catholic, the best Enlightenment writers, especially Voltaire, appealed to him the most. He was intelligent and ambitious, he was much better equipped to rule the country than his brother, who became King Louis XVI, and was conscious of this fact. He intrigued against him and especially against the king's hated Austrian bride Marie Antoinette. As Louis XVI's younger brother, he had the title of "Monsieur" and was heir to the throne. Hopeful that he might eventually become king, he tried to increase his popularity, frequented intellectual salons, took a Countess as his mistress, wrote political pamphlets, and wrote verses. Marie Antoinette, however, dashed his hopes of succession by having a son.

When the French Revolution broke out, he remained at first in France, intriguing to increase his influence during its early stages. As the revolution became more radical, his brother the king attempted to flee (the "Flight to Varennes," 1791), but was apprehended and brought back to Paris; the future Louis XVIII, however, made it out. He reached the German city of Coblenz,



which became the center of the emigration attempt to overthrow the French revolutionary governments. With the beheading of his brother in January 1793, he proclaimed himself Regent for his young nephew ["Louis XVII"], and with the nephew's death in prison, claimed the title of Louis XVIII on June 8, 1795. During this period, isolated from and angry at French developments, he came under the influence of reactionaries, especially his younger brother the Count of Artois.

In 1796, when the French Revolution seemed to have established itself and peace appeared near, Louis XVIII became less welcome as an exile. There now began a long period of wandering as the Bourbon cause seemed hopeless, reaching its low point in 1804 when Napoleon declared himself Emperor. Louis XVIII traveled across Germany, Poland, and Russia, settling in England after Russia's agreement with Napoleon at Tilsit in 1807. He always refused to "abdicate," despite the promise from Napoleon of monetary rewards that would improve his condition. In 1813, his hopes revived when Napoleon's empire was crumbling. In a shrewd move, Louis published a manifesto promising to recognize the results of the revolution and encouraging efforts in France to restore him.

These efforts worked and, returning to France, Louis XVIII promised to issue a constitution and kept his word. He was almost sixty, tired, obese, and suffering from gout, but he remained clear-headed and a good diplomat and determined not to go into exile again. However, he unwisely made concessions



to conservative elements returning with him, weakening him and encouraging Napoleon to return during the “Hundred Days.” Forced to flee once again, he returned after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo “In the baggage-train of the Allies.”

Perhaps having learned his lesson, Louis followed a moderate policy after his “second restoration.” He tried to keep the conservative Ultras led by his brother the Count of Artois at bay and, although his relations with Parliament were far from smooth, worked within the system established by the constitution.

In 1820, with the assassination of the heir to the French throne, his health increasingly poor, Louis came under the control of his brother, the future King Charles X, and the Ultras. His new mistress, the Countess of Cayla, was their agent and influenced him to accept the leadership of the conservatives. Louis thus lost his influence even if he retained some of his former wit. He once had said, “A king should die on his feet,” but now was reduced to announcing “I am not dead yet.”

A worn-out Louis XVIII finally died on September 16, 1824. In the end, the fate of this intelligent and moderate person turned out to be tragic. The King of Belgium wrote: “History will state that Louis XVIII was a most liberal monarch, reigning with great mildness and justice to his end, but that his brother [Charles X], from his despotic and harsh disposition, upset all the other had done and lost the throne.”