

Enlightened despotism before the Enlightenment?

Voltaire on Louis XIV and Charles XII



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Bachelor's Thesis

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Title page illustrations:

Top center: Voltaire, Portrait by Nicolas de Largillère, c. 1724.

Bottom left: King Louis XIV of France, c. 1661. Hulton Archive.

Bottom right: Charles XII, King of Sweden, by and published by

John Smith, after David von Krafft, 1702 (1701),

reference collection: NPG D11541.

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Introduction

Political systems, and contemplation on them, command, along with a few other subjects, the most profound impact on the lives of humans. It would be feasible to claim that considerations about the ideal type of society are as old as civilization. The 18th century was no exception, and many thinkers of this period have contributed to the overall knowledge and understanding. One of the most significant thinkers is the French *philosophe* François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (1694-1778). Within his monumental works he has determined many themes which he considers as fundamental to society. Some of the most basic are freedom of thought and opinion. Today, they may be taken for granted in western democracies, but for the time they were nothing short of revolutionary. Another idea of Voltaire's which has been overlooked is his concept of a "philosopher prince".¹ This concept is better known as "enlightened despotism" and refers to monarchs that rule by themselves, while embracing much of the thought of the *philosophes* in their administration. Two examples of this are Frederick II "the Great" of Prussia (r. 1740-1786) and Catherine II "the Great" of Russia (r. 1762-1796). Voltaire spoke at length about politics and how a state ought to be run and to a great extent has shaped the modern idea of "enlightened despotism". The principles he outlines, such as subordination of the church to the state, although part of enlightenment thinking, are not necessarily unique to the era.

This paper will examine whether two pre-Enlightenment rulers qualify for the title of *philosopher prince* in the eyes of Voltaire. These are Louis XIV of France (r. 1654-1715) and Charles XII of Sweden (r. 1697-1718). The same analysis will be performed for Frederick II and Catherine II.² Both of these were considered by Voltaire as exemplary rulers and he went to great trouble to earn their friendship and support, both for his own self-interests as well as his altruistic ambitions. In addition, posterity has granted them the title of *enlightened despot*. However, they were not without fault and it is beneficial for 18th century historiography to examine them through the perspective of Voltaire's concept of the ideal ruler. As such, Voltaire's own ideas about the ideal ruler and his state in conjunction with his views on these four rulers will be used in order to speculate the extent to which they could be given the title of *philosopher prince*.

¹ Voltaire, "La Voix Du Sage Et Du Peuple," in *Oeuvres De Voltaire*, vol. XXXIX (Paris, 1830), 341-9. The original French wording is "prince philosophe". The concept is mentioned a few times and he mentions some of the principles that the prince should follow.

² For a visual aid regarding their overlapping timelines, see Figure 1 in the Appendix.

Academic Debate

Many historians and political thinkers have written about Voltaire's political philosophy, however, no attempt has been made to apply Voltaire's principles to the lives of monarchs. This is the gap that this paper wishes to address and provide a nuanced approach Voltaire's ideas by attempting to apply them on specific historical figures. This paper includes identifying and constructing a cohesive set of principles for the analysis.

In order to gain an insight into his mind, an overview of the academic debate concerning his political thought is paramount. After the Second World War, academics were questioning the validity of the Enlightenment, some arguing that it was the progenitor of the modern liberal democracies and others that it gave rise to many evils including the ideologies of Hitler and Stalin.³ Peter Gay, one of the first to try to reverse the bad reputation the Enlightenment and the *philosophes* had been tarnished with, argued that Voltaire was a pragmatist who cared little about utopian ideas.⁴ He describes Voltaire as a moderate who desired to improve France by treating the evils of the existing system.⁵ To achieve this, royal absolutism or *thèse royale* was the best bet.⁶ Not due to admiration, but rather its realistic prospects of success. Nevertheless, he sees Voltaire as an enemy of the established order, that being the Church, nobles and *parlements*.⁷ Interestingly, Gay insists that Voltaire possessed an innate desire for liberalism and representative government.⁸ The reason for not pursuing them is the realization that it would be impossible to implement such a system in contemporary France.⁹

Opposite to Gay, Robert Darnton claimed that the *philosophes* were not interested in overthrowing the Ancien Régime.¹⁰ Instead, he views them as "fat cats" that benefited from it by inserting themselves and, through its defense, ensure their own livelihood.¹¹ Such a claim is understandable when considering that Voltaire in particular wanted to retain much of the existing order instead of complete replacement. It finds, however, little support in people like David Williams, who argues that Voltaire was a propagandist

³ Annelien De Dijn, "The Politics Of Enlightenment: From Peter Gay To Jonathan Israel," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (September 3, 2012): 787-9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x12000301>.

⁴ Ibid. 789; Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), 309.

⁵ Ibid.; Ibid.

⁶ Gay, *Voltaire's Politics*, 309.

⁷ Ibid. 309-333.

⁸ De Dijn, "The Politics Of Enlightenment", 790.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. 793.

¹¹ Ibid.

for change towards and absolute monarchy based on reason, justice and liberty.¹² Ironically, Darnton eventually followed in the footsteps Gay and portrayed the *philosophes* as moderate and pragmatic and most importantly in genuine desire to change the situation.¹³ In shocking contrast with his old claims, he went as far as to portray them, including Voltaire, as the people who shaped our modern western, liberal, democratic polities.¹⁴ This image of votlaire is espoused by Phillip Neserius as well.¹⁵

Jonathan Israel and Margaret Jacob adopted a rather unique perspective on the matter. They saw the French *philosophes* of the likes of Voltaire as moderate and conservative, in direct opposition to the radical, republican atheism of someone like Spinoza.¹⁶ Between all these scholars, despite any potential differences, a reoccurring theme is the moderate opinions that people such as Voltaire expressed, an absolute, law abiding, monarchy featuring prominently. A strong proponent of Voltaire's view is Theodore Besterman who, in his analysis of Voltaire's works, makes extensive mention to his anti-republicanism based on practical considerations and his preference towards absolute monarchy limited by the law.¹⁷ Thus, we can conclude that there is a consensus among academics as to the Frenchman's basic politics.

Methodology and Sources

The paper will be divided into five parts. The first part will take a close look at the political philosophy of Voltaire and, based on that, establish a set of principles that will be used when analyzing the lives of the rulers. The next four parts of the paper will include a summary of the rulers' lives as well as an analysis based on the principles identified during the first part. In addition, whenever possible, Voltaire's own views of the monarchs will be included. Oftentimes his views will differ from the results of the analysis as his treatment of them differs depending on their relationship. For example, he had little to gain from portraying Louis and Charles positively and much to gain from doing the same for Frederick and Catherine, both of whom could benefit him personally. The analysis will be performed in chronological order, either of the publication of a biography by Voltaire about these rulers or of the establishment of his relationship

¹² Williams, David, "Introduction" in: Idem (ed.), *Voltaire: Political Writings*, ed. and trans. David Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹³ Ibid. 794,795.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Philip George Neserius, "Voltaire's Political Ideas," *American Political Science Review* 20, no. 1 (February 1926): pp. 31-51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1945097>.

¹⁶ Ibid. 798-800.

¹⁷ Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976).

with them.¹⁸ In the conclusion, I will determine whether, based on the analysis, they would qualify to be *philosopher princes* based on Voltaire's principles.

One of the main sources of this paper is the English translation of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1824) published in London. The first edition of the *Dictionnaire* appeared in 1764 under the title *Dictionnaire Philosophique Portatif*. The original version was meant as a pocket edition, aimed to be kept on one's person. The edition dealt primarily with philosophical and theological problems. Later editions were expanded significantly to include various other works by Voltaire that were not originally intended to be in the *Dictionnaire*. The extended version of the *Dictionnaire* is of paramount importance for this paper as it provides, in one source, many of Voltaire's principal ideas on politics.

Along with the *Dictionnaire*, a number of Voltaire's works will be used. First is *Pensées sur le Gouvernement* (1752), far smaller compared to the massive *Dictionnaire*, but no less useful as it contains many of his thoughts in compact form. Second, *Age of Louis XIV* originally published under the French title *Siecle de Louis XIV* in 1751. Third is the *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden*, first published in 1731 under the title *Histoire de Charles XII*. This work was monumental, not so much for Voltaire himself, but for the field of historiography as it entirely abandoned the deterministic nature of older works that operated within a religious framework.¹⁹ Rather than following the example of previous historians who included biblical and historical events, Voltaire focused only on events that dealt with the recent history of Sweden and also assumed a style of writing that resembled a novel instead of a list of events.²⁰ The final work is *L'ABC* (1768), a series of imaginary dialogues between three characters called A, B, and C.

1. Voltaire's political philosophy

In order to make an analysis of the prospect of Louis and Charles being viewed as enlightened absolutists, what makes a good philosopher prince according to Voltaire needs to be assessed. The first part of this chapter will be devoted to an analysis of his work in order to determine his ideas on politics a bit more

¹⁸ The order will thus be: Charles, Frederick, Louis and Catherine. The biography on Charles was published in 1731, his relationship with Frederick was established in the late 1730s, the biography on Louis XII was published in 1751, and his relationship with Catherine was established in the early 1760s. See the Appendix for a visual aid.

¹⁹ Besterman, *Voltaire*, 159-166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

generally. The second part will then go deeper into the subject at hand and analyze his views on the ideal enlightened ruler.

The types of governments and Voltaire's preference

According to Voltaire, there are three kinds of political systems: aristocracies, monarchies, and democracies/republics.²¹ He advocates that republics are the most natural course of action for human beings and claims that they are to be found in every corner of the earth, including the Americas where, with a few notable exceptions, most of the natives lived in republics.²² He argues that republics are also less prone to committing horrific acts.²³ To explain this, he gives two examples, that of ancient Athens and ancient Macedonia. Crimes committed in Athens against individuals, while horrendous, were limited.²⁴ In addition, for all of these the Athenians repented later on and even erected monuments to honor the victims of their own injustice.²⁵ On the other hand, Macedonia during the Hellenistic period experienced a wave of violence and betrayal, where members of the ruling families assassinated each other in order to take the throne.²⁶

While recognizing republics as less violent and more natural, he maintains that they are not viable for a population that surpasses a certain size.²⁷ A contrast can be made here between a city state like Athens and a massive country such as France. More specifically he claims that despite man's natural inclination towards a republican system, we as humans, being unable or unworthy of ruling ourselves effectively and in a reasonable manner, choose to establish monarchies in the hope that the monarch will be benevolent.²⁸ Benevolence ought to be emphasized as he holds no affection for tyrannical governments.²⁹ In a non-tyrannical form, the rule of the few, aristocracy, was rather limited in use during his time as well as in its capacity to produce beneficial results and as such it plays very little role in Voltaire's thinking.³⁰

²¹ Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, vol. V, "Policy", (London: G. H. Reynell, 1824).

²² Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. II, "Democracy".

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire. A Contemporary Version, A Critique and Biography* by John Morley, notes by Tobias Smollett, translated by William F. Fleming, In 21 vols, Vol. IV, "Country", (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/353>.

²⁹ Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. VI, "Tyranny".

³⁰ Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. V, "Policy".

Of these systems, Voltaire demonstrates a preference for monarchies, specifically absolute and enlightened monarchies. Many scholars acknowledge his preference.³¹ Besterman points out that Voltaire did support absolute monarchy, but contrary to what some of his contemporaries might have believed, the monarch had his position not as a result of divine right, but rather for pragmatic reasons.³² In addition, within a Voltairian framework, the king would be absolute, but only within the bounds of the law.³³ In *Pensees sur le gouvernement* Voltaire presents the image of a ruler who when “is not contradicted can hardly be wicked”.³⁴ In other words, a king whose authority is not disputed by others has no reason to become Machiavellian as it happened in Macedonia. A second example from the same text is the following: when Voltaire tries to explain the discrepancy between the rule of Louis XI and Louis XIV, the former having killed thousands of his subjects while the latter only a few, he attributes it to the absolute nature of the latter’s rule.³⁵ Since Louis XIV was willingly followed by his people he had no reason to be tyrannical. Thus, Voltaire does consider an absolute monarch to be the ideal scenario for France and, by extension, all countries of a comparable size. However, absolutism on its own is not nearly enough. As such, the philosopher prince is born.

The characteristics of Voltaire’s ideal state

In the previous section I dealt with the kind of political system that Voltaire considers to be the best possible solution for the context of his time. As mentioned, Voltaire did not care for utopian ideals.³⁶ Instead, he wanted pragmatic solutions that could work without bringing the entire society on its head. As such, the rule of an absolutist philosopher was for him the most feasible idea. Unfortunately, Voltaire never gave a clear-cut, dictionary definition of who was a philosopher prince. However, in his vast work, he points to several principles that would be crucial for a just and reason-based country. As Besterman points out, justice and reason form a basic axis upon which everything that Voltaire does is based.³⁷ Having this as a starting point, his philosophical dictionary contains a number of entries that explain in great depth what the ideal state ought to have. It is not a stretch to argue that if a ruler willingly implements these

³¹ Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 309-333; Besterman, *Voltaire*, 305-319.

³² Besterman, *Voltaire*, 314.

³³ Ibid. 316, 317.

³⁴ For the English translation see: Besterman, *Voltaire*, 317. For the original French text see: Voltaire, “Pensées Sur Le Gouvernement” in *Oeuvres De Voltaire*, vol. XXXIX (Paris, 1830), 429. The passage in French is as follows: “Un roi qui n'est point contredit ne peut guère être méchant”.

³⁵ Voltaire, “Pensées Sur Le Gouvernement”, 430.

³⁶ This is an overarching theme across many scholars.

³⁷ Besterman, *Voltaire*, 309.

principles on their kingdom, they would at the very least fulfil the practical qualifications of what a philosopher prince is, leaving aside any philosophical, artistic or scientific pursuits they may have on a personal level. In the next few paragraphs I will deal with some of these principles that would bring a ruler closer to Enlightenment ideals.

During the time of Voltaire there were many things that by our standards – in all honesty probably by those of the contemporaries as well – would be unacceptable. The people of France were seen by their elites as nothing more than easily exploited, manipulated and abused inferiors. Their rights – if they were existent at all – were constantly trampled, their property taken away from them, forced into beggary, and the unlucky ones were tortured, turned into slaves in all but name, and even executed for the most minuscule of offences. This kind of treatment stemmed from superstition, mostly religious, or outright power hunger and wickedness. As a man fueled by the desire for justice and reason, Voltaire finds all of these abhorrent.³⁸ His answer to these issues is just laws. In his mind, just laws obeyed by everyone, including the king and the Church, are the foundation of a just society.³⁹ It is no wonder that the 1824 edition of *Dictionnaire* contains five entries on the subject of law, more than any other subject. In addition, one of the dialogues found in the *L'ABC* contains the following sentence: “Tout est soumis à la loi, à commencer par la royauté et par la religion.”⁴⁰ In addition, *La Voix du Sage et du Peuple* reinforces the idea of an absolute monarch that would be supreme over the church and force it to bear its rightful burdens of the state.⁴¹ This latter idea is also dealt with in the *Dictionnaire* in the article about Church property, where, in horror and disgust, he describes the manner in which the Church acquired its massive property – one fifth of France’s total riches if Voltaire is correct – and how even in his day they were abusing their position to fatten themselves up while the poor were forced to bear all the burdens of the country.⁴² These are some of the most crucial parts of what he sees as wicked and unacceptable in his contemporary state of France and that could potentially be solved under a philosopher prince.

Apart from those issues that needed to be prevented or corrected there are a number of concepts that Voltaire suggested to be implemented in society. One of the most fundamental ideas that is also connected to the supremacy of law over all, is equality. According to Voltaire, all men are equal on virtue

³⁸ For more information on his thoughts on these issues see the following articles in his *Dictionary*: “Church Property”, “Confiscation”, “Execution”, “Fanaticism”, “Slaves”, “Superstition”, “Torture”.

³⁹ Besterman, *Voltaire*, 305-319.

⁴⁰ Voltaire, *L'ABC Dix-sept dialogues traduits de l'anglais de M. Huet*, Edited by André Lefèvre, (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1879), 23, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5733f/f1.image.textelimage>.

⁴¹ Voltaire, “La Voix Du Sage Et Du Peuple,” in *Oeuvres De Voltaire*, vol. XXXIX (Paris, 1830), 341-349.

⁴² *Ibid.*; Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. II, “Church Property”.

of being born as humans.⁴³ There are, however, certain preconditions to this. While he recognizes that all men are born equal and should be treated as such, he also accepts that for the good of society, there are certain hierarchical relations that should be retained.⁴⁴ For example, the cook of a nobleman ought to adhere to his role as a cook and not be spitefully rebellious as such behavior would be the undoing of man if many were to adopt it.⁴⁵ A second precondition concerns beggary. He accepts that due to life circumstances people end up in misfortune. However, he takes a harsh stance towards beggars who, in his eyes, lose their status of equality the moment they turn to beggary instead of working.⁴⁶

The second concept is that of liberty of opinion along with liberty of the press. He claims that the ability of man to think freely and without religiously-imposed superstitions and restrictions is the surest way of improving society.⁴⁷ Naturally, mere thought is not enough for that noble purpose to succeed. As such, the liberty to publish one's thoughts is paramount.⁴⁸ The Church was mortified by this prospect. To that he responds with his usual wit. He claims that the church would have nothing to fear from people publishing their thoughts and amusing themselves by doing so if the church itself had not become the tyrannical beast that it was in his time.⁴⁹ In other words, if the church had no ill acts to hide there would be no reason to suppress information.

Another important concept is toleration. Tolerating one's neighbors, within the bounds of the law, is for Voltaire the only way to avoid destroying society entirely.⁵⁰ The memory of the Thirty Years War in Europe, and the religious strife that was the French wars of religion – to that we can include the even more recent persecutions of French protestants by Louis XIV – were still in recent memory and had completely decimated both France and the continent. He is particularly disappointed by the conduct of Christians who he believes ought to have been the most moderate and tolerant religious group based on their dogmas, and yet they were the most vile, brutal and intolerant.⁵¹

Last is his antiwar principle. In what perhaps is his most straightforward principle, Voltaire shows a clear disdain for warfare as it does nothing but cause destruction and death.⁵² All these concepts and perhaps

⁴³ Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. III, "Equality".

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. IV, "Liberty of Opinion".

⁴⁸ Ibid., "Liberty of the Press".

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. VI, "Toleration". In the context of the time that meant primarily religious toleration.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Voltaire, *Dictionary*, vol. VI, "War".

toleration above all, are rooted very deeply in Voltaire's historical context and it is easy to see why he so strongly believed in this type of society and political system. This concludes the set of principles that will be used in the analysis.

2.Charles XII

The life of Charles XII bears many similarities to that of Alexander the Great, a comparison that both himself and others made about the young king.⁵³ From his military genius to his early demise, one can picture the two as victims of the same fate. To what extent did Charles embody Voltaire's concept of the philosopher prince? Contrary to all other rulers dealt with here, his reign was short and he was constantly – and this term should be taken quite literally – preoccupied with warfare. As such we don't have much to analyze in terms of his administrative work, but thankfully there are some features that can give at least some nuance to the answer. Voltaire himself, throughout his biographical work on Charles, makes it clear that he holds great admiration for the man. Not only for his military and physical prowess, but also for his sense of morality and his general character, which is apparent through the language he uses in most of the book.

During the 17th century, Sweden had undergone a massive transformation which saw the country transform from a mere kingdom at the edge of the continent to the arbiter of Europe. A very important change introduced by Charles XII's father, Charles XI, was the introduction of absolute monarchy in Sweden. Despite this change not being his own achievement, he not only managed to maintain the status quo despite his young age, but also managed to reinforce the position of the crown. Early examples of his absolutism can be found even during his coronation when he crowned himself and refused to bind himself by the royal oath.⁵⁴ This unnerved many people, including the nobles who thought they could manipulate the young monarch.⁵⁵ If popularity among the people can be seen as a proxy against this concern, then he definitely did not disappoint. During the endless wars, he built such a reputation among his subjects that he was adored to such an extent that even after almost two decades of warfare they were still following

⁵³ Voltaire, *History of Charles XII King of Sweden*, trans. Winifred Todhunter (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1912), 12, 38, 141, 153.

⁵⁴ R. Nisbet Bain, *Charles XII And The Collapse Of The Swedish Empire 1682-1719* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 41-45; Frans G. Bengtsson, *The Life of Charles XII: King of Sweden 1697-1718*, trans. Naomi Walford (London: Macmillan and Co., 1960), 30-32.

⁵⁵ Bain, *Charles XII*, 41-45.

him enthusiastically.⁵⁶ His strong sense of morality and duty along with his rather unique attitude of sharing in all the hardships that his men went through during campaigns earned him respect and fear all across Europe.⁵⁷ In this regard he was definitely absolute as there was no man in Sweden that would dare cross him. Even before the war started and the nobles were expecting their share of the state burdens to be reduced, he flatly rejected any such prospect.⁵⁸

When it comes his role within the administration there is some discrepancy between Voltaire and later historiography. Voltaire paints a portrait of a man who did not participate much and was respected even less during the first years of his reign.⁵⁹ While it may be true that he was still young and sometimes immature, both Bain and Bengtsson seem to disagree and instead present a man who was not only active, but was also respected by his ministers.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, this is where the analysis hits a stalemate. As mentioned already his life was dedicated to warfare and more specifically the defense of Sweden from her enemies. One notable aspect is that he never started an offensive war, but rather was always on the defensive, even if that defensive took him as far as Ukraine. This attitude does fit with Voltaire's principle about the evils of war and puts him in direct opposition to the rest of the crowned brigands that ruled the states of Europe.⁶¹ Another aspect that fits with Voltaire's principles is his rejection of torture as a means to extract confessions.⁶²

The state of the rule of law or freedom of expression during his reign is a subject that warrants further research. However, due to his short period of personal administration of the state it is unlikely that anything related to this would have been his doing. One thing that is known concerns the position of the peasantry in Sweden which was significantly better compared to that of France or Russia. Despite all the benefits that the nobility held in Sweden, the peasants were not treated nearly as bad as their true lords were the king, God and the law of the land.⁶³ In addition, the Swedes were a religious people, in particular Lutherans and as such the church did not have nearly as much power as in France or other catholic

⁵⁶ Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 235-237, 320, 341, 358.

⁵⁷ See Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*. These hardships include diet and attire both of which were identical to those of any footman. It becomes apparent throughout the book that he commanded great respect, not only amongst his friends but also his enemies.

⁵⁸ Bain, *Charles XII*, 41-45; Bengtsson, *The Life of Charles XII*, 30-32.

⁵⁹ Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 45.

⁶⁰ Bain, *Charles XII*, 41-45; Bengtsson, *The Life of Charles XII*, 34-37.

⁶¹ Bengtsson, *The Life of Charles XII*, 12.

⁶² Bain, *Charles XII*, 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

countries.⁶⁴ An interesting detail about the state of equality in Sweden comes from the operation of the army. The Swedish army of the time was extremely feared and one of its elements that made it unique was its meritocratic character. The nobles, contrary to other countries, did not receive officer positions within it merely on the merit of being nobility, but were forced to start at the bottom with the rank and file.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly they also suffered great numbers of casualties just like the rest of the men.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, there is not much more to be told about Charles in regards to the question of this paper. He lived and died as a warrior and ultimately his legacy is focused on that more than on any other aspect of his life. While he was virtuous and his people were better off than in most other places in Europe much of the conditions enjoyed by them were not the product of Charles. Even his position as an absolute ruler was not earned by his own sword but rather by his ancestors'. In addition, his interest in things philosophical was practically nonexistent and his education was rather pragmatic. While being undeniably an intriguing figure, when it comes to being Voltaire's ideal philosopher king, he falls short.

3. Frederick II

Out of all the rulers in this list, Frederick II, known to posterity as the Great, is the best candidate. Not only is he known as one of the enlightened absolutist rulers of the time, but also maintained a personal relationship with Voltaire. To the *philosophe*, Frederick presented the first real opportunity to see his ideas being implemented. This relationship started when Frederick was still the crown prince in 1730s. It became apparent to Voltaire however, that his optimism was a bit wild and soon reservations flooded his mind. Despite any personal friction their relationship lasted for many years and it is pretty clear that they both influenced each other. Their turbulent relationship, including Frederick's attempts to arrest Voltaire as the latter was escaping Prussia, are bound to influence any personal accounts by the *philosophe* about the king. But what of our philosopher prince? Can he be found in the person of Frederick despite all the animosity? Besterman seems to be pretty negative as he assigns a lot of the blame for the rough relationship between the two men to the king and his immature behavior.⁶⁷ His conclusion is that

⁶⁴ Ibid. It should be mentioned that like other Scandinavian countries Sweden chose its religion. As such the national church was by definition not entirely free to act independently.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Besterman, *Voltaire*, 280.

Frederick is not an enlightened ruler. Theodor Schieder on the other hand seems to be softer on Frederick and claims the opposite based on the fact that Frederick was very much aware of his sometimes contradictory actions.⁶⁸ Perhaps this chapter can provide some nuance on the subject through an analysis based on Voltaire's principles instead of his feelings.

Frederick was greatly influenced by the enlightenment. This influence can be found to many of the ideas he held about how the state and society should be organized. He tried to implement many of these ideas in Prussia, but his results can be seen as questionable at times. Interestingly, he was an advocate for the theory of a social contract between the ruler and the subjects, an idea picked up from Rousseau.⁶⁹ It should also be added that he was an enthusiast of absolute monarchical power and considered its greatest weakness to be the potential incompetence of the ruler himself.⁷⁰ Frederick held enough power to be able to enforce his will in general, but when it came to provincial matters he had to deal with vested interests and powers that he could not always subdue, especially in faraway parts of the realm or, alternatively, younger additions to the state of Prussia.⁷¹ He wanted to control every aspect of the state's function, the realism of which ought not be exaggerated as he was forced to allocate much of the workload to ministers.⁷² Nevertheless, he wished to be in firm control of the ministers and always be the ultimate arbiter of judgement.⁷³ Overall, he can be considered as absolute as an 18th century ruler can be as he did not live to please a group of benefactors.

In terms of the law in Prussia, he did a decent job of rationalizing the judicial process. This included both the introduction of new legislation as well harmonization across the country.⁷⁴ Prussia at the time extended in a very extensive geographical area, forming a patchwork of states, stretching from the Dutch borders all the way to Konigsberg. It comes as no surprise that these areas did not always share the same law, which makes the administration of justice complex. Frederick wanted the law to be as close as possible to natural law and believed that Prussian law under his rule was quite successful.⁷⁵ The finished product of his reforms is considered as one of the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment.

⁶⁸ Theodor Schieder, *Frederick the Great*, ed. Sabina Berkeley, trans. H. M. Scott (New York: Longman, 2000), 195.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 182.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 188.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 194-195.

⁷² *Ibid.* 189-190.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 185.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 186.

Similar to Sweden, Prussia was a primarily Protestant state which meant that the ruler of the state was also the head of the church, an arrangement dating back to the peace of Westphalia. In addition, Frederick himself was pretty tolerant of religious beliefs, except in the case that one's beliefs were becoming detrimental to the survival of the country.⁷⁶ Further Enlightenment influences can be found in his abolition of torture as well as his desire to abolish serfdom.⁷⁷ While torture was abolished, the abolishment of serfdom was deemed to be practically impossible as it formed the backbone of the economy. This is a heavy blow to the principle of equality, but one that was inevitable for the time, especially when events such as the Seven Years' War were raging on. Frederick's humanitarian ideas, noble as they might be, were, unfortunately for him, unrealistic for the time. In terms of the antiwar principle he fares very poorly in ways that are reminiscent of Louis XIV rather than Charles XII.

Overall Frederick can be considered as an imperfect example of Voltaire's philosopher prince. He held many of the ideas of the enlightenment, including the Voltairian principles used in this paper. In addition, he had a personal interest in things philosophical which he limited to his own private time and circle. Nevertheless, despite whatever genuine interest he may have held for the ideas championed by Voltaire and his colleagues he was always limited in his ability to implement them in full.

4. Louis XIV

Louis XIV, known also as Louis the Great or the Sun King, was King of France from 1643 until his death in 1715. He reigned for a total of 72 years; however, he did not actually assume the burden of government before 1660. His reign is remembered as one of splendor, luxury and war. He was vital in the creation of French culture as we know it as well as for establishing France as the dominant power of Europe. He was a great patron of the arts and a warrior king renowned for his achievements on the battlefield as he led his victorious and massive armies from triumph to triumph. He is also remembered for his absolutism as he is known to have been an absolute ruler superior to any of his predecessors. Such a record for a king sounds impressive. The question we are asking here, however, is not whether he was a great tactician or lover of the arts. Rather, the question is whether he would be given the title of philosopher prince. Voltaire himself paints a controversial image. On one hand he seems to admire all the good qualities of Louis,

⁷⁶ Ibid. 184.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 185, 187.

including his absolutism, but is also critical of his actions when they are clearly immoral. Examples of that is the disapproval he expresses when the king turned his armies against Spain and his own infant nephew who was ruling at the time, as well as the persecution of the Huguenots.⁷⁸

The age of Louis XIV is a significantly different book from the *History of Charles XII*. The latter was written earlier in Voltaire's life and was full of youthful passion, free from the hand of the censors that were involved heavily on the publication of the former. The tone is more dry and academic and less novelistic. The subject matter is quite different as well, one being a biography and the other resembling a report on an era. These differences make it clear that Voltaire is less enthusiastic about the character of Louis compared to that of Charles. The principles that have been laid out in the first chapter prove useful in a situation like this when faced with discrepancies in the original material. It has already been mentioned that Voltaire considers Louis to be absolute. He even uses him and his conduct as a positive example of what a monarch who holds undisputed authority can achieve.

The historian Richard Wilkinson claims that such an assertion is highly exaggerated. He claims that our image of Louis as an absolute king is false.⁷⁹ He first attacks the very concept of absolutism as a 19th century pejorative term meant to showcase the evils of the Ancien Régime.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it is a term used by Voltaire positively and as such, in this context, Wilkinson's claim is irrelevant. Secondly, he claims that Louis could never hold so much power as the country had very diverse problems, vested interests and priorities.⁸¹ While keeping in mind these considerations, we ought to acknowledge that for his time, Louis was extremely powerful and could operate with a degree of independence that was unknown to other rulers. In other words, he was as absolute as he could be considering his context.

Louis's attempts to reform the judicial system of France saw limited success. Even when the content was positive, the people rarely reaped the benefits due to vested interests, local laws, and obstruction by the *parlements*.⁸² In addition, the king was not bound by the law in ways similar to those a modern-day head of state is. He was instead the maker of law. As for trade and industry his rule was not particularly beneficial.⁸³ In agriculture, one of the most fundamental elements for the economies of the time, no

⁷⁸ Voltaire, *The Age Of Louis XIV*, trans. R. Griffith, vol. I (London, 1779), 104; Voltaire, *The Age Of Louis XIV*, trans. R. Griffith, vol. II (London, 1779), 345-348.

⁷⁹ Richard Wilkinson, *Louis XIV*, 2nd (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 76-85.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. 232.

⁸³ Ibid.

improvements were introduced.⁸⁴ All these in combination with the increased taxation to fund the wars that Louis indulged in on a regular basis only exacerbated the already unbearable life of the peasants who were forced to carry the majority of the state's burdens.⁸⁵ That brings us to the principle of equality. The descriptions of peasant life we have from the time make it clear that equality was simply nonexistent. For Voltaire equality did not mean that everyone ought to be in the same social position, but rather that, on merit of being human, no citizen, whether commoner or nobleman, was to be arbitrarily punished, tortured, executed, or dehumanized.⁸⁶ In other words, they were to be treated equally by the law no matter their position. Against this principle, Louis's reign falls short as nothing was done to improve either the conditions or the social status of the peasantry.

The ability of the citizens to express and publish their opinions freely was extremely limited. Louis was a censor that ran a massive propaganda machine meant to make himself look good to the detriment of free-thinkers.⁸⁷ Part of his campaign to regulate the country in ways he considered virtuous was his war on the French Huguenots. He persecuted them fiercely, trampling the principle of free expression, particularly religious expression, as well as that of tolerance as he would not accept people of different beliefs. Industrious French citizens who wanted to live freely in France, safe from physical or mental harm, were not able to do so.⁸⁸ As such, both free expression and tolerance score pretty low during the reign of Louis.

Louis XIV had a rather special relationship with religion. It was important to him as long as it could serve his purpose, whether that was in absolving him from his sins on demand or operating as a tool of the state.⁸⁹ Additionally, he held a very simplistic view of Christianity and could not fathom the possibility that others could think and believe differently than him.⁹⁰ While being a good Catholic (at least in his own eyes), he was keen on picking fights with the Pope, even forcing him to erect a monument in Rome in remembrance of the humiliation of the Holy See while at the same time waving the banner of Gallicanism.⁹¹ To make matters more complicated, he was forced to request the Pope's assistance against the Jansenists and the *Parlement*.⁹² A positive that he achieved in the area of religion and the Church is

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Wilkinson, *Louis XIV*, 226-230.

⁸⁶ See the chapters of the *Dictionary* mentioned above.

⁸⁷ Wilkinson, *Louis XIV*, 54, 189.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 171-175; Voltaire, *The Age Of Louis XIV*, vol. II, 345-348.

⁸⁹ Wilkinson, *Louis XIV*, 164-166.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 165.

⁹¹ Ibid. 168-171.

⁹² Ibid. 177-183.

the relatively consistent appointment of men of good quality to the French bishoprics.⁹³ Overall, despite his conflicts with the papacy, something not unusual to French monarchs, he did not manage to turn the Church in France into a branch of the state, managed and controlled entirely by him and forced to share in the burdens of governance.

The last principle is that of war. Needless to say, Louis XIV would never fit into this as his appetite for war was matched only by his appetite for splendor and luxury. It is also important to mention that he indulged himself in many offensive wars initiated out of his own volition.

5. Catherine II

A German princess sitting on the Russian throne, usurped from the Czar Peter III, her husband. This was the beginning of Catherine's reign, and it proved to be the source of much hardship. Out of the four rulers, she was the one that tried her best to appear virtuous along the lines that the great Enlightenment thinkers had laid out. To that end, she had regular correspondence with a number of them, including Voltaire, who developed great affection for and held high hopes for the Czarina.⁹⁴ In fact, not only was he a great enthusiast of her work in Russia to the extent that he became her greatest propagandist, he even went as far as to celebrate her wars⁹⁵. This is in direct opposition to the anti-war principle. Nevertheless, he was willing to make a few sacrifices in his beliefs in order to see the Enlightenment progress in general. However, it was not only about the Enlightenment. His vanity was also well served as Catherine's letters were designed to flatter him and make him feel appreciated like never before.⁹⁶ In fact, his judgment was swayed to such an extent as to name her the true philosopher prince instead of Frederick II.⁹⁷ Catherine's efforts paid off as Voltaire's attempts to promote her good name were undeniably beneficial to her. However, the question we are interested in whether that reputation is well deserved.

How well does Catherine fair in terms of absolutism when compared against Charles XII, arguably the most absolute of the four rulers? Throughout her reign there was the lingering burden of her accession to the

⁹³ Ibid. 188.

⁹⁴ Voltaire and Catherine II, *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: Selected Correspondence*, trans. A. Lentin (Cambridge, Eng.: Oriental Research Partners, 1974), 11-32

⁹⁵ Ibid. 14, 15, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 16-17.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

throne. Whether she was really the murderer of her husband or is not as important as the effects it had for her rule. She became empress thanks to the support she received from the nobles to whose well disposition she was always dependent.⁹⁸ As time passed on and military triumphs piled up, she was more independent, but it is undeniable that she could never be considered as entirely free from their influence.⁹⁹ Another noteworthy issue with her absolutism is the influence of men like Potemkin, to name the most iconic. It is hard to consider her as absolute when she willingly submitted herself to the heavy hand of outsiders. That is not to say that rulers should not have advisers. It is quite clear, however, that his role went a bit further than mere advising.

In terms of ruling by herself she demonstrates a poor record. But what of her law reforms? This is something she was well known for in Western Europe. She spent two years compiling a new set of laws, the Nakaz, that was relying heavily on Enlightenment principles.¹⁰⁰ Soon after completion it was circulated all throughout Europe and was used as a propaganda machine.¹⁰¹ Ironically, the one place where it never circulated freely was Russia.¹⁰² The reason being, it was not meant to be implemented. After two rounds of amendments, the Nakaz was reduced down to one fourth of its original size.¹⁰³ And even the articles that did survive were not guaranteed to become law. In the end the attempt to reform the law in Russia was nothing, but an attempt by Catherine to be perceived as a supporter of the Enlightenment to the rest Europe. This attempt clearly paid off as she was considered to be one out of a few picked rulers to be named enlightened despots. What benefits the peasantry received is a completely different and sad story.

The rest of Voltaire's principles are not fairing too much better either. Freedom of expression was not exactly a priority and equality was even less sought after. The peasants in Russia have always been some of the most miserable in Europe, but during Catherine's reign the privileges of the nobility not only were not reduced, but were actually reinforced.¹⁰⁴ That could mean only increased hardships for the peasantry. In fact, when the French Revolution began, Catherine responded not by addressing some of the issues in her own country that the revolutionaries in France were fighting to combat, instead deciding to double

⁹⁸ Ian Grey, *Catherine the Great: Autocrat and Empress of All Russia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 111-112.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 165.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 147.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 149-150.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 148. This also goes to show that she did not have the power to implement anything she wanted, making her even less absolute.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 151.

down and uproot all kinds of liberal sentiment from Russia altogether.¹⁰⁵ Something that puts her, the supposed champion of the Enlightenment, in an awkward position is her meddling into the affairs of a sovereign state, Poland.¹⁰⁶ Using the protection of the orthodox Russians in Poland she tried to enforce her own candidate for the Polish throne.¹⁰⁷ Ironically, it would have been detrimental to her to improve the conditions of the Orthodox minority in Poland too much as the persecutions that were taking place there were one of the few things keeping thousands of Russians from escaping there.¹⁰⁸

One aspect that works to her benefit is that she allowed for religious freedom.¹⁰⁹ However, it is unlikely that the huge diversity of Russia would have allowed for anything else without massive repercussions. In addition, she was successful at subduing the church and using church property for secular purposes.¹¹⁰ Both of these do align with Voltaire's principles and as such offer a ray of hope to her case.

Overall Catherine the Great seems to be the least likely candidate for the title of Voltaire's philosopher prince. Despite the man's own favor towards Catherine, there are serious doubts for the Czarina. Voltaire's attitude could be explained by the fact that to a great extent he was kept in the dark about the conditions in Russia as he was never allowed to visit.¹¹¹ In addition, his old age may have made his standards a little more flexible as his desire to see the principles he championed throughout his life be enforced could have meddled with his judgment. Despite Voltaire's opinion on Catherine, it is clear, even more resoundingly than any of the other monarchs of this paper that she was in many ways the exact opposite of a philosopher prince.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to make a contribution to the historiography of the Enlightenment generally and on Voltaire in particular, by analyzing his work, identifying these elements that would characterize his concept of a philosopher prince and apply them to four rulers, two of them having lived before the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 235, 236, 238

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 138-140.

¹⁰⁷ In her defense, she was one among many that did the same. Nevertheless, if she really was the enlightened ruler that she portrayed herself to be she should have acted differently.

¹⁰⁸ Grey, *Catherine the Great*, 141.

¹⁰⁹ Voltaire and Catherine II, *Correspondence*, 18-20.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 20.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 31.

Enlightenment and two during it. By engaging in such a process this paper has taken the anachronistic concept of the enlightened despot, and found a more suitable application in Voltairian political theory. The principles that formed the basis of the analysis of the four rulers were their degree of absolutism, the power of the church within the state, the rule of law and its fairness, pacifism, and finally the state of equality, toleration and freedom of expression under their rule.

When dealing with the ability of the ruler to rule by themselves without fearing for their position or relying on others, Charles seems to be on the top as he was undisputed within his country and was brought into an absolutist system introduced by his father. Louis XIV and Frederick II, while still retaining enormous amounts of control over their states, were never entirely able to bring every single vested interest under control, contrary to Charles whose 18 years of warfare saw nothing, but the absolute loyalty of his subject. Catherine II can hardly be called an absolute ruler as she was always indebted to her benefactors who brought her to the throne: the nobility. In fact, she was forced to cater to them to such extent that despite advocating Enlightenment principles abroad, she was creating a nobleman's paradise at home to the detriment of the peasantry.

Church power cannot really be considered an issue for the three non-Catholic rulers as the only one who had to deal with the almighty Catholic Church was Louis XIV. Despite his best attempts, especially in his early reign to humiliate the Pope, he ended up being pushed and having to consider the pleasure to the Holy See of requesting assistance against his own. The other three rulers were more or less in control of their respective national churches and as such do fulfil the principle of limiting the power of the church.

When it comes to the rule of law and its fairness, the one that did the most to create optimal conditions was Frederick whose reforms are considered an Enlightenment achievement. Louis's efforts into this were rather limited as very few positive things came out of it for the common people. In the case of Charles, he spent most of his reign abroad. This makes it difficult to assess really any of his potential due to his absence. At the same time the better conditions enjoyed by the Swedish peasants in comparison to their counterparts were mostly the product of his predecessors. As for Catherine, she started off well by drafting a new law code based on Enlightenment principles, but, as it turned out, this effort was never meant to be implemented in Russia and was instead used as a propaganda tool abroad.

As for the state of equality, toleration and freedom of expression, Charles and Frederick are the most promising overall. As far as equality is concerned, it needs to be mentioned that no true equality could exist in those times and perhaps not even today. As such we are looking for the closest approximation to

that. A good example comes from the Swedish army where the nobility were not immediately granted better positions due to their status, but instead served with the rank and file. In addition, the peasants were not subjugated to the same extent as others. What works against Charles is that none of this was his doing. At the very least he did nothing to make their lives worse. Frederick had the right intentions, but due to the circumstances of his life, he was unable to improve the state of equality in Prussia. The other two did only harm to their people in this regard and as such they cannot be considered.

In terms of toleration Frederick and Catherine have a clear advantage thanks to their policy of religious toleration. The rest either did nothing to promote it – like Charles – or actively worked to suppress and persecute religious minorities – like Louis and his war on the Huguenots. Freedom of expression found very little application during these times as it was seen by both church and state as detrimental to their power, Louis going as far as to be a great censor of his time, running a propaganda machine that included the church as an instrument.

Finally, the antiwar principle is more or less completely ignored by all of them with the exception of Charles. As mentioned, his wars took him as far as Ukraine and later the Ottoman Empire, but what separates him from the rest is the fact that he never started an offensive war. In addition, he prided himself on his strict and unmovable moral code that at times even caused him to suffer as a result. Famously he has said: 'I am resolved . . . never to begin an unrighteous war, but I am also resolved never to finish a righteous war until I have completely humbled my enemies'.¹¹²

The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that all four fall short when it comes to their chances of being considered as philosopher princes according to Voltaire's principles. Catherine II shows herself to be a hypocritical Machiavellian empress while Louis XIV was a warmonger that turned on his own people when they did not fit his conservative Catholic beliefs. Frederick II might have the best chance of being seen favorably by Voltaire, but despite having the right mindset and being influenced to a great degree by the Frenchman, he was limited by his capacity to act in ideal ways. Lastly, Charles XII while having great qualities that gave him an almost superhuman reputation amongst his contemporaries, his life was cut short and was limited to warfare above all. It is likely that had he been given the chance to act he would surpass every other ruler mentioned on this paper. Unfortunately, we will never know how his story could have ended.

¹¹² Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, xxiii.

Appendix

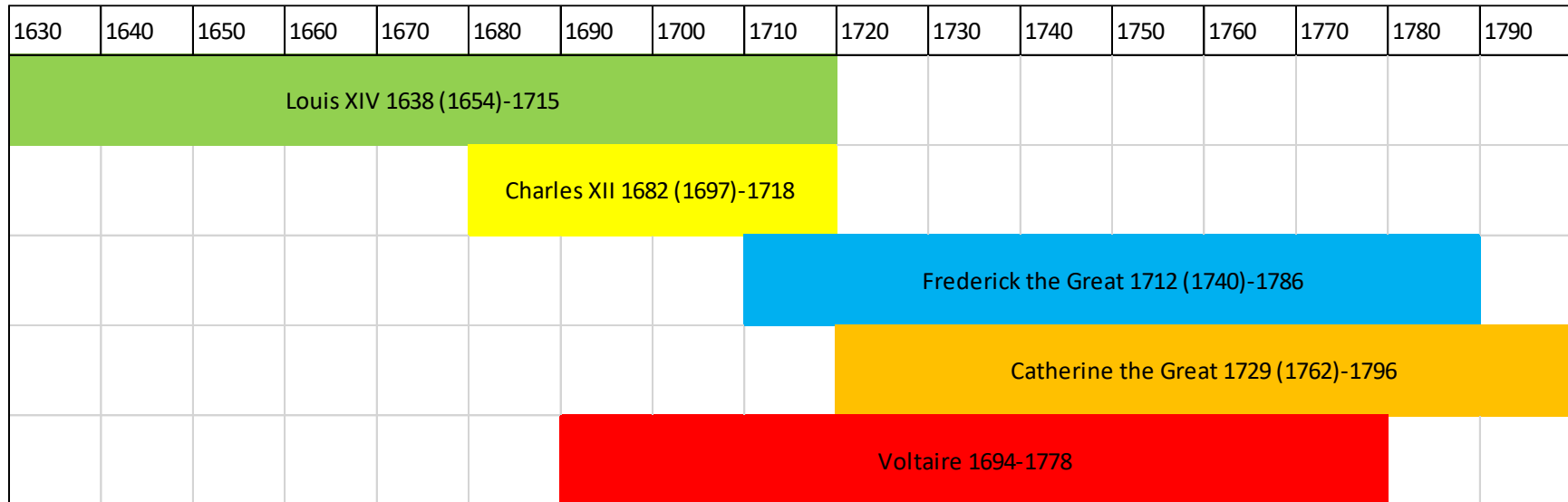


Fig. 1. Visual aid detailing the overlapping timelines of the four rulers along with Voltaire's corresponding timeline.

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