

INTRODUCTION

FRANCE HAD WOOD, WATER AND STONE. To its early inhabitants these were the essential raw materials, and the land offered them in abundance. Less rich in mineral resources, it proved in time to have scattered deposits of coal, iron ore and bauxite. More important, its mixture of soils, climatic zones and different kinds of landscape provided the basis for a variety of agriculture that has been the mainstay of its economy. In shape a rough hexagon about a thousand kilometers long and the same across, France stretches from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, giving it a blend of northern and southern characteristics that can sometimes disconcert its neighbors. For centuries, the more stolid English have looked across the Channel with alternating envy and disapproval at this unpredictable, seductive country, with its flair for style, its dubious taste for the speculative and theoretical, its alarming penchant for revolutions.

Where does its history begin? Popular tradition long ago fixed on **Clovis**. It was he who dispatched the last representative of Roman power in Gaul and went on to piece together a Frankish kingdom that had at least the rough outlines of what later became France. But only after five ragged centuries of Merovingian and Carolingian rule do we really begin to see the emergence of modern France. Once the Capetian monarchs have established their sovereignty, we can talk with more assurance about the history of a nation. The **Hundred Years' War** against England left it drained but intact, and before long it was looking towards Italy for foreign conquests. At the end of the 16th century, after decades of religious civil war, the Bourbon dynasty came to the throne. Within a generation, it had set France on a course of expansion abroad and absolutism at home which led at last to the financial chaos, political exclusion and social inequity that precipitated the



Revolution. **Napoléon**'s rapidly acquired empire was as rapidly dismantled, leaving France to weave its way through a checkered century of restoration, revolution, empire and republic towards the cataclysm of 1914. In spite of the trauma of two devastating world wars and bitter colonial troubles, the end of the 20th century saw France in confident mood. Its millennium celebrations, by common consent among the best in the world, reflected a country that was still, as it had been for centuries, at the forefront of European powers.

For those living at the time, it is the political history of a nation that looms largest—the wars, the laws, the governments, the national triumphs and disasters. For those who come after, the perspective changes. In the middle of the bloody horrors of the Seven Years' War, **Voltaire** published *Candide*. Its words of provocation still ripple across the world; but who cares now about the victories and defeats that in 1759 seemed so much more important? In truth, the impact of a nation's history often has less to do with battles than with books. Measured in terms of the unspectacular events that create a cultural heritage, the significance of France's history is immense. From the poetry of the troubadours and the architecture of the great medieval cathedrals to the dominant artistic and intellectual movements of the 20th century, France has exercised a cultural influence unrivalled by any other country in Europe. If we look for the forces that shaped our way of thinking today, it is to the writers of the **French Enlightenment**—to Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau and the rest—that we must return, and beyond them to Pascal and Descartes.

The French themselves have rarely been in doubt about their cultural pre-eminence, which is perhaps one reason why, at a time when the west has in general been eager to shelter under America's umbrella and share its culture, France has tended to stand aloof. A healthy suspicion of American influence has marked French policy on a range of issues from its attitude to NATO to its stance on the Middle East, from pursuit of nuclear weapons to protection of the national film industry. France goes its own way. And this irritating, admirable confidence in the superiority of its own arrangements comes ultimately from a pride in its past. No one demonstrated this more clearly than **General de Gaulle**. France, he explained at the start of his war memoirs, had always seemed to him to have a special destiny: "France could not be France without greatness." The conviction came to him from his father in a manner that de Gaulle sums up in a single, brief sentence. Quite simply, "Il m'en a découvert l'Histoire"—He revealed to me its History.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Valois

{ 1328-1589 }

WHEN THE FIRST OF THE **VALOIS** MONARCHS WAS CROWNED IN 1328, France was a fragmented medieval kingdom on the threshold of a long, fruitless war that threatened its very existence as an independent state. By the time the last Valois monarch died in 1589, it had become, in spite of difficulties and divisions, a Renaissance power whose cultural and political influence was felt across Europe.

Fighting was the business of the Valois kings, and the history of the dynasty presents above all a spectacle of recurring warfare. The **Hundred Years War** was a bleak struggle for survival fought on French soil and followed in the second half of the 15th century by a series of domestic campaigns to re-establish the authority of the French Crown. Within a few years, the scene of battle had moved to Italy. Like many sovereigns before and since, **Charles VIII** preferred adventures abroad to problems at home. The **Italian Wars** provided an intoxicating outlet for royal vanity and military zeal, but they also drained the exchequer and inaugurated the centuries-long quarrel with the **Habsburg** rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Finally, there were the **Wars of Religion** that overshadowed the closing years of the Valois dynasty. The **Reformation** launched by Martin Luther in 1517 had altered the political as well as the religious landscape of Europe; and France, subject to influences from both north and south, was particularly vulnerable to the tensions that arose. More bitterly divided between **Protestant** and **Catholic** than any other country in Europe, it was to suffer internal conflict that long outlasted the initial round of wars.

Amid this turmoil, the old order was changing. The Hundred Years War and the ravages of the **Black Death** accelerated the erosion of feudal labor practices, while military reorganization undermined the feudal basis of warfare. The complexities of governing a more centralized kingdom, allied to the widespread sale of offices, encouraged the growth of an administrative class. To meet the cost of expensive wars, the system of taxation had to be revised. Outside Paris, the founding of new universities and the spread of regional *parlements* fostered the development of provincial cities. Artistic influences from Italy furnished the seeds of a cultural renaissance. All these were aspects of France's emerging identity in a Europe that was now poised to enter the modern age.

The Early Valois

1328-1461

Gibbon's melancholy verdict that history is "little more than a register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind" could serve as an epigraph for the period of the **Hundred Years War** (1337-1453). The war itself, sustained by English claims to the French throne and large areas of French territory, was a vicious, futile seesaw that went first in England's favor then France's, before repeating the cycle across another half century. For the hapless population, the interludes of peace, when marauding bands of unemployed soldiers terrorized the countryside at will, were scarcely preferable to the long years of warfare.

The English were only part of the problem. On the death of **Charles V**, who had managed to claw back much of his kingdom from enemy hands, the country was left with the 12-year-old **Charles VI** as its sovereign. For the next 50 years France was a theatre for the competing rivalries of the boy's relations, whose hunger

for power led in the end to the bloody civil war between **Armagnacs** and **Burgundians**, the two parties representing the **duc d'Orléans** and the **duc de Bourgogne**. French fortunes were at an ominously low ebb in 1429 when the unlikely figure of **Jeanne d'Arc** (Joan of Arc) came on the scene and the tide began to turn. Within a quarter of a century English power in France had been broken for good.

Almost as horrifying as the war itself was the backdrop of social disintegration against which it was played out. Since 1315, the worsening climate had spread periodic **famine** through the land. Hunger was followed by plague. Starting in the south at the end of 1347, the **Black Death** spread like a fatal stain across the countries of Europe, leaving empty villages in its wake. Meanwhile, the costs of incessant warfare imposed a relentless burden of taxation on the stricken peasantry. The fierce eruptions of popular rebellion against these conditions were suppressed with matching ferocity. France lurched on towards the hope of better times.

Not surprisingly, it was a period more barren of cultural landmarks than any other in the last thousand years of France's history. The great age of cathedral building was over, the world of the troubadours had vanished long ago. Only at the sumptuous **court of Burgundy** was there an artistic flourishing to bear comparison with what was happening in Italy. It is perhaps appropriate that the greatest poet of this murderous age should be **François Villon**, himself a thief and murderer, who left behind a poetry that still flashes with haunting images of a world on the edge of darkness.

1328 Philippe VI de Valois is crowned at Reims (May 29).

On August 23 Philippe crushes Flemish rebels at the **battle of Cassel**. After his disputed accession to the throne, this victory is

hailed as a judgment of God, sealing his legitimacy and reinforcing the support of the barons who have given him the crown.

1329 On June 6 **Edward III** of England does homage to Philippe for **Guyenne** (the name used for the area of Aquitaine under English control), whose revenues the French king has been withholding.

1334 Work begins on the construction of the **Palais des Papes** at Avignon.

1337 In the wake of worsening relations with Edward III of England, Philippe VI confiscates Guyenne (May 24).

On October 7 Edward III repudiates his homage to Philippe VI and claims the throne of France, signaling the start of the **Hundred Years War**.

1340 In February, following a revolt against the **count of Flanders**, the Flemish recognize Edward III as king of France.

The French fleet is destroyed by the English at **Sluys**, near Bruges (June 24).

1341 The extension of the **gabelle** (salt tax) to the whole kingdom heralds a steady increase in the tax burden on French subjects.

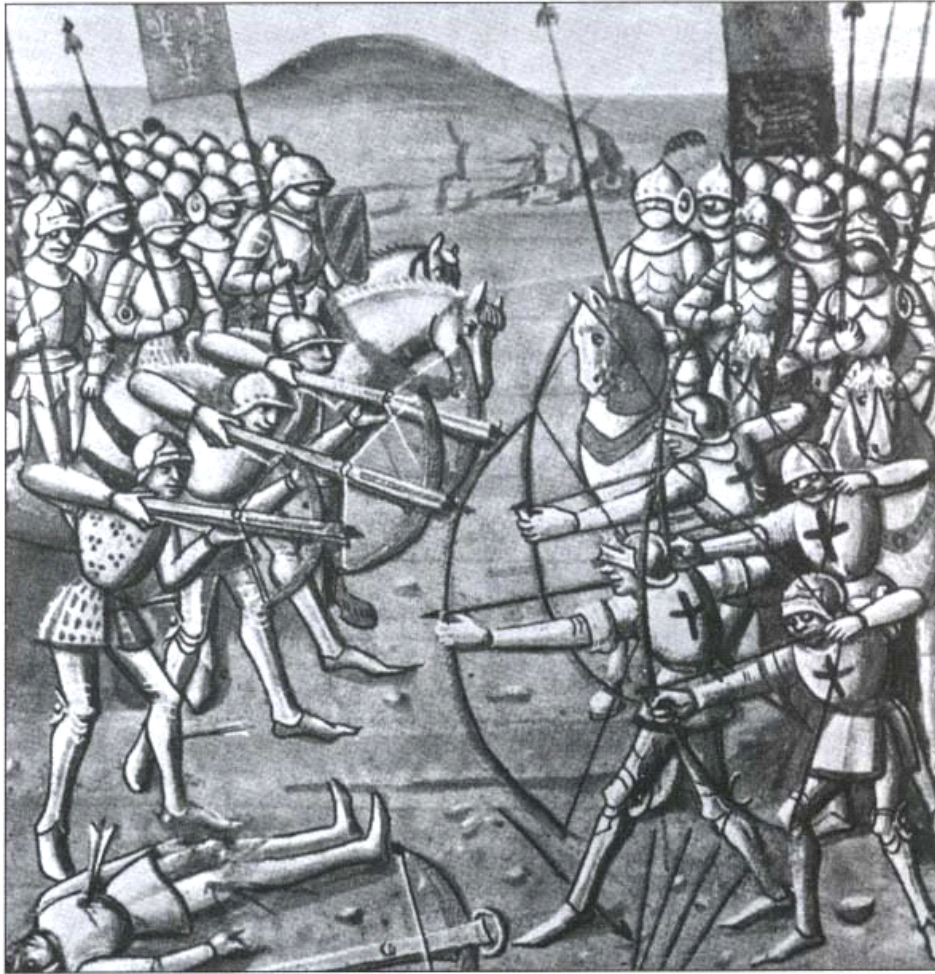
1346 In July Edward III lands in France. The French army is routed at the **battle of Crécy** (August 26). Among those killed is the French king's brother, **Charles d'Alençon**.

1347 After a year-long siege, **Calais** surrenders to the English on August 4. To avert the threat of a general massacre, six of the richest citizens—remembered as the **Burghers of Calais**—offer themselves (in what may have been a stage-managed public spectacle) as sacrificial victims to Edward III; they are spared at the intercession of Queen Philippa. Edward fortifies and garrisons Calais, establishing it as an English outpost for the next two centuries. By now both countries are feeling the economic effects of prolonged warfare, and in September Philippe VI and Edward III agree a **truce**. Renewed in 1351, it lasts for the next eight years.

In December the **Black Death** first appears in France, probably brought by a Genoese galley that has touched at Marseille.

1348 The Black Death spreads northwards. Within a year it kills something like a third of the population of France.

1349 In spite of **Clement VI**'s threat to excommunicate Christians who mistreat Jews, **pogroms** become increasingly frequent as part of



The Battle of Crécy