

The Rise of France

In the latter half of the 16th century, France was a country deeply troubled and divided by religious wars. The French protestants, the *Huguenots*,* and the Catholics fought a series of bloody wars against each other. The situation seemed rather hopeless until Henry IV came to power in 1594. Originally, he had been the leader of the Huguenot minority, but supposedly saying that “Paris is well worth a Mass,” he converted to Catholicism in 1593 so that his religion would not pose an obstacle between himself and the French throne. Once the last of the Valois kings was dead, Henry’s time had come: as the first member of the Bourbon family, he came to the throne of a vast country that was to play a leading role in European history well into the 19th century.

At the beginning of his reign, Henry had to defuse the religious conflict and reconcile the feuding parties. He achieved this by issuing the Edict of Nantes (1598), guaranteeing freedom of worship and political rights to the Protestant minority, and by successfully trying to set up a very strong central government. This, of course, entailed that he restrict the power of the French nobles who had undermined royal authority in the preceding decades. He did this by persuading them to succumb to the central government and by paying them large bribes. However, before he could really complete all of his reforms, he was stabbed to death by a fanatic monk in 1610. Henry’s son and heir Louis was only eight years old at that time which meant that everything that Henry had done would have been in vain if the French nobles regained their old strength.

And, indeed, under the regency of Marie de Medici, the future king’s mother, French politics were characterised by plots and counter-plots until Louis came of age (in 1616) and appointed Cardinal Richelieu *chief minister** (1624). In fact, it was Richelieu who really governed the country. He wanted to make France a supreme power in Europe, but to realize this ambitious plan, the Cardinal had to see to quite a number of problems: in order to establish an efficient, strong central government that would enable him to fight against the Catholic Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs threatening the very existence of France, he had to curb the power of the French nobility. Therefore, he abolished the *Constable of France** in 1627 and made sure that all fortified castles that were not needed to defend the country were razed, thus stripping the nobility of a powerful means to oppose the king in a rebellion. Having limited the nobles’ military might, he turned next to their political power. In a first step, he personally saw to it that only those who supported the idea of a strong monarchy were appointed as governors of provinces. His second step was to limit the administrative power of these noble governors by installing royal emissaries, so-called *intendants**, who kept the local administration under close scrutiny. These powerful officials were members of the wealthy middle-class and directly responsible to the king who had the power to appoint and to dismiss them. In this way, Richelieu had managed to create a relatively modern and loyal administration independent of the nobility. Obviously, this did not make the Cardinal popular with the French nobles.

In addition, Richelieu had to quench the growing power of the Huguenots who, being under the protection of the Edict of Nantes, had managed to control fortified cities that were in fact like states within a state. In a long struggle in which Richelieu could be seen personally leading armies into battle, the Cardinal eventually prevailed and took away the Huguenots’ political power, but left them their religious freedom (Peace of Alais 1629).

The principles of Richelieu’s foreign policy were also guided by his dream of making France the dominant power in Europe. Therefore, it should not be surprising to hear that Richelieu – a Cardinal of the Catholic Church – at first secretly and later openly supported the Protestants in the *Thirty Years’ War* because these formed the anti-Hapsburg coalition in this conflict. He saw this war – basically a series of wars interrupted by intervals of peace – as the big chance to curb once and for all the power of the Hapsburgs and the Holy Roman Empire, thus forging the possibility for France to emerge as a leading European power.

When the Cardinal died in 1642, he had managed to pave the way for a unified nation that was efficiently governed by a strong central government. His foreign policy had also laid the foundation for making France a strong European power.

Richelieu's monarch, Louis XIII can be characterized as a man forced to do a job he did not really like doing. He is described as a rather gentle, quiet, reserved, and extremely sensitive man who was more interested in hunting and actually working with his own hands than in politics. Nevertheless, he saw it as his duty and divine obligation to rule France as well as he could. Knowing about his own shortcomings, he had very early resorted to Richelieu as the mastermind, allowing him to shape the future of the French nation. However, on a very dreary winter day in early December 1637, the king – by then a deeply sad and exhausted man – was forced to make a very serious decision: he was caught in a heavy rainstorm and did not want to risk travelling on to one of his castles at Saint-Maur (eight miles south-east of Paris), as planned, but on the spur of the moment decided to stay at the queen's (Anne of Austria's) residence, the Louvre. There – so rumour has it – the queen's chamber was the only one equipped with a comfortable, curtained, four poster bed. So that night, Louis and Anne, who were on friendly terms, but not very close, actually slept together. The result was Louis XIV, the future king of France, who would manage to finish the work already started by Cardinal Richelieu, namely making France into a strong and powerful nation.

In 1643, when the future king of France was only five years old, his father died. To avoid another struggle for power, Louis' mother acted swiftly and appointed Cardinal Mazarin as the chief minister of the country. Immediately, this ruthless politician had to face a serious domestic crisis: the nobility undertook one last attempt to regain its former power and glory. In a bloody revolt, the so-called *Fronde** conspiracy (1648-1653), the nobles actually tried to revoke some of the laws that Richelieu had made to curb their power. Above all, they wanted the *parlements** to regain the right to turn royal edicts into laws by "registering" them, i.e. including them in the roll of all the laws and legal traditions of France kept by these Supreme Courts, thereby winning back the means to control the crown. Obviously, Mazarin could not allow that. However, the nobles, believing that their time had come since the French army was busy fighting the Thirty Years' War and the people of France were groaning under a very heavy tax-load, refused to back down and took up arms. The chief minister and the royal family actually had to leave France for a while before Mazarin was finally able to quench the rebellion in 1653. In the long run, this final revolt had actually only contributed to domesticate the nobility and to increase the power of the royal government.

Despite his domestic problems, Mazarin proved to be an excellent "foreign secretary" of France, for he came out of the Thirty Years' War as a winner. In the negotiations at Westphalia (1648), he had managed to secure territories along the eastern border of France, thus weakening the power of the Hapsburgs and actually laying the foundation for French supremacy in Europe.

However, the Treaty of Westphalia did not bring peace for France and Spain. These two bitter enemies continued to wage war against each other until Cardinal Mazarin crowned his career by negotiating the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. This treaty established the new border with Spain at the Pyrenees and gave Louis a Spanish bride, thereby providing him with a claim to Spain's empire.

When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis XIV started to rule a country which was well organised and whose enemies had largely been defeated. In addition to that, the young king had had the opportunity to learn from a political genius – and he had learned his lesson well. His first decision was to abolish the office of chief minister, thereby making it quite clear that, from the beginning of his personal rule, Louis himself would govern France. Of course, he still needed support since he was not able to govern the country single-handedly, and to make sure that his "support" would forever remain just that, he largely relied on the wealthy and educated middle class to provide him with competent advisers. He also made sure that his edicts were swiftly and properly carried out throughout the country by establishing permanent government outposts in the provinces. These were headed by the new generation of intendants who resided in their respective provinces as the king's effective tools. This step made the administration not only more effective, but also more loyal since Louis could appoint and dismiss these

intendants as he saw fit; it also basically ended French feudalism since the nobility was essentially made redundant.

90 Still haunted by the visions of the Fronde conspiracy, the king decided to keep the now redundant nobles under close watch. Therefore, he had the most magnificent castle –Versailles – built outside of Paris and insisted that the most powerful nobles of France live at Versailles. Here, they formed the royal court, an equivalent of a playground for the nobility, where royal favours and offices ensured personal success. This made Louis the master in his own house, and he rightly proclaimed that he was the state. (“L’etat, c’est moi.”)

95 The king dealt the nobility the final blow when he reorganized the army. Making it illegal for anybody to raise an army, he was the only one who kept about 100,000 men permanently under arms. The commanding officers of the army were carefully chosen according to their skills and abilities, and not to their birth. Issuing uniforms and standardised weapons as well as looking after injured and retired soldiers created an *esprit de corps* within the army. This close-knit “community” was solely at the king’s command and could be used to raise taxes, 100 to quench minor riots in the provinces, or to disperse rioters in Paris. Having turned the army into his very own private tool, Louis had many castles built along the borders of his country, thus making France a fortress.

Obviously, all the measures mentioned above were quite expensive. Since the amount of taxes that could be raised was limited with the clergy and the nobility largely exempted from paying taxes at all, the crown had to look elsewhere for money. It was Jean Baptiste Colbert, an expert in finance, who advised the king to build up 105 French industry at home and French trade abroad in order to fill the royal coffers. Thus, the government tried to regulate the economy by granting subsidies to private companies to build new industries and by imposing high tariffs on foreign imports to make products “made in France” even more attractive to the consumers.

Having seen the *esprit de corps* at work in the army, Louis also wanted the French people to form a close-knit, obedient society supporting and adoring their king. He believed that the Protestant Huguenots were an 110 obstacle to achieving this goal. Therefore, he started to persecute them. At first, he tried to make them convert to Catholicism, but since most of them refused, he resorted to open violence. In 1685, he issued the Edict of Fontainebleau which basically made the Edict of Nantes obsolete, and he started to destroy Protestant churches, to ostracise the Protestant clergy, and to force those to emigrate who refused to convert to Catholicism. An estimated 300,000 Huguenots actually left France. Although this fact was widely popular among French Catholics, 115 one has to keep in mind that most Huguenots were highly skilled and, as such, an asset to French society.

Louis knew that his well-trained army could not only be put to good use in domestic affairs, but could also be most helpful when attempting to achieve his objectives in foreign policy. Like Richelieu before him, he was a firm believer in the concept of having natural frontiers to guarantee France’s safety. Richelieu and Mazarin had seen to it that the Alps, the Mediterranean Sea, the Pyrenees, the Atlantic Ocean, and the English Channel 120 formed a protective wall around France. But there still was a rather noticeable gap in this wall – in the northeast and east of the country. To close the gap, Louis wanted to make the River Rhine the eastern frontier of France, and therefore he fought a series of wars*. Although these wars did not make the Rhine a French frontier, they proved her military might and marked the pinnacle of Louis’ career. But in the long run, they evoked a feeling of unease within most European countries. When Louis crossed the River Rhine to wage war against the Austrian 125 Hapsburgs in 1688 over a rather complicated inheritance dispute, he had gone too far. William of Orange, the English king, together with Holland, Denmark, and Austria, formed the Grand Alliance in 1689 to stave off French supremacy and to maintain the balance of power in Europe. The ensuing war proved most devastating for the Palatinate, and, before it ended, Louis had destroyed such prominent cities as Worms and Speyer as well as the castle in Heidelberg. However, the French army was not invincible, and Louis was forced to agree to the 130 Treaty of Ryswick in 1697. This treaty gave France the territory of Alsace and the town of Strasbourg, but Louis had to abandon all the towns his army had occupied in the Netherlands. This war had not only damaged the king’s reputation, but also almost ruined France.

The imminent death of the feeble and childless Spanish monarch, Charles II, offered Louis the final opportunity to establish France as the dominant European power, for Charles had ruled over a vast empire that included Spain itself, Latin America, the Low Countries with the exception of Holland, and parts of Italy. In 1700, Charles II eventually died, leaving the Spanish throne to Philip, the Duke of Anjou, a grandson of Louis XIV. The French king was determined to keep this empire, but the other European powers formed an alliance to prevent him from doing that. Thus, the so-called “War of the Spanish Succession” started in 1701. The fighting was most costly and brutal and inflicted further damage to French self-esteem when Louis’ army suffered terrible defeats at Blenheim* and Ramillies* against the Duke of Marlborough. However heavy the French losses were, the allies had to realize that they were not strong enough to deprive Philip of the Spanish throne. Therefore, the warring parties started long-lasting peace negotiations, finally ending in 1713 with the Peace of Utrecht, which decreed that the Spanish empire should be divided: Philip was granted Spain itself with the obligation never to unite Spain with France; England won most of the former Spanish colonies* and the monopoly of the slave trade; and the Austrian Hapsburgs were given the Spanish Netherlands as well as the Spanish possessions in Italy. A year later, the emperor also recognised the Peace of Utrecht in a treaty that was signed in Rastatt. Thus, the English idea of the balance of power in Europe prevailed, but France would have to suffer the consequences of Louis’ continuous warfare in the near future.

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