

THE RISE OF NATIONAL STATES IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453)

The tradition of monarchy in France and England was forged in the hearth of centuries-long war between the two countries. After 175 years of feudal warfare between the French Capetians and their English royal vassals, the Capetian line became extinct and Philip VI of the Valois House assumed the throne in 1328. Edward III, the English king, maintained that he was the legitimate heir to the French throne since his mother was a sister of the late French king, while Philip VI (Valois) was merely the grand nephew of Philip IV (Capetian). Salic law prohibited inheritance through the female line, however, and French legists now used it to prevent an English king from ascending the French throne.

More than dynastic rivalry gave rise to enmity as economic concerns entered the situation. As the French king extended his control over France, he came to demand heavy feudal revenues from Flanders, which matched the king's determination with stout refusal. In their refusal the Flemings sought aid from the English, whom they knew would readily respond, for Flanders, as a textile center and market for the fine wool of England, played an important part in the English economy. (One is reminded of Athens, its colonial interests and the Peloponnesian War.)

In the first phase of the Hundred Years' War, which lasted until 1360, almost complete disaster overtook the French kingdom. By employing new military techniques (long bow and pike), the English forces won stunning victories, notably at Crecy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356. In the latter battle the French king himself was taken prisoner. It is important to note that the new techniques of war hastened the decline of feudalism in both countries in that they ultimately destroyed the usefulness of the heavy-armed mounted knight who was so much a feature of the medieval world. And it is perhaps a little irony of history that the English provided the instruments by which the French monarchy was ultimately strengthened to the extent that they effectively eliminated (literally) its internal opposition.

French losses in war led to social unrest (the Peasant Jacquerie of 1358) and political instability (the abortive attempt of the Paris guilds to control the government through the Estates General). And, as the scene of constant war, the French countryside fell victim to armies and mercenaries from both sides. After the historic Battle of Agincourt (1415), all seemed lost to the French; the English controlled most of northern France, and Charles VII, who came to the French throne in 1422, could not be crowned since his capital of Paris and the city of Reims (where coronation took place) were in the hands of the invader from across the channel. It was at this critical juncture that Joan of Arc (1412-1431) came upon the scene. Captured and turned over to the English for trial as a witch and heretic, the simple peasant girl who was subject to visions was found guilty by a high ecclesiastical court and burned at the stake. But not before she had infused the French forces with a confidence they had

hitherto lacked. Her martyrdom and devotion to the French cause became a driving force behind a series of French victories that drove the English out of France and brought the Hundred Years' War to an end in 1453.

As a result of victory Charles VII was able to restore royal power in France, and the great magnates were forced into a position of support for the king. At his death in 1461 Charles was able to pass on a kingdom rather than a feudal fief to his son, Louis XI (1461-1483), whose reign marks the beginning of France as a truly modern national state. Louis put to clever use the strong "national" sentiment that ensued from the long conflict and victory with England: using the middle class as a support, he crushed the power of the feudal nobility and virtually finished the territorial consolidation of the French national state. Commerce and state centralization were both strengthened by the improvement of roads, harbors, and waterways which carried both trade and government troops of the new state.

At the end of the Hundred Years' War England was in a less happy state. Henry VI (1422-1461) had become king as an infant, and England was ruled by a regency during which noble factions gained in power. Matters were not helped by Henry's attainment to majority (he was given to fits of insanity), and a full-scale civil war, known as the War of the Roses, broke out in 1455. For a while the White Rose of the House of York seemed victorious when Edward IV became king (1461-1483), but his troubled reign left his two sons as his heirs. They were murdered, and their uncle took the throne as Richard III. In a pitched battle at Bosworth Field in 1485 Richard was slain, and Henry Tudor of the Lancastrian House (Red Rose) took the throne as Henry VII (d. 1509). Under the Tudor line begun by Henry, the fortunes of England waxed under a strong central government that united the people into a nation.

Displaying the political sagacity which distinguished the Tudor line, Henry proceeded to heal old wounds by marrying Elizabeth of York, niece of Richard III. With the support of the lesser gentry and the middle and lower classes, Henry freed the throne from its dependence on the nobility. Administrators drawn from the bourgeoisie directed the destruction of illegal feudal armies and the replenishment of the royal treasury. During his reign trade and industry advanced by the passage of navigation acts which protected English shippers and the negotiation of favorable treaties with the Netherlands, Denmark, and Venice. At his death his son, Henry VIII, inherited a united and orderly state built upon a new relationship between monarch and people.

EVENTS IN ITALY

As we have seen in the preceding section, the trend in France and England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was toward dynastic monarchy and away from the particularism of power and loyalty that had distinguished the High Middle Ages. In Italy, on the contrary, the basic

political unit was neither the kingdom nor the feudal fief; it was rather the city-state (somewhat analogous to the ancient Greek *polis*) which acted as a sovereign power, capable of taxing its subjects and conducting foreign relations. Indeed, it is a notable characteristic of the period we call the Renaissance that it was the only time in the history of Italy between antiquity and the nineteenth century that Italians controlled their own political destiny. The decline of the Holy Roman Empire in the middle of the thirteenth century and the removal of papal influence during the Babylonian Captivity had the effect of freeing the Italian city-states to go their separate ways.

Although a host of city-states existed in this period, five major powers dominated political life: the city-states of Milan, Florence, and Venice in the north; the kingdom of Naples in the south; and the Papal States extending across central Italy. To begin with the last of these, the Papal States virtually disintegrated as a political unit as a result of turmoil in the Church, especially the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism. After 1450, however, a number of capable popes restored Rome to importance and made of the city a center of artistic endeavor in the Renaissance. In the process of rebuilding, the papacy, from the political point of view, came to be considered as merely one Italian power among the many.

For its part, the kingdom of Naples was less prosperous than in previous times, but underwent a revival in its political and cultural life under Aragonese leadership and patronage. The influence of Spain was a mixed blessing, however, since this connection was one cause of the French invasion of the Italian peninsula in 1494.

The real political power of Italy lay not in the south but in the north, where the wealth, military strength, and organization of Milan, Florence, and Venice dominated. Milan, strategically located in north-central Italy, had been an important political and economic power from as early as the twelfth century. Although at first a republic, the city-state was seized in 1277 by the Visconti family, who were to control the city for almost two hundred years. When the Visconti line died out, the ducal title was usurped by Francesco Sforza (1450-1466), an able soldier of fortune (*condottiere*). Sforza and his son, Ludovico il Moro, were lavish patrons of the arts, who gathered about them a circle of intellectuals and artists, including Leonardo da Vinci. Like a meteor, however, the brilliance of the court soon ended with the arrival of French troops in the city in 1500. Ludovico was driven from his post, and the city passed into Spanish hands in 1535 as a result of peace negotiations with France.

More than any other Italian city, Florence, during the fourteenth century, was stricken by factional, class struggle as wealthy merchants' and bankers' guilds battled against the craft builds. Both sought the support of the lower class, the laborers, who had little to gain from either side. Economic difficulty and social strife followed upon military reverses, and in 1434 Cosimo de' Medici, head of a wealthy banking family, came to power as a political champion of the poor. In diplomatic fashion,

Cosimo remained largely in the background while holding all the reins of power. Under his rule Florence achieved a stability it had not known for centuries. The true high point came in the period from 1469 to 1492 when Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo (*il magnifico*), controlled the city. Under his patronage this twenty-three year period produced men, ideas, and art which justify the often applied title of "Golden Age." It is to his generosity that Florentine buildings of the period owe their splendor.

In Venice, contrary to the rest of Italy, the old established oligarchy maintained its control, and the city enjoyed a great deal more political stability than Milan and Florence. Since Venice's lifeblood was trade, its government was in the hands of the great merchants, who regulated the state to benefit commerce and, at the same time, to maintain themselves in power. Because of its tightly knit power structure, social change came slowly if at all, and Venice maintained the calmest aspect of any Italian state in the Renaissance.

As can be seen from even this too brief survey, Italy's development and situation in terms of politics, economics, and social life was unique when compared to the rest of Western Europe at the same time. Here the city was the focus of a dense population engaged in commerce and industry; there the dominant way of life was still agrarian, still heavily colored by a feudal tradition which was slowly losing its integrative powers. That this contrast existed is not surprising; Italy had long ago established itself as a center of trade and exchange, while the countries further west and north had coped with the problems of frontier existence.

Given this difference in economic life--in the basic ways people made a living--it is not surprising that Italy should have produced different attitudes and ideas about how that life should be organized and lived. One of the most striking differences is found in the character of the Italian prince or despot, a figure that came to dominate much of life in Renaissance Italy and thus provides us with a prominent symbol.

As opposed to the Western rulers we have examined--men whose positions were justified by dynastic inheritance, Church sanctions, and feudal traditions--the Italian prince was a man best seen as a "rugged individualist" who attained position and power through personal ability and character. In him we find a parallel to the ruthless egotism and self-confidence which distinguished the economic activity of the time and place. This contrast with the west is not to say, of course, that men like Philip IV or Henry II were not dynamic and ruthless rulers who succeeded and failed often by personal strength and will; the difference is one of degree and, more importantly, of tradition. Of hereditary status, the Italian despots had little enough, for they had broken through the moral and corporate restrictions imposed upon individual enterprise in the normal burgher society of the Middle Ages; being a prince, like being a pirate captain, was a career open to talent. Indeed, the prince often began as a *condottiere*, a leader of a band of mercenaries.

Because of his lack of "traditional" support, the prince was forced to justify his status in other ways: through the maintenance of peace

within his realm, by expanding the size and prosperity of his particular city-state, and by keeping his military forces in readiness. He might also gather about him writers and artists, whose services would add to his prestige as well as feed his vanity. In the last analysis he might engage in that "surgical cruelty" recommended by Machiavelli in his *Prince*, a book written as a handy guide for the do-it-yourself despot.

Seen in a larger context, the competitive individualism *within* city-states is revealed in the relations *between* city-states. Nationalism of the sort we find growing in France and England is not apparent in Italy, and neighboring principates were often seen as foreigners with whom diplomatic relations had to be established. As a result, Italy was ripe for invasion and partition by true foreigners, a process which began in seriousness in 1494. Thus, the concentration of fluid capital and of power in relatively few hands was a mixed blessing, for it created not only that surplus of wealth so necessary for the patronage of artists and intellectuals whose work has come to represent the Renaissance, but also that anarchy and instability which led to destruction.

CONCLUSION

The period of the Early Renaissance played an important role in the transition from the civilization of the High Middle Ages to that of the early modern world. As such, it was a time of tension filled with inconsistencies as people strove to reconcile their inherited traditions, institutions, and ways of thought with the activities and needs of a changing world. Economic and cultural expansion stemming from the twelfth century quickened in pace and scope, changing the fundamental basis of Western European society. The change was neither steady nor uniform throughout Europe, and the responses varied greatly from place to place. Thus the history of the time has the appearance of a "crazy-quilt" in the making.

Both feudalism and the Church reached their highest point of development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, yet neither was the product of that vigorous age. When Europe awoke to new activity through commerce, the feudal system and the Church had already acquired their major characteristics. And, though the Church especially displayed an enormous cultural vitality, the pace of change revealed the organization and social doctrines of each to be increasingly out of keeping with the spirit and needs of the times. Nothing, however, is so powerful or stubborn as an idea or institution whose time has passed, and the Early Renaissance found both feudalism and the Church to be obdurate. Thus rulers in France and England especially were forced to wage a continuous battle in their attempt to create new political and social forms which were themselves yet faintly perceived and little understood.

The weight of tradition bears more heavily upon people's thoughts than upon their actions, acting as a brake upon one-half of the whole person.

In Italy, where the tradition was different or less heavy, intellectual and social change proceeded earlier and faster. In those parts of Europe where the weight of tradition was heaviest, either physical activity was retarded or the gap between thought and action grew to schizophrenic proportions. In varying degrees the Early Renaissance was a period in which people in Western Europe came to occupy a position between worlds, feeling completely at home in none.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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