

## **Volume I .**

### CONTENTS

1. Europe in 1453
  2. Economic and Political Economy
  3. The Legacy of the Hundred Years War
  4. Humanism and Intellectual Curiosity
  5. From Burgundy to The Netherlands
  6. How Absolute was Francis I?
  7. The Constitution of the Holy Roman Empire
  8. The Habsburg-Valois Wars
  9. Spain from Ferdinand to Isabella
  10. Islam and Christendom
  11. The pre-Reformation Church
  12. Martin Luther and his protest
  13. The Spread of Lutheranism
  14. The Swiss and South German Reformers
  15. Anabaptist and other Radicals
  16. Catholic Reformation before Trent
  17. Exploration and Overseas Trade
  18. Money and People: financial & demographic problems
  19. The End of the Wars, 1545-1559
  20. The France of Henry II
  21. The Council of Trent
  22. Portugal, Spain, and the New World
  23. Cateau-Cambresis and its consequences
  24. The Rise of Calvinism
  25. The Jesuits and the Counter Reformation
  26. The French Civil Wars to 1572
  27. The First Phase of the Revolt of the Netherlands
  28. Civil Wars and Settlement in France, 1572-1598
  29. The Creation of the United Provinces
  30. Spain as an Imperial Power
  31. The Empire and the background to the Thirty Years War
  32. The Scandinavian Intervention
  33. The France of Henry IV and Richelieu
  34. France and the Thirty Years War
  35. The Treaties of Westphalia
- Suggested Reading
- Maps

## 20. The France of Henry II

When Henry succeeded his father, Francis I in 1547, France had only partially evolved from a feudal kingdom, and was far from being a fully centralised state. The boundaries of the kingdom were better defined than they had been in 1515, but there were still uncertainties. The Duchy of Brittany, joined to France in a personal union when Charles VIII married the Duchess Anne in 1491, had been precariously retained until 1532, when it had been finally integrated into the kingdom, but many of its laws and customs were still distinctive. In the north east France still claimed suzerainty over Artois and Flanders. Theoretically surrendered by the Treaty of Madrid (1526) in fact the claims were maintained, on account of the dubious moral status of that treaty, until Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559. On the East, there remained considerable uncertainty over the exact location of the boundary between French and Imperial lands, and some noblemen owed allegiance to both king and Emperor. Provence and the Dauphine in the South East were still not fully integrated, the king ruling them by virtue of separate titles, and controlling them through their own institutions. In fact, France still showed many signs of the piecemeal way in which it had been assembled. There were also many relics of the country's feudal past, both theoretical and practical. Towns, corporate guilds, and even individual estates, might function as autonomous franchises rather than subjects of a sovereign. The ancient system of customary law also supported such a concept, because although it was maintained and administered in the king's name, it had grown out of the community which it served, and that origin was still recognised. Codification of the customary law began in the late fifteenth century, and was largely complete by the time of Francis's death. But codification, although it helped everyone to know what the law was, and prevented major incompatibilities between one place and the next, was not the same thing as uniformity. Francis had encouraged the *use* of Roman Law, because it was more consistent with the absolutist theories which he liked to promote, but France was not to be subjected to a single code of law until the Revolution. Even language was an obstacle to unity. Quite apart from Breton, and some German speaking minorities in the East, two main tongues were spoken. In the north, the *langue d'oïl*, the ancestor of modern French, and in the south the *langue d'oc*, or Provençal, akin to modern Catalan. As late as the end of the fifteenth century the division was fairly even, but during the sixteenth century the use of the *langue d'oïl* by the royal court and by the king's officials altered the balance. By 1550 the *parlements* of Toulouse, Aix and Bourdeaux used it, and it was becoming increasingly common in ordinary use by the aristocracy only Gascony and Provence remained largely unaffected.

There was no universally accepted theory of royal government, and certainly nothing that could be called constitutional law - except possibly the Salic law which not only debarred women from the throne, but also barred claims transmitted through women. Strictly speaking, a king's heir was his nearest male kinsman, which would be his son if he had one, but could be a fairly distant cousin - which was how Francis had inherited from the sonless Louis XII. Absolutist theory was widespread and influential, particularly Guillaume Bude's *L'Institution du Prince*, but it was by no means universally accepted - and certainly not acted upon. The same was true of the centralisation of royal government. A complete machinery of royal offices existed, but the officers tangled constantly with local privileges and immunities, so that the actual practice of government was a network of pragmatic compromises. Nowhere was this better illustrated than in the case of the *parlements*. The *parlements* were courts of law, with jurisdiction over defined areas, and had grown out of the autonomous courts of the old fiefs. They also had extensive administrative functions. As we have seen, the *parlements* were ultimately amenable to royal control, but all kings recognised such actions to be of last resort and in

practice the *parlements* could often be obstructive, and sometimes win important concessions. By 1550 the average number of councillors in each *parlement* was about seventy, making about 600 for the whole country. The judges employed by these courts numbered some 3000, at a time when the population of France numbered about fifteen million.

Below the *parlement* in the hierarchy of local government came the *baillage* (also called *senechaussee*, of which there were about a hundred. The *bailli* or *senechal* was rather like the English sheriff, and commanded the feudal levy (which was virtually obsolete). The main work of administration was conducted by the tribunal of the *baillage*, which was presided over by the deputy-bailli, or Lieutenant. In January 1552 Henry II introduced a new tier of jurisdiction between the *parlements* and the *baillage*, called the *prisidiaux*, of which there were sixty-nine. Opposition to this move by the *parlements* was tough and protracted (although ultimately unsuccessful) and for good reason. In fact Henry created the whole system, not in the interests of justice, or speedier administration, but in order to sell the large number of offices so created. Francis had made the creation and sale of offices a regular part of his fiscal system, and at the end of his reign it was estimated that he was receiving 900,000 livres a year from that source. In 1515 there had been some 5000 royal officials in the whole kingdom; by 1546 that number had risen to 20,000, and by the middle of the following century to 55,000. Many were unnecessary, obstructing the processes of government with bureaucracy, and making the whole system unwieldy and expensive. Such offices were, in effect, *rentes*, and could not be abolished without compensation, which subsequent kings could not afford. Nevertheless, both the administrative and fiscal systems worked with reasonable efficiency. The main problem was that regular taxation never produced enough to pay for the regular and expensive wars in which both monarchs engaged, hence the need to sell offices, and raise loans from foreign bankers, particularly in Antwerp. Francis had just borrowed the large sum of 6m livres when he died equivalent to nearly 70% of a year's income.

The fiscal system was complex, revenues being divided into 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'. The former consisted of the profits of the royal lands, and of the courts of justice, where these belonged to the king. The latter was direct and indirect taxation, particularly the *taille*, *gabelle* and *aides*. The *tailles* produced about half the 9m livres per annum which Francis's extraordinary revenue was bringing in at the end of his reign. The *gabelle*, produced about 6% and the various *aides*, which included both clerical taxation and duties on the sale of goods, about 17%. For the administration of ordinary revenue, France was divided into four regions, each supervised by a *tresorier de France*, with a team of subordinate officials. Extraordinary revenue was administered under two different systems, as we have seen. The *pays d'etats* ran their own, and the rest of France was divided into four *generalises*, each under a *generaux des finances*. These in turn were divided into *elections*, each under an *elu* who was in effect a royal commissioner. Francis modified this traditional structure in two ways. In 1523 he created an official called the *tresorier de l'Epargne*, with responsibility for all casual revenues (such as loans); and in 1542 he introduced sixteen *recettes generales* as an intermediary layer between the *generalites* and the *elections*. The system which existed in 1550 was more centralised and more effective than that of 1515, but it still did not produce enough income for war Henry II, who started his reign deeply in debt, and got steadily further enmeshed, attempted in 1555 to set up a system of consolidated domestic loans, promising repayment at 20% per annum. This was known as the *Grand Parti de Lyons*. Not surprisingly, he defaulted after only two years, and when he died in 1559 was twelve million livres in debt and for all practical purposes bankrupt.

Financial embarrassment was not the only problem to have been created by the long

wars. Prolonged war always worked to the political advantage of the major aristocratic families, whose high social status, military training and substantial private resources all made them indispensable to their kings. Francis, who himself enjoyed high military prestige, had managed to control this situation but his death revealed that this had been a personal ascendancy. By 1551 Henry was allowing, and indeed, encouraging, the development of a situation which was fraught with potential danger, the emergence of three families whose clientage networks spread throughout France. The first of these were the Montmorencys, the family of his personal favourite Anne de Montmorency, the Constable of France; the second were the Guises led by the ambitious and able soldier Francis, Count of Aumale, whom he created Duke of Guise; and the third were the Bourbons. This family had been virtually destroyed by Francis after the treason of the constable in 1523, but had then been rehabilitated, partly by the terms of the Treaty of Madrid. In 1550 they were led by Duke Anthony, who in 1555 became king of Navarre in right of his wife, Jeanne d'Albret, daughter of Francis's sister, Margaret of Angouleme; his son Henry was consequently a prince of the blood. As long as Henry lived, he kept these ambitious clans in a rough equipoise, but the defeat of Montmorency at St. Quentin in 1557, and the great victory of Guise at Calais six months later gave the latter an ascendancy which he was quick to exploit. The marriage of his niece, Mary of Scotland to the Dauphin Francis in 1558 also brought him close to the royal family and encouraged further ambitions.

The dangers of this situation were increased by two additional factors. It was not only the king whose finances had suffered from the wars. Heavy taxation had damaged both trade and agriculture, and old economic centres such as Lyons were severely affected, leading to steep rises in unemployment and widespread social discontent. Only the west coast, open to the developing trade of the Atlantic, largely escaped the depression. At the same time many minor noblemen had served in the king's wars for honour, and in the hope of reward, rather than for regular pay. The disaster of St. Quentin left scores of them with heavy ransoms to find, and no prospect of recovering their losses. Disillusioned with the king, they naturally gravitated towards one or other of the great clientage networks, looking for an opportunity to escape from the heavy burdens of debt which the wars had landed upon them, and which the cessation of wars meant could no longer be lifted by a new twist of military fortune. More seriously still, economic and political grievances helped to create a welcoming audience for the Calvinist preachers who began to enter France from Geneva around 1555. Hitherto the reformation in France had lacked clarity, both of content and direction. In the early 1520s a humanist circle, led intellectually by Jacques Lefevre-d'Etapes, and politically by Guillaume Briconnet, the bishop of Meaux, had enjoyed considerable influence at court. Marguerite de Valois, the king's sister was their chief patron, and Francis himself was sporadically interested. The extensive control over ecclesiastical affairs which the king had secured by the Concordat of Bologna not only meant that the French church was effectively his private domain but also that it was unusually corrupted by secular priorities. Had humanist influences been allowed to develop undisturbed, they might well have led to a major catholic reform movement under royal control. However, the prospect for this was ruined by the condemnation of Luther, and the almost simultaneous appearance of large quantities of his writings in France. The ultra-conservative theological faculty of Paris - the Sorbonne - took fright, and executions for heresy began in August 1523. When Francis was captured in 1525 his protection was withdrawn from the circle of Meaux. Some, including Briconnet, were charged with heresy and forced to recant; others fled. For some time after Francis's return the *parlements* were hotter in their pursuit of heresy than was the king, but after 1534, when the so-called 'affair of the Placards' seems to have awoken him to the true

implications of radical religious dissent, the king himself became a fierce, although sporadic, persecutor. It was this persecution that drove many reformers (mostly influenced by the South German preachers rather than by Luther himself) into exile. One of these was John Calvin, who eventually found refuge in Geneva, and issued from there in 1541 his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with a hopeful dedication to Francis. Henry II was a more consistent and committed persecutor than his father, and established soon after his accession an additional chamber of the Paris *parlement* - the so-called *chambre ardente* - to deal with cases of heresy. This did not last long, but neither the king nor the *parlements* flagged in their efforts. As so often in such cases, heresy appeared to thrive on persecution. Calvin and most of his fellow exiles in Geneva were French speaking, and their ideas soon became characteristic of French reformers. In 1555 Calvin established in Geneva the Company of Pastors, specifically to train missionaries for the French field, and within three years they were making a considerable impact. Protestant ideas spread rapidly among two main groups - urban artisans and the aristocracy. The latter, with natural qualities of leadership, soon became the protectors and patrons of the new churches. Unlike Lutheranism, Calvinism thrived in adversity, and new congregations developed rapidly; in 1556 at Blois; in 1557 in Bourges, Rouen, Caen, La Rochelle, Lyons, Aix, Bordeaux, Issoudun and Anduze; in 1558 at Dieppe, Le Havre, Tours, Saintes, Montargis, Marsellies, Bergerac, and several other places. The speed of the infection astonished everyone, and it reached to the highest aristocratic levels. Jeanne d'Albret, the Queen of Navarre and effective leader of the house of Bourbon, became a convert, as did several members of the Montmorency family, including Gaspard de Coligny, the Constable's nephew. Religion thus added its own potent ingredient to the fierce aristocratic rivalry which was surging up under Henry's feet by 1559, and which his death in that year unleashed upon the minority government of his son.