**Hundred Years’ War**



The Hundred Years’ War was a dispute between the monarchs and nobles of France and England. Although there were often breaks in the fighting—including a period from 1348–1356 when the Black Death was raging across Europe, war lasted from 1337–1453. More accurately, it was a series of wars that took place in what is now known as France. The driving motivation was to determine who should be king of France.

**Lead-up to the war**

The conflict between the kings of France and England began long before the start of The Hundred Years’ War. For centuries, rulers in both countries struggled for economic control of French provinces. However, when Philip the Fair (Philip IV) died in 1328 without an heir, the fight for the throne of France began. The French supported a cousin of the dead ruler. The English king, Edward III, the grandson of Philip the Fair, believed he had a stronger claim to the throne. Edward III invaded France on November 1, 1337. He had the support of several French barons, but the majority of the French did not want to be part of England and fought to drive out the English.

**English victories (1337–1429)**

The English gained control of vast areas of France up until 1429 when they began to lose ground. They had a powerful weapon—the longbow—that repeatedly helped them defeat French armies. Archers, ordinary villagers, were trained to use the longbow. It could penetrate plate armor and kill a knight. In three important battles the French tried to ride past the common archers to get at their social equals—the English knights—but the volley of arrows was so deadly that, in each case, many French were killed. The surviving knights were ransomed for large sums of money. At the Battle of Crécy, on August 26, 1346, the English were outnumbered by a French army three times its size. The French knights believed they were invincible and attacked. They retreated when they saw the onslaught of arrows. Many knights, knocked from their horses, lay helplessly in their heavy armor and were slaughtered with knives. At Poitiers, in 1356, the English repeated their victory. In this battle the French believed they had caught the English at a disadvantage. The knights charged on foot but were killed by a wall of arrows. The French king, John, and his son, Philip, were captured and held for ransom. At the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, the French army of 20,000– 30,000 men outnumbered the 6,000 English. Led by Henry V, the archers won another victory over the heavily armored French knights.

**Internal conflict among the French (1392–1435)**

Around 1392, the current king of France, Charles VI, was rumored to be mad. Because he was an ineffective ruler, the country was governed by John the Fearless (Duke of Burgundy) and Louis of Orléans (cousin of the king). John and Louis had different opinions about what was best for France. John wanted to promote trade and make peace with the English. Louis wanted to recapture a French province controlled by England. John assassinated Louis.

The son of the king, also called Charles (Duke of Orléans), was the dauphin or rightful heir of France. He gathered forces from his father-in-law, Bernard of Armagnac, and prepared to fight the current ruler of France, the Duke of Burgundy. But John the Fearless gathered his own troops. Civil unrest between the Armagnacs and Burgundian troops grew. Both sides turned to England for help. In 1411, the Burgundians asked for help and were given 2,000 soldiers. The next year, the Armagnacs promised the English king French provinces in exchange for 4,000 men. Both sides accused each other of treason and the conflict continued.

Queen Isabeau, acting on behalf of her insane husband, formed an alliance with the Burgundians. In 1419, when the dauphin Charles’ men assassinated John (Duke of Burgundy), the Burgundian troops formed an alliance with England. Philippe the Good, who succeeded John as the Duke of Burgundy, supported the English claim to the throne. He thought it was better to let the English have their way than to keep fighting. Queen Isabeau agreed and in 1420 she convinced her mad husband to sign the Treaty of Troyes. Philippe, the Duke of Burgundy, was promised more power in the new France. Under the treaty, Henry V, king of England, married Catherine, the daughter of the current French king. When Charles VI died, Henry would become king of France. The only person who refused to go along with the treaty was the dauphin Charles, who insisted on his claim to the French throne.

**Ending of the war (1429–1453)**

In the early part of the 15th century, France was divided into three regions. The northern part of France was ruled by the English king, Henry VI. The eastern part, including Paris, was controlled by the Burgundians, who for many years had supported England’s attempts to conquer France. Nearly one-half of the country, from the Loire valley south, recognized the dauphin Charles as Charles VII of France even though he had not yet been crowned. Although the royal officials remained loyal to Charles, his youth, inexperience, and lack of funds made it difficult to reconquer the rest of France.

In the spring of 1429 the English were driven from Orléans and on July 17, 1429, Charles was crowned king of France. Six years later he and Philippe, Duke of Burgundy, agree to cooperate. This effectively undermines the English cause to determine who should be the French king and marks the beginning of the end for the English. In 1436 Paris surrendered to the French and by 1450 the English had been driven out of Normandy. The war finally ended in 1453. The English had left France except for the area near the port of Calais.

**Joan of Arc**

**Insistent voices: 1428-1429**

A sixteen-year-old peasant girl, growing up and tending the cattle at Domrémy, has for some years been hearing voices. She sometimes sees the speakers, and recognizes them as St Michael, St Catherine and St Margaret. But in this winter of 1428-9 they have been giving her a very specific instruction. She must raise the siege of Orléans so that the king of France, Charles VII, can go to Reims to be anointed in the cathedral.

The girl is Jeanne Darc, known in English as Joan of Arc. Her voices reflect a shrewd political perception which no one but she, it seems, has appreciated.

This perception relates to the common people’s idea of their king. Thanks to a long tradition, much fostered in the previous century by Charles V, it is believed that each French king acquires a divine quality once he is anointed with the sacred oil from the Sainte Ampoule at Reims.

At present, in the middle of the Hundred Years’ War, there are two rival claimants to the French crown. One is Henry VI, the young king of England, whose forces - in alliance with the Burgundians - control the entire north of France, including Reims itself. The other is Charles VII, king by rightful descent but a weak figure, confined to the region round Bourges.

Neither of these claimants has been anointed - Henry VI because he is a child of seven in England, Charles VII because he cannot get to Reims.

Joan sees with the clarity of passionate faith that if Charles can fight his way to Reims to be consecrated, France will have a king again. This becomes her mission. But first she must reach Charles himself. Dressed in a man’s clothes, with six male companions, she travels for eleven days to Chinon. It is two more days before her request to see Charles VII is granted. (He is often still referred to as the dauphin at this stage; he has been crowned at Poitiers in 1422, but Joan does not yet consider him a proper king).

Joan’s reputation as a woman possessed must have preceded her. Charles conceals himself among his courtiers, as if to test her powers. She immediately identifies him, telling him that she wants to make war against the English so as to open his way to Reims.

For three weeks Joan is examined by leading churchmen. They recommend to Charles that he use her services. He provides her with the household of a knight. She has her own squire and pages, her own painted standard and banner. She has armour and a sword, miraculously found - it is said - behind the altar in a church where she sends men to seek it.

**From Orléans to Reims: 1429**

Joan and her soldiers reach Orléans on 29 April 1429. The city has been besieged for seven months by the English, holding various fortified positions around the town. Joan’s presence among the French troops - armed like a man, fighting at least as bravely as a man, famous already as possessing special powers - proves as demoralizing to the English as it is exhilarating for the French.

One by one the English positions fall. By May 8 their army is in full retreat from Orléans. They withdraw to three other towns on the Loire, where they await reinforcements.

The French have driven the English from one of the three towns when reinforcements arrive in mid-June - 5000 men under the command of Sir John Fastolf. With Joan’s encouragement (and the advantage of a larger army) the French overwhelm this English force at Patay on June 18.

Joan now persuades Charles VII to move northeast towards Reims, about 150 miles away. Summons to the forthcoming coronation are sent out on June 25, even though the entire country as far as Reims is still ostensibly in English or Burgundian hands. The attitude of the fortified towns on the route is uncertain.

But Joan’s magic continues to work. The gates of almost every town are freely opened to the coronation party. One notable exception is Troyes, where the treaty was signed in 1420 diverting the French crown into English hands; but when Joan in person leads an attack on the city, the inhabitants rapidly change their minds.

Reims is reached on July 16. The city opens its gates to Charles. Preparations are made for an immediate consecration in the cathedral the following day. As Charles is anointed with the holy oil, Joan stands nearby with her banner. Then she kneels before him, and for the first time calls him her king.

**Capture and trial: 1430-1431**

For the next ten months Joan continues to campaign against the English and the Burgundians - usually with considerable success, for her reputation is now itself a powerful weapon. Paris is her one failure, in September 1429. The capital city resists both her assaults on its walls and her passionate pleas to the defenders to surrender to their rightful king.

Joan’s misfortunes begin in May 1430. In a skirmish against the Burgundians at Compiègne she falls from her horse and is captured. Over the next few months her fate as a captive is hotly contested. The university of Paris, shamelessly partisan for the English cause, demands that she be handed over to the Inquisition for trial as a heretic.

Several attempts are made to persuade her to recant. The records of her trial and interrogations survive, revealing the sturdy commonsense with which she maintains her position. In the face of this obstinacy, she is handed over for punishment by the civil powers - a sentence of death. Hearing this, she finally yields. She is then told that she can live, but in ‘perpetual imprisonment.’

Three days later she retracts, maintaining once again everything that she stands for. On 30 May 1431 she is burnt at the stake as a relapsed heretic.

The death of the saint in Rouen (Joan is finally canonized in 1920) comes less than thirty months after the departure of the 16-year-old girl from her village home in Domrémy. During that short spell the political face of France has been transformed. The English in northern France, dominant during Joan’s childhood, are cleared out of the country during the next few decades. And the French king, Charles VII, whom Joan coaxes and chivies to seize his destiny, reigns with great success for thirty years after her death.

No other story in history, so reliably recorded, can match Joan of Arc’s as an example of the power of inspiration.