Hundred Years' War briefing sheet

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 armour 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 armour 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 armoured French knights.

Internal conflict among the French (1392–1435)

Around 1392, the current king of France, Charles VI, was rumoured 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.

France during the Hundred Years' War

Sluys

Flanders

Calais

Crécy

Agincourt

Rouen

Compeigne

Rheims

Harfleur

Seine

Normandy

Marne River

River

Brittany

Troyes

Orleans

Burgundy

Loire River

Chinon

Poitiers

Bordeaux

Guyenne

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 re-conquer the rest of France.

It is at this time that Joan of Arc comes upon the stage. She supports Charles and is instrumental in driving the English from Orléans in the spring of 1429. 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. It marks the beginning of the end for the English, but it was too late for Joan, as she was executed in 1431. 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.