

# France After the Franco Prussian War of 1871

## French Third Republic

The French Third Republic was the longest lasting constitutional framework for politics in France since the French Revolution of 1789. Officially inaugurated in February 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War and formally demolished in October 1945 after World War II, the Third Republic began and ended with the catastrophic defeat of French forces and the occupation of French territory by German armies. Where earlier revolutions had failed, the Third Republic succeeded in completing the transformation of France into a modern democracy.

Despite its longevity and successes, the Third Republic is remembered more for the series of political crises that punctuated its duration and exposed divisions than for its stability. Universal male suffrage had resulted in the domination of France's legislative body, the French National Assembly, by monarchists. From the very start, the monarchist leaders of the Third Republic, led by Adolphe Thiers, grappled not only with the Prussian Army's demands for reparations, but also the armed resistance of the city government of the capital, the Paris Commune.

Although the Communards, who opposed the pacifism and conservative direction of the new government, were only able to hold out against French troops for a short while, this bloody civil war and the controversy about its meaning split the country between those who favored, or opposed, change. The republicans, made up of the middle class and peasantry, feared a return to the monarchy of pre-revolutionary times. They gradually gained in national elections until 1877, when the republicans finally won a majority over the monarchists in the National Assembly.

Weathering a shaky beginning, the Third Republic also withstood a series of crises involving the independent power of the military. Two generals, Marie Edme MacMahon (the first president of the republic, from 1873 to 1879) and Georges Boulanger each came close to seizing power and scuttling the republic on separate occasions in 1877 and 1888. Possibly even more damaging was the Dreyfus affair, in which a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was falsely accused and punished in 1894 for selling secrets to the Germans. The subsequent debate divided French public opinion on the issues of military reform, anti-Semitism, and religion.

The Third Republic did survive World War I and the Great Depression, although not unscathed. In 1940, yet another general, Philippe Pétain, effectively put an end to the Third Republic in all but name when he became president of the vestiges of the French government after German occupation of northern France. As a political period, Vichy France (1940-1945) is commonly treated separately from the Third Republic.

The storms of politics somewhat obscure the more basic changes that occurred in France during this period. This was an era of continued industrialization and its social effects. The advent of the new technology is perhaps best symbolized by the monument to iron production created for the Paris International Exhibition of 1889, the Eiffel Tower. The emergence of national trade union organizations and the growth of both the Socialist and Communist parties were other signs of the creation of an industrial working class. Modernization under the Third Republic also integrated France as a society as never before, bringing the rural peasantry into the political life of the nation.

### **French Fourth Republic**

The Fourth Republic of France lasted only 13 years. Born in the chaos of the end of World War II, it lacked the ability to face France's crucial postwar issues. Economic stagnation and repeated failures in international affairs forced the dissolution of the republic in 1958.

At the end of World War II, as Allied armies forced the retreat of German forces in France and the collaborationist Vichy government disintegrated, the responsibility for reestablishing government in liberated France fell to the government in exile formed by Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle feared that unless order was restored quickly, a communist government might seize power. The communists had been very active in the French Resistance, and the actions of the collaborationists discredited their conservative counterweight. A referendum on October 21, 1945 dissolved the French Third Republic and elected a new Constituent Assembly, tasked with writing a new constitution. Conflict between de Gaulle and the leftists in the assembly complicated the work. De Gaulle resigned as president in 1946. The French electorate rejected the first draft of the constitution in a May referendum that year. The voters elected a second assembly in June, which completed the second draft. Finally, after a year's effort, the constitution was approved in October 1946.

Two key points of debate over the constitution were the power of the executive and measures to promote the stability of the government. The Third Republic had a figurehead president and had been plagued by the constant dissolution of governments. Unfortunately, neither of these issues was resolved by the constitution of the Fourth Republic. It added a second chamber to the assembly, but the new body had no power. None of the stability measures worked, and the average life span of a government in the republic was seven months.

Failures in foreign affairs took their toll on the new republic. After a nine-year war, the French colony of Indochina won its independence. That same year, the colonies of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco rose in rebellion. Efforts to subdue these new challenges drew severe criticism from the far left in France. In 1956, these revolts bore fruit, and France lost its colonies in North Africa. Also in 1956, French participation in the Suez Canal crisis drew severe domestic and international criticism.

As the crisis deepened, support for strengthening the constitution emerged. On June 1, 1958, de Gaulle assumed leadership of the government again. He dissolved the assembly and promised new elections in the fall. The de Gaulle government wrote a new constitution that greatly increased the power of the executive. A referendum on September 28 approved the changes, disbanded the Fourth Republic, and proclaimed the Fifth.

### **French Fifth Republic**

The French Fifth Republic began when France's current constitution was created in 1958, and the term applies to all ruling governments having served France during this period.

The Fifth Republic's origins date back to the late 1950s, when France was badly destabilized by its defeat in the Indochina War and the ongoing Algerian War of Independence. Fearful of a coup by military leaders unfavorable to negotiations with pro-independence Algerian leaders, the French National Assembly requested that Charles de Gaulle take over as interim prime minister in order to oversee the drafting of a new constitution.

De Gaulle's constitution granted far more power to the executive branch than previous constitutions, including the power to dissolve parliament, choose cabinet ministers, and rule by decree during a crisis. Furthermore, the constitution would later be amended to provide for the direct election of the president by universal suffrage.

In September 1958, French voters overwhelmingly approved the new constitution by referendum, and de Gaulle became the Fifth Republic's first president in December of the same year. Many major events marked de Gaulle's tenure, including France's admission to the European Economic Community, a successful test of an atomic bomb in 1960, and the withdrawal of French troops from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1967. Social movements and a crippling strike in May 1968 brought France to an economic standstill and badly weakened de Gaulle's presidency. The following year, de Gaulle resigned after voters defeated a referendum he supported.

De Gaulle's successor, Georges Pompidou, continued many of his predecessor's policies but went against de Gaulle's wishes by ensuring the United Kingdom's admission to the European Community. After Pompidou's death on April 2, 1974, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected to office on May 27, 1974. He advocated more European unity and economic reform, but many of his policies failed due to the growing global recession. D'Estaing sought reelection in 1981 but was defeated by socialist candidate François Mitterrand.

Mitterrand put in place a system of higher taxes, wider social coverage, and nationalization of some firms and banks. Despite the Socialist Party losing many seats in the 1986 legislative elections, Mitterrand won another term in 1988. Under his leadership, French forces fought alongside NATO troops during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Mitterrand made history that same year by naming Edith Cresson prime minister, the first woman to hold that post in France.

In May 1995, President Jacques Chirac was elected and soon thereafter, made the controversial decision to resume underground nuclear testing in French Polynesia. Outcry against these tests was strong, eventually forcing Chirac to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (which had not yet been ratified in 2004). Domestically, Chirac turned France's military into a volunteer-only force, pushed for deeper European integration, and officially adopted the European single currency, the Euro, in May 1999.

Although born from crisis, the period since the Fifth Republic began has been and continues to be an eventful one for France. Spectacular economic growth during the 1950s to 1970s has made France the world's fifth-largest economy. Politically, changes made through the constitution have transformed the country into one of the world's most stable democracies.

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