

# 1

## The making of modern France

### 1.1

#### Introduction

This introductory chapter places the evolution of the French polity in its broad historical perspective until 1958. The chapter provides an overview of French political history, with particular emphasis on the role of the state in building a French polity and upon the legacy of the French Revolution and its aftermath. The problem of political legitimacy is revealed as an essential problem throughout most of French history, the result of multiple social, economic and ideological cleavages and of territorial, linguistic and religious identities. Chapter 1 also highlights various sources of historical continuity between the pre-Revolutionary monarchy (known as the *ancien régime*) and the post-revolutionary order, and puts into context the impact of political divisions upon the operation of French society.

By comparison with most of her European neighbours, such as Germany, Italy or the Netherlands, France is an old country. Modern France can trace its lineage back at least to the Capetian monarchy of the tenth century; Italy and Germany were only unified as independent nation-states in 1861 and 1870 respectively. But her relative age must not disguise the fact that the modern French nation is in certain respects an artificial creation. There was no natural empathy between the various provinces which came to form France. In the pre-Revolutionary period, many of the provinces of France shared no natural common cultural or linguistic ties. Small rural communities throughout France were suspicious of all outside authorities, and lived a largely self-sufficient, autarkic existence. The preponderance of agriculture in the French economy suggested why features of this social model survived until the early twentieth century. Identity was rooted in locality, or town, rather than the nation. The fact that French nationhood was imposed upon unwilling provinces (such as Normandy, Brittany, Aquitaine, Burgundy, Provence) by a succession of French kings, and later by the Revolution, served to reinforce this point. A city as France as Lille only became part of the nation in the late seventeenth century; Nice in the nineteenth century.

France was overwhelmingly a rural nation. Even in the pre-Revolutionary period, there were marked regional variations in the economic prosperity of the peasantry, and in the political freedoms exercised by subjects. In certain regions of France, forms of traditional local self-government had existed for centuries.

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In other areas subjects were deprived of any political rights and tightly controlled by a zealous aristocracy. Regional differences were themselves linked to varying kinship and economic structures in different parts of the country (Mendras 1989).

Pre-Revolutionary French history had usually appeared to turn around the attempts made by the central government in Paris to impose its will upon existing provinces, to conquer new regions and to extend the orbit of its competence. The attempt to impose central control was a constant feature of the pre-Revolutionary French monarchs, most notably of Louis XIV (1648–1715), whose chief minister Colbert endeavoured (with mixed success) to expand the competence of the state into the economic sphere, as well as to impose a measure of political uniformity upon the provincial nobles.

### 1.2

#### The *ancien régime*

Political historians dwell correctly on the importance of 1789 and the French Revolution as the fundamental reference point in French history. But many of the predominant traits of the French political tradition are older than the Revolution, rooted in the *ancien régime*, as the pre-Revolutionary monarchy is known. The main historical legacy of the *ancien régime* was to have created a central institution in the form of the monarchy, which was able to impose a degree of authority upon the powerful feudal aristocratic landowners, and other particularistic interests (such as the church). In a number of key spheres, the Revolution built upon the centralising pretensions of the old absolutist monarchy:

- The origins of state economic interventionism lay with the *ancien régime*, although efforts at state-sponsored commercial and industrial development met with limited success. France remained a feudal society until the Revolution.
- French monarchs named officials (intendants) in each of the kingdom's provinces to administer the core functions of the state: public order, the raising of finances and the levying of troops for military adventures abroad. In practice, these officials were forced to bargain with powerful vested interests, including the nobility and the clergy.
- French kings claimed their legitimacy from divine right: they were answerable to God alone. They were supported in this claim by the Catholic Church. This undivided form of political legitimacy was echoed later by the Revolution, with the insistence on the general interest.

The heyday of the old monarchy was in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when, under the influence of Louis XIV, France became the dominant power in Europe. The palace of Versailles remains until this day a testament to the glory of the old French monarchy. But throughout the course of the eighteenth century, the monarchy became steadily less effective and more

corrupt, its authority challenged by the rising bourgeoisie in the towns, by the state's incapacity to control the feudal nobility, by an endemic crisis in public finances and by its diminishing international prestige.

## 1.3

## The French Revolution: the making of modern France

The statist tradition in France certainly preceded the Revolution, but the case must not be overstated. The French Revolution, with its civil wars and its crushing of the power of the aristocracy and the clergy, created the conditions for the emergence of France as a genuinely unified post-feudal nation (Wright 1987). The French Revolution was thus the fundamental reference point in the development of the French nation-state.

The Revolution abolished the absolutist monarchy, which claimed to rule by divine right, and replaced it with a republic committed to the values of freedom, equality and brotherhood (*liberté, égalité et fraternité*). In spite of the restoration of the monarchical or imperial forms of government in 1815, 1830 and 1852, and, leaving aside the authoritarian Vichy government during the Second World War, the republic became firmly embedded in French political consciousness as the natural revolutionary form of government.

The French Revolutionary settlement also satisfied the mass of the peasantry. It achieved this notably by the sale of lands confiscated from the Church and nobility, which created a class of prosperous small landowners indebted to the Revolution. Loyalty was further assured by the abolition of feudal labour obligations to the aristocracy. The Revolution thus transformed the peasantry into one of the mainstays of support against any return to the pre-Revolutionary social order, even after the monarchy had been restored in 1815. The conservatism and loyalty of the peasantry underpinned the stability of the Republic as a form of government after 1870.

The Revolution crushed the political and economic power of the old landed aristocracy. More than anything else, this facilitated the creation of a more uniform centralised state, begun under the Revolution but greatly developed under Napoleon. The key foundations of modern Republican France might be traced to a synthesis of the parliamentary regime (*régime d'assemblée*), the revolutionary tradition and the authoritarian centralising institutions created and consolidated by Napoleon (Rosanvallon 1990; Alexander 1999).

The Revolutionary–Napoleonic legacy continues to shape many of the institutions of contemporary France. These include (or included until recently):

- Administrative uniformity throughout France, notably by the division of the country into departments, cantons and communes, each with the same legal responsibilities. Administrative acts are judged by a system of administrative courts, separate from the legal system.
- Central control over territorial administration and local government. The prefect was created as the representative of the central government in each department; the mayor was first and foremost an official of central government.

- A high measure of state interventionism in social mores by means of the civil code, a detailed regulation of family and property relations, and codes of moral conduct.
- A professional bureaucracy, conceived of as an elite to serve the state, to create order and enforce uniformity. The *école polytechnique* was created in 1804 to train an elite dedicated to state service.

The emergence of a strong central state during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods was accompanied by a gradual but ruthless suppression of all linguistic and regional identities; the progress of the idea of nation thus became largely synonymous with that of the state itself. It is in this sense that modern France might be considered a state-led creation.

## 1.4

## The French Revolution: a divisive heritage

The legacy of the French Revolution itself was highly divisive. This divisive heritage can be illustrated in relation to three spheres: the conflict between the Church and anticlerical movements; the legacy of political violence and the Revolutionary tradition, and the lack of consensus over the form of government.

## The Catholic Church, anticlericalism and the Republican state

The most divisive legacy bequeathed by the French Revolution related to the bitter dispute between the Catholic Church, the anticlerical-Republican movement and the French state. The close association of the Catholic Church with the *ancien régime* made it into an obvious target for the Revolution. The Church condemned the Revolution of 1789 as godless; in turn, the Revolution led a fierce attack on the privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church under the monarchy, notably by confiscating church lands and redistributing them to the peasantry. Church and state reached a new compromise under Napoleon's concordat of 1801, but they remained ideological rivals. The concordat recognised Catholicism as the religion of 'the great majority of French people', although Protestantism and Judaism were also tolerated religions. When the monarchy was restored in 1815, the Church recovered much of its former political influence, but by then it was probably too late. To be Republican became synonymous with an anticlerical stance; to be a practising Catholic automatically signified opposition to the notion of restoring a godless, secular republic. The Church also became associated with defence of a hierarchical conservative, pre-Revolutionary social order (Nicolet 1982).

Once the Republic had been restored in 1870, the ideological battle between church and state began in earnest. This took two forms. First, there was an attack by the Republicans on the continuing existence of powerful schools run by the Catholic Church; these schools were suspected by Republicans of perverting the

nation's schoolchildren with the anti-Republican ethos of Catholicism. Second, the period from 1870 onwards was characterised by an uneven but fierce ideological battle between the Catholic Church and the Republic, culminating in the separation of church and state in 1905 and the renewed de-facto opposition of the Church to the Republic until 1944 (Ravitch 1990).

One of the principal battlegrounds between church and state was in the sphere of education. The state's response to perceived clerical influence was to create its own echelon of Republican primary schools. In the Ferry laws of 1881–2, the Republican state created a secular rival to the powerful church schools, which aimed to reproduce Republican values. The conflict between church and state schools has remained imbued in French consciousness ever since. The ideological conflict between church and state (fanned by the Dreyfus Affair of 1899–1902) culminated in 1905, when the Republic decreed the separation of church and state, which had been tied since Napoleon's concordat of 1801. Catholicism was no longer recognised as the official state religion; priests were removed from the state payroll, and many church lands were again confiscated. Henceforth, the Republic was to be a secular one.

Until the First World War, religion was more important than social class in explaining political divisions within France. A party such as the Radical Party, which was fiercely anticlerical, was automatically placed on the left of the political spectrum, in spite of its basic social and economic conservatism. And Catholics were automatically considered to be on the right, even when they declared themselves to be socially progressive. This situation only gradually changed with the rise of the Socialist and Communist parties in the 1930s and the breakthrough of the politics of class and nationalism. Catholics became fully reconciled with the Republic as a result of their participation in the wartime resistance, despite the ambiguous role performed by the Church during the Vichy regime. The formation of a progressive Christian-democratic party in 1944 – the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP) – symbolised the final rallying of the Catholics to the Republic. While this party started out as a left-of-centre party imbued with reformist notions of social Catholicism, it became transformed into a recognisably conservative party under the pressure of its conservative, Catholic electorate. As the church school example illustrated, vestiges of the clerical–anticlerical conflict remain today and a practising Catholic is more likely to support a right-wing party than declared atheist.

### The revolutionary tradition

The second sphere in which the Revolution left a distinctive legacy was in the creation of an ill-defined revolutionary tradition, perhaps better expressed as a revolutionary myth, which spurned its own antibody in the form of a powerful counter-revolutionary movement. The upheavals of 1789–99 were not unique: there were further revolutionary outbreaks on a smaller scale in 1830, 1848 and 1871, as well as various abortive attempts. There developed a disposition towards the use of violence and street protest to achieve political ends

relatively small groups of conspirators might succeed in toppling a regime, as occurred in the uprising of 1830. As the levers of power were so centralised in Paris, the capital became the theatre for countless confrontations, which then extended to the provinces. In the nineteenth century, French people turned against each other with great ferocity. To take one example, the Paris Commune of 1871 was crushed with 20,000 deaths. The revolutionary tradition was itself highly ambiguous. It could mean either the tradition bequeathed by the French Revolution (which included a moderate Girondin phase as well as the more violent and messianic Jacobin phase), or else a commitment to using revolutionary means to seize power, a more specific connotation that would exclude most moderate Republicans. One powerful strand in the French revolutionary tradition became legitimised that was extremist, authoritarian and potentially violent rather than committed to compromise. And yet the prevailing Republican strand hardly fitted this description. By the early twentieth century, Republicanism became synonymous with preservation of the existing social order (Anderson 1970). The aspirations of moderate Republicans were largely satisfied with the consolidation of the Third Republic after 1875; these men became transformed into conservative supporters of the existing political, social and economic order. With the consolidation of the Third Republic, the mantle of revolutionary challenge to the status quo shifted from Republicans to anarcho-sindicalists, to Marxist Socialists and (after 1920) to Communists (Ridley 1970; Tiersky 1972; Kriegel 1985). For several generations, the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) successfully articulated the aspirations of alienated industrial workers and maintained a revolutionary tradition in French politics.

The existence of a revolutionary tradition on the political left was matched on the right by the preservation of a powerful anti-democratic strand in French politics, embodied by monarchist or Bonapartist political forces throughout the nineteenth century. Such forces held the ascendancy for most of the period from 1815 to 1870, especially from 1815 to 1830, and from 1852 to 1870 (Rémond 1982). They occupied a marginal place for most of the Third Republic but were recognisable as part of the conservative anti-Dreyfus coalition at the turn of the century. During the twentieth century, the counter-revolutionary current found expression in the anti-parliamentary leagues of the inter-war years and later in the visceral hostility to Republicanism by the wartime Vichy regime (Paxton 1972; Jackson 2000).

### The form of government

The correct form of government was closely linked to the church–state dispute and the Republican–anti-Republican division. Throughout the 150 years following 1789, there was a basic lack of consensus in relation to the organisation of the political system, as there was, indeed, in relation to the organisation of society as a whole. Since 1789, France has experienced three periods of monarchy, five republics, two spells of imperial rule and the reactionary wartime Vichy state (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Post-Revolutionary political regimes.

Years	Period	Regime type
1789–1815	Revolutionary–Napoleonic period	Monarchy/Republic/Empire
1815–30	Restored Bourbons	Monarchy
1830–48	July Monarchy	Monarchy
1848–52	Second Republic	Republic
1852–70	Second Empire	Empire
1870–1940	Third Republic	Republic
1940–4	Vichy	Dictatorship
1944–58	Fourth Republic	Republic
1958–	Fifth Republic	Republic

Excepting the brief wartime Vichy regime, the Republican form of government finally prevailed after periods of monarchical and imperial rule. There remained a basic lack of consensus in relation to the political regime throughout most of the Third and Fourth Republics, however, that damaged the legitimacy of both regimes.

## 1.5

## The Third Republic, 1870–1940

The Third Republic, which lasted for seventy years, was France's longest lasting post-revolutionary regime. A number of prominent features came to be associated with the operation of the political system, traits that reflected the divided state of French society throughout this period. In the seventy years of the Third Republic, France was a highly fragmented society, a society in which there was no natural majority for any particular course of action. The major sources of cleavage revolved around tensions between Paris and the provinces; the enduring influence of regional and local identities; the conflict between church and state; Republicanism, and challenges to the Republic; and the politics of social class and industrialisation.

As remarked above, there was a lack of consensus in relation to the political system, which reflected the divided ideological and social make-up of French society. The most powerful source of division was that which pitted devout Catholics, who detested what they considered as the godless republic, against anticlerical Republicans, determined to defend the Republican form of government against threats from monarchists and anti-Republican clergy. This divergence between Republican anticlericals and Catholic anti-Republicans dominated the first thirty years of the Third Republic, until the Republicans definitively established control during the Dreyfus Affair at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the inter-war period, the Republic again came under powerful attack from left and right. On the left, the PCF was created in 1920 to support the Russian Revolution and foster revolution in France. The 1930s witnessed, on the right, the challenge of the ultra-right-wing leagues, which aimed to replace the democratic republic with a more authoritarian regime. The anti-democratic undercurrent

French politics triumphed under duress in July 1940, when the Third Republic voted full powers to Marshal Philippe Pétain, who negotiated an armistice with Hitler after Germany's invasion of France. It provided a brief parenthesis before a return to the established Republican form of government at the Liberation.

The Third Republic appeared on the surface as a fragile, parliamentary-dominated system. The principal characteristics of the Third Republic's political system bore scant reference to the constitutional provisions theoretically governing its operation. The constitution of the Third Republic was finally adopted in 1875 as a compromise between monarchists and Republicans. Under pressure from the monarchist majority elected in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian war, the 1875 constitution provided for a strong president, portrayed by the monarchists (who could not agree among themselves on who should be king) as a monarchical type of strong leader. The putative strong presidency was stillborn as a result of the MacMahon crisis of 1876–7. President MacMahon's dissolution of the chamber of deputies in 1876 did not succeed in its objective of producing a subservient assembly. Rather, a more firmly Republican majority was elected in the 1877 election, one determined to uphold the rights of parliament. This precedent enshrined parliamentary omnipotence and disqualified presidential use of the weapon of dissolution (Thomson 1969; Hanley 2002). By 1879, the Republican forces had clearly established their ascendancy at all levels of government, with the result that the constitution of 1875 was never really applied as it had been intended.

Instead of being dominated by strong leaders, the Third Republic evolved into a political system dominated by a strong parliament, which ensured that – for the most part – governments remained weak and unstable. Throughout the seventy-year history of the Republic, there were 110 different cabinets. Governmental instability was a sign that deputies were performing their duty as collective guarantors of the national interest and as defenders of civil society against the state. The Republican tradition was thus interpreted to suit the reality of France as a divided, localist society with no natural majority for any particular course of action. On the rare occasions when the nation was divided into mutually hostile camps – 1876–7, 1902–6, 1936–7 – governments could take firm decisions and rely on de-facto parliamentary coalitions, but such occasions were short-lived. In the absence of cohesive political parties, deputies defended the interests of their constituents upon whom their political survival depended.

The manner in which parliament itself was organised during the Third Republic reinforced the tendency for the legislature to act as a block on governmental action. The lower house, the chamber of deputies, was composed of around 500 deputies, who, for most of the period, each represented a single-member constituency. The upper house, the Senate, was comprised of 300 senators, indirectly elected by electoral colleges within the departments, composed predominantly of local councillors. It was created to act as a conservative check on the chamber. The senate was overwhelmingly biased towards small-town and rural France, at the expense of the more dynamic, urban areas. With its right to veto Bills passed by the lower house, the Senate could be counted upon to frustrate any efforts to enact social reforms, levy income tax or generally to disturb the interests of small-town and rural France (Anderson 1977, Tombs 1996). One such example

occurred in 1912 when the Radicals finally pushed income tax through the chamber, only to be vetoed by the Senate.

During the Third and Fourth Republics, a number of features combined to create apparently omnipotent parliaments and to make governments unstable. The first of these was a belief, ultimately derived from the French Revolution, in the supremacy of the elected assembly as against the executive. A second feature was a fear of strong leaders, predicated upon the tendency of 'great men' to subvert the institutions of the Republic. During the Third and Fourth Republics, the fear of strong leaders usually meant that mediocre politicians were selected as premiers, by zealous parliamentarians determined to retain their own prerogatives. In periods of crisis, the Republican state had turned to 'great men', such as Georges Clemenceau during the First World War. But it rid itself of their services once normal circumstances had returned. The institutional consequence of this was to strengthen the negative capacity of parliament to unmake governments. Third, the fragmented nature of political representation, and the weakness of French political parties also contributed to the illusion of parliamentary omnipotence.

For most of the Third Republic, political parties were weak and poorly organised. The existence of universal male suffrage throughout the Third Republic meant that elections were fiercely and usually fairly contested. Yet the weakness of party structures reduced the election process to a myriad of local contests. As in the US Congress, what passed for parties were clusters of individual deputies representing conflicting local interests, who refused to be bound to tight parliamentary discipline. The fundamental relationship was that maintained between a deputy and his local constituents rather than with party. This was especially true of the parties of the centre and right, although the parties of the left were more disciplined. Party labels were often virtually meaningless: in line with the verbal leftism of French political culture, conservative candidates often attached to themselves revolutionary-sounding titles, which they discarded as soon as they had been elected. Furthermore, the pattern of electoral alliances varied greatly in different parts of the country; and there was no guarantee of electoral alliances being respected at a national level. The Radical Party during the early twentieth century symbolised the ambiguity of party. In the pro-clerical west of France, where the Church was strong, the Radicals were primarily an anticlerical party and attracted support from Socialist voters against conservatives. In the south-west, by contrast, where the Socialists predominated, Radical candidates were supported by conservative opinion as the only safeguard against the election of Socialist candidates. Radical deputies owed their election to different electoral clienteles, they could not long be bound by party discipline at a national level. And the Radicals possessed more cohesion than most other parliamentary groupings of the centre and right.

The lack of a natural majority, the weakness of parties, the geographical diversity of France and the weight of localism meant that it was unusual – outside of periods of war and national crisis – for governments to be able to rely upon the disciplined support of a majority of parliamentarians. Instead, deputies and senators jealously preserved what they deemed to be their rights and ensured

that the executive was kept in a position of subservience. The norm was that general elections would virtually never produce clear-cut majorities, upon which governments could be formed. Governments tended to be formed as temporary coalitions to solve one or two outstanding problems, but they usually fell apart once these problems were solved.

There were several reasons explaining the decline of the Third Republic in the inter-war period. First, certain social groups felt excluded altogether from the political system: this was notably the case for the new urban working class that developed with the industrialisation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Third Republic steadfastly avoided addressing the concerns of industrial workers, as it avoided those of urban society in general. Second, the challenges faced by and the demands placed upon the political system altered markedly after the First World War. During the period prior to 1914, the functions of government were relatively limited. In these circumstances, the shortcomings of the political system were tolerable, since national politics simply did not enter into most people's lives. French society – overwhelmingly rural – was largely self-sufficient and inward-looking. But the political system became progressively less tolerable in the inter-war period, when international crises such as the depression, or the rise of fascism demanded governments which could take far-sighted decisions (Winock 1995, 2003).

The rise of extreme internal and external challenges to the regime during the 1920s and 1930s further weakened the Republic, leaving it vulnerable to Hitler's aggressive designs. The polarisation occasioned by the victory of the left-wing Popular Front coalition in the 1936 election fuelled a mood of defeatism and revenge on the political right, symbolised by the slogan 'Rather Hitler than Blum' (Larkin 1988; Vinen 1996). The breakdown of internal cohesion coincided with a period of aggressive expansionism on behalf of European fascism. The Third Republic finally collapsed in July 1940, when the parliament (elected to support the Popular Front in 1936) voted full powers to Marshal Pétain, who suspended the constitution and signed an armistice with Nazi Germany.

The Third Republic has been much maligned, and yet it is not difficult to construct a defence of its political system. The system survived longer than any other since the Revolution, eventually succumbing to an external invasion. The impact of governmental crises in Paris were minimal on French society. The effects of political instability were often exaggerated. The powerful Napoleonic administration provided much continuity of policy, notwithstanding biannual changes of government. Moreover, individual ministers occupied their posts for long periods in spite of governmental instability: to take one example, between 1906 and 1932, Aristide Briand was prime minister on eleven occasions and foreign minister in seventeen different governments.

Ultimately, the static political regime of the Third Republic reflected the static nature of French society. France remained a largely rural inward-looking society, at least until the 1920s, within which social and geographical mobility was rare. Only when there was a clear dysfunctioning in the 1930s between an immobile political system, a worldwide economic crisis and a

chaotic international situation did the regime appear ill adapted to assume its responsibilities.

## 1.6 Vichy and the French Resistance, 1940–4

The Vichy regime lasted from 1940 to 1944. The formal division of the French territory into two zones in 1940 – an occupied sector in the north, a free zone in the south – created the illusion of independence for the Vichy government. The German occupation of the previously free Vichy zone in November 1942 ended the illusion of independence.

The Vichy regime was, in reality, a personal dictatorship under Marshal Pétain, which ruled thanks to the tolerance of the Nazis. The initial belief that Pétain had safeguarded French national sovereignty and secured the best possible deal for France conferred an aura of early legitimacy on the marshal. The shortcomings of the Third Republic were blamed by many for the occupation of France; the clamour for more authoritarian government was a logical consequence of this. The ideological tenor of the Vichy regime was counter-revolutionary: in the discourse of Pétain's National Revolution, 'work, family and nation' replaced 'freedom, equality and brotherhood' as the leitmotifs of the regime. France reverted to being an authoritarian political regime that idealised a hierarchical, corporatist society of the type the marshal believed to have existed before the French Revolution. The experience of the Vichy regime has been a subject of controversy in France ever since 1940, demonstrated by the continuing debate over the nature and extent of wartime collaboration, by the spate of trials of war criminals such as Klaus Barbie and Paul Touvier and by the controversy over former President Mitterrand's role as a minor civil servant of the Vichy regime (Péan 1994). The place of anti-Semitism within the Vichy regime in particular has been the subject of dispute (Jackson 2001). Though it is convenient to excuse the anti-Semitic acts of the regime by the anxiety to please the Nazis, the French police were responsible for rounding up Jews and handing them over to the Germans (notably with the Rafle d'Hel Viv in November 1942). Moreover, there were strong justifications for anti-Semitism within the ideology of the National Revolution itself (especially the emphasis placed on uncompromising Catholicism).

Resistance to the Vichy regime and to German occupation took two forms: internal and external. The external Resistance crystallised itself under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, a young general in the French army who fled France upon the signing of the Armistice. In June 1940, de Gaulle called upon Frenchmen everywhere to join his Free French resistance army, based in London. De Gaulle came unquestioningly to lead the French Resistance. Initially contested, his status as the key resistance chief was eventually recognised by the Allies, and ultimately by the main internal resistance movements. The internal resistance consisted of various groups, divided to some extent along ideological lines but united in its opposition to Vichy and to Nazi occupation. The main forces active in the internal resistance were Communists, Socialists and Christians. The internal

resistance movement was dominated by the Communists, who were portrayed by de Gaulle as fighting an ideology (Nazism) rather than a country (Germany).

The evidence suggested that few Frenchmen were involved in acts of resistance and that the imperatives of physical survival ensured a largely subjugated population until the liberation in 1944. The unification of the resistance forces under de Gaulle's control after the liberation of Paris most probably helped avoid any possibility of civil war (the Communists laid down their arms, in spite of their controlling large areas of France) and created a powerful coalition of forces anxious to rebuild and unify France. In August 1944, de Gaulle became the premier of a provisional government composed of the main resistance forces: the Communists, the Socialists, the Christian democrats and de Gaulle himself. A new progressive dawn beckoned.

## 1.7 The Fourth Republic, 1944–58

The liberation of France in August 1944 swept away the Vichy regime and inaugurated a new period of French history in a spirit of near-universal optimism. From highly auspicious beginnings, however, the Fourth Republic was rapidly faced by a crisis of legitimacy in its mission. The period 1944–6 revealed a lack of constitutional consensus that seriously weakened the political legitimacy of the new Fourth Republic (Fauvet 1963; Williams 1964; Rioux 1987; Elgey 1993; Courtier 1994). There was agreement among politicians that the form of government should be Republican. No one – not even the most pious Catholics – seriously contested this, as the anti-democratic, anti-Republican forces had been discredited by the Vichy regime. In addition, the pre-war parties of the centre and right were widely distrusted either for collaborating with Vichy or failing to resist it (which, in immediate post-war eyes, amounted to the same thing). The strength of the left was revealed in the first three elections of the post-war period (October 1945, June 1946, November 1946), which witnessed major gains for the two left-wing parties – the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) and the PCF – and a breakthrough of the new Christian-democratic party, the MRP (Gildea 1996).

In a first constitutional referendum in October 1945, the overwhelming majority of the French population invested the provisional government with responsibility for drawing up a new constitution rather than reverting to the 1875 charter. Although it was clear that people did not want a return to the Third Republic, it was much less obvious what type of regime was to replace it. There were, essentially, three different points of view within the provisional government:

1. De Gaulle believed in a rationalised democratic system, similar to the eventual Fifth Republic: *grosso modo*, he advocated a strong president who would stand above the petty quarrels of party politicians and incarnate the unity of the French nation. The parties of the left (SFIO, PCF and MRP) suspected de Gaulle of preparing a system that might lead to dictatorship. Unable to agree with his

partners, and vigorously opposed to any return to a parliamentary-dominated regime, de Gaulle resigned as premier in January 1946. The loss of the prestige of the resistance hero was a severe blow to the young Republic.

2. The two main parties of the left – the SFIO and the PCF – also called for strong disciplined governments, but they argued that these would have to base their authority on a single, powerful parliamentary assembly. The left expressed its preference for the Jacobin tradition of a single directing assembly, accepting few checks and balances to moderate the expression of the general will.
3. The Christian-democratic MRP rejected de Gaulle's advocacy of strong personal leadership, but it was wary concerning the left as well. The MRP opted for a parliamentary system with checks and balances to prevent arbitrary executive rule.

Once de Gaulle had resigned, the PCF and SFIO (but not the MRP) proposed their version of the constitution for ratification in a referendum held in April 1946. In their draft constitution, the PCF and SFIO proposed to abolish the second chamber – the Senate – and to create a monocameral parliamentary system. The left was opposed to the continued existence of the Senate, which, representing the interests of rural and small-town France, had consistently frustrated social reform during the Third Republic. The left's proposed constitution was rejected in the April 1946 constitutional referendum. Quite apart from the predictable opposition of de Gaulle, this projected constitution was also contested by all other significant parties, including the MRP. A majority of French people feared that a single-chamber parliamentary system would be equivalent to handing unrestrained power to the left-wing parties.

The constitution of the Fourth Republic was narrowly adopted in a third constitutional referendum in October 1946, with 9.5 million votes for, 8.5 million against, and 9 million abstentions (Williams 1964). The constitution-makers hoped that the 1946 constitution would encourage the development of strong cabinets, based on the support of a few large parties, and would thereby end the chronic division which had characterised the previous French Republic. It aimed to emulate the British system of strong governments drawing their support from disciplined majorities in the lower chamber. But in fact the Fourth Republican constitution established a parliamentary regime not fundamentally dissimilar from that of the Third. The idea that stable progressive governments would replace the transient coalitions of the Third Republic had little solid constitutional foundation: it depended for its reality upon the continuing political cooperation of the main resistance parties. This was called into question in 1947.

The principal features of the political regime created by the 1946 constitution were those of a parliamentary democracy. The supremacy of parliament was reaffirmed in the October 1946 constitution in a more overt manner than in the constitution of 1875: in so doing it reasserted traditions of the absolute sovereignty of parliament which dated back to the French Revolution. The powers of the Senate, renamed the Council of the Republic, were limited. It lost the power of veto over bills passed by the lower chamber, and its rights were limited to those of delay and consultation, somewhat like the British House of Lords. The president of the Republic remained largely a symbolic figurehead, as in the Third

Republic. The subordination of the president was to be ensured by an indirect method of election by the two houses of parliament. The rights of the executive were strengthened in certain respects, notably through the complicated provisions allowing the prime minister to call for a dissolution of the chamber of deputies, which Edgar Faure used to good effect in 1955 (the first time a dissolution had occurred since 1876).

The Fourth Republic has often been judged a failure. It lasted a mere twelve years, before it collapsed in the face of a military insurrection in Algeria.

The immediate legacy of the French Resistance had been to strengthen the parties of the left (Socialists and Communists) and to reconcile the Catholic community to Republican values. The three great parties of the Resistance (the PCF, the SFIO and the MRP) had believed that if they remained united, France would have a stable political system based on a progressive left-wing majority. This presupposition was unfounded. In May 1947, the tripartite governing coalition collapsed when the Socialist minister of the interior, Jules Moch, expelled the Communists from government. The PCF's departure was dictated by a combination of internal and external pressures. The role of the US government, which made it clear that the removal of Communists from government was an essential precondition for France receiving massive financial aid under the Marshall Plan, was primordial (Johnson 1981). In addition, the Cold War began in earnest in 1947, as Stalin began to consolidate his grip on eastern Europe and as revelations of the nature of Stalinism began to filter through to the western democracies. The PCF reacted to its exclusion by declaring its fidelity to Moscow and reinforcing its control over a marginalised working-class counter-culture. From 1947, almost until the collapse of the Fourth Republic in 1958, the PCF declared its total hostility to the regime.

The Fourth Republic also suffered after 1947 from the development of powerful new enemies on the right. The divisions of the left, the onset of the Cold War in 1947 and the electorate's disillusion with the left-wing parties allowed the French right to recover a measure of influence. In 1947, the right found a new champion in General de Gaulle, who founded the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF) as a movement dedicated to replacing the Fourth Republic with a more presidential-style regime. From 1947 to 1951, the RPF rivalled the PCF as France's best-organised and most popular party. From 1947 onwards, powerful enemies to its left (PCF) and its right (RPF) opposed the Fourth Republic. This forced the so-called centre parties (Socialists, Radicals, Christian democrats and moderate conservatives) into a series of defensive 'third force' alliances from 1947 to 1951 whose only rationale was to safeguard the Republic.

After the breakdown of tripartism, political instability returned after 1947, of a type that recalled that of the old Third Republic. Despite the fact that the centre parties combined to defend the Republic against its enemies, no party could resist manoeuvring to increase its influence in government. This led to the return of a pattern of governmental instability: from 1947 to 1958, governments lasted an average of some six months, just as they had done in the Third Republic. In the eyes of the French electorate, the Fourth Republic, which had never benefited from a broad consensus in its favour, became discredited by the selfish games played by its politicians. An example of the perceived cynicism of politicians

came in 1951, when, faced with the prospect of a negative, anti-regime majority (PCF, RPF), the centre parties changed the electoral system in a way that deliberately discriminated against their rivals (Cole and Campbell 1989). As in the Third Republic, parliamentary supremacy came to be directly equated with weak executive government. Parliamentarians displayed a preference for rather uncharismatic, consensual personalities as premier, since strong leaders might attempt to limit the rights of parliament. When clearly exceptional leaders did emerge, with widescale support in the country – the best example being the Radical Pierre Mendès-France in 1954–5 – a majority of deputies crystallised in order to bring them down.

The political system appeared out of step with what was happening in the country as a whole, which, by the early 1950s, was experiencing an unprecedented industrial take-off and social modernisation. The result of this governmental instability was that central government gradually lost the authority necessary to take tough decisions in a period of rapid international change. For the post-war period was one of heightened international crisis, signalled by the movement towards the break-up of the French empire with the outbreak of the Indochinese rebellion in 1946, and the onset of the Cold War in 1947. France was gradually forced to accept that it was no longer a first-rank international player; that it could no longer sustain a far-flung empire and that its interest lay in cooperating with others in Europe and the Atlantic Alliance. Due to the weakness of its political system, foreign-policy crises had a devastating impact upon the domestic political situation within the Fourth Republic. There was a direct and obvious relationship between permanent government instability within France and the perception of weakness in the eyes of foreign governments. Furthermore, the inability of the state to control the activities of its agents in the armed forces and the colonial administrations proved a tangible sign of its weakness, which, in a vicious circle, led to a further diminution of confidence in the capacity of the state to fulfil its functions.

The problem of decolonisation prevailed above all others (Keiger 2001) The retention of its extensive empire had been one concession obtained by Marshal Pétain in the armistice agreement with Hitler. France's post-war colonial headache began almost immediately after the end of the war, the most important conflicts being in Indochina, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. The first of these was in Indochina, where, from 1946 to 1954 a bitter war was fought between the French army and the Vietnamese nationalists, with the French finally admitting defeat in 1954. The pride of the French army was severely wounded. The decision taken by the Mendès-France government to withdraw from Tunisia and Morocco in 1954 and 1955 added insult to injury, regarded by many army officers as another humiliation by the despised Republic (Lacouture 1981; McMillan 1985).

The French army insisted that France must not cede in Algeria, regarded as a normal part of France even by most left-wing opinion. It had been a French colony since 1830 and was peopled by some 1 million native French settlers, who were determined to resist demands for independence from predominantly Muslim Algerians. A nexus of political, cultural, economic and religious influences combined to make Algeria into by far the most important of the colonial disputes faced by the Fourth Republic. Civil war and nationalist revolt raged in

Algeria from November 1954 onwards. Successive attempts by French governments to promote greater autonomy without ceding to independence proved fruitless. Attempts to introduce even moderate reform (such as that of Gaston Defferre) were fiercely resisted by the colonial settlers in Algeria, secretly abetted by the armed forces. The civilian government in Paris became progressively less able to control the activities of the military, of the colonial administration or of the native French settlers, with the effect that by early 1958 the authority of the Paris government had almost completely vanished. The army and the colonial administration in Algeria openly defied orders made by government departments in Paris: the problem of decolonisation was thus intricately linked with that of the lack of political authority of the government in Paris. The *coup de grâce* for the Fourth Republic came in May 1958, when the French army sided with rioting French settlers in Algiers (the capital of Algeria) who organised themselves into a committee of public safety and declared their autonomy from the Fourth Republic. The military authorities made it clear that their price for guaranteeing not to invade mainland France was a return of the wartime hero General de Gaulle to power. To all extents and purposes, the Fourth Republic was dead.

The achievements of the Fourth Republic were for long overlooked. They need to be reappraised and set against the regime's generally negative image. During the first fifteen years of the post-war period, France moved away from being a stalemate society and entered a period of rapid socio-economic and demographic change, more rapid, indeed, than that experienced in any other west European nation (Fourastié 1980). The French state succeeded in managing change in spite of (or perhaps because of) the Republic's weak political institutions. Political weakness left the administration free to fill the vacuum left by the feuding party elites. The introduction of elaborate planning mechanisms (the five-year plans) and the creation of the General Commissariat for Planning both testified to a powerful impetus in favour of economic and social modernisation on behalf of the state (Hall 1986).

There was a rapid economic upturn: economic growth soon reached an average 6 per cent per annum after 1950, helped by the effects of Marshall aid, and, it has been argued, by active state interventionism in economic management in the form of a series of five-year plans. The seeds for the French economic miracle were sown in the Fourth Republic. Economic development had a radical impact on the nature of French society. There was a vast movement of population away from the land into the new urban areas. For the first time, France became a predominantly urban country, with a modern economy. The country also experienced a demographic explosion in the form of a post-war baby-boom. In 1939, France's population was barely 40 million; by the end of the 1950s, it had reached 50 million. On balance, this economic and social modernisation made the old cleavages based on religion and class less acute. The accelerated pace of secularisation in the post-war period, and the formation of the Christian-democratic MRP also lessened the traditional importance of the clerical-anticlerical cleavage.

The Fourth Republic could point to its own political achievements. The most notable of these lay in the sphere of European policy. The main initiatives culminating in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 were of French, or Franco-German



inspiration: the European Coal and Steel Community of 1951, the abortive European Army of 1954, the Treaty of Rome of 1957 (Dedman 1996). The complexity of French European policy was revealed by the proposed European Defence Community (the 'European Army'), first proposed by premier René Plevin in 1951, as a means of providing a European safeguard over German rearmament. Although a French initiative, the European Defence Community treaty was finally defeated by the French National Assembly in 1954. A bitter legacy of anti-Germanism continued to manifest itself across the political spectrum; this resurfaced to sink the European Defence Community treaty in 1954 (Rideau 1975).

Despite this powerful anti-German sentiment, the principal driving force of post-war closer European integration was that of Franco-German reconciliation, symbolised by far-sighted French and German statesmen such as Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet and Konrad Adenauer (Cole 2001). The European Economic Community (EEC) was created in 1957 on the basis of a new Franco-German partnership, symbolising not only reconciliation between the two nations but also cold-headed assessments of national interest on either side. From a French perspective, the EEC itself was envisaged as a corset to prevent Germany from dominating the continent. The choice of European cooperation, at the same time realistic and idealistic, was made by visionary statesmen during the Fourth Republic.

As far as the effectiveness of the political system per se was concerned, however, the conclusion must be a globally negative one. Parliamentary domination led to a return to the pattern of unstable governments, just as in the Third Republic. The most pressing issues of the 1950s – with the exception of Europe – found no real response from French governments, because there was a power vacuum. Where progress was made in post-war France, it came about largely as a result of the professionalism of its bureaucracy rather than of its politicians. The weakness of the political system damaged France's international reputation during this period. For these various reasons, the restoration of effective government was a key priority for the constitution-makers of 1958, a theme discussed in Chapter 2.

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