

The 'Commonwealth Party' of France

Modern France began to take shape after the immense devastation of the Hundred Years' War with England (1339-1453). This war was initiated by King Edward III of England as a proxy of the Venetian Doge Bartolomeo Gradenigo; the English victories at Crécy, Maupertuis, and Azincourt were in effect Venetian victories over France. France became the first modern true nation-state of Europe in the years following the 1440 Council of Florence.

King Louis XI (reigned 1461-83) became the first republican monarch of France, educated by an ally of the great Christian humanist Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa. He ended the Hundred Years' War, and united the kingdom around around the slogan "one law, one weight, one currency." His creation of one permanent army was the beginning of the end of the private armies of the feudal nobility.

In the years following the reign of Louis XI, the League of Cambrai almost vanquished Venice, and the history of Europe since that time has been a drive by Venetian-centered, and later British-centered efforts, to crush the French nation-state because of what it represented: the living example of the republican or commonwealth

form of government, which based itself on uplifting the population by fostering their uniquely human, creative qualities, and ennobling the human soul by bringing science, technology, cathedral-building, and art into the daily lives of the people, thus enabling them to contribute to the advancement of the nation.

The great figures who shaped France include King Henri IV (reigned 1589-1610), who established religious peace with his 1598 Edict of Nantes, in order to pursue the task of building France's national economy and infrastructure. One of the founders of the school of national economy was Jean Bodin (1539-96), whose political, economic, and religious manifesto could be summed up by his motto: "There is no wealth but man."

The heirs of Louis XI and Bodin include the great Cardinal Richelieu and the Oratorian school founded in 1610, in the tradition of the Brotherhood of the Common Life. Bodin's most important successor was Louis XIV's General Comptroller of Finances Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who founded the French Academy of Sciences in collaboration with Gottfried Leibniz, and promoted an era of unprecedented economic development in France. These were the men who laid the foundations for the Ecole Polytechnique in the eighteenth century, and its successors, which included the West Point Academy in America.

The lives of these men were passionately studied by Gabriel Hanotaux as a young man. He read and studied Jean Bodin. He read Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which was written about Louis XI. He read Plato and Erasmus. He

The Third Republic of France was the daughter of this crushing defeat of France and its emperor. All eyes turned toward the once-denounced Thiers, who was voted chief executive of the new republic. In the peace negotiations that followed, Thiers would try to impress his interlocutor, Chancellor Bismarck, with the historic chance the two neighboring countries had to cement a peace arrangement on the basis of mutual self-interest and collaboration.

This is how Hanotaux described it, in his *History of Contemporary France*, alluding to the difficult factional situation in which Bismarck found himself:

"As for Germany, the question was whether she was going to fulfill completely the lofty destiny which was assured to her by the situation which she had just conquered in the center of Europe. She had just effaced by an unparalleled effort the last trace of the Thirty Years' War; she had recovered the material greatness, the fullness of life, the exuberant vigor which had made her famous in the prosperous years of the Middle Ages. . . .

"With what wisdom . . . was the new Germany going to make use of this unexpected good fortune? Not to perpetuate

the state of wars, to inaugurate a harmonious and balanced life for Europe, to assert himself by reason rather than might, here was an enterprise worthy of a conqueror crowned by fortune. A St. Louis would have attempted it. A Richelieu would have faced it. Bismarck himself had given, at Nikolsburg,² some idea of such an empire over oneself, and of a moderation so full of strength.

"The period of hostilities was at an end. The exact problem which was propounded was the following: What would be the nature of the new relations between the two peoples?

2. The 1866 Armistice of Nikolsburg concluded the Seven Weeks' War in which Prussia and Italy defeated Austria and most of the smaller German states. In the Prusso-Austrian peace which followed, Bismarck avoided annexations of Austrian territory and thus adroitly avoided a significant revenge complex on the part of Vienna. If Bismarck had been able to show a similar self-control with France in 1871, and had refrained from the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, the pretext for conflict between France and Germany during these years could have been vastly reduced. Bismarck's decision to humiliate France by detaching Alsace-Lorraine stacked the deck against future Franco-German cooperation and vastly facilitated the task of British "divide and conquer" geopolitics.



King Louis XI, founder of the first modern nation-state, the French commonwealth.

wanted to know everything about Cardinal Richelieu and about Louis XIV's reign. He threw himself into these studies with such intensity, that he would later write, "I lived in the seventeenth century before I lived in my times."—Dana Scanlon

Peace or a succession of wars? It was necessary to choose, to take a line. The most commonplace solution, the one which demanded the least intellectual exertion and the least control over self and facts, would be the system of peace under arms.

"This last solution was that of the [German] Headquarters Staff. It had prevailed at Versailles. But a last recourse to the diplomatists was still open at Brussels.³ Unhappily, the deadly germ was already laid. . . .

"The crowning error of German diplomacy and Prince Bismarck under the circumstances arose, perhaps, from the fact that their victory took them by surprise to such a degree, that they were never willing to believe it completely assured and accomplished. Successful by means of war, they no longer had confidence in anything but war. It became their sole instrument. They prepared it without intermission. Their shortsightedness consists in not having foreseen the durability of peace. They made all calculations excepting the most

3. This refers to the preliminaries to the Treaty of Frankfurt, May 10, 1871, by which Germany took Alsace-Lorraine and obliged France to pay a large indemnity.

simple of all."

When these events were taking place, Hanotaux, a crucial figure in the period leading up to World War I—was just a 16-year-old boy. But his future dedication to his nation was already evident. For the young Hanotaux, France's crushing defeat stirred no jingoistic passions against Germany, but rather a passion to learn, to reach into past history to understand what had just happened. "The generation to which I belong," Hanotaux wrote, "was barely emerging from childhood. . . . Its intellect was matured by that cruel spectacle. . . . From that time, pressing questions arose in me: What had been the causes of the greatness of France in the past? What were the causes of her defeat? What would be the moving forces of her approaching resurrection?"⁴

Gabriel Hanotaux's strategic role

Hanotaux's first published article, when he was 24 years old, was entitled "Did the Venetians Betray Christianity in 1202?" The mere fact of his interest in this episode of history demonstrates that he was on the path to studying the critical issues that shaped western civilization. In the newspaper of Third Republic leader and founder Léon Gambetta, Hanotaux wrote articles calling for a resurrection, in the political realm, of King Henri IV's policy of religious toleration, the Edict of Nantes, and for a return to Cardinal Richelieu's European foreign policy. When Hanotaux finally joined the French Foreign Affairs Ministry in 1885, he was already a recognized historian, determined to bring these great ideas from his nation's past to bear in France's foreign policy.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, France was polarized politically and socially around two major issues: First and foremost was the question of collaborating with Germany in building the peace, or waging a war of "*revanche*" (revenge). Although Bismarck had stupidly seized the French provinces of Alsace-Lorraine in the aftermath of the war, adding to the crushing burden of immense war reparations a painful daily reminder of the lost war, slowly a *détente* was beginning to emerge between the former enemies. Discussions were even entertained about the possibility of a Franco-German customs union.⁵

The second major issue was the religious question: whether there would be a republican-Catholic collaboration in building the new republic, or whether freemasonry's declared war on religion would prevail. An underlying problem

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, viii.

5. One of the main proponents of such an idea was a former Alsatian and ex-member of Parliament, Count Paul de Leusse. His pamphlet, published in 1888 and entitled "Peace by a Franco-German Customs Union," was said to have been favorably received by Bismarck, though not by other forces in Germany.