

Growth of Nation States

England and France Become Modern Nations

Some Characteristics of Modern Nations

Nations share a number of characteristics, namely land, boundaries, resources, and government. Without any one of these characteristics a nation probably could not exist. Land refers to the geographic area in which a people who have something in common-language, religion, or special interests-live. Boundaries set off the land of one nation from another. They may be neutral ones such as rivers, oceans, or mountains, or they may be agreed-upon borders. England and France developed into nations early. They had specific territories with defensible borders.

If a nation is to prosper, it must have natural resources to develop a sound economy. Good land for farming is most important, and the existence of stores of energy such as coal or oil are others. It is not necessary for every nation to have all the resources that it needs. No nation has all the resources it would like to have. Yet, to survive, a nation should have a reasonable share of natural resources upon which to build its economy, its trade with other people, and a decent standard of living at home. An industrious, hard-working people are a human resource that may overcome a lack of some natural resources.

For people to build a nation there must be agreement about the kind of government to have. The government of a nation, whether a monarchy or a democracy, must have the power and authority to do as it wishes within its borders. This characteristic of a nation is called sovereignty. It means that a nation, through its government, has the power to make its own decisions freely and independently.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was a famous political theorist. According to his views, the growth of a system of government based on absolute monarchs who rule nation-states was the most important development in the history of humankind. Hobbes believed that without the development of strong nations the lives of most people would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The system of nation-states

that Hobbes praised so much began to develop in Western Europe about the middle of the 14th century.

However, the growth of nation-states had some undesirable aspects. War had always been a fact of life. With the rise of nations it was conducted on a much larger scale than before and with more determination. As nations grew, they sought power, wealth and security. To achieve these they made war on other nations. Powerful monarchs, with the support of a loyal people, could raise money and large armies. In some ways war became a national obsession. It is small wonder that Thomas Hobbes chose the term Leviathan as the title for his book about nation-states. The word describes a powerful sea monster.

The Rise of Nations in Europe

During the Early Middle Ages monarchs were often weaker than the lords who served them as vassals. As towns and commerce grew, a middle class developed. Monarchs gave the middle class special privileges and rights in exchange for money. This money and taxes made the monarchs rich and helped them pay for an army of their own. Monarchs no longer had to ask the feudal lords for the towns and the middle class. The monarchs became powerful leaders. The growth of nations began when monarchs became strong enough to unify and control large numbers of vassals.

There were other reasons for the rise of nations. As a national language developed, nation-states grew with them. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages encouraged those who spoke the same language to unify. A common language provided a bond for people. Geography was another factor that played a part in the growth of nations. Rivers, oceans, or mountains often brought people together or separated them from those who were different. In addition to these factors, monarchs were able to take advantage of the Protestant Reformation. They could reduce the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and substitute their own power.

England and France became nations in the Middle Ages. Other countries such as Germany and Italy were not unified until the 19th Century.

How England Became a Nation

The English were one of the first groups of people to form a nation of their own. They were separated by the English Channel from the continent of Europe and so were relatively free of its problems. The English were a people easy to unite because they lived in a small area, spoke the same language, and shared the same history.

Despite have so much in common the English under the Anglo-Saxons could not agree among themselves. There was much disagreement, for example, about who would follow the Anglo-Saxon king known as Edward the Confessor. When Edward died, the Anglo-Saxons chose Edward's son Earl Harold to become king. However, William, Duke of Normandy, also claimed the throne as the cousin of Edward's mother. William challenged Harold's claim to the throne. In the summer of 1066, William the Conqueror, with an army of 5,000, crossed the English Channel from Normandy (France) and invaded England. At the Battle of Hastings, he defeated the Anglo-Saxon King Harold and made himself king of England. William proceeded to build a nation. The Anglo-Saxon's had tried but failed to do so.

William and his successors were able rulers. Henry II (1133-1189) was a strong king who improved the legal system and established king's courts throughout the country. A *grand jury* reported to the king's judges those who were believed to have committed crimes. A *petit jury*, made up of 12 men, listened to a case to decide whether or not a crime had been committed. The judges made the law, based on the customs of the people. The body of law that developed is called *common law*. For common law and for the jury system, we are indebted to the rule of Henry II.

The death of Richard the Lion Hearted (1157-1199) brought King John (1167-1216) to the throne of England. King John is remembered for his troubles with the pope and the English nobles. He had to pay tribute to the pope and was forced to give up some powers to the nobles. The *Magna Carta*, which John signed at Runnymede in 1215, stated that no taxes should be levied without the consent of the *Great Council*. The Great Council was made up of prominent nobles and church officials who advised the monarchs. The *Magna Carta* also stated that no free person could

be put into prison without a trial by jury or be punished except in accordance with law.

The *Magna Carta* outlined several fundamental rights that we take for granted in modern times. In the 13th century most people were serfs, and serfs were not free. The principles of the *Magna Carta* did not apply to them. Nevertheless, the *Magna Carta* was a political milestone; it showed that a monarch's power could be limited by law. Gradually, the principles of the *Magna Carta* were applied to a greater number of people and became the basic rights of the English.

Early in the reign of William the Conqueror, the beginnings of the representative government were made. The Great Council was at first an advisory body. As its influence slowly grew, the king had to get the council's approval before reaching a decision. Later, the Great Council came to be known as *Parliament*.

On the principle "let that which toucheth all be approved by all," King Edward I (1239 – 1307) called for a meeting. This had been named the *Model Parliament* (1295). It was made up of clergy, nobles, and commoners, or burgesses. The *Model Parliament* soon became divided into a House of Lords and a House of Commons. In the *Model Parliament*, the representatives of the House of Lords and the representatives to the House of Commons met in one room. Later, the House of Lords and the House of Commons met separately.

The year 1066 is the date usually given for the beginning of England as a nation. By the end of the Middle Ages, England had a strong monarch, a united country and a kind of representative government. It was on the road toward establishing a democratic government. ♦