



French Flag

# France



French Coat of Arms

France is a country with a long and colorful history. It is the largest Western European country and it is almost the size of Texas, with a population of about 63 million.

## PEOPLE

Since prehistoric times, France has been a crossroads of trade, travel, and invasion. Three basic European ethnic stocks--Celtic, Latin, and Teutonic (Frankish)--have blended over the centuries to make up its present population. France's birth rate was among the highest in Europe from 1945 until the late 1960s. Since then, its birth rate has fallen but remains higher than that of most other west European countries. Traditionally, France has had a high level of immigration. More than 1 million Muslims emigrated in the 1960s and early 1970s from North Africa, especially Algeria. About 85% of the population is Roman Catholic, 10% Muslim, less than 2% Protestant, and about 1% Jewish. However, the government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, and according to a January 2007 poll, 51% of respondents describe themselves as Catholic, and another 31% describe them as having no religious affiliation. In 2004, there were over 6 million Muslims, largely of North African descent, living in France. France is home to both the largest Muslim and Jewish populations in Europe.

Education is free, beginning at age 2 and mandatory between ages 6 and 16. The public education system is highly centralized. Private education is primarily Roman Catholic. Higher education in France began with the founding of the University of Paris in 1150. It now consists of 91 public universities and 175 professional schools, including the post-graduate Grandes Ecoles. Private, college-level institutions focusing on business and management with curriculums structured on the American system of credits and semesters have been growing in recent years.

The French language derives from the vernacular Latin spoken by the Romans in Gaul, although it includes many Celtic and Germanic words. Historically, French has been used as the international language of diplomacy and commerce. Today it remains one of six official languages at the United Nations and has been a unifying factor in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean.



## HISTORY

France was one of the earliest countries to progress from feudalism to the nation-state. Its monarchs surrounded themselves with capable ministers, and French armies were among the most innovative, disciplined, and professional of their day. During the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), France was the dominant power in Europe. But overly ambitious projects and military campaigns of Louis and his successors led to chronic financial problems in the 18th century. Deteriorating economic conditions and popular resentment against the complicated system of privileges granted the nobility and clerics were among the principal causes of the French Revolution (1789-94). Although the revolutionaries advocated republican and egalitarian principles of government, France reverted to forms of absolute rule or constitutional monarchy four times--the Empire of Napoleon, the Restoration of Louis XVIII, the reign of Louis-Philippe, and the Second Empire of Napoleon III. After the Franco-Prussian War (1870), the Third Republic was established and lasted until the military defeat of 1940.

World War I (1914-18) brought great losses of troops and materiel. In the 1920s, France established an elaborate system of border defenses (the Maginot Line) and alliances to offset resurgent German strength. France was defeated early in World War II, however, and was occupied in June 1940. That July, the country was divided into two: one section being ruled



directly by the Germans, and a second controlled by the French ("Vichy" France) and which the Germans did not occupy. German and Italian forces occupied all of France, including the "Vichy" zone, following the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942. The "Vichy" government largely acquiesced to German plans, namely in the plunder of French resources and the forceful deportations of tens of thousands of French Jews living in France to concentration camps across Europe, and was even more completely under German control following the German military occupation of November 1942. Economically, a full one-half of France's public sector revenue was appropriated by Germany. After four years of

occupation and strife in France, Allied forces liberated the country in 1944.

France emerged from World War II to face a series of new problems. After a short period of provisional government initially led by Gen. Charles de Gaulle, the Fourth Republic was set up by a new constitution and established as a parliamentary form of government controlled by a series of coalitions. French military involvement in both Indochina and Algeria combined with the mixed nature of the coalitions and a consequent lack of agreement caused successive cabinet crises and changes of government.

Finally, on May 13, 1958, the government structure collapsed as a result of the tremendous opposing pressures generated by four years of war with Algeria. A threatened coup led the Parliament to call on General de Gaulle to head the government and prevent civil war. Marking the beginning of the Fifth Republic, he became prime minister in June 1958 and was elected president in December of that year. The Algerian conflict also spurred decades of increased immigration from the Maghreb states, changing the composition of French society.

Seven years later, for the first time in the 20th century, the people of France went to the polls to elect a president by direct ballot. De Gaulle won re-election with a 55% share of the vote, defeating Francois Mitterrand. In April 1969, President de Gaulle's government conducted a national referendum on the creation of 21 regions with limited political powers. The government's proposals were defeated, and de Gaulle subsequently resigned. Succeeding him as president of France have been Gaullist Georges Pompidou (1969-74), Independent Republican Valery Giscard d'Estaing (1974-81), Socialist Francois Mitterrand (1981-95), neo-Gaullist Jacques Chirac (1995-2007), and center-right Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-present).

While France continues to revere its rich history and independence, French leaders are increasingly tying the future of France to the continued development of the European Union (EU). France was integral in establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and was among the EU's six founding states. During his tenure, President Mitterrand stressed the importance of European integration and advocated the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty on European economic and political union, which France's electorate narrowly approved in September 1992. The center of domestic attention soon shifted, however, to the economic reform and belt-tightening measures required for France to meet the criteria for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) laid out by the Maastricht Treaty. France continues to play a leading role in the EU, particularly in the development of European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Although a 2005 French referendum was actually responsible for the defeat of the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, France has since then backed the Lisbon Treaty--a main priority of Nicolas Sarkozy during France's EU presidency in the latter half of 2008. In July 2008, France was instrumental in launching the Union for the Mediterranean (UM), a continuation of the EU Barcelona Process. France and Egypt hold the first rotating co-presidency, which serves as a forum for political and economic cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean neighbors.

Info from the US Dept. of State Website



The lighted Eiffel Tower in Paris, France,  
July 12, 2001. [© AP Images]