



A Brief History of France

Cecil Jenkins

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A Brief History of France tells the story of the formation of this grand nation through its people, great events, and culture. When we think of France we often evoke images of fine food and wine, the elegant boulevards of Paris, and the chic beaches of St. Tropez, but the largest country in Europe has much more to offer than tourist attractions.

A Brief History of France Details

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Decayke says

good primer

Jason Koivu says

I'm too damn familiar with British history, I told myself recently. Time to branch out!...My branch didn't stretch too far.

The histories of France and England are deeply entwined (which always seemed odd to me considering how very different are their people, language, food, etc), so reading about France's history wasn't exactly like taking a trip to another galaxy. Since declaring nationhood, their almost constant warring would always insure some old familiar atrocity to ground my sense of time and place.

With that kind of background knowledge in place, I wasn't looking for any especially thorough or comprehensive history on France and that's just what I got in *A Brief History of France*. Very brief. Not particularly thorough. That's all right! There's a place, time and person for this kind of history-quickie and I'm it!

The real problem with this book revealed itself fairly early. It's uneven. In chapter one, within a few slim pages, we get the entirety of human civilization in the French region summed up in the quick mention of some cave paintings recently discovered. There ya go, a nice tidy summation of a couple million years. Then it jumps directly into Roman Gaul with a page or so on Julius Caesar and Vercingetorix. With the whole Roman Empire and its rule over Gaul taken care of, we now move into Medieval France, where Charlemagne and the early chivalric knights roamed. And all those hundreds and thousands of years are, not only lumped in with all of prehistory, but it's all jammed together in one twenty page chapter. I was a little miffed, so I flipped ahead and discovered that the period after the second world war up to the present, approximately 70 years worth, takes up 100 pages and an entire third of the whole book! So yeah, as I said, this is uneven.

Another issue, and it's minor, is the casual tone. I don't think I've ever read a history text before that referred to a historical figure in terms of their "bitchiness".

War, huh yeah, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing, you say Edwin Starr? Wrong! War is good for history books. That shit really fills the pages! It's all over this mother. I suppose that's not Cecil Jenkins' fault. I blame the French.

Khoa Dang says

A detailed narrative about the events and forces that constantly shaped and reshaped over the course of centuries what becomes modern-day France. Cutting through all the clichés about Frenchness, French romance and French work ethic, we will explore through this book a land rich in cultural and historical

heritages. From the cro-magnon beginning through the Medieval Age, the Enlightenment, the Revolution, the Napoleonic hegemony in Europe, the Great Wars to finally the modern French Fifth Republic and endless bitter divisions and bloody struggles in between, France has always been playing a crucial role in the inextricably intertwined international geo-political affairs that evolve constantly. To understand the country, we have to look at it in European and global contexts. This book does just that, and even more.

Strongly recommended for fans of history and culture, especially those of France. Be prepared to devour a great deal of tongue-twisting names and jargon. But I guess that is part of the fun when one reads this genre of books!

Rita says

Interesting, sociopolitical and cultural approach to study the relationship between French history and attitude through time. Rather strong focus on political events in the second half of the book (which makes sense). Needs to be read carefully :)

Brad Mundy says

As he gets into the 1900s he becomes somewhat opinionated. It takes away from the history. The portion prior to the 1900s is quite good.

WarpDrive says

A delightful, very cute brief overview of the history of one of the most beautiful, enchanting and cultured Countries on Earth, a Country that played such a pivotal role in the development of the European Civilization: France.

This little book (just a little over 300 pages) manages brilliantly to condense much interesting and relevant information about the main historical developments and character of this fascinating country; the overall narrative tends to be weighted towards early modern, modern and contemporary France, but the major stages of French history are all treated to some extent, with admirable conciseness and precision.

Being such a relatively little book, the author has been forced to be highly selective, however I think that he managed to capture all the most relevant events, and to explain convincingly and accurately how France developed its unique social, political and cultural style and outlook throughout the centuries.

The only real issue with this book is the lack of timeline and of maps (excusable to some extent given the size of the book, I guess).

Overall, a job well done for such a small book with such an ambitious scope: a very enjoyable, breezy and interesting read, well written with clarity, passion and conciseness.

4 stars.

Lydia says

From Les Eyzies-de-Tayac's National Museum of Prehistory, early Gaul leader Vercingétorix, and Clovis' creation of the Frankish Kingdom; to Jacques Chirac's and Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency and the threat of the 'Americanization' of French culture, Cecil Jenkins' sumup of *France: People, History and Culture* covers quite a bit in only 309 pages.

Cecil pulls from several resources to give us a balanced view of French history and culture. Without too many romantic leanings or criticisms, he lays out French history as a logical, methodical series of human interactions in relation to the ever-changing world around it—however, at times, stubbornly fixed in unchanging political ways.

From the tribes of Gaul to the end of the monarchy, World War II and the latest economic crisis; Jenkins' chronology is punctuated by political scandals, international faux pas, societal and global advancements, and the artistic translation of the times as seen through the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Impressionism, Existentialism and Relativism.

His writing is concise and very entertaining. *France: People, History and Culture* is a wonderful introduction to everything French. Through Ceil Jenkins' pristine and focused lens we are reminded that human interaction, both personal and political, is a never ending pursuit to enrich the world around us. The point is to learn from our mistakes, evolve, and do our utmost best to avoid repeating the terrible blunders of our past.

Abhaga says

Read it as part of travel reading before going to France. It does a decent job of giving you an idea of major arches in French history. I liked how he puts the cultural paradigms in perspective with the contemporary political and social changes. French history in itself is quiet interesting. It was a revelation to learn about the amount of churn it has undergone in last 225 odd years!

The book is quiet heavy on the post revolution part. The continuous procession of people in and out of power does begin to grate a bit on you after a while but I am not sure if it is possible to do a better job or if the French situation is pretty extraordinary in that regard!

The book spends little to no time on the IndoChina colonial past of France though Algeria does get some coverage. Having been to Cambodia and Vietnam, and seeing how France is a big part of historical consciousness in those parts, it almost feels like a betrayal. Also the sheer hypocrisy of not only expanding the empire after French revolution but continuing to cling to their colonies even after WWII is something I still need to wrap my head around. And this is when they were busy gifting the statue of liberty to USA.

Not the most enjoyable history book I read but it did the job of acquainting me with enough French history to enjoy my trip more.

Helen McGowan says

I picked this book up in France whilst on holiday, because I wanted a short reasonably detailed potted history of France, and that is exactly what I got. I would have liked more detail about the early modern period and less about the modern period, but I found it all interesting. I would recommend it.

Susan Liston says

Read this mainly to get my French kings straight. It served its purpose.

Aaron Hollander says

Well written and gives a great survey of the history of France. Weighted towards the French Revolution and 19th and 20th centuries, it certainly provides for a firm grounding to whomever wishes to acquaint themselves with French history, and provides for a good point-of-departure, to investigate any topic in more depth. Largest complaint is the emphasis on economics and politics, and not enough discussion of cultural contributions in the arts, literature, cinema, music, which is covered very superficially. Also images were in dire need. There was only a single map provided of the country at the forward. There should have been many many images, pictures, diagrams, maps, etc, to aid in getting a more concrete idea of the people, events, places, etc. Overall an enlightening read.

Peter Moy says

France Is An Exceptional Country And This Book Explains Why.

I have recently spent a delightful month in France. What is it about this country that stands it in contrast to the hard, winner takes all capitalism of the Anglosphere?(Britain and the US.) Reading this book certainly provides some of the answers to that question and in a way that is a very enjoyable read as well. It is one of the excellent “Brief History” series of book of which contains approximately 70 titles. It packs a lot of information into its 300 tightly written pages.

The book follows the evolution of France from a loose collection of feudal fiefdoms to a centralised state ruled by an absolute monarch in the form of Louis XIV the “Sun King”. To quote the Author:

“At a fundamental level, he [Louis] did indeed believe that a king derived his authority directly from God. So ‘kings are absolute rulers who can naturally dispose of all property, secular or ecclesiastical’ and the ruled are bound to absolute obedience. Since he is answerable to God for the discharge of his role he is not entitled to divest himself of his sacred responsibility by passing it to another. Louis was his own Prime Minister. What Louis did with the blessing of prominent Catholic theologian Bishop Bossuet was to take Christian monarchy with its divine right of kings as far as it could go.”

Needless to say the corruption and nepotism of this hereditary based system of privilege was not admired by the growing numbers of middle class bourgeoisie created by the rapidly industrialising society. This ultimately resulted in the republican revolution of 1789. I liked the author's colourful description of Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister as example of the corruption that had developed in French aristocracy of the 'Ancien Régime' prior to revolution.

"He may seem today to have been corrupt an old camembert, but in taking bribes for his services he was following a custom of the time and his attitudes owe much to his background. An aristocrat who lost his rights as the oldest son because of a club foot and had to make do, though an atheist, with being made bishop of Autun at the age of thirty five, which entailed the inconvenience of a three-day visit to the place."

Needless to say, the Catholic church which acted like to cheer leader for the aristocracy were given their marching orders by the republicans of the 1789 revolution. This author believes was a mistake, as the republicans should have made an effort to ally themselves to the village priests who were also deeply offended by the behaviour of the church hierarchy. This would have prevented nearly 150 years of subsequent conflict between the French Catholic Church and the republicans. One person to find the middle ground was Napoleon. When he came to power and he set about transforming the country, the authors writes:

"He made a concordat with the Pope which brought the church back into the national community under State supervision. And in appointing bishops he insisted they should actually believe in God."

For the next 130 years after the revolution, the country swung between the extremes of hard left secular communism and hard right dictatorships. The right wing reached its nadir with the Vichy government who ruled in association with the German NAZI party and the French Catholic Church during Work War II. To quote the author, Pétain, the leader of the Vichy government had more power than the Sun King, Louis XIV and during his reign:

"He was busily unscrambling the 1789 Revolution in order to establish the '*new moral order*' of his '*National Revolution*'. The republic's motto '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*' was now replaced by the Croix de Feu's trio of '*Travail, Famille, Patrie*' or Work, Family and Fatherland, in that redemptive order. '*Travail*' implied healthy agricultural toil. The right to strike was abolished as were trade unions to discourage any idea of class struggle. '*Famille*', accordingly, implied the traditional peasant unit, now strengthened by family allowances, restrictions to divorce, the criminalisation of abortion and an insistence that a woman's place was in the home. All this was further reinforced by the scrapping of free secondary education and State teacher training colleges, and the granting afresh to religious bodies of the right to teach and of subsidies to Catholic schools which inevitably involved rewriting school textbooks to remove any republican bias. As for '*Patrie*', since it was necessary to '*give France back to the French*', that meant taking steps to exclude gypsies, communists, Freemasons and, above all Jews."

The reaction to the appalling behaviour of the elites of the Vichy government caused the church to finally abdicate its claim to a role in government and the demands for privileges to an elite ruling class faded into the background.

Since the dark days of the Vichy government and World War II, France has transformed itself. The author

points out that “*France is a republic which is indivisible, secular, democratic and social*” as defined in the preamble of the constitution of the current and fifth republic. The French “are not subjects but citizens having equal right and responsibilities”. This means “they are defined as members of a collectivist society”. This collective heritage developed over 150 years of struggle is what the author defines as the ‘French Exception’ which stands their society in contrast to many other nations and particularly the hard individualistic capitalist Anglosphere nations that they take delight in deriding.

This is a very well written book and I recommend it to any one who is interested in understanding why the French feel they are exceptional. If you visit French for any period of time you will come to agree that they are not deluded. The concluding chapters of the book discusses whether this situation will persist or they will be swamped by the forces of globalisation. I share the author’s hope that the French people can resist these forces.

Robert says

Jenkins does an admirable job compressing two millennia of French history into one volume. This is definitely a "great man" approach to history—the narrative is almost entirely focused on political history and political leaders. Jenkins has a confident touch, and one gets a clear sense of which realities changed and which persisted as one moves from era to era.

The pace of the narrative slows, however, as one approaches the present. Major themes of the Fifth Republic are highlighted, particularly in the penultimate chapter, which analyzes the nature and contradictions of the "French exception." I came away with an appreciation for the richness and complexity of French history and how this historical patrimony continues to exert influence on the present.

Rachel says

This provided a breadth but not depth of pre-WW2 history. More then 1/3 of the book is after 1945. Feel like this is a shame because in early chapters, I would have enjoyed a longer look at the monarchy, the revolutions and some more medieval France.

While I learned some new things about France, which was my goal in reading this book, it is not the most enjoyable of the "brief history" books I've read.

Austin says

2.5. It served its purpose. Once de Gaulle came into power the book began to drag, but until then it was alright.
