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The Hundred Years' War

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Introduction

The Hundred Years' War stands as one of the most defining and transformative conflicts in European history. Spanning more than a century—from 1337 to 1453—it was much more than a protracted military engagement between the kingdoms of England and France. It was an era marked by immense turmoil and change, with dynastic ambitions, shifting alliances, and the upheavals of economic, social, and political life all intertwined. Although the war is remembered for its dramatic battles and legendary heroes, its real significance lies in the profound ways it shaped the destinies of two great nations and the broader trajectory of the continent.

At the heart of the conflict were unresolved questions about inheritance, feudal obligation, and sovereignty. The immediate cause was a disputed succession to the French throne, following the death of King Charles IV without a direct male heir. Edward III of England, as Charles's nephew, made a compelling—but controversial—claim to the crown, challenging the legitimacy of the Valois dynasty in France. This dynastic quarrel was exacerbated by deep-rooted feudal rivalries, particularly over the Duchy of Aquitaine, a vast and prosperous region in southwestern France under English control but subject to French overlordship.

The war soon outgrew its origins in aristocratic ambition, entangling nearly every stratum of medieval society. Looming economic interests—such as control of the profitable wool trade with Flanders—and the strategic imperatives of state power led each side to mobilize unprecedented resources for war. The ensuing decades saw the devastation of entire regions, the suffering of towns and peasants, and the slow emergence of a new social order. From the marshy fields at Crécy to the walls of besieged Calais, from the triumphs of English longbowmen at Agincourt to the rallying cry of Joan of Arc at Orléans, the war would witness profound changes in military tactics and technology.

Yet the Hundred Years' War was not one uninterrupted struggle, but a series of campaigns and truces, of treaties made and broken. Its course spanned three distinct phases, each marked by shifts in fortune for the warring kingdoms. The war's initial period, known as the Edwardian War, brought England a string of dramatic victories and vast territorial gains. The tables then turned during the Caroline War, as Charles V of France spearheaded a national revival, reclaiming much of the lost land. The final phase, the Lancastrian War, saw the English once again threaten the very heart of France, only to be driven back by a rising sense of French nationhood and the inspiration of new leaders.

By the conflict's end, both England and France had been irrevocably transformed. The

war extinguished the medieval world of feudal knights and castles, hastening the rise of centralized monarchies, professional armies, and new concepts of national identity. It left behind a legacy of cultural memory and historical myth that continues to resonate today. The destruction and loss were immense, but out of the crucible of war emerged the foundations of the modern European state.

This book explores the full sweep of the Hundred Years' War, examining its origins, its landmark events, its key figures, and its enduring consequences. Through the lens of politics, war, society, and culture, it seeks to illuminate how a century of conflict remade two kingdoms—and set the stage for the world that followed.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Medieval World and the Road to War

To understand the Hundred Years' War, we must first immerse ourselves in the world that spawned it: the Late Middle Ages. This era, generally spanning from 1300 to 1500 AD, was a period of both profound change and significant continuity, a complex tapestry woven with threads of tradition and innovation, stability and upheaval. Europe in the early 14th century was not a static entity; it was a continent on the cusp of immense transformation, yet still deeply rooted in the social, political, and economic structures that had defined it for centuries.

At the heart of medieval society lay the system of feudalism. This wasn't a neatly organized pyramid diagram you might see in a textbook, but rather a complex web of reciprocal legal and military obligations, primarily centered around land ownership. The king, theoretically at the apex, granted large tracts of land, known as fiefs, to powerful noblemen and bishops. In exchange for these valuable holdings, the nobles pledged their loyalty and military service to the crown. This meant that when the king called, these lords were expected to raise their own armies from their territories.

Beneath these great lords were lesser nobles and knights, who, in turn, received smaller parcels of land and owed homage and fealty to their immediate superiors. It was a system built on personal bonds of loyalty and a rather practical exchange of land for protection and military aid. This decentralized power structure meant that while a king held ultimate authority in theory, the day-to-day governance and military might often rested with individual lords in their own domains.

The vast majority of the population—around 90%—were peasants, whose lives revolved around agricultural labor. They were the bedrock of the feudal system, working the land, primarily growing crops like barley, wheat, oats, and rye, and raising livestock such as pigs and sheep. Their lives were harsh, dictated by the rhythm of the farming year, with a limited diet and few comforts. Though not slaves, peasants, often called "villeins" or serfs, were tied to the land and obligated to work for their lord, paying taxes or rent, often in the form of produce. In return, they received a place to live and, crucially, the lord's protection from external threats.

However, the 14th century was not solely about rural life. Towns and cities, though still relatively small compared to modern metropolises, were growing, spurred by agricultural advancements that led to food surpluses. These urban centers became hubs of commerce, learning, and government. Within these towns, a burgeoning merchant class was emerging, along with craft guilds that regulated trades and

provided a degree of economic stability for their members. This rising merchant class would eventually challenge the traditional feudal power structures, their wealth offering a new kind of influence.

Trade routes crisscrossed Europe, connecting distant regions and facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and even diseases. The Italian city-states, like Venice and Genoa, were particularly prominent, controlling lucrative sea routes and trading extensively with the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world. Goods such as spices, luxury textiles, and precious metals flowed into Europe, while wool, wine, and grain moved in the opposite direction. The wool trade, in particular, was a significant economic driver, and Flanders, with its thriving cloth manufacturing, was a key market for English wool. This economic interdependence, while fostering prosperity, also created points of friction that could, and often did, escalate into conflict.

Religion, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, permeated every aspect of medieval life. Its influence was profound, shaping not only spiritual beliefs but also law, education, and social norms. The Church owned vast lands and possessed immense wealth, with its rituals marking life's major milestones from birth to death. While it offered a sense of unity and spiritual guidance, the Church also faced criticisms of corruption and internal divisions, such as the Western Schism, which saw rival claimants to the papacy.

For the nobility, life was governed by a code of conduct known as chivalry. This was more than just good manners; it was a moral and social code that emphasized qualities like courage, military prowess, honor, loyalty, justice, and generosity. Knights were expected to uphold these virtues, defending the Church and the defenseless, and to serve their liege lord with valor and faith. While the idealized image of the chivalrous knight often differed from the messy realities of medieval warfare, the code nonetheless provided a framework for aristocratic behavior and identity.

Yet, the 14th century was also an "age of adversity." Periods of famine, epidemics among farm animals, and increasingly wet and cold weather plagued Europe in the early part of the century, making farming difficult and leading to widespread suffering. These environmental and social stresses created a volatile backdrop against which political tensions simmered. The population growth that had characterized the High Middle Ages began to decline, exacerbated by the devastating impact of the Black Death, which would sweep across Europe in the mid-14th century, further disrupting society and the economy.

Against this backdrop of feudal structures, burgeoning towns, religious authority, and environmental challenges, the stage was set for the conflict that would become known as the Hundred Years' War. The interwoven interests of kings, nobles, merchants, and the Church, combined with long-standing territorial disputes and dynastic ambitions, created a volatile mix. The peace, when it existed, was often fragile, a temporary lull

before the next storm. And soon enough, a tempest would brew that would forever alter the course of English and French history.

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