Henry IV of France

Henry IV (December 13, 1553 - May 14, 1610) was King of France from 1589-1610, the first of the Bourbon kings of France. He was the son of Antoine de Bourbon, Duke of Vendome and Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre.

On August 18 1572 Henry married Marguerite de Valois, sister of the then King Charles IX. In the same year he became king Henry III of Navarre, succeeding his mother Jeanne d'Albret, who had brought him up as a Huguenot. Jeanne herself was also a Protestant, and had declared Calvinism the religion of Navarre.

Attending the wedding of Henri III of Navarre and Marguerite Valois on the 18th of August 1572 at Notre Dame were many prominent protestants, who remained in Paris for several days to take part in the celebrations.

After an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the leading protestant Admiral Coligny, on the 22nd, a large number of protestants including Coligny, were murdered just two days later on the 24th of August 1572, which has become infamous in history as the St. Bartholomew's day massacre. Marguerite's brother, King Charles IX gave the order for the massacre to take place and similar events occurred in numerous other French cities. Charles' mother Catherine de Medici has been heavily implicated in persuading her son to order the murders.

Henry's marriage was part of a plan to help quell the French Wars of Religion. As part of this plan, he was forced to convert to Roman Catholicism on February 5, 1576, and kept in confinement, but later that year he gained his freedom and resumed Protestantism. Henri and his cousin the Prince of Conde (Son of Louis (1530-1561), who was the brother of Antony of Bourbon, Henri's father) only avoided being murdered by agreeing to become catholic. Despite their conversion they remained imprisoned within the court.

Charles IX died on 30th May 1574 and his brother, Duke of Anjou was crowned Henri III of France. At this time there was another brother, Francois the Duke of Alencon who would have inherited the crown for the Valois, if anything happened to Henri III of France. These two brothers hated each other and Henri III was paranoid that his brother would have him murdered.

King Henri of Navarre did not escape from the court of King Henri of France until 1576. Once having escaped the clutches of his wife's family and their cohorts he quickly returned to Navarre and to Protestantism. In 1578, Catherine de Medici brought his wife, Marguerite to his court at Nerac, hoping to persuade him to return. After a stay of more than two years, Marguerite left Nerac, without Henri.

King Henri III of France was catholic, but Henri of Guise was regarded as head of the catholic league, probably because of the very hard line he took against the protestants. King Henri of Navarre was regarded as leader of the protestants, which left Henri III of France somewhere in the middle. Initially aligned more with the Guise, Henri III found himself fighting the combined forces of Henri of Navarre and those of his own younger brother Francois.

This was the period, which is referred to as the "War of the three Henri's".

The French catholics received support from Philip II of Spain, while the protestants received it from Elizabeth I of England and from the Netherlands.
Francois, Duke of Alencon died of illness in 1584, leaving Henri of Navarre as heir to the throne of France should anything happen to Henri III of France. Fearing that the throne of France might in future pass to the protestants, Pope Sixtus V excommunicated Henri of Navarre in 1585. Henri for his part refused to acknowledge the excommunication by the 'heretic' pope.

On the 20th of October 1587, Henri of Navarre found himself outnumbered, facing a catholic army commanded by the Duke of Joyeuse, a favourite of King Henry of France at Coutras. By the end of the day the Duke of Joyeuse was dead and Henri of Navarre had won a victory, which gave his military reputation a huge boost.

Shortly after this Henri III of France found that Henri of Guise was becoming a major threat to his authority. This culminated in Paris on the 12th of May 1588, where citizens of the city erected barricades to prevent troops, under orders of the King, from surrounding those of the Guise, whom the King had ordered, not to enter Paris. On the 23rd of December the same year, Henri, Duke of Guise, was murdered on orders of King Henri III of France at Blois. Coincidentally Catherine de Medici died a few days later on the 5th of January 1589.

The death of Guise did not solve the problem for Henri of France, because apart from making him even more unpopular with hard line Catholics, Henri of Guise's place was quickly taken by his brother the Duke of Mayenne. Further more Henri III of France now found himself also excommunicated by the Pope.

Now the two excommunicated Kings, King Henri III of France and King Henri III of Navarre joined forces against the Catholic league and marched on Paris, which the league occupied.

Before any conclusive result was achieved, on the 1st of August 1589, on the 1st of August 1589, the last of Marguerite's surviving brothers and last in the Valois line of Kings, Henri III of France was attacked by the fanatical monk Jacques Clement. Shortly before his death on August the 2nd, Henri III of France, named Henri III of Navarre as his successor.

Henri III of Navarre was now also Henri IV of France, though it would take several more years for him to convince everyone of that.

Since Henry of Navarre was a descendant of King Louis IX, King Henry III had no choice but to recognize him as the legitimate successor. (Salic law disinherited the king's sisters and all others who could claim descent by distaff line. But the Catholic League, strengthened by support from outside, especially from Spain, was strong enough to force him to the south, and he had to set about winning his kingdom by military conquest. He was victorious at Ivry and Arques, but failed to take Paris.

With the encourgement of the great love of his life, Gabrielle d'Estrée, on July 25, 1593 he declared that Paris vaut bien une messe (Paris was worth a Mass) and permanently renounced Protestantism. His entrance into the Roman Catholic Church secured for him the allegiance of the vast majority of his subjects and he was crowned King of France at the Cathedral of Chartres on February 27, 1594. In 1598, however, he declared the Edict of Nantes, which gave circumscribed toleration to the Huguenots.

Henry's first marriage was not a happy one, and the couple remained childless. Even before Henry had succeeded to the throne in August, 1589 the two had separated, and Marguerite de Valois lived for many years in the chateau of Usson in Auvergne. After Henry had become king various advisers impressed upon him the desirability of providing an heir to the French Crown in order to avoid the problem of a disputed succession.
Henry himself favored the idea of obtaining an annulment of his first marriage and taking Gabrielle d'Estrée as a bride, who had already borne him three children. Henry's councillors strongly opposed this idea, but the matter was resolved unexpectedly by Gabrielle d'Estrée's sudden death in April 1599, after she had given birth prematurely to a stillborn son.

Henri now set about rebuilding the finances and infrastructure of the united Kingdoms of France and Navarre, which had been devastated by the lengthy wars of religion. His long time trusted friend and life long Protestant, the Duke of Rosny, proved to be not only a brave soldier, but also financially very astute. Rosny was promoted in 1606 and from then on became known as the Duke of Sully. Henri became famous for another saying which was attributed to him, "A chicken in every peasant's pot, every Sunday".

Henry IV proved to be a man of vision and courage. Instead of waging costly war to suppress opposing nobles, Henri simply paid them off. As king, he adopted policies and undertook projects to improve the lives of all subjects that would make him one of the country's most popular rulers ever.

During his reign, Henri IV worked through his right-hand man, the faithful Maximilien de Bethune, duc de Sully (1560-1641) to regularize state finance, promote agriculture, drain swamps to create productive crop lands, undertake many public works, and encourage education as with the creation of the College Royal Louis-Le-Grand in La Fleche (today Prytanee Militaire de la Fleche).

He and Sully protected forests from further desecration, built a new system of tree-lined highways, and constructed new bridges and canals. He had a 1200m canal built in the park at the Royal Chateau at Fontainebleau (which can be fished today), and ordered the planting of pines, elms and fruit trees.

The king renewed Paris as a great city with the Pont Neuf, which still stands today, constructed over the River Seine to connect the Right and Left Banks of the city. Henri IV also had the Place Royale built (since 1800 known as Place des Vosges) and he added the Grande Galerie to the Louvre.

More than a quarter of a mile long and one hundred feet wide, this huge addition was built along the bank of the Seine River and at the time was the longest edifice of its kind in the world. King Henri IV, a promoter of the arts by all classes of peoples, invited hundreds of artists and craftsmen to live and work on the building's lower floors. This tradition continued for another two hundred years until Emperor Napoleon I banned it.

King Henri's vision extended beyond France and he financed the expeditions of Samuel de Champlain to North America that saw France lay claim to Canada.

Because Henri planned to be absent for long periods on state business, Marie of Medici was crowned as Queen on the 13th of May 1610, so that she could act in his place while he was away.

On the 14th of May 1610 in Paris, Francois Ravaillac stepped out the shadows and stabbed Henri IV of France to death. Henri's son Louis XIII was still only eight years old, so Marie was appointed as Regent until 1617.

While the rest of France marks the end of monarchist rule each year on Bastille Day, in Henri's birthplace of Pau, his reign as king of France is celebrated.
Maria de’ Medici (French Marie de Médicis) (April 26, 1573 - July 3, 1642) was Queen and later Regent of France.

Born in Florence, Italy, she was the daughter of Francis, Grand Duke of Tuscany. In October 1600 she married Henri IV of France, as his second wife. She brought as part of her dowry, 600,000 crowns. Her eldest son, the future king Louis XIII, was born at Fontainebleau the following year.

The marriage was not a successful one. The queen feuded with Henri’s mistresses, in language that shocked French courtiers. During her husband’s lifetime Marie showed little sign of political taste or ability. Hours after Henri’s assassination in 1610 she was confirmed as Regent by the Parlement of Paris.

Not very bright, stubborn and growing obese, she was soon entirely under the influence of her unscrupulous Italian favourite, Concino Concini, who was created Marquis d'Ancre and Marshal of France. They dismissed Henri IV's able minister the duc de Sully. Through Concini and the Regent, Italian representatives of the Roman Catholic Church hoped to force the suppression of Protestantism in France. Half Hapsburg herself, she abandoned the traditional anti-Hapsburg French policy.

Throwing her support with Spain, she arranged the marriage of both the future king Louis and his sister Elizabeth to members of the Spanish Hapsburg royal family.

Under the regent's lax and capricious rule, the princes of the blood and the great nobles of the kingdom revolted, and the queen, too weak to assert her authority, consented (May 15, 1614) to buy off the discontented princes. The opposition was led by Henri de Bourbon~Condé, Duc D'Enghien, who pressured Marie into convoking the Estates General (1614-15), the last time they would meet in France until the opening events of the French Revolution.

In 1616 her policy was strengthened by the accession to her councils of Richelieu, who had come to the fore at the meeting of the Estates General. However, in 1617 her son Louis XIII, already several years into his legal majority, asserted his authority, ordering the assassination of Concini, and exiling the Queen to the Chateau Blois and Richelieu to his bishopric.

After two years of virtual imprisonment "in the wilderness" as she put it, she escaped from Blois in the night of 21/22 February 1619 and became the figurehead of a new aristocratic revolt headed by Gaston d'Orleans, which Louis' forces easily dispersed.

Through the mediation of Richelieu the king was reconciled with his mother, who was allowed to hold a small court at Angers, and resumed her place in the royal council in 1621.

The portrait by Rubens (above right) was painted at this time. Marie rebuilt the Luxembourg Palace (Palais du Luxembourg) in Paris, with an extravagantly flattering cycle of paintings (see link) by Rubens as part of the luxurious decor.

After the death of his favorite, the duke of Luynes, Louis turned increasingly for guidance to Richelieu. Marie de Medici's attempts to displace Richelieu ultimately led to her attempted coup; for a single day, the journée des dupes, November 12, 1630, she seemed to have succeeded; but the triumph of Richelieu was followed by her exile to Compiègne in 1630, from where she escaped to Brussels in 1631, and later to Cologne, where she died in 1642, scheming against Richelieu to the end.
Honoré de Balzac encapsulated the Romantic generation’s negative view:

"Marie de’ Medici, all of whose actions were prejudicial to France, has escaped the shame which ought to cover her name. Marie de’ Medici wasted the wealth amassed by Henri IV.; she never purged herself of the charge of having known of the king’s assassination; her /intimate/ was d'Epernon, who did not ward off Ravaillac's blow, and who was proved to have known the murderer personally for a long time.

Marie's conduct was such that she forced her son to banish her from France, where she was encouraging her other son, Gaston, to rebel; and the victory Richelieu at last won over her (on the Day of the Dupes) was due solely to the discovery the cardinal made, and imparted to Louis XIII., of secret documents relating to the death of Henri IV." (—Essay "Catherine de Medicis")
Louis XIII (September 27, 1601 - May 14, 1643) was King of France from 1610 to 1643.

Born at the Château de Fontainebleau, Louis was the first child of Henri IV and Marie de Médicis. He ascended to the throne at age nine after the assassination of his father. His mother, along with Cardinal Richelieu, acted as Regent for the minor Louis until he reached the age of sixteen, when Louis took the reins of government into his own hands.

This effectively removed Concino Concini, who had greatly influenced Marie's policymaking, from a position of power. Under Louis' rule, the Bourbon Dynasty continued to flourish, but the question of freedom of religion continued to haunt the country.

The brilliant and energetic Cardinal Richelieu played a major role in Louis XIII's administration, decisively shaping the destiny of France for the next 25 years. As a result of Richelieu's work, Louis became one of the first exemplars of an absolute ruler.

Under Louis XIII, the Hapsburgs were humiliated, a powerful navy was built, the French nobility was firmly kept in line behind their king, and the special privileges granted to the Huguenots by his father were canceled. He had the port of Le Havre modernized.

The King also did everything to reverse the trend for the promising artists of France to work and study in Italy. Louis commissioned the great artists Nicolas Poussin and Philippe de Champaigne to decorate the Luxembourg Palace. In foreign matters, Louis XIII organized the development and administration of New France, expanding the settlement of Quebec westward along the Saint Lawrence River from Quebec City to Montreal.

He was married to a Hapsburg, Princess Anne of Austria (1601-1666), daughter of King Philip III of Spain. Their marriage, like French-Austrian relationships, was never a happy one, and for most of it they lived apart. However, fulfilling her duty, after twenty years of marriage, Anne finally gave birth to a son in 1638. It is still not certain that Louis XIV is actually Louis XIII's son.

After Louis' death in 1643, his wife Anne acted as regent for their five-year-old son, Louis XIV.