

Topic Page: [French people](#)

Definition: **French** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

People who are native to or inhabitants of France, as well as their descendents, culture, or primary language, which is one of the Romance languages (see French language). There are also some sociolinguistic minorities within France who speak Catalan, Breton, Flemish, German, Corsican, or Basque.

Summary Article: **FRENCH**

From *Cassell's Peoples, Nations and Cultures*

The people of the French Republic, and historically one of the most influential of European peoples. The country also contains three longstanding minorities, the BASQUES, BRETONS and CORSICANS, who have maintained non-French identities in the face of varying degrees of central-government hostility. Although the French identity is today a relatively homogeneous one, this is largely the result of the 'Parisianization' of France in the 19th century; the country is traditionally one of strong regional identities.

The French originated from the amalgamation of two ancient peoples, the Celtic GAULS and the Germanic FRANKS. Following the fall of the ROMAN empire in the 5th century, the Franks conquered Gaul (a region approximating to modern France), making it part of a vast kingdom that also included the Low Countries and Germany. The Franks settled densely only in the northeast of Gaul and nowhere were the native Gauls displaced. The culture of the Gauls was highly Romanized and Christian, and their languages, originally Celtic, were related local dialects of Latin. The Franks were non-Christians, and their pre-literate warrior culture was much less sophisticated than that of the people they had conquered. Once they had converted to Christianity around AD 500, the Franks were slowly assimilated into the culture and language of the Gallo-Romans, who for their part began to adopt the Frankish identity because of its political prestige. By the 8th century the term 'Gaul' had become archaic; Gaul was simply part of Francia.

Frankish power reached its peak under Charlemagne (ruled 768–814), who dominated western Europe. In 843 Charlemagne's empire was partitioned among his grandsons into three kingdoms, one of which, West Francia, emerged as the kingdom of France after the empire broke up completely in 888. The early French kingdom was a highly decentralized collection of feudal principalities. The kings had direct control of little more than Paris, the surrounding Ile de France and OrlÉans, and they lacked the power to impose their authority on their mightier subjects, such as the dukes of Normandy and the counts of Anjou. Local identities at this time were often more important than the 'French' identity, which was predominant only in those areas directly controlled by the king. A line roughly from the Gironde to Lyon divided medieval France into two linguistic provinces, the northern *langue d'oïl*, where dialects of Old French were spoken, and the southern *langue d'oc*, where Occitan, or Provençal, was spoken (both areas are named for their words for 'yes'). This line also represented a cultural divide, with the south being an integral part of the Mediterranean world, with different customs to the more feudalized north.

From monarchical control to revolution

In the course of the 12th and 13th centuries the Capetian monarchy finally began to assert its authority over the feudal nobility. Paris became the dominant administrative and cultural centre of France, raising

the prestige of *Francien*, the dialect of the Ile de France, so that it began to replace other dialects, ultimately becoming the basis of modern standard French. The civilization of France in the 12th and 13th centuries was enormously influential. The French Gothic style of art and architecture spread throughout western Europe. Courtly literature and chivalry were essentially French innovations. The French also saw themselves, with some justification, as playing the leading role in the Crusading movement. The later Middle Ages were dominated by the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) with England. It was during this long struggle that a recognizably modern sense of French national identity began to emerge for the first time. Victory over the English allowed the French kings, notably Louis XI (ruled 1461–83), to complete the consolidation of centralized royal power.

The Reformation caused deep divisions in France. Catholics and Calvinist Huguenots each sought to control the Crown, leading to the Wars of Religion (1560–98). The wars were ended by the Edict of Nantes, which granted toleration to the Huguenots, but this was only a temporary solution. The 17th century saw the growth of royal absolutism, culminating in the reign of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King' (ruled 1643–1715), under whom France became the dominant European power. Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, seeing religious diversity as a threat to the unity of the state. Persecution of Huguenots, many of whom emigrated, restored Catholicism to an unchallenged position in French religious life, which it still retains. Louis XIV cultivated a glittering court life at his palace of Versailles and was a lavish patron of the arts. French fashions in art, music, architecture, dress, cuisine and manners were widely imitated across Europe. French became the language of international diplomacy.

During the 17th century the French also built an important colonial empire in North America, the Caribbean and India. French emigrant populations were established in Quebec and Louisiana. Most of this empire was, however, lost to Great Britain in the Seven Years War (1756–63), but the descendants of the French settlers in Quebec still retain their French cultural and linguistic identity (see QUEBECOIS).

The defining event in the creation of the modern French identity was the Revolution of 1789–1804. Economic crisis and rising taxes caused by the huge cost of France's wars with Britain led to increasing popular discontent in the 1780s. The writings of the Enlightenment philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), which were hostile to royal absolutism and religion, and the example of the American Revolution inspired calls for political reform. Popular dissent escalated and demands included the overthrow of the monarchy, aristocratic privilege and serfdom and the foundation of the French Republic in the name of 'Liberty Equality and Fraternity'. The legacy of the Revolution was mixed. It brought to the fore concepts such as human rights, popular sovereignty and civil equality whose subsequent global influence is hard to overstate. On the other hand, the Revolution's descent into terror and dictatorship make it a prototype for the bloody revolutions of the 20th century. Within France, the revolutionaries' anti-clericalism alienated conservative opinion and created divisions that still underlie the Left and Right in French political life. The Revolution also unleashed a fervent political nationalism. Harnessed by Napoleon, France seemed for a time to be on the brink of achieving dominion over continental Europe. But France never regained its political or cultural pre-eminence after his downfall in 1815.

"How can you govern a country which has 246 varieties of cheese?"

Charles de Gaulle, on his compatriots the French

Centralization and La RÉpublique

At the time of the Revolution, French identity was still strongly regional in character, and over one-fifth of French citizens did not speak French. The revolutionary government espoused the principle of the indivisibility of the French republic, a principle to which all subsequent French governments have strongly adhered. Since the Revolution a concerted effort has been made, mainly through the education system, to eliminate all regional dialects and languages and impose standard French on the whole country.

Resentment towards this policy has bred movements dedicated to preserving minority languages, such as Breton, Basque, Occitan, Corse and Alsatian (a German dialect). So far, none has become extinct, but all declined rapidly in the 20th century, not only as a result of state language policies, but also through the influence of French-language mass media, national military service, internal migration and tourism, which have also helped to spread Parisian values throughout France. However, considerable regional variations in French pronunciation are still strongly in evidence. Members of the literary intelligentsia are now fearful that standard French itself faces a new threat in the form of Anglo-American borrowings. An academy exists to protect French from linguistic pollution, but its pronouncements are largely ignored by the population at large. The gulf between high culture and popular culture is a wide one in France.

Nineteenth-century political life saw temporary restoration of the monarchy, humiliating defeat in the Franco-PRUSSIAN War (1870–1), and bouts of civil strife. Through all this, French culture continued to exert global influence, and the French language was spread throughout the world in the expanding French territories of Africa and elsewhere. World War I established the GERMANS as the great national threat; and the subsequent, and swift, defeat and occupation of France by Nazi Germany would be the defining event of the 20th century. The contrast between a small but heroic resistance movement and Charles De Gaulle's Free French movement on the one hand, and the enthusiastically collaborationist Vichy government and business community on the other, continues to be a contrast that the French have struggled with. Spurred by a sense of national humiliation, postwar France strongly re-asserted its role on the world stage, taking a leading role in the European Economic Community (now the European Union), a spiky role in NATO and frequent recourse to *l'exception française*, the principle that France is exempt from the rules it expects everyone else to follow. The French continue to see themselves as an important nation and have overwhelmingly supported the attempts of their postwar governments to pursue an independent foreign policy. Part of this is expressed through the concept of *La Francophonie*, the French economic-cultural equivalent of the British Commonwealth; but whereas the latter is a diffuse arrangement, the former continues to ensure that France remains central to many of its former colonies.

The French also continue to show a commitment to culinary and cultural independence: refusing to eat fast food is a political statement, generous subsidies support Europe's most successful film industry, and the home-grown cartoon character Asterix the Gaul continues to hold his own against the legions of Disneyland. Nevertheless, the internationalization of English as the language of the computer age heralds a new threat. Also, after the homogenizing of the French identity in the 19th and 20th centuries, immigration, mainly from former French colonies in North and West Africa, is making France a more culturally diverse nation again. This has led to the sort of racial tensions familiar in other European countries. Racist violence was common in the 1960s and the racist National Front continues to be a significant force in French politics. Thus, while the population of France was almost 59 million in 1998, 7% were born outside the country. Thus, renewed attempts to enforce French secular values (such as

the banning of religious emblems in schools in 2004) increasingly resemble a swimming against the tide.

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