CHAPTER II

Struggle

At the opening of the fourteenth century, prospects for political development were poor. The great thirteenth-century institutions were showing signs of strain, and a deep economic depression was beginning to make itself felt. To these ominous developments were rapidly added fateul accidents: the sudden disappearance of men of stature, then the beginning of a series of severe famines, and finally, in mid-century, an unprecedented epidemic of the plague. It is hardly surprising that society reeled under these blows. Authority—like the economy—was weakened and fragmented. Men saw their rights and interests threatened and reacted with desperation; armed conflict became the norm rather than the exception, creating the impression that Europe was dissolving into anarchy. And yet scrutiny of the record will reveal less disintegration than might have been expected. For one thing, most participants strove to shore up traditional institutions. Even when they failed, the resulting disintegration of political order tended to be temporary.
and partial in England and France, although more nearly complete and lasting in Germany and Italy. Among the ruins of the old order, however, significant new departures can sometimes be discerned. When their defenses began to crumble, men resorted to vigorous improvisation. The results were bewildering in their variety and defy neat summary, let alone systematization, but some general trends can perhaps be detected.

With the breakdown of central authority men were thrown back on their own resources, which usually meant close consultation among and cooperation with their fellows of a given class and locality. Sometimes viable solutions were achieved by mutual submission to an impartial arbitrator, other times by organizing the process of consultation. In their adversity, that is, they were often not only forced to face unexpected problems but driven to attempt unprecedented solutions which—even though clearly the result of efforts to bolster the crumbling remains of old, established institutions—nevertheless occasionally suggest new, "modern" departures which lend both interest and significance to the political history of the age.

The most powerful rulers of the fourteenth century, with few exceptions, were those whose careers came to an end shortly after it began. Edward I of England, Philip IV of France, and Pope Boniface VIII, all extremely vigorous men, shared a common
failing of trying to do too much too soon. By an excessive use of force and craft, they accomplished a great deal. They also made enemies of their victims and dissipated the confidence of their friends. Both Edward I and Philip IV lived to see their greatly extended royal authority threatened by aristocratic reactions, while Boniface VIII saw his unprecedented claims of papal hegemony utterly rejected. Even the luster of their very considerable achievements was eclipsed by the time these ambitious rulers died, and their subjects were left to stumble on in search of security in the gathering darkness of depression and confusion. The directions this search took can best be followed by examining the separate histories of each of the leading European powers.¹

*England—Political Chaos*

Only three kings succeeded Edward I to the throne of England in the fourteenth century. Of these, two—Edward II and Richard II—were deposed for flagrant ineptitude, while the far more able and successful Edward III outlived his years of energy and terminated his reign in dotage. Taken together, their exercise of royal authority was far too weak and vacillating to dominate the turbulent forces of the period.

By the time Edward I died in 1307, his magnates ²

¹ Spain and Scandinavia will not be discussed in this essay. Although they constituted part of western Christendom and did interact with the major European countries, their internal histories were marked by dreary and pointless turmoil.
were in a dangerously rebellious mood. As the fighting, especially in Scotland, had become more expensive and less rewarding, his subjects had begun to chafe with the result that, along with the crown, Edward II also inherited the resentments provoked by his father's unusual and unpopular methods of raising money to finance his aggressive foreign policies. To have handled such a situation, a successor would have needed a clear purpose, a genius for diplomacy, and an iron will. Unfortunately, Edward II was a mercurial weakling. His normal reaction to any problem was indecision, and his will, on those rare occasions when it became engaged, was usually misdirected. These flaws were compounded by eccentric tastes and a scandalous attachment to his favorite, Piers Gaveston. Charitable historians have been content to call Edward abnormal, while others have suggested that he was actually deranged. By neither interpretation was he fit to rule.

Edward's deficiencies were evident from the start. At his accession he handed over his responsibilities to Gaveston. This disreputable foreign adventurer, by his arrogance and incompetence, promptly drove the already restless and disaffected barons into a league which forced Edward, in 1311, to accept new constitutional limitations on his royal authority. Still under his favorite's spell, Edward tried to evade the commitments he had made. In response, the barons opened civil war. Although they captured and ex-
executed Gaveston and forced Edward himself to surrender within a year, they still failed to establish a lasting peace. By their execution of his favorite they had driven Edward to a secret but unswerving determination to seek vengeance.

With the country thus weakened by internal strife, the English suffered their greatest military disaster abroad in decades. The Scots, though repeatedly defeated by Edward I, had never been thoroughly subdued. Taking advantage of the respite offered by his enemies' dissension, Robert Bruce rallied and united his countrymen to win, at Bannockburn, in 1314, one of the most glorious victories in Scottish history. This stunning upset prepared the way for the revival of the Scottish kingdom and established Bruce and his spider in Scottish legend. It also robbed Edward II of any prestige he may have retained. Thus even though he did manage to defeat his barons in 1322 and repeal their reforms, his triumph was destined to be short-lived. Within five years, his wife, Queen Isabella, popularly known as “the she-wolf of France,” had raised an army and taken him prisoner; and after forcing him to abdicate, she brought his misrule to an end by having him murdered in captivity.

England's future looked far from promising in 1327. Edward's only son was still a minor, and Isabella had consolidated her power by seizing the regency. But the son was wholly different from his father. After watching his mother abuse her power
for three years, the young Edward III overthrew her by force and, in 1330, began what was to be the longest and most popular reign of the century. As conventional as his father had been eccentric, he devoted his energies to that most respected royal occupation, warfare. He was, in fact, an able soldier, and as long as he continued to be successful on the field, he commanded the loyalties and affections of his people.

Edward inaugurated his military career most auspiciously by restoring English military prestige at the expense of the Scots. Taking advantage of Scotland's weakness after the death of Robert Bruce in 1329 to reopen hostilities, Edward won a victory at Halidon Hill in 1333 which established him in the hearts of his countrymen and gave him the necessary support to embark on a collision course with France. But in this new venture success was neither swift nor easy. Instead, his aggressive policy was to drag on in a ruinous conflict with the French which has come to be known as the Hundred Years' War. As a result of his initial failure to win more swift successes, Edward's authority in England was undermined; and he was only able to surmount a threatened baronial rebellion, in 1340–1341, by politic maneuvering, determined resistance, and sweeping concessions. Then finally, in 1346 and 1356, respectively, the extraordinary victories of Crécy and Poitiers completely re-established his position with his restive subjects by laying all
France open to their aggressive energies and rapacious ambitions. Now, celebrated as a hero, Edward reigned peacefully over a tranquil and prosperous England until, at the end of his long reign, his advancing senility and a lull in the French war combined to provoke once again the ever-incipient baronial unrest.

Having ruled for fifty years, Edward III had outlived his eldest son—the chivalric "Black Prince"—and left his throne to his grandson the young Richard II. In character and career almost a reprise of his great-grandfather Edward II, this prince was, if anything, even more unusual. He was, for example, a patron of the arts, and he seems to have detested war out of moral principle, two attributes as little appreciated as they were unexpected in a mediaeval monarch. And although he possessed great personal charm, he was at once as vain and frivolous, as vindictive and deceitful, as Edward II. Obsessively suspicious and headstrong, he resented the inevitable attempts to limit his authority by constitutional restrictions. Some historians have seen in this trait a foreshadowing of modern theories of absolutism; but if Richard did nurture any such ideas of untrammeled rule, he was peculiarly unsuited to the task of imposing them on his rebellious nobles. His reign was marked by violent fits of rage and the equally violent reactions of his turbulent and disaffected subjects, just as his place in history would seem to have been determined by the
tragic flaws of character which have been so widely 
exploited by romantic biographers, speculative psy-
chologists, and Shakespeare.

Since Richard had been only ten when he suc-
cceeded to the throne in 1377, the royal authority was 
confided to an aristocratic council. Four years later, 
during the peasant rebellion of 1381, the boy king 
saved the day for his guardians by a remarkable dis-
play of personal courage; and by the time he was 
eighteen he was ready to make a bid for independence 
from his tenacious regents. Unsuccessful, mainly be-
cause he had espoused the unpopular cause of peace 
with France, he was not able to free himself from 
baronial control until 1389. Then, like Edward II, he 
harborred bitter resentment against those who had at-
tempted to limit or usurp his power. Hiding his in-
tentions behind a deceptive facade of moderate gov-
ernment for eight long years, he finally struck in 
1397. With no hint of warning, he suddenly charged 
his old enemies with treason and had them arrested, 
tried, and executed in swift succession. When a par-
liament, packed for the purpose, then granted him 
revenues for life, he apparently had created the base 
for purely arbitrary rule. But Richard had moved too 
fast and he had made a fatal error. Overestimating 
his strength, he decided on a campaign in Ireland. 
As soon as he had left England, however, the country 
rose in revolt. When he returned to deal with the 
insurrection, he was arrested by his own cousin
Henry of Lancaster, deposed, and secretly put to death. Thus, a century-long struggle between crown and barons played itself to a fitting end with the murder of a headstrong king.

*England—Constitutional Progress*

The longer and more bitterly the king contended with his barons, the more urgent and apparent became the need for order and continuity in the central government. But if the very confusion of the period contributed to this need, it also tended to obscure the origins of important new stabilizing institutions.

The fundamental organ of administration in England had been the royal council or *curia regis.* Originally an unspecialized and undifferentiated body of magnates serving as royal advisers, the council was, by the fourteenth century, becoming a body of trained administrative servants of the crown. The barons, however, reluctant to abandon what they considered their right to participate in making royal policy, never ceased their efforts to dominate the council. But even though they frequently gained the upper hand, they were never able to control the actual government for long.

Lacking the experience, the temperament, and the capacity to handle complicated and tiresome administrative business, they invariably left, or returned, such work to the newly trained experts. These, in

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turn, tended to find the kings personally more congenial than the unruly barons and the concept of monarchy more adaptable to their purposes than that of feudal independence. In this situation the kings were able, by vigilant resistance to all baronial encroachments, to retain at least nominal control of the council throughout the century. Nor had the long struggle been in vain, since it had served to define more sharply the specific functions of central government and to establish irrevocably the need for administrative specialists. In fact, the professional bureaucracy had become so efficient in its methods and so firmly entrenched in its position that no major changes in its structure or procedures were needed for another hundred years.

The best known branch of the royal council was Parliament. In simplest terms it was the largest open meeting of the council, but its functions and membership had been only vaguely defined until the fourteenth century. Then, as the work of the council became more and more technical, Parliament came to be used less and less for general bureaucratic business. Instead it established its own special preserves and prerogatives, particularly in the areas of justice, legislation, and taxation. As the full meeting of the royal council, Parliament was accepted as the highest court of the realm. In this capacity it heard special cases and occasionally tried royal officials in the judicial process of impeachment. It was also coming to be recognized
as a legislative body, a function which carried implications of the utmost importance for the future. Ordinances decreed by the king had been accepted as binding for his lifetime. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, it was gradually agreed that statutes passed by king and Parliament together would have the force of permanent law. And finally, by exercising the authority to levy taxes, Parliament had laid the cornerstone of its power. As early as 1297, Edward I had agreed to impose general taxation only with the consent of "the community of the realm." By the early fourteenth century, this term was accepted to mean the consent of Parliament and the principle was clarified and reinforced in the concessions made by Edward III during the crisis of 1340. With the right of control over the royal purse strings firmly established, if not vigorously exploited, in the fourteenth century, Parliament had captured a strategic position from which it was destined to serve as one of England's most important bulwarks against the threat of royal absolutism.

The implications of these intrinsic powers made it important to regulate the membership of Parliament. From time to time, apparently to serve his own interests, Edward I had summoned representatives of the counties and towns to Parliament. Gradually they were called more and more often until it would hardly have occurred to anyone to do without them. At what point they began to attend regularly and of
their own right, however, would be as difficult to date precisely as most other points of transition in the development of the English constitution. All we know for certain is that town and county representatives had not been essential to the functioning of Parliament at the beginning of the fourteenth century and had become the House of Commons by the end. At the same time, those great magnates who failed to entrench themselves in the inner council of the king began to meet in what was to become the House of Lords. This regular representation of the Commons and the division of Parliament into two separate houses were to become the most enduring and most important hallmarks of the English constitution.

The development of Parliament continued uninterrupted through the century. The crown and magnates both believed they could use it to their own ends, and both therefore tried to increase its powers. Thus, in their efforts to dominate Edward II, the barons tried to subject him to parliamentary control, while he, in turn, tried to strengthen Parliament as an institutional defense against their encroachments. In spite of such impressive gains, however, Parliament remained a supplementary branch of government. Day-to-day administration was handled by the royal council, and both king and country could still have circumvented the Parliament entirely. The reason they did not do so may be attributed in part, perhaps, to the English respect for precedent. Once Parlia-
ment was established it was accepted and thereby given the opportunity to develop its potential.

The troubled history of the century fostered the growth of one more characteristic English institution—the office of justice of the peace. The traditional representative of the crown in local affairs had been the sheriff. These royal officers, once both popular and efficient, had been given more and more duties until they had begun to lose both their effectiveness and their popularity. The countryside's hatred for the evil sheriff in *Robin Hood*, for example, represented an attitude which had become widespread well before the fourteenth century. To check the abuses of this office and at the same time to implement the extensive social legislation drawn up after the Black Death, the crown resorted increasingly to the new local officers.

These justices of the peace, as they were called, had important advantages over the sheriff for both king and country. First they came from the ranks of the local gentry, or landowners, which meant that they were known and respected by those they served as well as loyal and responsive to the king who had appointed them. Further, many had represented their counties in Parliament, from which the sheriffs were excluded, and therefore had acquired experience in legal and fiscal matters which was as useful as it was unusual. And finally, from the point of view of the crown, always concerned with keeping the royal budget within limits, the fact that they served with-
out salary was probably not the least of their attractions. In "Quarter Sessions"—so called because they were held four times a year—the justices not only presided over the local courts but also transacted a great amount of administrative business. And if in times of anarchy, when the royal power was being successfully challenged, they were no match for the local barons, under strong kings the justices demonstrated the capacity of local self-government to cooperate effectively with royal authority.

France—the Hundred Years' War

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the prestige of the French monarchy had no equal in all Europe. The saintly Louis IX had perfected the royal constitution which he had inherited from his Capetian predecessors; and under his benign rule the country had prospered as never before. Later his grandson Philip IV enlarged the royal territory abroad at the expense of Germany, increased French power by making the pope his client, and vastly extended the crown's authority within the realm. Known to posterity as "the Fair," Philip was also known to his contemporaries as "the Owl—the handsomest of birds which is worth absolutely nothing. . . ." This characterization of a king who apparently accomplished so much would seem to refer to an important development within the monarchical institution. For some time in France, as in England, the king's business had
been increasingly entrusted to, or pre-empted by, professional bureaucrats who in turn were increasingly drawn from the legal profession. For the first time, in the reign of Philip, these royal legists began to play not only an important but a public, and possibly even an independent, role in governing the kingdom. Indeed the question seems to have been raised whether Philip was really more than a handsome figurehead behind which his administrators worked to serve and develop the institution, if not the personification, of the monarchy; but it is a question to which modern historians have no final answer.

Philip and his ministers did much for France, but their methods were all too often unsavory and not in keeping with the high-minded policy of Philip’s saintly grandfather. Like his contemporary Edward I of England, Philip waged expensive wars which drove him to devious means of raising money. Illustrative is his treatment of the Templars, a military order originally founded in the twelfth century after the conquest of Palestine to protect pilgrims and defend the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In the course of time, however, they had acquired great wealth, which they used to provide and transfer credit for pilgrims and crusaders. When the Christian outposts in the Holy Land were lost, the Templars, of necessity, returned to Europe, where they put their financial capital and skills at the service of the king of France. Once they had become his principal bankers, how-
ever, they inevitably invited the traditional fate of royal moneylenders. Stripped of their religious purpose and military prestige, they were as vulnerable as they were tempting, and in 1307 one of the king's most unscrupulous lawyers manufactured a battery of charges against the order, including heresy and homosexuality. All the Templars in France were rapidly arrested and many, under ruthless interrogation, confessed. With this evidence Philip bullied the Pope into action, and although the affair dragged on for years, the order of the Templars was finally suppressed by a general council of the Church in 1312. Ironically, however, their property was given to another military order, the Hospitalers; and Philip was only able to seize the amount he claimed the Templars owed him. The largest part of their wealth, which had been his real objective, eluded his grasp.

In other efforts he was more successful. He expelled the Jews from the realm and, following well-established royal precedent, confiscated all their remaining goods. He also appropriated the holdings of the Italian bankers in France, who by this time were far wealthier than the Jews. Further, he manipulated the currency to royal advantage and managed to collect taxes that none of his predecessors had been able to impose. Still, government had become more costly and Philip's wars were so expensive that he was always in need of new funds. When he died in 1314, monarchical institutions were well developed and
France was the envy of her neighbors. But Philip's subjects were disgruntled, tired of the financial strain, and suspicious of the monarchy.

Feudal and provincial reaction followed. In 1315, one year after Philip's death and exactly a century after the promulgation of the Magna Carta in England, Louis X was obliged to grant a series of charters to his rebellious provincial nobles. Unlike the famous English model, however, these charters contained little that could be construed as constructive constitutional limitation of royal power. The very fact that the barons demanded a series of provincial charters instead of a charter for the entire kingdom suggests the highly particular, not to say selfish, nature of their demands and explains the ultimate weakness of their opposition. Unable to unite in a common cause, the French barons could never agree on a viable alternative to monarchical rule and could, therefore, rarely impose their will on their sovereign, no matter how weak or unpopular he might be. Furthermore, in the confusion created by the economic depression and natural calamities of the fourteenth century, the security offered by even oppressive monarchical rule had a seductive appeal in France.

Louis X, known as "the Stubborn," died in 1316, to be succeeded in rapid succession by his two brothers. When the second died in 1328, the Capetian line, which had succeeded from father to son for over three hundred years, came to an end, leaving the
French for the first time in centuries facing a disputed succession. By the most common feudal usage the crown would have passed to the daughter of Philip the Fair or at least through her to her male progeny. But her son was none other than the young Edward III of England. Confronted with the prospect of an English king mounting the French throne, the royal lawyers announced that the crown should not descend to, or through, a woman and gave the succession to the son of Philip's brother, thereby creating the new Valois dynasty. Later, when controversy raged over this decision, the lawyers argued that it was based on an ancient Frankish custom which they termed the "Salic Law." Thus they established a principle that lasted as long as the French monarchy and that entailed a series of serious consequences.

If at first the establishment of a new dynasty appeared a reasonable solution of the problem, that impression was quickly dispelled by Philip VI, who proved to be a quixotic fool. Edward, who could easily claim he had been excluded from his rightful succession to the crown of France, saw an irresistible temptation in the evident frivolity of his successful rival. When Philip intervened brutally in a civil struggle in Flanders, where English interests and influence were dominant, Edward seized the opportunity for which he had been waiting by declaring himself king of France; Philip responded by declaring Edward's French fiefs forfeited. With these actions both kings
contributed significantly to the complicated causes which embroiled France in the disastrous Hundred Years' War.

Even though it is unlikely that Edward really expected to occupy the French throne, his claim provided him with both a convenient pretext and an excellent lever for extracting concessions from his rival. The contention between them quickly found a focus in fiefs, notably Saintonge and the Bordelais, which Edward held directly from the French crown. This extremely rich wine-producing region had been in English hands since the twelfth century and its trade with London was an important source of income. Not surprisingly, the English intended to retain this last and most valuable part of their ancient Duchy of Gascony no matter what the cost. The French crown lawyers, on the other hand, had come to regard as anachronistic all feudal relationships that were not of advantage to the king. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, therefore, they were very much inclined to consider Edward's fiefs an integral part of the French realm. As officers of the French crown they expected to establish their royal authority in Gascony just as they were doing throughout the rest of the kingdom, even if that should require the expulsion of the English. And the English, for their part, were quite as determined to eliminate all royal hindrances in order to extend their feudal title to outright possession and control of the lucrative fief.
Armed conflict over this area had already broken out briefly during the reigns of Edward I and Philip the Fair, and tense relations had persisted ever since.

Actually, however, it was not in Gascony but Flanders that the French and English first came to serious blows. Economically, Flanders was one of the most advanced and prosperous regions of Europe. Its very prosperity, however, produced special problems both at home and abroad. The unusual business methods which had evolved with, and contributed to, the prosperity of the towns of the region made intolerable the traditional feudal relations either with the local aristocracy or the royal suzerain, the king of France. With wealth on such an unprecedented scale apparently within their grasp, the French kings were bound to resist with all their might any efforts the Flemish towns might make to gain their independence. To this end the kings regularly tried to bolster their own position and weaken that of the towns by supporting the latter's traditional enemies, the rural aristocrats. The English, who by this time were deeply involved in the Flemish wool trade, did their utmost to defend the towns and reduce the influence of the French. It was from this confused struggle that the Hundred Years' War finally erupted in 1337.

The major battles of the war were a series of disasters for the French. From experience gained fighting the Welsh and Scots, the English had discovered the value of the longbow and had developed
tactics which exploited its advantages. The French, who still relied on the traditional cavalry charge and chivalric heroism, were picked off with deadly efficiency by the English bowmen. Nor were the French able to adopt or counter this new technique. It has long been thought that social prejudice against common soldiers prevented them from developing an infantry of their own, but the problem was much more complex. Mastery of the bow demanded both great skill and great strength and therefore, much like mastery of the art of fighting on horseback, required constant practice, effectively placing it beyond the capacities of ordinary peasants. The French, thus, had little to put against the new English tactics except courage. As a result, when the two armies met directly on the field, the numerically inferior English invariably prevailed and, at Crécy in 1346 and Poitiers ten years later, crushed the French in two of the most famous battles of the Middle Ages.

The French king, John the Good, who had succeeded Philip VI in 1350, was taken prisoner in the total defeat at Poitiers and carried off to England. France was left in chaos. As a contemporary chronicler noted, “Thenceforward infinite harm, misfortune, and danger befell the French people for lack of good government and adequate defense.” It was in this difficult period, however, that John’s son, Charles, was able to rally the people in the French countryside to defend themselves against the maraud-
ing English. He then obtained a temporary respite by signing the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360, which gave Edward III outright possession of Gascony in the south and Calais and Ponthieu in the north in return for renunciation of his claim to the French throne. John the Good was freed on the promise of an enormous ransom, but when it became clear the French could never raise it, John gallantly returned to England, where he died in 1364.

Awed by their own glittering triumphs in the field, the English were convinced that they could completely conquer France. But the fact was they could not. Lacking the manpower to occupy and garrison so large a country, they could never fully subdue French opposition. Yet the war dragged on because the English king needed the prestige of victories, and his barons lusted for the profits of plunder. Like Falstaff's ragtag comrades, they were responsive to the cry:

Let us to France; like horse-leeches my boys,
To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck.

Under the resourceful leadership of Charles V, who formally succeeded his father in 1364, the French began to defend themselves effectively when the English broke the tenuous truce and resumed hostilities. In the wily Breton Bertrand du Guesclin, Charles found a military commander of unusual talent. Taking a leaf from the book of the famous Ro-