

# The Monarchs' Revolution

One revolution calls forth another. When the Protestant Reformation of the 16C had done its best and its worst while destroying unified Christendom, its worst—namely the protracted<sup>1</sup> war of sects—hastened<sup>2</sup> the Monarchical Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup>. Its twofold Idea was “monarch-and-nation” and its double goal was stability and peace. The sects had challenged or broken authority everywhere; some means must be found to restore order through a new loyalty and a new symbol.

The symbol was *monarch*, not king. There had been kings in Western Europe for a thousand years, but no matter what their ambition had been they had remained “first among equals” rather than “one and only.” Their peers, the great noble houses, had endlessly challenged or infringed<sup>3</sup> their authority, fought to usurp<sup>4</sup> their title, and ruled like kings of large parts of their country. Each was the legitimate force in his own country or dukedom. As a result, boundaries were always shifting. What was France? Burgundy? Italy? Austria? Savoy? Wholes or parts, they were at the mercy of rulers seeking wealth and power by conquering provinces not only nearby but far afield. France and Spain fought Italy to annex some piece of it, just as the English had done in France for centuries. Indeed, for 400 years after their departure, the English in their coronation<sup>5</sup> service continued to claim France as part of their king’s realm and to sport the lilies of France on the English coat of arms. Within each country, strong nobles kept enlisting the aid of some foreign king to dislodge their own and take his place. The idea of a *nation*, a continuous, stable territory with an increasingly homogenous<sup>6</sup> population, was hardly clear in theory, let alone in practice.

Nation implies the nation-state, the one source of authority, just as *monarch* when compared to *king* means undisputed rule by one alone. This double development—king into monarch, realm into nation—is the mark of the revolution, in keeping with the definition given earlier; a violent transfer of power and property in the name of an idea.

This change in the meaning of kingship and country did not take place all at once throughout Europe. Local traditions and the chances of war and of character in kings account for the variations of speed and of phase that made this revolution take over 200 years. If this seems odd for a “revolution” remember that revolution is a process not an event. We think of the French Revolution in a capsule form—1789 to 94’, but what occurred then had antecedents<sup>7</sup> in polemics<sup>8</sup> and practice, and the Idea of the outbreak—the rights of man, equality, suffrage<sup>9</sup>, and “no king”--took 100 years to be finally accepted, either in France or among the other western nations. As for the idea of the nation-state, it is still in the future for some peoples in various parts of the world. Their struggles are a remote consequence of the revolutionary monarch-and-nation idea, as well as a paradox in our time, when kings are few and the nation as a form is falling apart in the countries that first made it a reality.

The story of that accomplishment is long and complicated and need not occupy us at length.

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1 Protracted: Lasting for a long time or longer than expected.

2 Hastened: Quickened

3 Infringed: Act so as to limit or undermine (something).

4 Usurp: Take (a position of power or importance) illegally or by force.

5 Coronation: The ceremony of crowning a monarch.

6 Homogenous: Of the same kind; alike.

7 Antecedents: A thing or event that existed before.

8 Polemics: A strong verbal or written attack on someone or something.

9 Suffrage: the right to vote.

A reminder of a few facts will suffice to show the pattern. In 15C Spain, the union of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile through the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella was enhanced by the conquest of Granada and the expulsion or assimilation of the Moors and the Jews. The local assemblies were gradually subdued to the central power, the very test of monarchy. In the 16C Portugal came under Spanish rule but broke away after a half-century, making two nations in the peninsula.

In England, again in the late 15C, the Wars of the Roses (coalitions of great lords) came to an end, also by a marriage and a victory, and the first two Tudors ruled almost as monarchs. Henry VIII had to face one rebellion, and by Elizabeth's time internal troubles returned and weakened autocratic<sup>10</sup> rule. Tried again by Charles I it collapsed in the Civil Wars. Not until the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (no revolution but a glorious compromise) was the English monarchy a solid institution. Two failed attempts to overthrow it in the 18C showed its strength. Note in passing that after 1066 the English never had a line of *English* kings: William the Conqueror was Norman; the Plantagenets were French; the Tudors were Welsh; the Stuarts were Scots, and the Hanoverians, Germans. These shifts and turns no doubt helped Parliament to retain powers that a sustained monarchy might well have extinguished.

In Sweden, the Vasa family succeeded early in governing the entire Scandinavian region, and did not falter, despite the death of Gustavus Adolphus, in the Thirty Years' War and the abdication<sup>11</sup> of the wondrous Christina. Poland in the 16C was a nation in spirit and seemed to have a sole ruler, but unhappily he was an elective monarch, and one particularly hamstrung, because the nobles who chose him enjoyed each a veto on the acts of the law-making body. It was institutional anarchy and contradiction. The two semi-nations, the Netherlands and Switzerland, created by the comprehensive treaty that ended the Thirty Years' War, managed their affairs without a monarch by schemes as composite as their group of provinces. Two larger, indefinite regions, Germany and Italy, were unable to overcome their past and seize the benefits of revolution. They remained divided into small units for some 200 years, suffering the harm of division and causing harm to others by their tempting weakness.

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Barzun, Jacques. *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 years of Western Cultural Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

### Thinking Questions:

- 1) What was the twofold idea and goal of the 17C's Monarchical Revolution?
- 2) What is the difference between a King and a *Monarch*?
- 3) What is a *nation*?
- 4) According to Barzun, why did England's Parliament remain strong?**

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<sup>10</sup> Autocratic: relating to a ruler who has absolute power.

<sup>11</sup> Abdication: a formal resignation and renunciation of powers.