From the 11th century, the House of Plantagenet, rulers of the County of Anjou, established its dominion over the surrounding provinces of Maine and Touraine, then built an "empire" from England to the Pyrenees, covering half of modern France. Tensions between France and the Plantagenet empire would last a hundred years, until Philip II of France conquered, between 1202 and 1214, most continental possessions of the empire, leaving England and Aquitaine to the Plantagenets.

Charles IV the Fair died without an heir in 1328.[42] The crown passed to Philip of Valois, rather than Edward of Plantagenet, who became Edward III of England. During the reign of Philip, the monarchy reached the height of its medieval power.[42] However Philip's seat on the throne was contested by Edward in 1337, and England and France entered the off-and-on Hundred Years' War.[43] Boundaries changed, but landholdings inside France by English Kings remained extensive for decades. With charismatic leaders, such as Joan of Arc, French counterattacks won back most English continental territories. France was struck by the Black Death, from which half of the 17 million population died.[44]

The French Renaissance saw cultural development and standardisation of French, which became the official language of France and Europe's aristocracy. France became rivals of the House of Habsburg during the Italian Wars, which would dictate much of their later foreign policy until the mid-18th century. French explorers claimed lands in the Americas, paving expansion of the French colonial empire. The rise of Protestantism led France to a civil war known as the French Wars of Religion.[45] This forced Huguenots to flee to Protestant regions such as the British Isles and Switzerland. The wars were ended by Henry IV's Edict of Nantes, which granted some freedom of religion to the Huguenots. Spanish troops[46] assisted the Catholics from 1589 to 1594 and invaded France in 1597. Spain and France returned to all-out war between 1635 and 1659. The war cost France 300,000 casualties.[47]

Under Louis XIII, Cardinal Richelieu promoted centralisation of the state and reinforced royal power. He destroyed castles of defiant lords and denounced the use of private armies. By the end of the 1620s, Richelieu established "the royal monopoly of force".[48] France fought in the Thirty Years' War, supporting the Protestant side against the Habsburgs. From the 16th to the 19th century, France was responsible for about 10% of the transatlantic slave trade.[49]

During Louis XIV's minority, trouble known as The Fronde occurred. This rebellion was driven by feudal lords and sovereign courts as a reaction to the royal absolute power. The monarchy reached its peak during the 17th century and reign of Louis XIV, during which France further increased its influence.[50] By turning lords into courtiers at the Palace of Versailles, his command of the military went unchallenged. The "Sun King" made France the leading European power. France became the most populous European country and had tremendous influence over European politics, economy, and culture. French became the most-used language in diplomacy, science, and literature until the 20th century.[51] France took control of territories in the Americas, Africa and Asia. In 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, forcing thousands of Huguenots into exile and published the Code Noir providing the legal framework for slavery and expelling Jews from French colonies.[52]

Under the wars of Louis XV (r. 1715–1774), France lost New France and most Indian possessions after its defeat in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). Its European territory kept growing, however, with acquisitions such as Lorraine and Corsica. Louis XV's weak rule, including the decadence of his court, discredited the monarchy, which in part paved the way for the French Revolution.[53]  
  
Louis XVI (r. 1774–1793) supported America with money, fleets and armies, helping them win independence from Great Britain. France gained revenge, but verged on bankruptcy—a factor that contributed to the Revolution. Some of the Enlightenment occurred in French intellectual circles, and scientific breakthroughs, such as the naming of oxygen (1778) and the first hot air balloon carrying passengers (1783), were achieved by French scientists. French explorers took part in the voyages of scientific exploration through maritime expeditions. Enlightenment philosophy, in which reason is advocated as the primary source of legitimacy, undermined the power of and support for the monarchy and was a factor in the Revolution.

The French Revolution was a period of political and societal change that began with the Estates General of 1789, and ended with the coup of 18 Brumaire in 1799 and the formation of the French Consulate. Many of its ideas are fundamental principles of liberal democracy,[54] while its values and institutions remain central to modern political discourse.[55]

Its causes were a combination of social, political and economic factors, which the Ancien Régime proved unable to manage. A financial crisis and social distress led in May 1789 to the convocation of the Estates General, which was converted into a National Assembly in June. The Storming of the Bastille on 14 July led to a series of radical measures by the Assembly, among them the abolition of feudalism, state control over the Catholic Church in France, and a declaration of rights.