The next three years were dominated by struggle for political control, exacerbated by economic depression. Military defeats following the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in April 1792 resulted in the insurrection of 10 August 1792. The monarchy was abolished and replaced by the French First Republic in September, while Louis XVI was executed in January 1793.

After another revolt in June 1793, the constitution was suspended and power passed from the National Convention to the Committee of Public Safety. About 16,000 people were executed in a Reign of Terror, which ended in July 1794. Weakened by external threats and internal opposition, the Republic was replaced in 1795 by the Directory. Four years later in 1799, the Consulate seized power in a coup led by Napoleon.

Napoleon became First Consul in 1799 and later Emperor of the French Empire (1804–1814; 1815). Changing sets of European coalitions declared wars on Napoleon's empire. His armies conquered most of continental Europe with swift victories such as the battles of Jena-Auerstadt and Austerlitz. Members of the Bonaparte family were appointed monarchs in some of the newly established kingdoms.[57]

These victories led to the worldwide expansion of French revolutionary ideals and reforms, such as the metric system, Napoleonic Code and Declaration of the Rights of Man. In 1812 Napoleon attacked Russia, reaching Moscow. Thereafter his army disintegrated through supply problems, disease, Russian attacks, and finally winter. After this catastrophic campaign and the ensuing uprising of European monarchies against his rule, Napoleon was defeated. About a million Frenchmen died during the Napoleonic Wars.[57] After his brief return from exile, Napoleon was finally defeated in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo, and the Bourbon monarchy was restored with new constitutional limitations.

The discredited Bourbon dynasty was overthrown by the July Revolution of 1830, which established the constitutional July Monarchy; French troops began the conquest of Algeria. Unrest led to the French Revolution of 1848 and the end of the July Monarchy. The abolition of slavery and introduction of male universal suffrage was re-enacted in 1848. In 1852, president of the French Republic, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Napoleon I's nephew, was proclaimed emperor of the Second Empire, as Napoleon III. He multiplied French interventions abroad, especially in Crimea, Mexico and Italy. Napoleon III was unseated following defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and his regime replaced by the Third Republic. By 1875, the French conquest of Algeria was complete, with approximately 825,000 Algerians killed from famine, disease, and violence.[58]

France had colonial possessions since the beginning of the 17th century, but in the 19th and 20th centuries its empire extended greatly and became the second-largest behind the British Empire.[59] Including metropolitan France, the total area reached almost 13 million square kilometres in the 1920s and 1930s, 9% of the world's land. Known as the Belle Époque, the turn of the century was characterised by optimism, regional peace, economic prosperity and technological, scientific and cultural innovations. In 1905, state secularism was officially established.

France was invaded by Germany and defended by Great Britain at the start of World War I in August 1914. A rich industrial area in the north was occupied. France and the Allies emerged victorious against the Central Powers at tremendous human cost. It left 1.4 million French soldiers dead, 4% of its population.[60][61] Interwar was marked by intense international tensions and social reforms introduced by the Popular Front government (e.g., annual leave, eight-hour workdays, women in government).

In 1940, France was invaded and quickly defeated by Nazi Germany. France was divided into a German occupation zone in the north, an Italian occupation zone and an unoccupied territory, the rest of France, which consisted of the southern France and the French empire. The Vichy government, an authoritarian regime collaborating with Germany, ruled the unoccupied territory. Free France, the government-in-exile led by Charles de Gaulle, was set up in London.[62]

From 1942 to 1944, about 160,000 French citizens, including around 75,000 Jews,[63] were deported to death and concentration camps.[64] On 6 June 1944, the Allies invaded Normandy, and in August they invaded Provence. The Allies and French Resistance emerged victorious, and French sovereignty was restored with the Provisional Government of the French Republic (GPRF). This interim government, established by de Gaulle, continued to wage war against Germany and to purge collaborators from office. It made important reforms e.g. suffrage extended to women and the creation of a social security system.

A new constitution resulted in the Fourth Republic (1946–1958), which saw strong economic growth (les Trente Glorieuses). France was a founding member of NATO and attempted to regain control of French Indochina, but was defeated by the Viet Minh in 1954. France faced another anti-colonialist conflict in Algeria, then part of France and home to over one million European settlers (Pied-Noir). The French systematically used torture and repression, including extrajudicial killings to keep control.[65] This conflict nearly led to a coup and civil war.[66]

During the May 1958 crisis, the weak Fourth Republic gave way to the Fifth Republic, which included a strengthened presidency.[67] The war concluded with the Évian Accords in 1962 which led to Algerian independence, at a high price: between half a million and one million deaths and over 2 million internally-displaced Algerians.[68] Around one million Pied-Noirs and Harkis fled from Algeria to France.[69] A vestige of empire is the French overseas departments and territories.