

CHAPTER
14

HISTORYMAKERS

Joan of Arc

Pious Peasant, Courageous Leader

Section 4

“As long as I lived at home, I worked at common tasks about the house, going but seldom afield with our sheep and other cattle. I learned to sew and spin . . . When I was 13, I had a voice from God to help me govern myself.”—Joan of Arc, describing her early life

One of the most remarkable stories in the history of Europe was the tale of Joan of Arc. In an age when men held political power, this girl inspired a people. In a time when nobles determined the fate of kingdoms, this peasant changed the course of history. Spurred by faith, Joan of Arc rescued France from domination by England. Subjected to a harsh trial and abandoned by the king she restored to the throne, she was put to death for heresy.

In the early 1400s, England was winning the bitter Hundred Years’ War against France. Henry V of England forced the French to accept him as the heir to the insane Charles VI, the king of France. Charles VI’s son was also named Charles and called the dauphin, the French title for the successor to the throne. He was disinherited, though, with the acceptance of Henry V as the heir. However, in 1422 both Charles VI and Henry V died. The dauphin was able to control southern France. The English held the north, and the powerful French duke of Burgundy, who was allied to the English, held much of eastern France. Joan’s hometown of Domrémy remained loyal to the dauphin, however.

The English hoped to gain control of southern France by capturing the city of Orléans. They laid siege to the city, and French soldiers were barely able to defend it. Then Joan arrived.

Born around 1412, she had led the life of a typical village girl until about 1425, when she began to have visions of saints who spoke to her. She said the saints “told me of the pitiful state of France and told me that I must go [help] the king of France.” After failing to gain an audience with the future ruler twice, she was finally accepted. She had to travel 11 days through enemy lines to reach the dauphin and was initially treated with suspicion. After being examined, she was found to be pious and sincere. Charles gave her the rank of captain, equipped her with a detachment of soldiers, and sent her to join the fighting at Orléans.

Joan reached the city and began to inspire hope. She made the French soldiers renounce their sinful

practices and dedicate themselves to a holy fight. Her arrival also brought needed supplies, and her accurate predictions of what would occur in the battle won the soldiers’ confidence in her. On May 7, 1429, the French were about to be overrun. Joan, injured, cried “In God’s name, charge boldly!” She led a counterattack that brought a French victory. The English ended the siege, and soon French forces had defeated the English in many nearby towns.

On Joan’s urging, Charles’ forces moved farther north. They won many cities, either in battle or simply because the towns began to recognize the dauphin’s authority. On July 17, the heir was crowned as King Charles VII in the city of Reims.

In the fall, Joan was again wounded in a failed attack on the English army at Paris. During the following spring, she attacked the English again, this time against the wishes of Charles. He wanted to end the war through diplomacy. In May of 1430, she was surrounded and captured by the forces of the duke of Burgundy. He quickly gave her to the English, who put her on trial for heresy. Hearing the voices of saints, they charged, was a sign of witchcraft. Charles did nothing to gain her release.

Joan stood firm through most of the long trial. French church officials under control of the English questioned her honesty. The church officials threatened her with torture and produced false evidence. Finally, weakened, she signed a paper renouncing the voices she heard and was sentenced to life in prison. Soon, though, the church said she had resumed her sorcery and condemned her to death. On May 30, 1431, she was burned at the stake.

Questions

1. **Making Generalizations** Describe the political situation in France when Joan began to see visions.
2. **Recognizing Facts and Details** Give two examples of Joan’s courage.
3. Find examples to support the idea that Joan was devoutly religious.