

The accomplishments of cardinal richelieu



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Up until the mid 17th century, it was evident that France was by no means a major player in the field of European affairs. Spain was still the most powerful state as it held a dominant monopoly over European commerce and economics. However, by 1648, this power would shift, and France would come into its own in terms of political and economic influence. The transfer of power was aided by a weakening of the Spanish Empire, along with the establishment of an increasingly strong French state. This establishment of France would begin to occur prior to the religious wars, and would be spearheaded by a strengthening of the centralized government through the development of royal absolutism. The most significant contributor to this movement was Cardinal Armand du Plessis de Richelieu, political advisor to the king, Louis XIII, and head of the French Roman Catholic Church. The Cardinals capable leadership, ambition and strong will fortified Frances move from a second rate country to a European powerhouse. During his reign as first minister, Richelieu would accomplish numerous tasks, and establish himself as a symbol of power and leadership in France. Born in Paris in 1585, Armand du Plessis de Richelieu is considered by many to have been " the most important single figure in the building of French absolutism" . Despite his role in distinguishing France on the European map, some of the Cardinals greatest personal accomplishments lie before his reign as first minister. To best understand these accomplishments, in particular how a " middle ranking ecclesiast" of little influence would become the most successful of the Kings political advisors, it is best to look into his personal background. Probably the Cardinals greatest assets in his rise to the top were his strong ambition and will. These characteristics can be traced back to his father, Francois Richelieu, whose own ambition and military accomplishment helped

gain him the reigning Kings, Henry III, favor. This rise in favor, along with the establishment of important family connections, would allow Francois to " tap into royal ecclesiastical patronage" . Armand eventually benefited from this by gaining the title of Bishop of Lucon. Unfortunately, before Richelieus father could create any form of financial establishment, he died, and left the family in debt. However, the message he left his sons, in particular Armand, was not one of failure, but rather one of what could be accomplished when one was willing and ambitious. This attitude would set the stage for the son of Richelieu, who would use his religious status as bishop and educated background along with some important family connections to help pull his way to the top. It took Richelieu a full decade to accumulate the title of Cardinal and he would suffer a number of political setbacks along the way. But, by the year 1624, Richelieu had gained entrance into the kings council, and soon after became the kings personal advisor. His decade long assent provided him with the education needed to maintain an 18 year reign (until his death in 1642) which would see the beginnings of French dominance in Europe. Although King Louis XIII and Richelieu would eventually work together to create a politically dominant France, it is important to note that their relationship was not always as such. Prior to his roles as political advisor and Cardinal, Richelieu entered the queen mothers court by becoming the secretary of state during her regency. At this point, Richelieu would suffer a major upset in his political assent when Louis overthrew his mothers court and took political control of France in 1617 . Affiliation with the Queen Mothers court and suspected implication in attempted rebellions against Louis kept the future Cardinal in exile for a number of years. However, the Queen Mother and her son would eventually come to a

<https://assignbuster.com/the-accomplishments-of-cardinal-richelieu/>

temporary peace settlement, and when she was reinstated, so was Richelieu. More importantly, as advisor to the Queen Mother, Richelieu had shown a "political shrewdness and wisdom" that had gained Louis favor. The king was willing to overlook Richelieu's earlier associations and an overbearing administrative style that he had once likened to tyranny, and appointed him to council in 1624. The Cardinal soon became the king's advisor through his ability to provide help in relation to conflicting religious and secular interests and his display of able political decisions. Although the king had provided the Richelieu with much political influence, he still had strong personal notions of where he wanted his state to go, and the characteristics of his advisors. Part of the Cardinal's success was due to his ability to conform to the king's ideas, and at the same time execute a strong influence over council. The resulting relationship entailed a respect of Richelieu's political ability by the King, and a respect of the King's authority by Richelieu. The result of this dual respect was the ability of Richelieu to stay in power, and be able to influence the shaping of France into a dominant European state. Even before he had become first minister, Richelieu recognized the need for change in the governing of French affairs. He would portray his views in a speech to the queen mother's court in 1616, his first public address, during which he outlined the weaknesses of the present-day structure of government. Once he had become first minister, Richelieu set out to eliminate these weaknesses in order to create a more stable French state. One of Richelieu's main objectives to allow for a fortification of France's European position lay in a strengthening of the country's internal political structure through the establishment of an absolutist monarchy. Richelieu saw three main ways to fully and successfully establish this ideal monarchy; to deal with any threat

of Religious conflict; to "humble the great men", that is, reduce noble power; and to bring the subjects to their duty, which meant full loyalty to their ruler, King Louis XIII. Richelieu's first issue, to deal with Religious conflict or threat, was focused mainly on the Huguenots. The Huguenots of France were a group that had benefited substantially from the Edict of Nantes signed in 1598 as it permitted them both political influence and military presence. Richelieu saw both of these privileges as a direct threat to the crown since they conflicted directly with the ideology behind his absolute monarchy. Not only this, but he foresaw in this political and military power the means and makings of a revolt, especially should the Huguenots gain foreign support. Revolt would eventually occur as the Huguenots, aided by the British, rebelled against the French crown in the city of La Rochelle. Richelieu quickly crushed the rebellion and stripped the Huguenots of all political and military power through the signing of the Edict of Alais in 1629. It is important to note however, that Richelieu did not persecute the Huguenots for religious belief despite his position as Cardinal of the French Catholic Church. This religious lenience reflects the Cardinal's priorities of state in his search for political stability, something which religious dispute and conflict had shown to disrupt in the past. Richelieu also focused his attention on the types of people who were to fill ecclesiastic roles, especially the high church officials. It had been made obvious to Richelieu through past example, that the scandalous and flamboyant lives often led by these church officials did little else than annoy the common public and thus endanger the stability of the state. Richelieu aimed to fill the church hierarchy with "persons of both merit and commendable habits". This would not only cleanse the church's image, but allow Richelieu to strategically place

<https://assignbuster.com/the-accomplishments-of-cardinal-richelieu/>

allies and supporters within the church hierarchy. The Cardinal employed this same strategy to gain supportive factions in both the military and civil offices. Richelieu's second focus area was the aristocrats, a class which he saw as an important organ of the state "capable of contributing much to its preservation and stability". This recognition of aristocratic importance, however, did not override the Cardinal's ambitions for absolute monarchy, and he placed the affairs and powers of state far above those of the nobles. In short, the Cardinal recognized the need to limit the aristocratic domain, and impose upon it royal law and order. It had become obvious to the Cardinal, that a lack of enforcement of centralized power, on the part of the French government, had allowed the French nobles to develop a sense of defiance towards the crown. Some of the major land-holding aristocrats had grown particularly powerful and independent. This resulted in a lack of loyalty towards the crown as many nobles felt that their position placed them above the status of royal subjects. Richelieu would come down hard on the nobility through a restriction of their rights, and independence. By implementing the spy system, Richelieu effectively crushed any conspiracies and thereby eliminated any major internal threat to the king. The rigidity and severity of the Cardinal's methods were quite evident, as portrayed in the punishment of Seigneur Bouteville, who was executed for fighting a simple duel on the Place Royal. This restriction of dueling would become one of the Cardinal's target areas since it was a show of noble military presence, no matter how seemingly insignificant. The end result of this and other restrictions placed on the nobles was an enforcement of state dominance through example. It wasn't long, however, before the nobles took up arms to defend their decreasing independence and began revolting. One such revolt

occurred at Laguedoc, in 1632, under the leadership of the politically influential Duke of Montmorency . Richelieu responded to this and other conflicts by defeating the rebels, using the Kings forces, and executing the participants. Through this thorough and methodical defeat of the aristocracy, the Cardinal effectively established King Louis as the sole symbol of power in France. The other major group that Richelieu wished to reform was what he referred to as the " third order of the realm" . This third order was composed of three groups: the judiciary, the finance officers, and the common people. Richelieus goal in the reformation of these groups was to clearly define their roles as subjects of the king, and thus further enforce kingly power over all affairs and aspects of the state. When it came to the judiciary and finance officers, Richelieu attempted to dispell their perceived corruption through a strategic placement of allies who displayed more " merit" in office. Again, to forcefully establish crown dominance in the state, Richelieu would employ the use of state officials. The officials effectively carried out their role of executing government orders within the state, and using force to deal with any attempt to refuse them. The result was a successful enforcement of kingly authority over the states' provinces and kings subjects; the " commoners". In an attempt to set an example for the role of these commoners Richilieu discouraged their education. The cardinal explained that " one would find little obedience and an excess of pride and presumption" in a country made up entirely of educated people. Richelieu would instead encourage the kings subjects to take a greater interest in the military rather than the luxuries of education. This definition of the subjects' roles displayed the Cardinals further ambition of military strength and French expansion in Europe. It is usually assumed that just as Richelieu had a " clear

<https://assignbuster.com/the-accomplishments-of-cardinal-richelieu/>

plan to create an absolute monarchy in France", he wished to "expand French power abroad". At the time, one of the best ways to expand a country's influence in Europe was to establish a strong navy. This would become one of the Cardinal's focus areas as he sought to create a fleet of ships capable of transporting goods, and providing adequate protection in the process. The result was a strengthening of the country's economic and political status through increased trade of French and foreign goods. To fortify French presence to a greater extent, Richelieu showed his support of the arts and education by founding the French Academy. The country would greatly increase its output of art and writings and eventually establish itself as a cultural model for the rest of Europe. Another method that allowed the Cardinal to strengthen France's position in Europe was through a fortification of the military. This proved to be extremely useful during the course of the ensuing religious wars which would see France come out victorious over a declining Spanish empire. From a middle ranking and uninfluential bishop, to the man who molded France into a European powerhouse, Armand du Plessis de Richelieu achieved a number of accomplishments on a number of levels during the course of his life. The Cardinal not only established himself politically, but stabilized the French state through absolute monarchy, and introduced to Europe a new dominant France. Perhaps one of the only failures lay in his inability to stabilize the French Economy, which would spiral upward during his reign, and ultimately become the country's downfall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite this, it is clearly the political ability, ambition and will of Cardinal Richelieu that would allow him to mold France into a political and cultural "model" for the rest of Europe.

and earn him the respect of historians and contemporaries as " a true man of destiny" .