

Age of Empires – Balancing Imperial Commitments Between the First and Second World Wars

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By the early 20th century, Britain and France both held vast empires but their importance differed significantly. Britain was an island nation and relied on trade for her survival, wealth and influence. It was empire that made Britain a great power. As such, British military strategy, capability and force structure was centred on her navy's global dominance, supported by a small professional army structured to protect the Home Islands and garrison its interests abroad.¹ Resource expenditure leading up to the 20th century allowed Britain to establish a dominant navy. Combined with geographic isolation, this allowed her to adopt a unique 'British way of warfare'. Liddell Hart described it as the indirect approach, where Britain would avoid large scale continental commitments in Europe and instead protect her empire and trade using her navy, whilst subsidising her allies to do the fighting for her.²

In contrast, the continental position of France meant that she would always have an enemy at the gates. This focused France's national and military strategy on the continent. As a result, France's expenditure, military capabilities and force structure differed from Britain. France's military centre of gravity was her offensively focused and large conscript army. It was France's continental capabilities that made it a great power. France's empire, despite yielding economic benefits, was focused on reinforcing its global influence and prestige rather than being seen as critical to its national security.³ Different geographies and strategic cultures had a significant influence on the importance of empire and in the way Britain and France balanced their imperial commitments from 1900–1939.

The essay will argue that imperial commitments did not severely constrain Britain and France's ability to prepare for and win the First World War. The interwar period did however see imperial commitments or their military, strategic and political culture severely constrain

¹ David French. *The British way in warfare, 1688-2000*. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), xv.

² French, *The British way in warfare*, xv.

³ Robert Gerwarth and Manela Erez. *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. First ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 126.

Britain and France's ability to prepare for and fight war in Europe. Firstly, it will be demonstrated that the rise of Germany as the principal threat leading up to the First World War enabled both Britain and France to consolidate their imperial commitments through diplomacy. This enabled them to effectively prepare their nations and their respective empires for war in Europe. Secondly, empires reinforced Britain and France's financial, economic and demographic strengths allowing them to wage a war of attrition more effectively than the Central Powers. Imperial capabilities also provided Britain and France with strategic flexibility which enabled them to effectively isolate and defeat Germany in Europe. Lastly, the outcomes of the First World War saw Britain and France adopt different imperial and military strategies. Their respective approaches led to military force structures and capabilities that undermined their ability to fight wars effectively in Europe and compromised their industrial capacity to prepare for the Second World War. For Britain, these constraints were caused by her imperial commitments. For France, these constraints were caused by political, military and strategic culture, rather than imperial commitments.

Consolidation for War (1900–1914)

The years before the First World War can be best described as a period of imperial and strategic consolidation. The rise of Germany was the principal threat to both British and French national interests. This strategic focus allowed them to maximise the benefits of diplomacy to isolate Germany and effectively balance their imperial commitments in preparation for war.

The end of the Second Boer War in 1902 marked the turning point in British imperial strategy. The dismal performance of Britain's colonially focused army demonstrated that it was not capable of waging a modern continental war. More importantly, the huge costs of the campaign confirmed Britain's preference for waging war using an indirect approach.⁴ British global consolidation also allowed the French to seize this strategic opportunity to better balance imperial commitments and focus her military capabilities on the continent.

⁴ Rhodri Williams, *Defending the Empire, The Conservative Party and British Defence Policy 1899-1915* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), 9.

British and French strategic consolidation commenced with the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902.⁵ This alliance reduced the need for Britain to maintain a significant naval capability in the Far East and the Pacific.⁶ In 1904, Britain withdrew from the western hemisphere and signed the Anglo-French Entente which strengthened the relationship between the two powers and allowed France to benefit from Britain's alliance with the Japanese.⁷ By virtue of their alliance with the British, Japan was unable to contest French interests in the Far East and the Pacific. The Anglo-Russo Entente in 1907, mitigated the Russian threat to India and allowed Britain to consolidate her forces for a European war.⁸ The Anglo-French Entente continued to develop into more clearly defined strategic areas of interest. This allowed Britain to focus her sea power in the North Sea, whilst the army focused on the Home Islands and the northern provinces of France. It also allowed France to consolidate her naval power in the Mediterranean and focus her army on her continental eastern frontier.⁹ Britain also supported France's claims in Morocco during the Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911. This enabled France to deny Germany influence within her empire and consolidate her position in North Africa.¹⁰ It is evident that Britain and France used diplomacy effectively to consolidate their global commitments. This consolidation reduced the costs of managing their empires and allowed Britain and France to reorganise, modernise and reinforce their respective military capabilities and force structures to fight a war in Europe.

From the end of the Second Boer War to the commencement of the First World War, British military capabilities, force structure and focus changed significantly. Military garrisons across the empire were rationalised. By 1906, the number of overseas battalions was on par with those on the Home Island.¹¹ The Territorial and Reserve Forces Bill of 1907 enabled the development of a Territorial Force of up to 300,000 soldiers that would be available to supplement the regular 90,000 strong British Expeditionary Force (BEF).¹² The British Army

⁵ French, *The British way in warfare*, 155.

⁶ Paul, M Kennedy. 'The End of Pax Britannica (1897-1914)', in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London: Macmillan, 1983), 213.

⁷ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 213.

⁸ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 212.

⁹ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 227.

¹⁰ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 213.

¹¹ French, *The British way in warfare*, 162.

¹² French, *The British way in warfare*, 162.

was reorganised into units that included their own organic artillery, engineers, supply and medical services and military exercises were conducted at the divisional level.¹³ At the end of the Second Boer War, the British Army received only three percent of annual defence spending, not including the cost of fighting campaigns.¹⁴ From 1905 until the onset of war, Army funding increased an average of 30 percent annually. By 1914, BEF was arguably the most highly trained and modern army in British military history and was focused on fighting a war in Europe.¹⁵

The Royal Navy was also reorganised and refocused into European waters. Naval squadrons across the globe were consolidated in Singapore and thereafter to the North Sea. Small and old naval vessels were scrapped and ship building focused on technologically advanced battleships and battle cruisers. These initiatives, combined with diplomatic efforts allowed the Royal Navy to maintain a two power standard in European waters until 1912.¹⁶ At this time, the excessive cost of new technology and increases in German shipbuilding saw Britain adopt a 60 percent power standard based on the German High Seas Fleet.¹⁷ Prior to the commencement of the First World War, the Royal Navy had established a dominant Grand Fleet in the North Sea. The Grand Fleet was the most capable and technologically advanced combined arms flotilla in naval history and was focused on a war in Europe.

Diplomatic measures and imperial consolidation also allowed France to reinforce the strength of its military and aligned its focus on the European continent. At the turn of the 20th century, French military strength lay in its conscript Metropole Army which numbered 3.5 million men.¹⁸ The French Navy, secured colonial trade and enabled Colonial Army campaigns across the empire. The strengthening of the Anglo-French Entente in 1912 allowed the Navy to focus purely on the Mediterranean. As the prospect of war increased, Colonial Army campaigns were limited in funds and French military manning was withdrawn.¹⁹ In 1913, the term of service for conscripts increased from two to three years. This increased her standing peace

¹³ French, *The British way in warfare*, 161.

¹⁴ French, *The British way in warfare*, 169.

¹⁵ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 217.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *The End of Pax Britannica*, 218.

¹⁷ French, *The British way in warfare*, 164.

¹⁸ French, *The British way in warfare*, 154.

¹⁹ David Thomson. *France: Empire and Republic, 1850 – 1940. Historical Documents* (London: MacMillan, 1968), 311-315.

time army from 690,000 in 1913 to 827,000 men by 1914.²⁰ It also increased the size of her fully mobilised army to four million which was effectively consolidated in France and ready for war in Europe.²¹

British and French spending increased dramatically leading up to the war. British defence estimates at the start of the 20th century totalled 21.5 million pounds to navy and 600,000 pounds to the army over a five-year period.²² The rise of Germany saw spending for the navy gradually increase to 49 million pounds annually by 1914, whilst annual spending on the army peaked at approximately five million.²³ French defence estimates started at 42.4 million francs in 1900, increased to 52.4 million in 1910 and rose to 57.4 million by 1914.²⁴ Despite her smaller population, France conscripted more men than Germany prior to the onset of the First World War.²⁵ Assessing this expenditure in light of military concentration in the North Sea and on the eastern frontier provides clear evidence that empire did not significantly constrain Britain or France in preparing to fight a war in Europe.

Britain and France were also able to prepare their respective empires for war through numerous foreign policy initiatives. This allowed them to draw upon the resources of empire in preparation for war and set the conditions for their continued contribution to the war effort. British measures in India for example saw the introduction of censorship laws that enabled the gradual redeployment of its garrison of over 70,000 men back to Europe. By 1915, the British garrison had been reduced to as few as 15,000 soldiers.²⁶ British influence over Indian Foreign Policy also enabled the development of an Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF). The IEF not only numbered 250,000 but was paid for by the Indian Government, a cost that would normally reside with the British Government.²⁷ The introduction of the Government of Ireland Act of 1914 is another example of pre-war imperial preparation. This bill promised Ireland

²⁰ Jean Bau. *Land pre-World War One*. Presentation to Australian Command and Staff College (Joint), Weston Creek, Canberra, March 9, 2018.

²¹ William Simpson and Martin Jones. *Europe 1783-1914, Third Edition* (London: Routledge, 2015), 408.

²² French, *The British way in warfare*, 164.

²³ French, *The British way in warfare*, 152-164.

²⁴ Simpson and Jones, *Europe 1783-1914*, 406.

²⁵ Bau, *Land pre-World War One*. Presentation, March 9, 2018.

²⁶ Robert Gerwarth and Manela Erez. *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. First ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 154-155.

²⁷ Patrick K. O'Brien. *The Costs and Benefits of Imperialism 1846-1914*, in *Journal, Past and Present*, Vol 120, issue 1, pages 163-200 (Oxford Journals, 2017), 188.

home rule and mitigated the risks of a local uprising during the war.²⁸ Another example was Britain's provision of a naval squadron to the Royal Australian Navy prior to the onset of war.²⁹ This contribution allowed for the protection of Australia and reinforced her global naval strength.

France was also effective in managing her empire in the lead up to the war. In 1913, France introduced conscription in a number of her colonies. This allowed her to conscript and deploy up to 90,000 indigenous troops as well as the majority of her Colonial Army back to France prior to the commencement of the war.³⁰ Lastly, in the years leading up to the outbreak of war, resources for the conduct of campaigns across the empire were almost non-existent. French colonial commanders received almost no funds for their campaigns and were reliant on local revenue streams to fund their campaigns.³¹ These initiatives demonstrate both Britain and France were effective in preparing their nations and their empires for the onset of the war in Europe.

Effective diplomacy enabled Britain and France to consolidate their strategic commitments. This allowed for the reorganisation, modernisation and reinforcement of their respective military capabilities with a clear focus on a war in Europe. For Britain, this was a military strategy based on the indirect approach. For France, alliances with Britain and Russia would split Germany's efforts across two fronts and enable her reinforced conscript army to achieve a quick and decisive victory on the continent. Foreign policy initiatives also enabled Britain and France to mitigate possible commitments to their empires during the war. These initiatives allowed them to rationalise their imperial garrisons and draw resources and manpower from their respective empires to reinforce their military capabilities in preparation for war in Europe. Britain and France were both required to balance imperial commitments with their preparation for war but these commitments did not severely constrain their preparations for war in European waters or on the continent.

²⁸ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 154-155

²⁹ Nicholas, Lambert. 'Sir John Fisher, the fleet unit concept, and the creation of the Royal Australian Navy,' in *Southern Trident: Strategy, History and the rise of Australian Naval Power*, David Stevens & John Reeve, eds. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 224.

³⁰ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 120.

³¹ Thomson, *France: Empire and Republic, 1850 – 1940. Historical Documents*, 311-315.

Fighting the First World War

The First World War was a war of attrition. It demanded the total mobilisation of nations to support the generation of mass armies, to equip and sustain them and to support their campaigns across the globe. For France and Britain their empires contributed significantly to their success in the war. Empires provided much needed money, resources and manpower to wage a war of attrition. This support enabled Britain and France to rapidly change or reinforce their respective force structures and supplement their industries to achieve victory in Europe.

Financial support and the provision of raw material from across their empires allowed Britain and France to outproduce the Central Powers. Britain spent close to two billion pounds on the conduct of the war. Australia, Canada and India spent an additional one billion on the war effort whilst other colonies provided direct financial support.³² The empire enabled Britain to feed her population and supply her war industries. Much of Britain's food, timber, cotton, iron, rubber, gold and silver came from her empire.³³ Some colonies also supplemented the war effort directly. Canada for example, produced 3,000 military aircraft and by 1917, 30 percent of all ammunition used on the Western Front came from Canada.³⁴

France also benefited from imperial financial contribution during the war. Her empire provided over 1.5 billion francs in financial support and shipped over 5.5 million tonnes of raw materials to France during the war.³⁵ Importantly, empire provided most of her foodstuffs as Germany's initial seizure of French territory undermined her self-sufficiency.³⁶ Although, direct financial support to France only accounted to approximately two percent of her total expenditure on the war, access to critical resources cannot be underestimated.³⁷ Importantly, not only did empires guarantee the provision of resources to Britain and France, it denied them to the Central Powers, thereby multiplying the benefits of empire in an industrial war of attrition.

³² Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 154-155.

³³ Wilkinson R.J. *Imperial Economy*, (London: Sifton Praed & Co, 1930), 68.

³⁴ Glen St John, Barclay. *The Empire is Marching: A Study of the Military Effort of the British Empire: 1800-1945*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 81.

³⁵ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 112-114.

³⁶ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 112-114.

³⁷ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 112-114.

Empires also contributed significantly to the manpower requirements of the war. Britain's empire provided well over two million soldiers, approximately 30 percent of her fighting power during the war.³⁸ For France, the manpower benefits of empire were far more important than financial benefits. As the French Minister of War in 1914, Adolphe Messimy stated "Africa has cost us heaps of gold, thousands of soldiers, and streams of blood. We do not dream of demanding the gold from her. But men and the blood, she must repay them with interest".³⁹ Of the eight million men mobilised by France throughout the First World War, half a million or approximately 16 percent came from across her empire.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Britain and France also secured in excess of one million labourers and workers from across their empires to supplement their factories and military logistics.⁴¹ It is evident that manpower and resources from across their empires allowed Britain and France to wage an industrial war of attrition more effectively than the Central Powers. For France, this additional manpower reinforced the strength of her army and supported her industry. For Britain, it supported the restructuring of her military from a naval focused capability, to a land-based capability on continental Europe.

Empires also allowed Britain and France to fight a global war against the Central Powers. These victories reinforced the morale of Britain and France and forced the Central Powers to split their efforts across multiple fronts. This undermined the ability of Germany to draw resources from her allies for fighting on the Western Front and reinforced her isolation, supporting her defeat in Europe. Examples of these campaigns include British and French conquests across Africa as well as Australian and New Zealand conquests in the South West Pacific.⁴² These actions denied Germany the use of global port facilities, enabled the destruction of German communication stations and supported the global domination of oceanic trade routes.⁴³ Actions closer to Europe include the Mesopotamia, Gallipoli, Salonika and Palestinian campaigns. Many of these campaigns were manned heavily by indigenous or colonial forces allowing British and French troops to concentrate on the fight in Europe.

³⁸ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 154-155.

³⁹ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 118.

⁴⁰ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 118.

⁴¹ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 146.

⁴² Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 140.

⁴³ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 140.

Despite the failure of some of these campaigns, they did force the Central Powers to fight the war on multiple fronts, undermining their ability to effectively concentrate solely on the war in Europe.

Some historians have suggested that the imperial campaigns across the globe undermined Britain and France's ability to fight the war in Europe. Campaigns such as Gallipoli, Salonika, Mesopotamia and Palestine, drew thousands of British, French and colonial troops away from the Western Front. The rapid redeployment of British Army Divisions from Palestine back to the Western Front during the German Spring Offensive in 1918, is a historical action that supports this argument.⁴⁴ Although there may be some merit to this argument, it fails to acknowledge the character of war on the Western Front. To suggest that an additional 1-200,000 colonial troops on the Western Front would have changed the course of the war has as much merit as claims that the offensive spirit of the infantry alone can overcome the combined defensive capability of the machine gun and artillery. It also fails to recognise that it was the success of the Palestinian and Salonika campaigns that marked the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and triggered the collapse of the Central Powers alliance.⁴⁵ The strategic flexibility that colonial troops provided Britain and France in the conduct of a world war far outweighed the benefit of larger troop concentrations on the Western Front.

It is also important to note that Britain and France's focus on fighting the First World War in Europe did not see imperial uprising across their respective empires disappear. For example, British and French troops were still required to quell uprisings in Ireland and Morocco during the war. All of these uprisings were however dealt with rapidly or with such violence that they remained dormant until after the war.⁴⁶ Although these actions did have consequences for the stability of Britain and France's empires after the war they did not severely constrain them in the conduct of the First World War.

⁴⁴ Matthew Hughes. *General Allenby and the Palestine Campaign, 1917-18*, in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1996). 71-80.

⁴⁵ Bau, Jean. *World War One - Palestine*. Presentation to Australian Command and Staff College (Joint), Weston Creek, Canberra, March 26, 2018.

⁴⁶ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 118.

In a war that demanded the effective mobilisation of entire nations both Britain and France were able to benefit greatly from their empires. Empire allowed Britain to change her military strategy and force structure to “fight the war she must, rather than the war she wanted”.⁴⁷ Empire allowed France to continue to reinforce her Metropole Army in Europe, or fight campaigns across the globe. Importantly, empires provided Britain and France with strategic flexibility across the globe. This allowed Britain and France to maintain continuous pressure on the Central Powers. This eventually triggered the collapse of their alliance and isolated Germany enabling her defeat in Europe. It is evident that imperial commitments did not severely constrain Britain and France’s ability to fight war in Europe. More correctly, they supported and enabled Britain and France to win the First World War.

1919–1939 – Over-extension, Culture and the Death of Industry

The First World War left Britain and France with massive national debt, catastrophic losses of manpower and a psychological aversion to war. Imperial conquests, combined with League of Nations Mandates also resulted in the growth of their empires. Importantly, the war changed the global balance of power. The combination of these outcomes saw Britain and France develop and pursue different imperial and military strategies during the interwar years. Both strategies led to significant changes in force structure and capability that severely constrained their ability to fight and prepare for war in Europe. For Britain, these constraints were primarily due to her imperial commitments. For France, these constraints were primarily due to her culture, rather than her commitment to empire.

After the war, Britain refocused her strategy on maximising the economic benefits of empire. From 1919, military estimates were based on the assumption that Britain would not be involved in a great war for at least ten years.⁴⁸ The ‘Ten Year Rule’ combined with naval disarmament treaties ensured that military capabilities were only developed or maintained to meet the strategic needs of the time rather than preparing to fight a future war in Europe.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ French, *The British way in warfare*, 170.

⁴⁸ John Ferris. *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 120-137.

⁴⁹ David G, Chandler and Ian Becket. *The Oxford History of the British Army*, (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 260-271.

The army was reduced from 3.5 million to 350,000 and effectively evolved into a ‘Cinderella Service’ with the primary task of imperial policing.⁵⁰ Disarmament treaties limited the strength of the navy and eventually saw it lose its position of dominance against Japan.⁵¹ The growth of the Royal Air Force (RAF), came at the expense of both the navy and army but threat of French air strikes and support to imperial policing saw it expand to 70 squadrons by 1929.⁵² These changes left the British military incapable of dealing with imperial emergencies let alone capable of preparing for war in Europe.

The Chanak Crisis in 1922 is a clear example of British strategic overextension. At the height of the crisis, the British military was unable to effectively reinforce her garrison on Turkey against an advancing Turkish Army.⁵³ The Shanghai Crisis in 1932 is another example. When the Japanese launched a major military campaign in Shanghai, the British military were unable to respond and were reliant on a coalition of naval squadrons to secure her interest.⁵⁴ The Abyssinian Crisis in 1935 is another example. The British response to the crisis was limited to oil sanctions against Italy and the reinforcement of her imperial possession in the Mediterranean.⁵⁵ This was based on advice from the Admiralty that any naval losses in the Mediterranean would undermine their ability to commit to the Far East against Japan.⁵⁶ It is evident that Britain’s military reforms and overextension saw her unable to effectively balance her imperial commitments or fight a war in Europe.

For France, the First World War had demonstrated the benefits of empire. The Ministry of Colonies developed a plan that would see the continued exploitation of her colonies and make them more productive and economically viable.⁵⁷ The realities were significantly different. France’s heavy-handed management of her empire during the war left many colonies and their economies devastated.⁵⁸ As a result, the French fought in more battles than any other great

⁵⁰ French, *The British way in warfare*, 181.

⁵¹ French, *The British way in warfare*, 186.

⁵² French, *The British way in warfare*, 168.

⁵³ Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 121.

⁵⁴ Paul Haggie. *Britannia at Bay, the Defence of the British Empire against Japan 1931-1941*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981), 24-53.

⁵⁵ Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, 88.

⁵⁶ Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, 88.

⁵⁷ Christopher M, Andrew and Kanya-Forstner A.S. *France Overseas - The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 226.

⁵⁸ Gerwarth and Erez, *Empires at War*, 120-126.

power during the interwar period.⁵⁹ The cumulative cost of these campaigns over the interwar period was significant. The French campaigns in Syria for example, cost over four billion francs from 1920 to 1936.⁶⁰ The cost of empire was a heavy burden and effectively resulted in the Minister of Colonies losing government support and becoming a 'Cinderella Ministry'.⁶¹

It is evident that France's imperial commitments had a financial impact on France's ability to prepare for and fight wars in Europe. This being said, despite the burdens of empire and their poor financial position, the French spent more on defence than any other great power throughout the interwar period, until 1936.⁶² It must also be acknowledged that it was not the Colonial Army that was defeated in Europe but rather the entire French military. This indicates that the most severe constraints for France's ability to fight and prepare for war in Europe were not her imperial commitments but rather internal to the Metropole Army and the government.

Victory for France in the First World War also served to confirm the superiority of its army and doctrine and reinforced the belief that future wars would also be total wars. As a result, French military strategy was centred on the strategic defence and methodical battle.⁶³ German disarmament and financial constraints enforced the initial reductions in the size of the Metropole Army but it was fundamentally France's military, strategic and political culture that severely constrained her ability to fight and prepare for war in Europe. For example, a review of defence needs by the army in the 1920s indicated that 80 divisions were required to defend France but the government allowed for only 32 divisions.⁶⁴ Political pressure also saw conscription reduce to 12 months in 1930.⁶⁵ This reduced the standing army to 320,000 by 1933, two thirds of which had less than six months experience.⁶⁶ These reforms effectively limited French military options to accepting 'total war or no war'.⁶⁷ The German reoccupation

⁵⁹ Robert A. Dougherty. *The Seeds of Disaster, The Development of French Army Doctrine 1919 – 1939*. (Connecticut: Archon Press, 1985), 87.

⁶⁰ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas*, 245.

⁶¹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas*, 19.

⁶² Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 183.

⁶³ Eugenia C Keisling. 'Resting uncomfortably on its laurels: The army of interwar France.' Chap. 1 in *The Challenge, of Change: Military Institution and New Realities, 1918-1941*, edited by Harold Winton and David Mets, 1-25. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 8-11.

⁶⁴ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 19.

⁶⁵ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 19.

⁶⁶ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 22.

⁶⁷ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 36.

of the Rhineland in 1936 demonstrates French military limitations perfectly. On German reoccupation, the government was considering military action against Germany. However, the military indicated that even limited mobilisation would result in the call up of approximately '1.2 million men, force the mobilisation of industry and cost 20 million francs per day'.⁶⁸ The same advice was provided to ministers when intervention into the Spanish Civil War was being considered.⁶⁹ It is evident that France's military capability and force structure undermined her ability to wage even limited wars in Europe.

Reinforcing France's constrained capability and force structure was her military's inability to learn and adapt in the interwar years. New doctrine and ideas were generally suppressed by the continual reinforcement of lessons learnt from the First World War.⁷⁰ Exercises that involved experimentation were only allowed when a senior officer was present.⁷¹ Ideas that espoused the generation of separate, professionally trained mobile armoured divisions were undermined by senior military officers or the government for being too offensive in nature or politically unpalatable.⁷² As such, new weapon systems and advances in mechanisation were simply integrated into their doctrine of the methodical battle.⁷³ This culture also undermined their ability to learn and adapt from operations such as the Rif War in 1925. Despite the success of independent tank formations across the Sahara throughout the Rif War, these lessons were not deemed relevant to war on the continent.⁷⁴ Another example is the Spanish Civil War where French military observers simply used the war to reinforce the merits of France's existing doctrine.⁷⁵ The French military's inability to adapt and learn resulted in the poor employment of their own military capabilities. This failure combined with their strategy of the defence saw their most potent combat forces diluted across the entire front and unable to deny armoured penetration into France. In the interwar years, fewer imperial commitments may have allowed France to spend more on her Metropole Army. This however, would not have changed her doctrine, nor her organisational design for battle which were the decisive

⁶⁸ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 36-37.

⁶⁹ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 36-37.

⁷⁰ Keisling, 'Resting uncomfortably on its laurels: The army of interwar France,' 11.

⁷¹ Keisling, 'Resting uncomfortably on its laurels: The army of interwar France,' 11.

⁷² Bond, Brian, and Martin Alexander. 'The Doctrines of Limited Liability and Mobile Defense.' in *Makers of modern strategy: from Machiavelli to the nuclear age*, edited by Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 613-620.

⁷³ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 5-11.

⁷⁴ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 87-89.

⁷⁵ Dougherty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 89.

factors in her defeat. It is evident that it was France's military, strategic and political culture that severely constrained her ability to fight wars in Europe, rather than her imperial commitments.

Arguably, the most severe constraint for both Britain and France in their preparation for war was their industries' inability to support rearmament in the late 1930s. For Britain, this failure is a direct result of her imperial strategy. For France, this failure was a result of her military and political cultures. For Britain, the end of the First World War saw the flight of capital to her empire.⁷⁶ As a result, British industry struggled to remain globally competitive. The continuation of the 'Ten Year Rule' combined with naval disarmament treaties often saw ship building delayed or cancelled completely resulting in the closure of firms.⁷⁷ The continued growth of the RAF in the interwar period allowed her to maintain an effective British aero industry. Contracts were limited to only a few companies allowing them to achieve financially viable economies.⁷⁸ This being said, the RAF's focus on strategic bombing and imperial substitution did undermine the development of a capable monoplane until late 1938.⁷⁹ As a result, only limited numbers of these planes were available for the initial fighting in Europe.

The biggest failure of British industry was for the British Army. The army's reduced force structure and focus on imperial policing undermined the financial viability of many armament industries and forced them to close or refit to civilian production.⁸⁰ The costs of mechanisation resulted in very few armoured units and a lack of money for research, development and experimentation.⁸¹ Contrary to many claims, the BEF that deployed to France in 1939 was far from the most advanced mechanised army in the world. It possessed less than 50 percent of its anti-tank weapons, no new artillery pieces and only 60 Infantry Support Tanks out of the 1,646 required.⁸² It is evident that imperial strategy caused

⁷⁶ Ian M. Drummond. *British Economic Policy and Empire: 1919 – 1939*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), 9.

⁷⁷ French, *The British way in warfare*, 188.

⁷⁸ David Stevenson. *Strategic and military planning 1871 – 1914 within The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty*, edited by Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 165.

⁷⁹ Stevenson, *Strategic and military planning 1871 – 1914 within The Fog of Peace and War Planning*, 172.

⁸⁰ French, *The British way in warfare*. 198.

⁸¹ Chandler and Becket, *The Oxford History of the British Army*, 260-263.

⁸² Chandler and Becket, *The Oxford History of the British Army*, 270-271.

significant damage to industry which severely constrained Britain's ability to prepare for war in Europe.

French industry throughout the interwar period benefited from post war reconstruction, investment and the repossession of lost territories. From 1936, the French Arms Budget also rose substantially providing the necessary funds for her industry to rearm and equip the military.⁸³ It was not however, a lack of funds that undermined France's military rearmament but rather her political and military culture.

The rise of the Popular Front led to large scale industrial unrest across France in 1936.⁸⁴ This unrest caused the loss of months of production, led to the introduction of the 40-hour working week and undermined the establishment of mass assembly lines across the country.⁸⁵ The impact on industrial production was catastrophic. For example, it took five years to produce 198 B-Tanks from 1936 to 1940, half of which were produced in 1940, post formal industrial mobilisation.⁸⁶ It took four times as long to produce a French Morane 406 aircraft than it took to produce a vastly superior Messerschmitt.⁸⁷ Even large orders for aircraft from America were denied by the French Manufacturers Lobby.⁸⁸ Reinforcing the inefficiency of the civilian work force was ineffective military decision making. Different arms of the military would often champion the development of different types of vehicles and aircraft. In the air force for example, in-fighting saw the continued development of prototypes followed by a small order for planes, only to be cancelled by new leadership.⁸⁹ This produced an air force of many different air planes, most of which were obsolescent from the commencement of the war.⁹⁰ Military, strategic and political culture not only severely constrained France's ability to fight but also severely undermined the ability of her industry to support preparations for war.

Britain and France's imperial commitments in the interwar period did have an influence on their ability to prepare and fight wars in Europe. Britain's strategic overextension combined

⁸³ Alistair Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969), 60-64.

⁸⁴ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 60-64.

⁸⁵ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 60-64.

⁸⁶ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 60-64.

⁸⁷ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 78.

⁸⁸ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 77.

⁸⁹ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 76.

⁹⁰ Horne. *To Lose a Battle, France 1940*. 75-77.

with her commitment to the financial bottom line saw her adopt a force structure that denied her the ability to effectively act not only in Europe but also across her empire. The threat of Germany, Italy and Japan provided her with a strategic dilemma that left her with only one option, the defence of the Home Islands via the Royal Navy and RAF but no ability to fight in Europe. For France, her imperial commitments did constrain her financially but this impact was not decisive in her defeat. It was her strategic, military and political culture that denied the French military the ability to recognise the changing character of war and adapt to survive. Imperial commitments and culture also resulted in the death of both British and French armament industries, which severely constrained their ability to prepare for war in Europe.

Conclusion

A review of British and French imperial and military strategy between 1900 and 1939 provides some clear conclusions and lessons. It is evident that in the lead up to and in the conduct of the First World War both Britain and France were effective in balancing their imperial commitments to prepare for war. A common enemy provided them with a strategic focus that allowed them to prepare for the war in their respective 'ways of war'. The character of war forced both Britain and France to modify their strategies to survive and win. In a total war of attrition, their empires facilitated victory through the provision of money, material and manpower. Additionally, their empires provided a level of strategic flexibility that undermined their enemies across the globe and supported success in Europe.

In the interwar period, it is evident that imperial commitments and culture severely constrained their ability to prepare and fight war in Europe. The outcomes of the First World War shaped Britain and France back towards their respective centres of gravity and undermined their ability to adapt, learn and prepare for war in Europe. In the interwar years, both Britain and France became oblivious to the changing character of war in Europe. Reinforcing their inability to effectively fight war in Europe was the impact their strategy and culture had on industry. This alone denied them the ability to effectively prepare for war.

Recognising the impact that military, strategic and political culture can have on undermining national and organisational adaptation and learning is a key lesson identified in this essay.

Understanding the perils of strategic overextension and ‘going it alone’ is another important lesson. The final critical lesson identified, is the ability to recognise the impact that the first two factors can have on a nation’s industrial capacity and its ability to support the preparation and conduct of war. All of these are highly relevant to Australia, which is geographically isolated and reliant on both trade and alliances for her wealth, security and key armaments.

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