

Britain and the league of nations before wwii



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Why Was Britain So Ill-Prepared for War in 1939?

Consequences of WWI

The representatives of the states that met at Versailles in the first half of 1919 were confronted by a world in deep turmoil. The war was over but it appeared that a significant threat still remained in the form of the rapid spread of bolshevism. Right wing governments were springing up in Eastern Europe, and the victors of the war were worried. ^[1] A reaction to this, and as something of a punishment to Germany, was the redrawing of borders throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Huge swathes of various nations were effectively removed and annexed by a neighbouring state. Germany's eastern frontier, for example, was moved far to the west of its previous position, removing part of Silicia, West Prussia and Poles from German control and given to neighbouring states. Germany was not the only state to suffer, however, Russia lost vast areas of land in the west and Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania became independent states. ^[2]

This realignment of Europe was widely unpopular and provided some of the seeds for future conflict, it was only achievable through the new instrument of international diplomacy, the League of Nations. The mandate of this new league was to maintain peace in Europe. Refusal to abide by the dictates of the league would result in economic or military sanctions; the main problem was that the league did not directly command any troops and its actions required the unanimous consent of all members. Great Britain, after the deprivations of the First World War, seemed little interested in getting too heavily involved in the affairs of its European allies and hoped the League would essentially remove that responsibility.

Britain showed such revulsion at the prospect of another (or further) was that in 1919 Winston Churchill, former First Lord of the Admiralty, persuaded the British government to adopt a rule whereby “ for the purpose of framing the (defence) estimates, (it should be assumed) that at any given date there will be no major war for 10 years.” [3] This so called ten year rule was officially renewed every year until 1932, and even then Britain took no significant steps towards rearmament until 1937. This ten year rule meant that if war was to break out in Europe again, Britain was certain to be caught unprepared.

Hitler

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 on the back of deep resentment of the treatment of Germany by the western allies at the end of the First World War. In 1934 he had been shown a demonstration of the potential of the new tank arm that was being developed in secret by Guderian, [4] and by the following year three panzer divisions were under construction. [5] By 1935 his power base was strong enough for him to renounce the clauses of the treaty of Versailles that limited the German army to 100, 000 men; he reintroduced conscription and decreed the creation of the Luftwaffe, banned by Versailles. [6] By 1936 Hitler has negotiates a treaty with Britain that allowed him to build U-boats and he sent troops to unilaterally occupy the demilitarised Rhineland. In 1937 the new German army had 37 infantry divisions and three panzer divisions, in comparison to the seven allowed by Versailles, a total strength of three million men, the following year saw the strength of the newly formed Luftwaffe at 3350 (zero in 1932). [7]

While obvious rearmament was underway in Germany, and the French were building the Maginot line (clearly expecting and preparing for 'static' trench warfare) along the border with Germany, the British steadfastly refused to re-arm, believing in the principle of the ten year rule.

The economic situation in Great Britain was poor after WWI, unemployment was high and the economy generally was performing very poorly indeed. This situation was not at all aided by the great depression that developed with stunning rapidity in the United States. This can be juxtaposed with the booming German economy where unemployment had fallen from five and a half million to less than one million under Hitler, ^[8] it is perhaps not too surprising that Britain felt ill equipped financially or perhaps emotionally (after the deprivations of trench warfare) to rearm or resist German expansion until it was too late.

Failure of the League of Nations

The great hope of the British (and to a very large extent of the other western powers) was that any potential for future conflict in Europe would be obviated by the League of Nations; this was its very reason for existing in the first place. A series of devastating setbacks for the League essentially exposed its impotence. Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 (a member of the league), was met with economic sanctions at the behest of the British, but this only drove the Italians into Hitler's arms (a long time admirer of Mussolini). The next crisis for, and failure of, the League came the following year: civil war in Spain led to an uprising by General Franco. The government were supported by Russian troops and Franco by Italians. Taking this opportunity Hitler entered into an anti-communist treaty with the

government of Japan, and as it became apparent that Franco was winning the civil war, and while the attentions of the world were elsewhere, he annexed Austria; ^[9] two weeks later the Sudetenland. This series of seriously mishandled crises demonstrated that the League of Nations was totally ill equipped to perform a peace keeping role in Europe and it disintegrated. Britain's (and Churchill's faith in the League and the ten year plan had been seriously flawed).

Britain Re-arms – Treasury Resists

The main consequence for the British and the French of the events of 1935-6 was a sudden realisation that rearmament was required, and quickly. The situations in Abasynnia, Spain and Germany clearly demonstrated the, at best, inability, and at worst incompetence of the League of Nations. The only possible conclusion for the British by the mid 1930's was that the only way to deter aggression, and future war, was with a significant military presence. Baldwin had been elected to office in Britain the back of a promise to rearm. British public opinion, then, was in favour of rearmament, but political leaders remained strangely opposed. By 1936 the military budget was increased to £136 million, but this was still only half of that of Germany, and they newly created post of Minister of Public Defence was given to the weak Sir Thomas Inskip rather than someone like Churchill. ^[10] This new post had been described simply as a “ treasury break on the demands of the service”, ^[11] which is to say a means of keeping down military expenditure.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Chamberlain firmly believed that the economy was the fourth branch of the armed services. He believed that

economic stability was of prime importance and that it could not be put at risk in order to rearm the country. He believed that economic strength would act as a deterrent to any potential enemy and that financial strength could enable the nation to purchase any military equipment it may need as and when required, thus permanent rearmament was not deemed a priority. ^[12] Chamberlain in fact argued that the economy simply could not bear the strain of rearmament. His military logic was seriously and obviously flawed, be argued that if Germany made war in the east, this was simply too far away for the British to do anything about it, and if they invaded France or the Low Countries, the British would not be able to react fast enough, therefore a large standing army was not necessary. ^[13]

There were also serious strategic discussions in Britain at the time; should rearmament be based on land forces or on the navy and air force. Some believed in the magical power of the newly developing air forces. General John Burnett-Stuart ^[14] argued that an appropriately large and well equipped air force could far better perform the role of the expeditionary force in protecting the Low Countries and indeed in winning a war with far less risk of loss of life. ^[15] Britain, then, was in serious disarray as to what strategy to pursue, and was not given the financial backing to pursue any strategy fully.

Strategy – *Blitzkrieg*

The question may presuppose that Britain was ill prepared in simply practical terms, be they military or economic, but there is far more to the question than that. Britain, and indeed every one else in the world, was seriously ill prepared for war in 1939 in terms of strategic thinking as well.

It has often been noted that large wars begin with the strategy of the last major war; this was not the case in World War II. World War I had effectively begun with Napoleonic tactics that developed into static, and devastating, trench warfare. The building of the Maginot line by the French is a strong indication that a future war (i. e. WWII) would again be a static war in the mould of trench warfare. ^[16] The Germans, however, had other ideas. Heinz Guderian had fought in WWI and seen the stupidity of trench warfare, and the potential of the tank if properly utilised. During the inter war years he developed a strategy of mobile warfare, ^[17] later to become infamously known as *blitzkrieg*, ^[18] lightning war. He came to believe, and persuaded Hitler of the same, (as noted briefly above) that the panzer, utilised in massed formations, could act as a hammer and smash a hole through the enemies' defensive line. Following this initial action (to be preceded by artillery bombardments and air strikes) ^[19] the fast moving panzer divisions, ^[19] along with mechanised infantry units, ^[20] could stream through this gap in the line and drive quickly deep into enemy territory, seriously disrupting their lines of communication and supply. These units could then be used to encircle slow moving (or static) enemy infantry.

Conclusion

This new strategy, new philosophy, was the second strand to Britain's unpreparedness (and indeed everyone else's too). For one of the few times in history, Germany entered the war with an entirely new philosophy, one for which their entire armed forces had been forged and developed to utilise with devastating effect. The British, French, Russians etc. were utterly unprepared for an offensive of the scale that Hitler launched, or for the

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tactics that were being employed. In every campaign, highlighted spectacularly in Poland, the Low Countries and France, the *Wehrmacht* were capable of moving far faster than the allies could counter.

I have tried to argue throughout this brief essay that Britain was not the only nation to be ill prepared for war with Germany in 1939. The lack of preparation was partly due to poorly placed faith in the League of Nations and in the ten year plan, but also on an unwillingness to properly invest in the armed forces until it was too late to deter war. The allies were also utterly unprepared for the new kind of warfare brought by the Germans and it is this final point that leads to the conclusion that even if funding had been available and rearmament had taken place much earlier, would it have made a difference given the vastly superior strategy and technology employed by the *Wehrmacht*.

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Footnotes

[1] Kagan, 1995, 285.

[2] Kagan, 1995, 287.

[3] Keegan, 1993, 366.

[4] More on Guderian later.

[5] Barnett, 1989, 444-5

[6] Keegan, 1993, 367.

[7] Keegan, 1993, 368.

[8] Fuller, 1956, 369.

[9] Fuller, 1956, 371.

[10] Kagan, 1995, 367.

[11] Taylor, 1965, 390.

[12] Kagan, 1995, 370-1.

[13] Kagan, 1995, 371.

[14] Kagan, 1995, 3.

[15] This is an idea that seems somewhat ahead of its time, the first time this occurred (an air force essentially winning a war) was the first Gulf War of 1991.

[16] Guderian, 1937, 36-38.

[17] Macksay, 1965, 57-79.

[18] Messenger, 1976.

[19] Guderian, 1937, 167-170.

[20] Guderian, 1937, 171-173.