



How Long Before the Sunset ? British attitudes to war, 1871-1914

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Rowena Hammal examines the fears and insecurities, as well as the bombast and jingoism, in British thinking.

British attitudes to war in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have frequently been described as 'jingoistic'. This term, which originated in 1878 from a music hall song supporting British intervention in the Russian-Turkish war, is helpful in depicting an increasingly bullish and popular imperialism which was a feature of the period. However, the paradox of late imperialism was that its swagger and bombast were accompanied by deep insecurities. Many contemporaries feared that the British Empire had reached its zenith and was destined to collapse, and that the security of Britain itself was also in doubt. A stream of popular 'invasion' literature highlighted the threat which other European powers, particularly the newly formed Germany, posed to mainland Britain. The ruling classes worried about the 'degeneration' of the British population, fearing that Britain would not have the military strength to vanquish its enemies in the 'war to come', a conflict which was increasingly seen as inevitable. This article will examine the causes and the impact of these fears.

A New Power

A rising Germany was the cause of much British insecurity. Under Bismarck, the new Germany successfully defeated France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, and in doing so realigned the axis of power in Europe. The British now looked towards Germany, rather than France, as their greatest threat. They did not like what they saw: rapid industrial growth, imperial ambitions, a fierce Prussian militarism and, ominously, conscription. Compelling men to serve in the armed forces was incompatible with the British liberal tradition – a significant problem as by 1874 France, Italy, Japan and Russia had all followed the German example and adopted conscription. For Britain, an increasingly democratic country following the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, compulsory military service was politically impossible, and the policy was not adopted by either the Tories or the Liberals.

Britain's military forces had always been overstretched, as they were required to defend and police the Empire, which sprawled across the globe and was home to around 235

million people. However, in Europe, Britain's small professional army now faced a continent of large armies of conscripted soldiers. Unsurprisingly, this unequal situation generated anxiety amongst some political figures and members of the military establishment, and in so doing created a new genre of popular fiction: invasion literature. Tales and songs about French invasion had been popular since the Napoleonic Wars, but the publication of *The Battle of Dorking* in 1871 saw invasion literature become truly mainstream. Supposedly written years after a successful German invasion and occupation of Britain, it described the reasons for Britain's failure to defend itself in chillingly realistic detail. Its author, General Sir George Tomkyns Chesney, was thus able to offer to the public a devastating criticism of Britain's military strength. Chesney frequently referred to inadequate reserves ('the army was kept down, and the militia and volunteers were left untrained') and to the problem of recruitment ('a nation too selfish to defend its liberty could not have been fit to retain it'). The public responded. *Dorking* sold 110,000 copies, was translated into seven languages, and inspired a succession of responses in the form of poems, fiction, and music hall songs. The mass appeal of *Dorking* illustrates that British insecurity predated the 'new imperialism' and was grounded in European rather than Imperial affairs. Science In an era of great scientific and technological progress, Victorian intellectuals looked to science to explain the world around them. As the European powers rushed to grab colonies in the 'scramble for Africa', which saw 90 per cent of the continent fall under European control in 1881-1900, their efforts were seen in an evolutionary context. Social-Darwinism applied Darwin's theory of competition and evolutionary advantage to international relations. Stronger nations would prevail over weaker ones, which would perish while the winner enjoyed the spoils of war: colonies, wealth, security and pride.

Many historians have claimed that this idea of the 'survival of the fittest' was the cause of new imperialism, arguing that social-Darwinism became a fundamental element in imperial ideology and inspired new waves of expansion. However, the revisionist historian Paul Crook has criticised this approach. Social-Darwinist themes frequently recur in sources from the time, but Crook has shown that they tended to fit into pre-existing ideas about racial superiority, paternalism and empire. Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' is typical; the assumed racial superiority of the British did not justify uncontrolled aggression, but rather produced the responsibility of looking after 'less civilised' races. Ultimately, economic factors were more important in determining imperial policy than ideological ones. As Cecil Rhodes said in 1899, 'The people of England are finding out that "trade follows the flag" and they have all become Imperialists'. Rather than changing the direction of imperial policy, social-Darwinism was being used defensively, to explain and justify imperialism. Its zero-sum approach to imperial power also indicates the pessimism with which contemporaries viewed European imperial competition.

Popular Imperialism?

If Britain was to remain pre-eminent, it was essential to maintain support for the imperial mission at a popular level, as well as amongst the intellectual and educated classes. Britain needed men to volunteer for its army, and public opinion became increasingly important to politicians as the electorate increased. The historian John Mackenzie has described Britain as being awash with imperial propaganda, which permeated popular culture and the press, disseminating the 'dominant ideology' of militarism, monarchism, and social-Darwinism.

Undoubtedly, imperial imagery was commonplace in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Soldiers were proudly depicted on advertisements for whisky and cigarettes. There were spectacular military reviews, such as the 1897 Fleet Review to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Rising literacy rates followed the 1870 Education Act, and by the turn of the century a new type of newspaper had developed to cater to the large lower middle class market. The *Daily Mail* was founded in 1896 and the *Daily Express* in 1900,

and both were decidedly jingoistic. The *Express* declared in its first leader: 'Our policy is patriotic, our policy is the British Empire'. In the music halls, a tremendously popular form of entertainment at the time, performers sang songs about Empire and national pride.

Michael Paris' study of children's fiction found that it was steeped in imperial adventure and the 'warrior hero' archetype of masculinity. G.A. Henty wrote dozens of stories in the imperial setting, such as *The Tiger of Mysore* (1896) and *With Kitchener to the Soudan* (1903), which typically featured a very young male protagonist who saved the day. Rider Haggard's African adventure stories, notably *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), were also extremely popular with schoolboys. However, Paris showed that even the authors of such jingoistic tales were also haunted by fears of imperial decline. Henty wrote in 1885: 'The courage of our forefathers has created the greatest empire in the world around a small and in itself insignificant island; if this empire is ever lost, it will be by the cowardice of their descendants.'

Henty's aim was thus to ensure the continuity of the Empire by inspiring boys to fight for it. Many new magazines for boys were started in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and most of these carried war stories which linked virility with the defence of the Empire. Chums magazine, founded in 1892, published military accounts such as 'Fighting for Empire' and 'The Bugle Call: a thrilling story of the Zakka Khel War' (1908). Similarly, in many schools the imperial mission was woven into assemblies and history lessons. Nowhere was this more evident than in public schools, where generals frequently addressed public school pupils at prize-givings and speech days.

'Muscular Christianity', the idea that boys should develop physical strength in order to use it to advance the cause of Christianity, had developed in the 1860s and had been one cause of the emphasis on sport in public schools. The language of sport was often used by writers in their descriptions of war, to emphasise the continuity between school and the army. Henry Newbolt's second verse of *Vitai Lampada* (1897) exemplifies this:

*The sand of the desert is sodden red -
Red with the wreck of a square that broke
The gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed its banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name, B
ut the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks -
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

For the middle class boys at whom this was aimed, the effect was profound. Paris quotes the novelist Stuart Cloete to show the impact of popular imperialism on a boy at the turn of the century; 'Everything was glory to me ... I was taught to recite "The Charge of the Light Brigade" ... I used to play with my father's sword and he would tell me stories of campaigns. Of Kaffir Wars and rebellions, and colonies ... Only glory.'

Ironically, sporting and chivalric ideals were the cloak for a new imperialism which carried with it an increasingly unbalanced death toll. At the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, the use of the recently developed machine gun allowed the British to kill 11,000 Sudanese with a loss of only 28 British soldiers.

Revisionist historians have questioned the extent to which the working class were influenced by the imperial culture. Richard Price examined the popular response to the Boer War and found that members of the lower middle class, such as clerks, were keenly patriotic and avid to enlist. However, he believed that members of the working class were less committed. If they volunteered to serve in the army, it was most likely to be for economic or social gain, rather than to defend the Empire. Bernard Porter argued that the growth of 'popular imperialism' may actually have been defensive – an attempt by the nation's elites to bolster support for the British Empire even as its hegemony was being challenged by other European countries.

The Test of the Boer War

Popular support for the Empire reached a high point in the Boer War. Volunteers rushed to join up, often leaving relatively well-paid jobs to defend the Empire. The press maintained a ceaseless stream of reports from war correspondents, and used photography to make the war seem more accessible to the public. Most of the images were carefully selected to give a positive view of the conflict; the realities of the trenches were ignored in favour of posed pictures of happy troops. The famous 'Siege of Mafeking' (October 1899-May 1900) in which Colonel Robert Baden-Powell withstood a siege for 217 days, was the subject of weekly reports in pro-war publications. Baden-Powell achieved celebrity status in Britain as the 'Hero of Mafeking' and a fine example of 'British pluck', despite the fact that the siege was of limited military value. The British press preferred to describe the cricket games and plays organised by Baden-Powell to maintain morale throughout the siege, rather than to examine the poor record of the British elsewhere in the war. News of the relief of Mafeking reached Britain on 'Mafeking night', and the country went wild. Scenes of hysterical celebration shocked many contemporary observers.

Although the Boer War was perhaps the apogee of jingoistic popular imperialism, it was also the cause of new anxieties about Britain's future. Imperialists were deeply worried by Britain's inability to defeat the Boer farmers quickly. Although the Boers were well armed by Germany, they remained a small army, numbering no more than 40,000 troops at any one time. Britain required three years and 500,000 troops to defeat them, sustaining 30,000 casualties in the process.

The conflict also revealed the brutal side of British imperialism. Cruelty was preferable to humiliation for the 'island race', and so, frustrated by the Boers' guerrilla tactics, the British burnt Boer farms and forced their inhabitants into concentration camps. This was a new method of controlling the enemy, whether civilian or otherwise, and as a result of starvation, illness and the cold, 28,000 Boer children, women and men died in British camps.

Britain eventually managed to defeat the Boers, but such a hard-fought victory was cause for concern rather than celebration. Britain's military had been shown to be alarmingly weak, and this fact combined with the latent insecurities about imperial decline and European competition to produce a new and more desperate mood of anxiety and introspection. A government report published shortly after the war found that 40-60 per cent of volunteers for the army had been rejected because they were physically unfit for service. Much of the political elite, the media, and the public were shocked. How could Britain's reserve of manpower be in such a poor state? The answer was to be found in Britain's urban areas, the cities, which were a product of the industrial revolution and which had long been seen as a source of decadence. Now the condition of the industrial working class was also blamed for national degeneration.

Illness, malnutrition and relentless hard work meant that the urban poor were generally shorter, thinner, weaker and sicker than their wealthier compatriots; as a result, many had failed to pass the physical examination for the army. The social problem of poverty was

thus simultaneously a problem for national defence and imperialism. Lord Rosebery, a former Prime Minister, observed Britain's urban squalor with alarm: 'in the great cities, in the rookeries and slums ... an imperial race cannot be reared ... The survival of the fittest is an absolute truth'. Rosebery presented the fear of national degeneration in social-Darwinist terms, as did other contemporaries, and the fledgling eugenics movement formulated possible solutions to the problem. However, most responses were more practical. The historian Bernard Semmel used the term 'social-imperialism' to explain the social reforms which both political parties advocated after the Boer War. Improving the quality of working class health, housing and education would ensure a higher quality of recruits to defend the Empire, and help to maintain popular support for the Empire which would be depicted as the source of plenty.

There was a sense that the British were too liberal and too relaxed to compete with the other great powers. Kipling blamed the British obsession with sport, as it distracted men of all classes from the more serious business of war. Many commentators felt the British needed to cultivate a 'national efficiency' akin to that of the Germans or the Japanese, and called for a recalibration of society to ensure that Britain was as productive as possible. The *Times*' war correspondent L.S. Amery described 'an earnest desire to make [our] defects good', and the statesman Lord Milner called for 'a great effort ... and great seriousness'. The government responded to fears of national decay by setting up the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1903. The Committee recommended social reform to ensure healthy national stock, and endorsed military drill to improve physical fitness.

Militarising Society

The fears produced by the Boer War were not simply confined to London's political elites. The National Service League (NSL) was set up in 1901 to campaign for universal military service and compulsory military drill in schools, and from 1906 it was led by Lord Roberts, who had been commander of British forces in the Boer War. Under his high profile, dynamic leadership the League grew rapidly and set up local branches across the country, its membership increasing from 4,000 in 1906 to 98,931 in 1912. Conscription was supported by 177 MPs in 1911, and by many people from across the political spectrum. The socialist Robert Blatchford argued that 'unless the British people make greater sacrifices than they are at present prepared to make, we shall lose our Empire and our independence'. The NSL also counted many churchmen from the Church of England amongst its members. One of them put the Christian case for militarism thus: 'War is not murder but sacrifice, which is the soul of Christianity'. Yet neither of the main political parties was willing to adopt the NSL's policies: despite the deteriorating international situation British freedoms remained sacrosanct.

As military participation in Britain depended on volunteers, social attitudes to war became ever more important. The alumni of public schools were expected to fill the top positions in the armed forces, and as a result the Officer Training Corps (OTC) was set up in schools to inculcate military attitudes and train pupils in drill and shooting. However, all levels of society needed to be prepared for war. On returning from war, Robert Baden-Powell set up the Boy Scouts, providing healthy outdoor activities for boys, in a militaristic context. Although Baden-Powell always maintained that the Boy Scouts were 'peace Scouts', and did not include military drill in their activities, this was to ensure that the movement had as broad an appeal as possible. He openly admitted that the Boy Scouts were a 'potential recruiting ground', and claimed that 70 per cent of scouts went into the army. Baden-Powell aimed to combat the perceived degeneration in society by teaching boys from all classes to respect the social hierarchy and preparing them to defend the Empire – or, as he put it in *Scouting for Boys*, to 'be a brick' in the 'wall of Empire'. The tenacity with which both Roberts and Baden-Powell dedicated themselves to increasing Britain's military strength is evidence of the degree of anxiety within the military elite.

The sense of foreboding was nowhere more obvious than in fiction. Invasion literature had remained popular, and from the 1890s Germany's growing naval power meant that it was consistently depicted as threatening to invade. As the Entente Cordiale developed it became obvious that Germany and Britain would be on opposite sides of a war which was largely seen as inevitable. William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* (published in 1906) depicted a German invasion, and sold a million copies. *The Invasion of 1910* had been commissioned by Alfred Harmsworth, owner of the *Daily Mail*, who was keen both to sell papers and to campaign for a stronger military. Several different newspapers used invasion stories to promote increased defence spending as Britain competed with Germany in the naval race. This process culminated in the Dreadnought campaign, which received widespread public support with its slogan demanding more Dreadnought ships: 'We want eight and we won't wait'.

Conclusions

The impact of popular militarism on the population of Britain is hard to gauge. Sources such as newspapers, books and journals tended to be written and read by members of the upper and middle classes, and these certainly indicate that militarism became part of the British cultural landscape, a process which predated the Boer War but which gained momentum afterwards. However, historians have found it difficult to find sources which depict the response of the working class with accuracy. Richard Price's investigation of the working class during the Boer War indicated that they were less affected by jingoism than had been assumed, but it became harder to ignore the call to arms as Britain's invasion threat became more immediate.

Militaristic organisations like the NSL and the Scouts set out to target the working class, and the invasion literature and soldier-hero genres were ubiquitous in the years immediately preceding the First World War. The rush to volunteer in 1914 is evidence that a sense of duty had been instilled in the general population. Themes of glory and masculinity had been used to create a society which was ready for war, from the men who eagerly enlisted to the women who taunted civilian men with white feathers. However, fear had also played a crucial role in creating an atmosphere in which militarism was seen as essential.

As the war began in 1914 the government would use crude atrocity propaganda to harness public anxiety; the 'rape of Belgium' inspired men to enlist to prevent their women from suffering the same fate. However, these fears dated back to the Franco-Prussian War, when Germany first revealed a deadly military efficiency. The fear of invasion combined with the understandable concern that 'the Empire on which the sun never sets' might be unsustainable, and the pervasive fear that the British race was in long term decline. The Boer War was a trigger for action; a justification for the introduction of social reforms and the inspiration behind a more active form of popular militarism. The men who volunteered in 1914 were thus motivated partly by fear, and the sense that they had to act to avert a catastrophe. One seventeen-year-old volunteer described the trip to the cinema which caused him to enlist: 'they showed the Fleet sailing the high seas and played "Britons Never Shall Be Slaves" ... And you know one feels that little shiver run up the back and you know you have got to do something.' Years of exposure to imperial propaganda, invasion literature, militaristic organisations, and popular songs had combined to produce 'that little shiver'.

Issues to Debate

- Why did Britons fear decline in the period after 1870?
- In what ways did the Boer War teach the British 'no end of a lesson' (Kipling)?
- What motivated Britons to enlist in 1914?

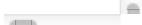
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