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978-1-108-02372-6 - The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812, Volume 1

A. T. Mahan

Excerpt

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THE  
INFLUENCE OF SEA POWER

UPON THE  
FRENCH REVOLUTION AND EMPIRE.

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

OUTLINE OF EVENTS IN EUROPE, 1783-1793.

THE ten years following the Peace of Versailles, September 3, 1783, coming between the two great wars of American Independence and of the French Revolution, seem like a time of stagnation. The muttering and heaving which foretold the oncome of the later struggle were indeed to be heard by those whose ears were open, long before 1793. The opening events and violences which marked the political revolution were of earlier date, and war with Austria and Prussia began even in 1792; but the year 1793 stands out with a peculiar prominence, marked as it is by the murder of the king and queen, the beginning of the Reign of Terror, and the outbreak of hostilities with the great Sea Power, whose stubborn, relentless purpose and mighty wealth were to exert the decisive influence upon the result of the war. Untiring in sustaining with her gold the poorer powers of the Continent against the common enemy, dogged in bearing up alone the burden of the war, when one by one her allies dropped away, the year in which Great Britain, with her fleets, her commerce, and her money, rose against the French republic, with its

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conquering armies, its ruined navy, and its bankrupt treasury, may well be taken as the beginning of that tremendous strife which ended at Waterloo.

To the citizen of the United States, the war whose results were summed up and sealed in the Treaty of Versailles is a landmark of history surpassing all others in interest and importance. His sympathies are stirred by the sufferings of the many, his pride animated by the noble constancy of the few whose names will be forever identified with the birth-throes of his country. Yet in a less degree this feeling may well be shared by a native of Western Europe, though he have not the same vivid impression of the strife, which, in so distant a land and on so small a scale, brought a new nation to life. This indeed was the *great* outcome of that war; but in its progress, Europe, India, and the Sea had been the scenes of deeds of arms far more dazzling and at times much nearer home than the obscure contest in America. In dramatic effect nothing has exceeded the three-years siege of Gibraltar, teeming as it did with exciting interest, fluctuating hopes and fears, triumphant expectation and bitter disappointment. England from her shores saw gathered in the Channel sixty-six French and Spanish ships-of-the-line, — a force larger than had ever threatened her since the days of the Great Armada, and before which her inferior numbers had to fly, for the first time, to the shelter of her ports. Rodney and Suffren had conducted sea campaigns, fought sea fights, and won sea victories which stirred beyond the common the hearts of men in their day, and which still stand conspicuous in the story of either navy. In one respect above all, this war was distinguished; in the development, on both sides, of naval power. Never since the days of De Ruyter and Tourville had so close a balance of strength been seen upon the seas. Never since the Peace of Versailles to our own day has there been such an approach to equality between the parties to a sea war.

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The three maritime nations issued wearied from the strife, as did also America; but the latter, though with many difficulties still to meet, was vigorous in youth and unfettered by bad political traditions. The colonists of yesterday were thoroughly fitted to retrieve their own fortunes and those of their country; to use the boundless resources which Divine Providence had made ready to their hands. It was quite otherwise with France and Spain; while Great Britain, though untouched with the seeds of decay that tainted her rivals, was weighed down with a heavy feeling of overthrow, loss and humiliation, which for the moment hid from her eyes the glory and wealth yet within her reach. Colonial ambition was still at its loftiest height among the nations of Europe, and she had lost her greatest, most powerful colony. Not only the king and the lords, but the mass of the people had set their hearts upon keeping America. Men of all classes had predicted ruin to the Empire if it parted with such a possession; and now they had lost it, wrung from them after a bitter struggle, in which their old enemies had overborne them on the field they called their own, the Sea. The Sea Power of Great Britain had been unequal to the task laid upon it, and so America was gone. A less resolute people might have lost hope.

If the triumph of France and Spain was proportionate to their rival's loss, this was no true measure of their gains, nor of the relative positions of the three in the years after the war. American Independence profited neither France nor Spain. The latter had indeed won back the Floridas and Minorca; but she had utterly failed before Gibraltar, and Jamaica had not even been attacked. Minorca, as Nelson afterwards said, was always England's when she wanted it. It belonged not to this power or that, but to the nation that controlled the sea; so England retook it in 1798, when her fleets again entered the Mediterranean. France had gained even less than Spain. Her trading

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posts in India had been restored ; but they, even more than Minorca, were defenceless unless in free communication with and supported by the sea power of the mother-country. In the West Indies she returned to Great Britain more than the latter did to her. "France," says a French historian, "had accomplished the duties of her providential mission" (in freeing America); "her moral interests, the interests of her glory and of her ideas were satisfied. The interests of her material power had been badly defended by her government; the only solid advantage she had obtained was depriving England of Minorca, that curb on Toulon, far more dangerous to us when in their hands than is Gibraltar."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately at this moment France was far richer in ideas, moral and political, and in renown, than in solid power. The increasing embarrassment of the Treasury forced her to stay her hand, and to yield to her rival terms of peace utterly beyond what the seeming strength of either side justified. The French navy had reaped glory in the five years of war; not so much, nearly, as French writers claim for it, but still it had done well, and the long contest must have increased the efficiency of its officers along with their growing experience. A little more time only was wanted for France, allied to Spain, to gain lasting results as well as passing fame. This time poverty refused her.

Spain, as for centuries back, still depended for her income almost wholly upon her treasure ships from America. Always risked by war, this supply became more than doubtful when the undisputed control of the sea passed to an enemy. The policy of Spain, as to peace or war, was therefore tied fast to that of France, without whose navy her shipping lay at England's mercy; and, though the national pride clung obstinately to its claim for Gibraltar, it was forced to give way.

<sup>1</sup> Martin, *Histoire de France*, vol. xix. p. 370.

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Great Britain alone, after all her losses, rested on a solid foundation of strength. The American contest by itself had cost her nearly £100,000,000, and rather more than that amount had during the war been added to the national debt; but two years later this had ceased to increase, and soon the income of the State was greater than the outgo. Before the end of 1783, the second William Pitt, then a young man of twenty-four, became prime minister. With genius and aims specially fitted to the restorative duties of a time of peace, the first of British finance ministers in the opinion of Mr. Gladstone,<sup>1</sup> he bent his great powers to fostering the commerce and wealth of the British people. With firm but skilful hand he removed, as far as the prejudices of the day would permit and in the face of much opposition, the fetters, forged by a mistaken policy, that hampered the trade of the Empire. Promoting the exchange of goods with other nations, simplifying the collection of taxes and the revenue, he added at once to the wealth of the people and to the income of the State. Although very small in amount, as compared with the enormous figures of later years, the exports and imports of Great Britain increased over fifty per cent between the years 1784 and 1792. Even with the lately severed colonies of North America the same rate of gain, as compared with the trade before the war, held good; while with the old enemy of his father and of England, with France, there was concluded in 1786 a treaty of commerce which was exceedingly liberal for those days, and will, it is said, bear a favorable comparison with any former or subsequent treaty between the two countries. "In the course of little more than three years from Mr. Pitt's acceptance of office as First Lord of the Treasury," says the eulogist of his distinguished rival, Fox, "great commercial and financial reforms had been effected. . . . The nation overcoming its difficulties, and rising buoyant from depression, began

<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth Century Review, June, 1887, p. 922.

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rapidly to increase its wealth, to revive its spirit, and renew its strength.”<sup>1</sup>

Such was the home condition of the British people ; but fully to appreciate the advantageous position to which it was rising, in preparation for the great conflict still unforeseen, it must be remembered that all things worked together to centre and retain the political executive power in the hands of Pitt. The feelings of the king, then a very real force in the nation ; the confidence of the people, given to his father’s son and fixed by the wisdom of his own conduct and the growth of the moneyed prosperity so dear to the British heart ; the personal character of his only rival in ability, — all combined to commit the political guidance of the State to one man at the great crisis when such unity of action was essential to strength. Whether the great peace minister was equal to the wisest direction of war has been questioned, and has been denied. Certainly it was not the office he himself would have chosen ; but it was a great gain for England that she was at this time able to give herself wholly to a single leader. He took office with a minority of one hundred in the House of Commons, held it for two months constantly out-voted, and then dissolving Parliament appealed to the country. The election gave him a majority of over a hundred, — a foretaste of the unwavering support he received from the representatives of the people during the early and critical years of the French Revolution, when the yet fluid opinions of the nation were gradually being cast and hardened into that set conviction and determination characteristic of the race.

How different the state of France is well known. The hopeless embarrassment of the finances, hopeless at least under the political and social conditions, the rapid succession of ministers, each sinking deeper in entanglements, the weak character of the king, the conflict of opinions, the

<sup>1</sup> Lord John Russell’s *Life of Fox*, vol. ii. p. 137.

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lack of sympathy between classes, all tending to the assembling of the Notables in February, 1787, and the yet more pregnant meeting of the States General, May 4, 1789, which was the beginning of the end. France was moneyless and leaderless.

But while the Western countries of Europe were by these circumstances disposed or constrained to wish for the continuance of peace, restlessness showed itself in other quarters and in ways which, from the close relations of the European States, disquieted the political atmosphere. The Austrian Netherlands and Holland, Poland and Turkey, the Black Sea and the Baltic, became the scene of diplomatic intrigues and of conflicts, which, while they did not involve the great Western Powers in actual war, caused them anxiety and necessitated action.

The Empress-Queen of Austria and Hungary, Maria Theresa, had died in 1780. Her son, the Emperor Joseph II., came to the throne in the prime of life, and with his head full of schemes for changing and bettering the condition of his dominions. In 1781, the weakness of Holland being plainly shown by her conduct of the war with Great Britain, and the other countries having their hands too full to interfere, he demanded and received the surrender of the fortified towns in the Austrian Netherlands; which, under the name of the "barrier towns," had been held and garrisoned by Holland since the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, as a bridle upon the ambition of France. At the same time the circumstances of the great maritime contest, which during the American Revolution covered all the seas of Europe, impelled every neutral nation having a seaboard to compete for the carrying trade. Holland for a time had shared this profit with the nations of the North; but when Great Britain, rightly or wrongly, forced her into war, the trade which had been carried on through Holland and her great rivers reaching into the heart of Germany, being denied its natural channel, sought a new one through the

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Austrian Netherlands by the port of Ostend. The growth of the latter, like that of Nassau during the Civil War in the United States, was forced and unhealthy, — due not to natural advantages but to morbid conditions; but it fostered the already strong wish of the emperor for a sea power which no other part of his dominions could give.

This movement of Belgian commerce was accelerated by the disappearance of the British carrying trade. As in the days of Louis XIV., before he had laid up his ships-of-the-line, so in the American War the cruisers and privateers of the allies, supported by the action of the combined fleets occupying the British navy, preyed ravenously on British shipping. In the days of the elder Pitt it had been said that commerce was made to live and thrive by war; but then the French great fleets had left the sea, and British armed ships protected trade and oppressed the enemy's cruisers. Between 1778 and 1783 Great Britain was fully engaged on every sea, opposing the combined fleets and protecting as far as she could her colonies. "This untoward state of things reduced the English merchants to difficulties and distresses, with respect to the means of carrying on their trade, which they had never experienced in any other war. Foreign vessels were used for the conveyance of their goods, and the protection of a foreign flag for the first time sought by Englishmen."<sup>1</sup> The writer forgot the days of Jean Bart, Duguay-Trouin, and Forbin; we may profitably note that like conditions lead to like results.

Thus, while America was struggling for life, and the contests of England, France, and Spain were heard in all quarters of the world, Netherland ships showed abroad on every sea the flag of an inland empire, and Ostend grew merrily; but if the petty port and narrow limits thus thrived, how should the emperor bear to see the great city of Antwerp, with its noble river and its proud commercial

<sup>1</sup> Annual Register, vol. 27, p. 10.



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record, shut up from the sea as it had been since the Treaty of Westphalia? His discontent was deep and instant; but it was the misfortune of this prince that he took in hand more than his own capacity and the extent of his estates would let him complete. His attention being for the moment diverted to southeastern Europe, where Austria and Russia were then acting in diplomatic concert against the Porte, the question of Antwerp was dropped. Before it could be resumed, the Peace of Versailles had left Great Britain, France, and Holland — all so vitally interested in whatever concerned Belgium — free, though loath, to enter into a new contention. Matters having been for the time arranged with Turkey, the emperor again in 1784 renewed his demands, alleging, after the manner of statesmen, several collateral grievances, but on the main issue saying roundly that “the entire and free navigation of the Scheldt from Antwerp to the sea was a *sine qua non*” to any agreement.

The arguments — commercial, political, or founded on treaty — which were in this instance urged for or against the natural claim of a country to use a river passing through its own territory, to the sea that washes its shores, are not here in question; but it is important to analyze the far-reaching interests at stake, to note the bearing of this dispute upon them and so upon the general diplomacy of Europe, and thereby trace its intimate connection with that Sea Power whose influence upon the course of history at this period it is our aim to weigh. Though modified in expression by passing events, and even at times superficially reversed, like natural currents checked and dammed by contrary winds, these underlying tendencies — being dependent upon permanent causes — did not cease to exist during the storm of the Revolution. Ever ready to resume their course when the momentary opposition was removed, the appreciation of them serves to explain apparent contradictions, produced by the conflicts between transient necessity and enduring interests.

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From that great centre of the world's commerce where the Scheldt, the Meuse, the Rhine, and the Thames meet in the North Sea, near the Straits of Dover, there then parted two principal lines of trade passing through European waters, — through seas, that is, along whose shores were planted many different powers, foreign and possibly hostile to each other. Of these two lines, one ended in the Baltic; the other, after skirting the coasts of France and the Spanish peninsula and running the gantlet of the Barbary corsairs, ended in the Levant or Turkish Seas. The great Empire of Russia, which only made itself felt in the sphere of European politics after the Treaty of Utrecht, in 1713, had since then been moving forward not only its centre, which bore upon the continent of Europe, but also both its wings; one of which touched and overshadowed the Baltic on the North, while the other, through a steady course of pressure and encroachment upon the Turks, had now reached the Black Sea. This advance had been aided by the fixedness with which France and England, through their ancient rivalry and their colonial ambitions, had kept their eyes set upon each other and beyond the Atlantic; but the Peace of Versailles forced the combatants to pause, and gave them time to see other interests, which had been overlooked through the long series of wars waged, between 1739 and 1783, over commerce and colonics. It was then realized that not only had Russia, in the past half-century, advanced her lines by the partition of Poland and by taking from Sweden several provinces on the Baltic, but also that she had so added to her influence upon the Black Sea and over the Turkish Empire by successive aggressions, wresting bits of territory and establishing claims of interference in behalf of Turkish subjects, as to make her practical supremacy in Eastern waters a possibility of the future.

The Western Question, as it may fitly be called, had been settled by the birth of a new nation, destined to