

The Centenary of the Anglo-French Treaty, 1919-2019

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The Anglo-French Treaty was signed by Lloyd George and Clemenceau on June 28th, 1919, the same day as the signature of the Treaty of Versailles. The two were regarded as inextricably linked. For France, it represented the fulfilment of an important bond in its security in Europe, and for Britain, it was the logical conclusion to its wartime relationship.

Nevertheless, today, it is remarkably difficult to find references to the Anglo-French Alliance, overshadowed by the magnitude of the Versailles settlement of course, but also because it was, at the same time, both normatively self-evident that it existed after the Great War, and also because it did not entirely conceal the significant differences of opinion that remained between the United Kingdom and France. Indeed, within three years the alliance was in serious jeopardy because of deteriorating trust, misunderstanding, and what seemed like different national interests.

Throughout the inter-war years, the Treaty existed only on paper and through a sense of responsibility to the League of Nations. The point of antagonism was primarily what to do with Germany: whether it was to be treated as a democratic and peaceful power, or whether it was to be permanently crippled to prevent its recovery to a position of unwelcome dominance in Europe.¹

By the late 1930s, with another crisis looming, it was becoming clearer what the mutual interests of Britain and France really were and how essential co-operation was. As security arrangements failed, the Treaty was replaced with another on 3 September 1939, which begs the question: what could have happened if the Anglo-French Alliance had been stronger, more evident, and alive?

The greatest critic of the politics of the inter-war years was Winston Churchill. In the summer of 1919, when the Anglo-French Treaty was first signed, Churchill was occupied by his new appointment as Air Minister, and there is no specific reference from Churchill. However, in 1921, he spoke at length about European security at the British Imperial Conference (7 July). In it, he reminded his colleagues that, in return for France ending its intended permanent occupation of the Rhineland, Britain had agreed to guarantee the security of France and offer the firm assurance that the British “will be with you in the hour of need.” The concern was that, since America had been the other guarantor, but had now relinquished its responsibility to France, the treaty appeared to be invalidated. Churchill called for his countrymen to empathise with French concerns that, impoverished and bloodied by the war, it saw a resurgent Germany just across the border. He said it was therefore entirely understandable that France was taking a hard line against Germany. He then referred to the Treaty and said it was the ultimate guarantee to France, even though Britain would prefer a process of reconciliation with Germany. He said it amounted to a statement that: ‘we shall be as good as our word next time as we were last time [in 1914].’

His position was statesmanlike, but, sadly, most of the British government felt France was being unjust.

¹ Gerard de Groot, *The First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 198-9.

France was dissatisfied with the results of the peace settlement – it had paid copious amounts of blood and resources to liberate Alsace and Lorraine and it was determined to ensure Germany should not recover its powerful position. For Clemenceau, Versailles only made sense with the Alliance and it represented ‘the keystone of European peace.’ Britain took a different line, believing that treating Germany reasonably might prevent the desire for revenge, not least as Germany could be encouraged as a new democratic country and not fall into the hands of communists, who were then evidently threatening Europe.

At Versailles, the German delegation’s defiance at the terms, expressed as a blunt refusal to accept the ‘War Guilt’ clause, its demilitarisation, and the loss of its colonies, had caused outrage.² The American President described the German speech as ‘the most tactless speech I have ever heard’ and felt that the Germans, being a ‘stupid people’, could be relied upon to always do the wrong thing. David Lloyd George, who later expressed his belief that the Great Powers had slithered into war by accident, nevertheless could ‘not accept the German point of view’, specifically, that *all* had been guilty for starting the war. The submission of Germany’s counter-proposals in May 1919 got a scathing response from France. French newspapers condemned German ‘arrogance’ and their ‘monument to impudence.’ The German delegation were given three days to accept the terms the Allies had presented, causing political chaos in Germany itself, and their refusal gave rise to a French and British ultimatum. Foch prepared to send the French armies, some 42 divisions, into Germany, while the Royal Navy prepared to reinforce the maritime blockade on a severely weakened German economy. On 21 June, German sailors gave their own defiant response and scuttled their impounded ships at Scapa Flow. The German government, bitterly divided, agreed to the Allied ultimatum only at the very last moment. The reluctant German delegation arrived at the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on 28 June and were summoned to sign it at 3pm.

In the interval, there had been furious disagreements between Britain, France, and the United States about the terms to be imposed. There was some doubt, for Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George, that the war reparations were too high.³ Clemenceau disagreed: France was badly damaged by the war; it had suffered the highest proportion of casualties of any of the Allied powers, and had lost much of its wealth: it would not accept that Germany could be relieved of its responsibilities so lightly.

These disagreements continued after the signing of Versailles. But it got worse, as France tried to reassert its global position after years of having to focus on the European theatre of war on its own soil. The result was that, by 1921, the Foreign Secretary, George Curzon, concluded: ‘In almost every quarter of the globe ... the representatives of France are actively pursuing a policy which is either unfriendly to British interests or, if not that, is consecrated to the promotion of a French interest which is inconsistent with ours.’

Lloyd George wanted *rapprochement* with Germany to prevent another war of revenge. In his Fontainebleau memorandum of March 1919, he had written: ‘I cannot imagine any greater cause of future war than that the German people ... should be surrounded by a number of small states, ... each containing large masses of Germans clamouring for reunion with their native land.... If she feels she has been unjustly treated in the peace of 1919 [Germany] will find means of exacting retribution.’ Any country that feels the bargain is unjust will first debate the matter

² Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers* (London: John Murray, 2001), pp. 473 and 476.

³ M. Meigs, *Optimism at Armageddon* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1997); A.A. Lentin, *Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson and the Guilt of Germany* (Leicester, 1984).

loudly at home, but in due course it will seek a policy that causes mutual and bitter damage in international affairs.

Lloyd George knew that the terms of Versailles were unacceptable and it was his firm belief that the new League of Nations would be the body to gradually iron out the difficulties, not least over Germany's eastern borders. It would, in his words, act as a 'Court of Appeal to readjust crudities, irregularities, [and] injustices.'⁴

The primary disagreement had been Clemenceau's pursuit of '*une garantie d'ordre physique*' by the detachment of the Rhineland from Germany. It was this that had prompted Lloyd George's Fontainebleau statement. Lloyd George argued it would create new 'Alsace-Lorraines' in reverse. Clemenceau recalled: 'When confronted with the Rhineland question, Mr Wilson shook his head in an unpromising fashion, and Mr Lloyd George assumed a determined air of antagonism.' There were no less than 23 summit conferences between 1920 and 1922 to discuss security and reparations. Each time the British tried to persuade France to moderate the terms of Versailles, and each time the French feared the British could not be relied upon *unless* it was forced to stick to the treaty terms as they stood.

There were attempts to create a Franco-Belgian-British alliance in the early 1920s, but the French occupation of the Rhineland, and later, in January 1923, the Ruhr (to extract reparations repayments), just mired the relationship further. Trust deteriorated. In 1920, when the idea of a Channel Tunnel was proposed, the Foreign Office rejected it on the grounds that 'our relations with France never have been and are not, and probably never will be, sufficiently stable and friendly, to justify the building of a Channel Tunnel.' The French description of the British, when the operations in the Ruhr were underway, was one of 'surly neutrality'. Only with great difficulty did the issue get resolved when America offered loans to Germany, and these allowed the Germans to make reparations repayments, by which Britain and France could then repay their war loans.

In 1925, there were hopes of a better Anglo-French relationship when European representatives met at Locarno in September 1925.⁵ The famous arrangement was that Germany, now a stable democracy, would be admitted to the League of Nations by guaranteeing its western borders. France was reassured, but it established new treaties with Czechoslovakia and Poland to keep Germany contained. It was also mindful that, for all the British enthusiasm for Locarno, it was now unlikely that the British would ever accept a French incursion into the Rhineland or the Ruhr. Indeed, Britain urged France to end their occupation of the Rhine five years early, which only served to underscore suspicions in Paris.

In the Middle East, France believed the British were still using their Arab allies to cause problems in the French Mandate territory of Syria. It was remembered that T E Lawrence 'of Arabia' had accompanied Emir Feisal to the Paris peace conference in 1919 and advocated an Arab state in Syria. The French had fought the Arab nationalists in 1920 and defeated their bid for independence. When Emir Abdullah of Trans-Jordan threatened to march into Syria at the head of an Arab army in support of his deposed brother Feisal, Paris demanded that the British intervene. Ironically, it was Lawrence that helped dissuade Abdullah from taking action. In 1936, when Britain faced Arab unrest in Palestine (prompted by large-scale Jewish immigration), it is

⁴ HC Deb, 21 July 1919, c1054.

⁵ Zara Steiner, 'The War, the Peace, and the International State System,' in Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker, and Mary R. Habeck, (eds), *The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 267-72.

alleged that French intelligence used to opportunity to pay the British back for their alleged interference in Syrian affairs.

What changed the situation was Hitler's foreign policy. First, the German re-militarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 raised the possibility of conflict, but the arrangements put into place to deter France from incursion and the depth of suspicion of the previous decade, now played against the Allies.

When Hitler seemed poised to strike against Czechoslovakia, it was clear to the British service staffs that, alone, the British armed forces could not conduct a limited war and that any action against Germany must necessitate a world war. On the other hand, since France was a guarantor of Czechoslovakian integrity, Britain could not tolerate a defeat of France that would place Europe into the hands of Hitler. Unfortunately, the French government believed the British would *not* come to their aid in the event of war. The British government thought that the French would insist on fighting alongside the Czechoslovakians and this would drag Britain into a war it did not want, even though France was actually looking for a way out of its Czech alliance. Misunderstanding, rather than mutual suspicion, thus characterised the alliance in the 1930s.

Despite Chamberlain's efforts to preserve peace in Europe, at Czechoslovakia's expense, by direct talks with Hitler, there were some misgivings in the Daladier government. Nevertheless, the rapturous response to Munich, where war was averted, gave some cause for hope. Both Britain and France examined robustly their readiness for war. Sadly, neither country was in good shape. France had committed itself to a defensive strategy along the Maginot Line. The British had run down their forces and could only maintain their imperial possessions at a stretch. Yet, crucially, the need for new defence agreements together was clear. In February 1939, Chamberlain agreed to support France in the event of war. Joint staff talks were to be held. Britain would increase the size of its land forces to 32 Divisions, a sizeable proportion of which would fight in France.

On the other hand, there were still problems. A wave of pacifism affected both France and Britain which increased the doubt of political leaders about taking military action. The British staffs did not want to commit British forces to a continental campaign because they did not want to be forced to adhere to a French war plan. British politicians felt that French leaders were unreliable, prone to disclose secrets, and too ready to make a deal with the Germans, all of which were baseless and unfounded, but which influenced decision-making. The French, for their part, held to their traditional view that the British might not be trusted to come to the aid of France if it came to a crisis.⁶ On 2 September, several days after the German invasion of Poland, the agreed trigger for action, French leaders were still waiting for the British to commit, a critical issue when French mobilisation had to be commenced. Nevertheless, British rearmament had been proceeding at pace, so, while still unprepared in the spring of 1939, it would be in a better position in 1940. And Chamberlain realised the gravity of the situation in the autumn of 1939 such that, together, the two countries declared war on Germany, and, at the same time, on September 3, 1939, they restored the Anglo-French Alliance.

⁶ André Géraud (Pertinax) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20029030>. (Accessed May 2019). *The attempts to form an Anglo-French alliance, 1919-1924*, by Selsam, J. Paul published in 1936, was reviewed in the UK and condemned as 'quite unconvincing' when it tried to maintain that the cause of the difficulties over the Rhineland stemmed from the absence of the US from the League of Nations. The issues evidently ran far deeper than that.

It was, tragically, a case of too little, too late.