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# The Hundred Years' War: A Different Contextual Overview

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The origin of most wars is invariably traceable in a linear sense to certain events or key personalities. World War One is easy—the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo gave the Austro-Hungarian Empire its *raison d'*être to deal with its Serbian Problem. World War Two is traceable through a series of events such as the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937, and perhaps even Munich. In the late twentieth century, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was the pretext for the First Gulf War. But the casual student of history would see no obvious historical markers to direct their attention to the immediate causes of the Hundred Years' War.

Here the historian has to conduct a forensic examination of both the economics of feudal Europe and of states and principalities that no longer exist. In the early fourteenth century, Flanders was the industrial heart of Europe, based in large part upon its manufacture of cloth. To meet the demands for its products, the manufacturers of Flanders had to import English fleece. The English Crown in turn became dependent upon this source of foreign revenue. This set poorly with the French, for in the not too distant past the nobility of Flanders had been vassals to the French King. Much like Vladimir Putin's machinations in the Ukraine, the French worked to undermine the English position, supporting the landed nobility in their efforts to rein in the manufactures—those with no nobility whose economic engine was loosening the feudal ties the landed nobility depended upon for their economic well-being. A civil war caused by two different economic systems, manufacturing versus the feudal land system, soon engulfed Flanders. Here is the center of gravity for understanding the Hundred Years' War.[1] Although England's King Henry III relinquished his control of the French territories in 1259, there were still English settlers there. Dealing with them was a source of friction between France and England, giving England an excuse for intervention, much as the Tsar and Soviets used for the pretext of invasions to protect ethnic Russians elsewhere.

## The Struggle for Control of France

Ironically, when the editors of the *Saber and Scroll Journal* commissioned an article on the Hundred Years' War, this author accepted the project unenthusiastically. However, as research progressed, the outlines of pre-

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Westphalia Europe began to take shape, almost like the movement of tectonic plates reshaping the landmass and political structure of Europe. The aftermath of the Hundred Years' War served to consolidate the power of the French monarchy, which heretofore the claim of the English Crown had usurped from the Crown of France. This consolidation had second and third order effects that are easy to overlook. For France, it meant that it became a dominant continental land power. Moreover, the French began to establish an actual navy. For the English, with the loss of France, their eyes turned elsewhere. Without the loss of France, and the French consolidation, would the Age of Exploration have happened the way that it did? For with the loss of France, the English Crown needed to replace the loss of its French holdings and the associated revenue stream. Hence, by the late sixteenth century following the defeat of the Spanish Armada, both England and France began eyeing the New World discovered by Spain to stake a claim. Perhaps this is the greatest impact of the Hundred Years' War, that with the establishment of France, the preconditions for the Age of Exploration were set.

## The Battlefield of the Hundred Years' War

"Pride goeth before the fall" could easily be the epithet for French tactical thinking at Agincourt. But the same epithet fits for Poitiers and Crecy, though by Agincourt the French should have learned from their previous defeats. As an aside, none of the Union Army officers from West Point that fought at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862 must have studied Poitiers. Had they done so, they would have blanched at assaulting such a steep hill against far greater lethality than that projected by the English longbow archers. Most battles were sieges, fought by certain and set rules of war. Raids were utilized to extract political concessions when the English would pillage the countryside, demonstrating to the population that the King of France was powerless to protect them from the depredations of the English.

Artillery was first and foremost the biggest technological advancement of the period. Town walls could no longer withstand the new power of artillery. In turn, this meant one could no longer defend passively and hope the enemy's siege would fail or sickness would ruin their army. By the Battle of Poitiers in 1356, the advent of plated armor lessened the power of the longbow. However, it made walking difficult and running impossible. When dismounted, a French heavy cavalry soldier would soon be exhausted. For when a heavy French cavalryman fell at Poitiers or Agincourt, he could not rise again without assistance. By contrast, the English light infantryman had a steel cap and a breastplate that

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provided protection to his torso and enabled easy movement.[2]

In terms of command and control, a changing battlefield emerged. This change originated with dominance on the battlefield shifting from shock to missile power. It enabled England's King Edward III and the Black Prince, respectively at Crecy and Poitiers, to establish themselves on high ground and fight the battle as they saw it from that vantage. The change from shock to missile meant that battles became of longer duration and subject to greater control in terms of engaging and for purposes of disengagement.[3]

The most important advance of the period was Henry V's introduction of the Royal Navy. He realized that not having a standing fleet at the ready was an impediment to quick and decisive action. His establishment of a standing fleet gave the English greater maneuverability, as the English armies in France were always dependent upon sea power for supply and reinforcement.

Analysis of the Battle of Agincourt presents a different challenge. Numbers do not match up in various accounts of the battle. In *Cursed Kings,* Jonathan Sumption puts the odds at roughly two to one, which seems baffling.[4] In *The Agincourt War,* Arthur Burne reaches a figure of six thousand English to twenty-five thousand French.[5] The English figures are of course always subject to desertion, straggling, and wastage. Burne also notes that a French historian in recent years, Fenrindad Lot, as well as the German historian Hans Delbrück, reached the astounding conclusion the English outnumbered the French that day. One can at least charitably excuse the



Figure 1. King Henry V, by unknown artist. Oil on panel, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. National Portrait Gallery, UK.

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French historian save for the fact that he panders the same excuse for Crecy.[6] Under the biography of Henry V, *The Harpers Encyclopedia of Military Biography* comes up with a figure of six thousand English to as many as thirty-five thousand French.[7] The battle figures remind one of the Battle of Kursk, where the number of tanks has been massaged by both sides. What is hard to understand is why the French did not allow Henry to simply limp to the coast, dogging his retreat every step of the way. Sumption's opinion probably reflects the prevailing French sentiment that, "Politically it was probably unthinkable, after Henry V's capture of Harfleur and his ostentatious challenges, to let him escape with impunity."[8]

Joan of Arc is harder to assess in the military sense. Nevertheless, in the political and psychological sense, she revitalized the French fighting spirit, acting as a morale force multiplier. It is hard to understand how this peasant girl, albeit from prosperous peasants, was given such an opportunity except to consider that the fortunes of France were at their lowest nadir. Even with Henry V's death in 1422, the French forces were demoralized, and their leadership decimated to the point of conceding defeat to the invading English forces and their allies from Burgundy. If the English took the city of Orleans, it seemed as if French resistance would simply crumble. The French loss at the Battle of the Herrings—where they failed to capture a English resupply train (of herring no less!)—meant the impending loss of Orleans was seemingly the last psychological straw. Instead, Joan led the French to victory at Orleans. More importantly, Joan of Arc changed the rules of the game. No longer was this to be the gentlemanly and leisurely style of warfare. If anything, Joan ushered in an early era of something akin to a predecessor to Total Warfare. In a sense, Machiavelli had been the theorist for what seems to us a period of unregulated warfare, whose influence now began to wane.[9] Joan seemed to have fought with the Augustinian concept of a Just War, an alien concept. Here was now a war not just for some prince or king but a war for the general welfare of the French people, an ideal of all equal before God, and by inference a war on feudalism itself, where the ancient order produced the evil of man subjugating man. Joan changed the French Army's thought to one where it mattered how "it [felt] about the soil and about the people from which it springs."[10] It is small wonder that once Joan had recovered the political and military situation, the French were perhaps not unhappy to abandon her to her fate, as her ideas were revolutionary and a threat to the existing order.

But the French were learning. Like the English, they began setting the foundation for a more professional army, for imitation is the highest form of flattery. There would be no more of the emotional charges like at Poiters or Agincourt that decimated the French forces. The return of the Province of Maine to
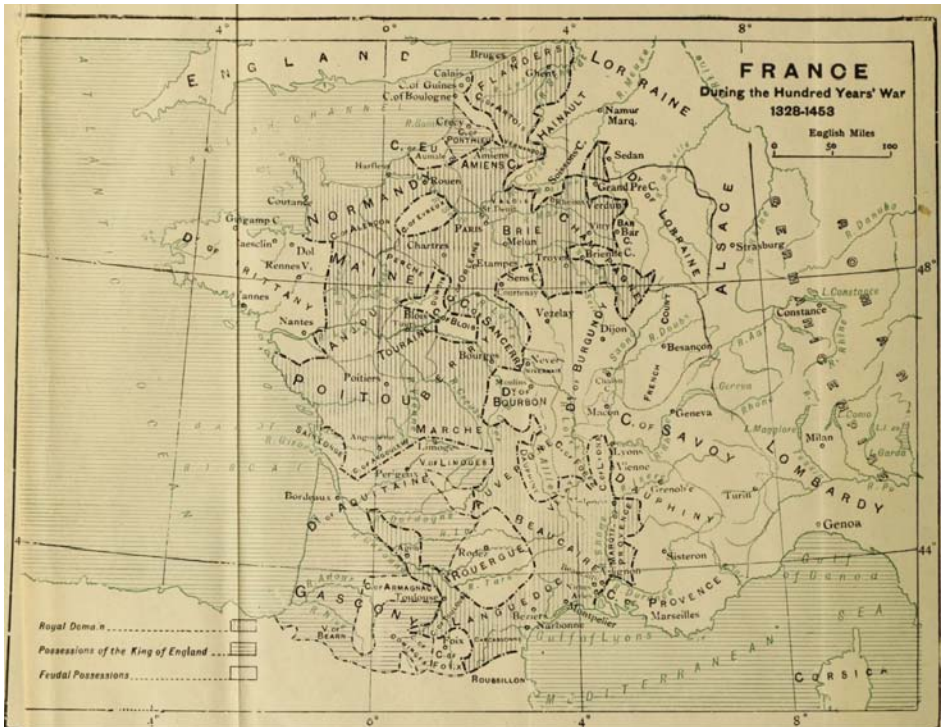
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Figure 2. A. Mary F. Robinson, *A short history of France from Caesar's invasion to the Battle of Waterloo*, 1918. Internet Archive Book Images

the French signalled that they had the measure of Henry VI, in whose veins they ascertained did not run the blood of The Black Prince or that of his father, Henry V. Nor when the French began preparations for the invasion of Normandy was anything done by Henry VI, for politics at the court of England were now taking precedence over the defense of the English dominions of France. A small army was hastily assembled and sent over under the command of Sir Thomas Kyriell in 1450. On the way to battle at Formigny, the city folk of Carentan engaged the English rearguard in waist deep water and the French assailed the English with an almost rudimentary form of partisan warfare.[11] Such a brazen action alone speaks volumes of the decline of English influence and the rise of perhaps a French consciousness. Kyriell seemingly had the battle won when another French column showed up, and in contrast to times past where the French showed unwillingness to give battle, charged. The English army died to nearly the last man. And, with

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the destruction of this English Army, Normandy was lost.

## The Political Struggle

Of course, family ties and the lack of an heir often were cause for political turmoil. The quest for a male heir to secure the line was often an obsession for rulers. It is not surprising that this too was one of the underlying political reasons for the Hundred Years' War. Charles IV died heirless in 1328. England's Edward III asserted that the throne of France was his due to his birthright from his mother. Instead, the French nobility crowned Philip VI of Valois. Adding insult to injury, this French usurper attacked the British wine country of Aquitaine, a large province in southwestern France. By feudal law, Aquitaine was a fiefdom to the English Crown. With Philip's attack on Aquitaine and claiming it as rightfully his, war was inevitable. Edward, of course, responded militarily and thus began a long drought of French success on the battlefield through seemingly the rest of the fourteenth century.

If the French military, logistical, and economic structures and population were not already stressed enough by the early fifteenth century, the assassination of the Duke of Orleans led to civil war in France. Much as America's Civil War allowed Napoleon III to crown Maximillian as the Emperor of Mexico, the English—who were seriously threatened with the loss of their Brittany possession—now got a breathing spell. With the soon to be crowned Henry V, this breathing spell saw France soon courting disaster. Yet the English were slow to capitalize upon this opportunity. The always unsettled Scottish border, with the Scots supplied and egged on by France, the faux Richard II paraded about, and then a full blown rebellion in Wales were more than merely distracting to Henry IV, and upon his death Henry V.

The setting as well has many interesting current and near past history parallels. The use of the "assigned" companies who periodically pillaged the French countryside could be thought of as warring by proxies. The Cold War saw many conflicts waged by proxies to not only win control of land but to also sway the court of public opinion at home and in their own regional and global sphere. Both sides used the most important two social media of their day—public letters read as pronouncements in towns and the Catholic Church. The importance of the Catholic Church lay in the fact that the Pope could consecrate one side as the defender of the faith. In addition, at the parish level, the church from the pulpit could sway opinion by preaching for the cause of either the French or English.

Other competing elements affected the West for the next five hundred

plus years. Although monarchs ruled both systems, like most of Europe, the two systems of monarchy and government were already heading in different directions. By the end of the Hundred Years' War with the French victorious, France moved to a system of absolute monarchy. The English already had a different approach prior to the war with Magna Carta. However, Henry IV's regicide had different repercussions. For the French, it meant the English were in sense barbarians with a usurper who committed regicide, a crime against God. However, Henry's act served notice that this was an acceptable way to replace the English monarch, and gave the French Crown reason to be nervous about an ambitious French knight. Repercussions of Henry IV's act of seizing the crown by the death of Richard II would help fuel the War of the Roses. Not only did Henry IV have to fear for his crown, but before Henry V's 1415 campaign, a cabal of English nobles under French pay plotted to assassinate Henry the V.

With the disastrous diplomatic decisions of Henry VI, the English Crown lost its remaining lands in 1451. The subsequent loss of a revenue stream to the crown and to the lords who had lost their estates in France, as well as rising unemployment among the professional military class, built resentment. It is easy to see the nexus that if one king could be replaced, then another could as well. In the present day, the horrible decision of Paul Bremer to disband the Iraqi Army in 2003 helped spin Iraq into civil war, much like England post-1451. However, never was the Hundred Years' War like the line from *Mrs. Miniver* "a war of the people."[12] This war was strictly power politics between the Crowns of France and England.

### The Sins of Their Fathers - the long-term aspects of The Hundred Years' War

The Hundred Years' War ensured long-term enmity between France and England. The two kingdoms fought a series of proxy frontier wars in the American colonies until Colonel George Washington attacked a French scouting party in Western Pennsylvania, which ignited the French and Indian War in America, or the Seven Years' War in Europe. This war spanned the globe from Canada to Europe and India. Later, Britain often served as the driving force against Napoleon in the various anti-French coalitions. Even in the immediate period before World War One, these two powers nearly came to blows over the Fasho Crisis in 1898. In the mad scramble for colonies, a French expedition to Fashoda tried to seize control of the upper Nile, which would have rendered Britain's position in the Sudan meaningless. In the opening phases of World War One in France, the French were certain that after the initial defeat of the British Expeditionary Force in August

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1914 at Mons, the British would make a two hundred plus mile retreat under their commander Field Marshall Sir John French to the sea. Historically, from the Hundred Years' War onward, the British Army used the Royal Navy as an escape valve. The climax of the hatred sowed during the Hundred Years' War came with **Operation Catapult,** the Battle of *Mers-el-Kébir.* On 3 July 1940, the Royal Navy bombarded the French Fleet at its Algerian base of Mers El Kébir. This action by Prime Minister Winston Churchill against his former ally of less than a month before caused the death of the hundreds of French sailors and cemented the French view of Perfidious Albion. Even with the recent Brexit vote by the British, it is possible to see traces of this still simmering dislike of the British for continental entanglements.

Ultimately, it is difficult to conceive that the Hundred Years' War could have ended with any different result other than England's expulsion from France. Much like the Third Reich's gamble to conquer Europe, England—like the Third Reich—was simply over taxed in terms of its resources. It lacked the manpower to hold France, as the available manpower in England simply was not enough to conquer and hold the domain of France. Unlike the later British Empire, the English did not have a technological prowess that gave them a force multiplier. No, the sides were equal in the technology of arms. With the early death of Henry V, England lost its best and perhaps only opportunity to bend France to its knee. Henry died of dysentery a month before Charles VII died, meaning that Henry would have succeeded to the throne of both England and France, a consequence of the earlier Peace Treaty of Troyes. It would be interesting to speculate what could have happened had Henry not died and instead had twenty strong years as regent of both France and England. However, his death coupled with the rise of the Maid of Orleans—who in her short lifetime gave France a holy mission—brought forth a new France, a France for the French. Vercingetorix's dream of a united Gaul may have died at Alesia, but from Orleans arose a new France and its monarchy began to move out of the Feudal Period.

## Conclusion

Much like the Third Reich, England won all the famed battles. It was like the heady days of 1941-1942 for the German *Heer* in Russia—crushing all in its path. Agincourt, Crecy, Poitiers . . . yet like the Heer, the English were vanquished. The world of the English in France fell.  In its loss of World War One, Imperial Germany focused on the reason for its loss both externally and internally. Never beaten on the battlefield, Germany propagated the myth that it was defeated due to the stab in the back, wielded by leftists and Jews, who poisoned the German body

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politic with bacillus from abroad. The English, instead, did their version of the piece of American political theater "Who lost China"? that poisoned American politics in the 1950's—as if China was America's to lose. However, France, or at least the parts of France that were for the English Crown to lose, was lost. Losing the territories was bad enough, but with the ill-conceived political decisions of Henry VI, the French witnessed English appeasement like that of Neville Chamberlain in a latter age. That show of weakness, and in French eyes lack of resolution, gave them a window of opportunity to reconquer Normandy and all the other English-held lands. From this arose the antecedents of the War of the Roses, the dynastic struggles Henry VI unleashed by his perceived lack of legitimacy and loss of the English holdings in France.

Notes

1. Lynn Harry Nelson, "The Hundred Years' War, 1336-1453," *Lectures in Medieval History*, University of Kansas, accessed February 27, 2017, http://vlib.us/medieval/lectures/ hundred_years_war.html.

2. Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 165-171.

3. Martin V. Cevald, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 51.

4. Jonathan Sumption, *Cursed Kings: The Hundred Years War IV* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 451.

5. Arthur H. Burne, *The Agincourt War* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), 90-91.

6. Ibid., 91.

7. Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson, and David L. Bongard, *The Harpers Encyclopedia of Military Biography* (New York: Castle Books 1995), np.

8. Sumption, 452.

9. Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 72.

10. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow, 1947), 158.

11. Burne, *The Agincourt War*, 315.

12. *Mrs. Miniver*, directed by William Wyler (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942).

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