

## The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880-1914

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One might be forgiven for thinking that British defence policy between the Napoleonic era and the outbreak of the First World War was always geared towards a large, continental commitment. Bookmarked as it is by Wellington's army opposing Napoleon at Waterloo, and the British Expeditionary Force landing in support of the French army in the opening stages of the Great War, the near-century between 1815 and 1914 seems to confirm continuity in British war planning. As David Morgan-Owen shows with this well-argued and well-researched study, the reality was quite different.

Morgan-Owen's book looks at war planning in the period between 1880 and the outbreak of war in August 1914. As the title makes clear, the possible threats to the British Isles outweighed concerns over threats to the empire, and influenced the thinking and planning among both the Army and the Navy. Other authors have dealt with this topic in some detail. Franklyn Arthur Johnson's aged, yet still relevant *Defence by Committee* – where the author had the advantage of first-hand access to Maurice Hankey, the once secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) – remains an important study of the workings of the CID.<sup>(1)</sup> So does Rhodri Williams' *Defending the Empire* <sup>(2)</sup>; not to mention Howard Roy Moon's influential unpublished PhD thesis, 'The Invasion of the United Kingdom' <sup>(3)</sup>. Morgan-Owen's important book adds to studies like these by expertly investigating how the two services tried – and failed – to coordinate a response to a future conflict.

As Morgan-Owen points out, some former studies, in looking at either the Army or Navy separately, have

created a false dichotomy between “Continental” and “Blue Water” schools and painted the period after 1900 as a zero-sum competition between the War Office General Staff and the Admiralty for control of British strategy. Reality was far less clear-cut than this depiction would suggest (p. 4).

Morgan-Owen is convincing in this analysis, as even the later ‘invasionist’ Lord Roberts, while Commander-in-Chief believed that the force allocated for home defence ‘seems in excess of our requirements’ (p. 79).

The lack of coordination between the two services was a more serious issue, seriously hampering British war planning throughout the period discussed in the book. 'Britain had no defined strategy and lurched from crisis to crisis, guided only by broad outlines of defence policy established in 1903-4', as Morgan-Owen notes. 'If the nineteenth century had witnessed defence policy by crisis, the first decade of the twentieth paid host to strategy by the same means' (p. 179). The problem was failure of political leadership, even at a time when defence policy came under increased political scrutiny. As Morgan-Owen shows, the CID, far from being an efficient planning body, was unable to provide the guidance needed for the services to iron out their differences. Indeed, the Committee could at times exacerbate the tension between the two services, rather than smoothing over it.

The later chapters are particularly effective at illustrating how the Navy's diminishing ability to guarantee the British coast from an enemy raid – a fact the Admiralty initially tried to play down – had implications for the disposition of the fleet, and the plans for deploying the Army at the outbreak of war in Europe. The Army and Navy in 1914 were not destined for a new Waterloo and Trafalgar respectively, but attempted to adjust themselves to changed circumstances and technological developments. It was never an obvious choice to send the Regular Army to Europe in the form of an expeditionary corps, and Admiral 'Jackie' Fisher in particular envisioned a more flexible use of the Army, with the Senior Service in the driver's seat in the event of a conflict: 'the *Regular Army* (as distinguished from the *Home* and *Indian Army*) should be regarded as a projectile fired by the Navy!', as he once remarked to Lord Esher (p. 113). This implied an active use of the Royal Navy. Instead, by the time August 1914 came along, 'the country's primary military strategic asset' was left in a defensive capacity, rather than being utilised offensively (p. 226). Morgan-Owen leaves the blame for the failure to plan adequately ahead at the feet of Asquith's Liberal government, but Balfour and the leaders of the two services do not escape censure. The chapters leading up to this conclusion are well-argued and convincing, and this study effortlessly weaves an intricate discussion of the myriad planning papers, internal memos and war games conducted over the period into a coherent and convincing narrative.

However, there are some unexplored avenues. The book might have been strengthened by a more detailed discussion of British society outside of the halls of power. Early on, Morgan-Owen notes that 'the spectre of invasion excited the passions of the public on a regular basis – obliging politicians to take an active, if episodic interest in the armed forces' readiness to repulse a foreign attack' (p. 12). This is an important point, as it hints at public pressure behind the political decisions regarding planning for future conflict. Yet there is little discussion of this in the text itself. 'The public', or 'public opinion' does not feature in the book beyond a few hints as to its role in the background of the policy and planning. This is of course a methodological choice, as the book focuses on investigating the official mind, rather than the more abstract idea of the public; the 'fear' in the title therefore refers to that of admirals, generals and politicians, not of, say, the average *Daily Mail* reader. Still, it would have been interesting to see the author explore public pressure in more detail, as studies by Frans Coetzee and Jan Rüger, among others, have shown that popular politics and culture contributed in shaping Edwardian national defence discourse.<sup>(4)</sup> The book's focus also means that thinkers outside of the Admiralty, War Office and Horse Guards offices are rarely mentioned – meaning that important theorists of imperial defence like Spenser Wilkinson and Sir Charles Dilke are left out of much of the discussion.

Morgan-Owen writes in clear and concise language, and the text is not only easy to follow but at times a joy to read. There are one or two annoying typos, and hopefully the publisher will take the time to fix these by the time the next edition of the book comes out. The last name of Hugh Oakeley Arnold-Forster, Balfour's overworked and under-performing Secretary of State for War, switches between being hyphenated and not. And on two pages alone I counted three different ways of spelling the name of Sir Michael Hicks Beach, the Chancellor of the Exchequer under Salisbury. I mention this because such varieties in spelling can make the text difficult to follow, and in the latter case actually means that the index is incomplete, as it only lists pages with one of the spellings of Hicks Beach's name.

However, these are but minor criticisms of what is a brilliantly argued and impressively well-researched monograph. Morgan-Owen's book will doubtless become a key reference alongside existing works on pre-

Great War British war planning, and offers important new insight into the workings of the political and military leadership who tried to decide how to pursue an offensive military policy while also defending the heart of the empire itself.

## Notes

1. Franklyn Arthur Johnson, *Defence by Committee: The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885–1959* (London, 1960).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Rhodri Williams, *Defending the Empire: The Conservative Party and British Defence Policy 1899–1915* (New Haven, CT, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Howard Roy Moon, ‘The Invasion of the United Kingdom: Public Controversy and Official Planning, 1888–1818’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1968).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (New York, NY, 1990); and Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2007). For a later period, there is Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Farnham, 2014).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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