

The Consequences of Britain's Total War Efforts in the First and Second World War on the Dissolution of the British Empire

Shannon Buskermolen

About the Author

Shannon is an academic located in Toronto who currently works to research and develop engaging projects for a Canadian-based agency. She recently completed a graduate certificate in Museum and Cultural Management at Centennial College in Toronto. She also holds a double MA in International War Studies from University College Dublin and the University of Potsdam. Additionally, she received her BA in Anthropology and History at Trent University. She has lived, worked, and studied in Canada, Germany, and Ireland. Her special interests lie in war and memory, completing her master's thesis in 2023 entitled "The Interconnection Between Assimilation and First World War Memorialization and Veteranship in Canada, 1917-1939."

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Introduction

The history of the British Empire and its inevitable dissolution is a complicated topic that cannot be justifiably covered in its entirety in this paper. There are many social, political, and economic factors which contributed to the gradual dismantling of the British Empire. While some factors contributing to the dissolution of the British Empire go beyond the scope of this argument, there is an undeniable tie to the experiences and totality of both the First and Second World Wars. Twice in the first half of the 20th century, the world found itself in what may be considered some of the greatest, most gruesome wars in modern times. The experiences of Britain, and perhaps more importantly those of her Dominions and colonies within the Empire, played a role in the change of policy, sentiment towards, and justification for the existence of the British Empire as it was.

The totality of the wars affected both Britain and her empire greatly. Consequences that stemmed from the total war efforts of Britain and the British Empire during both the First and Second World Wars were important factors in the dissolution of the British Empire. The war effort of the Dominions and colonies during the First World War led to an increased sense of nationalism and self-governance, especially for the Dominions. Although contested as a post-war narrative, the increasing nationalism in the interwar period is evident in the examination of primary sources. Fighting another total war during the Second World War affected the British Empire further. Britain did not have the power or resources necessary to protect her empire. Feelings of abandonment in many of the British colonies in the Pacific arose from the consequences of total war. The economic challenges faced by Britain in the inter- and post-war periods contributed to the dissolution of the British Empire. The toll of fighting a total war in both World Wars was costly for the British. By analyzing the events and experiences of the war for Britain and the British Empire, using Canada, Australia, India, and colonies in Southeast Asia as case studies, it can be observed that the consequences of

these wartime experiences had a gradual, yet inevitable effect on the existence of the British Empire and were important factors to the Empire's dissolution.

An Empire at War

In both the First and Second World Wars, Britain fought a total war in any sense of the concept.¹¹¹ The entire population and economy were mobilized to provide for the war effort- men, women, and children performed valuable tasks, food rations and conscription were enacted, and regular buildings and factories were repurposed for the war. The British Empire was another method of mobilization that made Britain's war effort more total. If Britain had not made use of the resources the British Empire had then the maximum potential of mobilization would not have been reached, and therefore could be considered less total if Britain had not involved the Empire in the war.

The British Empire was invaluable to the British total war effort during the First World War and the Second World War. The men, funds, resources, and land supplied by the Empire throughout the wars helped Britain sustain their total war efforts. Colquhoun remarked that when referring to the Triple Entente in the Great War, the three nations spoken of were Russia, France, and Britain; however, he noted that in this case, Britain is actually the British Empire, meaning that there were five nations' personnel and resources to account for rather than one.¹¹² Even this number provided by Colquhoun does not sum up the entire power of resources at the disposal of the British in the First World War as there were more than five nations involved. It lacks the involvement of other dependent colonies that also played an important role in the war which should not be forgotten. In 1911, General

¹¹¹ For example, the blurred distinction between civilians and combatants, the complete mobilization of the population and resources, and the methods and extreme goals of total war as mentioned by Paul K. Saint-Amour, "On the Partiality of Total War," in *Critical Inquiry* 40 no. 2 (2014): 429.

¹¹² Archibald R. Colquhoun, "Why the British Empire is at War," *The North American Review* 200 no. 708 (1914): 678.

Bernhardi, a Prussian general and author of *Deutschland und der Nächste Krieg*, expressed his opinion that the “self-governing Colonies were not any concern to European theatres and could therefore be ignored.”¹¹³ This proved to be a major miscalculation.

On August 4th 1914, when Britain declared war against Germany, she did so on behalf of the entire Empire; although, the Dominions were able to decide the extent of their involvement in the war. Many of the Dominions chose to involve themselves totally in the war effort and fight fiercely alongside Britain and the Empire.¹¹⁴ The strong sense of loyalty towards Britain and the Empire was a leading factor in the involvement of the Dominions in the war. On August 19th 1914, Canadian Prime Minister Borden exemplified this when he declared in the House of Commons “as to our duty, all are agreed: we stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain and the other British Dominions in this quarrel. And that duty we shall not fail to fulfil as the honour of Canada demands.”¹¹⁵ In Canada, English-Canadians still had strong ties to Britain, many of them British-born or early-generation Canadian themselves. Pierre Berton explained the situation of the English in Canada simply: “most English-speaking Canadians thought themselves as British first, Canadian second.”¹¹⁶ As such, the majority of English-Canadians wanted to support their motherland and were eager to enlist to support the war effort. In contrast, many French-Canadians felt little to no sentiment towards Britain, many still bitter over their treatment by the English, and were not as willing to sacrifice their lives for Britain. Loyalty to Britain and the Empire was a strong factor in the Dominions’ decisions to mobilize all aspects of life for near total control, civilian mobilization, and military commitment, all of which are characteristics seen in total war efforts.

¹¹³ Quoted in Colquhoun, “Why the British Empire is at War,” 678.

¹¹⁴ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2006): 6.

¹¹⁵ Henry Borden and Heath MacQuarrie, *Robert Laird Borden: His Memoir Vol. 1* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1969): 218.

¹¹⁶ Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2012), 8.

The importance of the British Empire's resources is acknowledged by Colquhoun in 1914 when he wrote,

since an army fights on its stomach, we must also reckon among the advantages of our scattered Empire those reservoirs of food and those markets for trade which... are now placed unreservedly at our disposal in a manner which obviates for Great Britain the greater part of the material sufferings inflicted by the near proximity of war... We are fighting the greatest fight, probably, of our existence with a minimum of hardship and even inconvenience to our civilian population.

Although this observation was made in 1914 when the war was still fresh and hardships were still quite minimal, the sentiment that the British Empire's contribution was invaluable to Britain is still relevant to the discussion and understanding of the British Empire's role in Britain's total war efforts and the consequent dissolution of the Empire that occurred thereafter.

Demonstrating this greatly is the contributions of India, a dependent colony of the Empire which had no choice in the war. It is estimated that the contribution of cash, materials, and loans to Britain between 1914 and 1918 totalled a draft of £596 million on the Indian economy.¹¹⁷ This substantial contribution was costly for the economy and the people of India. To sustain food supplies for the British people, wheat supplies were shipped from elsewhere across the Empire, including India. Bagchi stated that "the extraction of that supply cost India several millions lives, in addition to the tribute that was needed to finance that supply."¹¹⁸ He criticized the tendency of historiographies to ignore the dimension of India's efforts in the Allied victory of the war. He used the lack of consideration to the "forced contribution of India and other non-white colonies" in Avner Offer's argument that "the German defeat was ultimately due to the ability of the British to access food supplies and personnel from Canada, Australia and eventually, from 1917, the USA as well, so that the

¹¹⁷ Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Indian Economy and Society during World War One," in *Social Scientist* 42 no.7/8, (2014): 13-14.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

effective hinterland of Britain was much larger than that of the Axis powers” as an example of this.¹¹⁹

In addition to the food supplies and resources provided by the Empire to support the war effort in Britain, many military personnel were also recruited. During the course of the war, the Dominions mobilized roughly 1.3 million soldiers for the war effort.¹²⁰ In addition, a significant majority of soldiers provided by the British Empire came from India; a total of 1,440,437 soldiers are recorded to have been recruited into the Indian army during the war.¹²¹ British colonies also supplied troops, recruiting a total of 134,837 soldiers. Troops from the British Isles totalled 66.4% of the military efforts during the First World War with 5,704,416 soldiers.¹²² This means that the British Empire consisted of nearly 34% of the soldiers in the British war effort, many of whom sacrificed their lives. Troops from the British Empire reinforced the British army and partook in many of the victories and losses during battles. Rudolf von Albertini argued that the recruitment and mobilization of colonial troops brought forth political concessions and reforms “at least as much ... as of the ability of nationalist spokesmen in wartime conditions.”¹²³ It is also important to note Buchowska’s discussion of the racism and discrimination that occurred on the Western Front. With this, Buchowska remarked that many Indian soldiers thought that ““they were being deliberately sacrificed to spare British lives, particularly after the heavy Indian casualties at Second Ypres.””¹²⁴ Feelings of their efforts going underappreciated were also felt among other nations in the Empire as well.¹²⁵ With the immense sacrifice and hardships taken on by the Empire, it is no

¹¹⁹ Bagchi, “Indian Economy and Society during World War One,” 19.

¹²⁰ Graeme Thompson, “Reframing Canada’s Great War,” in *International Journal* 73 no.1, (2018): 87.

¹²¹ Dominika Buchowska, “The Empire Comes to Western Europe,” in *The British Art Journal* 19 no. 2 (2018): 31.

¹²² Data from Table 1 in Joan Beaumont “United We Have Fought: Imperial Loyalty and the Australian War Effort,” in *International Affairs* 90 no. 2, (2014): 398.

¹²³ Rudolf von Albertini, “The Impact of Two World Wars on the Decline of Colonialism,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 4 no. 1 (1966): 20.

¹²⁴ Buchowska, “The Empire Comes to Western Europe,” 32.

¹²⁵ Thompson, “Reframing Canada’s Great War,” 106.

surprise that there were wavering feelings towards the role the Empire was playing for Britain.

A Rise in Dominion Nationalism

The Battle of Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Gallipoli have been turned into legends in Canadian and Australian history and nationalism respectively. Thompson critiqued the tendency historians have of interpreting the national sentiment as evidence of fraying imperial ties, stating that “the nationalist mythology was in many ways a post-war invention.”¹²⁶ Beckett exemplified this when he noted that although the Battle of Gallipoli accomplished little and was, for the most part, an utter failure, Australians have come to remember it differently. Gallipoli is seen and used as a turning point for national independence and identity.¹²⁷ Although these arguments may have arisen primarily after the war, the effects of Vimy Ridge for Canada and Gallipoli for Australia as an important factor in building a sense of nationhood, which ultimately had an effect on the British Empire, can be seen during the war as well.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge was the first operation of the war that all four divisions of the Canadian Corps participated together and was under full Canadian control. The army consisted of men from across Canada fighting side by side; English-Canadians, French-Canadians, men from the Maritimes and British Columbia fought beside each other.¹²⁸ Also significant is that it was not only the European-Canadians who joined the war, but approximately 4,000 First Nation men (not including the Metis who joined) and thousands of other visible minorities as well.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ian Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 51.

¹²⁸ Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lanes, 2017), 301.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 14.

The Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge represented a nation coming together as one under its own command. The victory of the Canadians at Vimy Ridge not only increased feelings of nationalism among Canadians, but also provided further support for the Dominion's desire to have more autonomy and recognition in foreign policy on the international level.

After the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Prime Minister Borden attended a conference with the Imperial War Cabinet in England and sought appropriate compensation for Canada's victorious efforts, as well as the sacrifice Canada and other Dominions suffered from supporting Britain's total war efforts as well as their own. From this, they drafted Resolution IX, an agreement that the Dominions would become equal partners within the British Empire.¹³⁰ With Resolution IX the Dominions of the British Empire would have full control over their own foreign policy after the war.¹³¹ In December of 1931, the Statute of Westminster was passed, legally recognizing the independence of the Dominions.¹³² These changes can be in part attributed to the substantial efforts of the Dominions during the course of the war, including the Canadian Corps' victory at Vimy Ridge. The events of Vimy Ridge gave Prime Minister Borden the leverage he needed to help Dominion representatives convince Britain that the Dominions were capable and worthy of having more independence and control. Canadian politician Oscar D. Skelton wrote that the Dominions "had helped to pay the piper, henceforth they would insist on a share in calling the tune."¹³³ This statement can be interpreted as direct affirmation that the men, funds, and resources the Dominions provided to Britain to sustain their total war effort played a key role in the changing policies and increased nationalism and sovereignty after the war. The Battle of Vimy Ridge for

¹³⁰ Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend*, 152.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² K. H. Bailey, "The Statute of Westminster," in *The Australian Quarterly* 3 no. 12 (1931): 25.

¹³³ Thompson, "Reframing Canada's Great War," 107.

Canada and the involvement of the Dominions in the First World War were, therefore, an important turning point in national history and that of the British Empire.

An increase in nationalism in the Dominions during the First World War due to their involvement in supporting Britain's total war efforts is not merely a post-war narrative. Using the propaganda recruitment posters in Canada during the war, one can see a reflection of the gradual shift from a focus on Britishness to the Canadianization of citizens during and after the First World War. Comparing recruitment posters from the First World War to the Second World War provides what can be interpreted as evidence of this Canadianization. A large majority of the recruitment posters and propaganda during the First World War had imagery and text that directly alluded to Britain and the British Empire. For example, the "This is Your Flag" recruitment poster (Figure 1) depicts a uniformed officer standing in front of the Union Jack telling Canadians that that is their flag and that they should fight for it. This is a prime example of Canada's strong ties to Britain and the British Empire during the First World War. Canada used variations of the Red Ensign throughout its history, however by the turn of the century the Red Ensign on the Parliament Building was replaced again by the Union Jack in a "period of imperial ascendancy" for the Queen and her empire.¹³⁴ The consistent use of the Union Jack over the Red Ensign is therefore unsurprising and demonstrates the strong British ties and loyalty to Britain and the Empire in Canada. From this, it is also evident that the ties and sense of loyalty to Britain were important factors in the war effort.

¹³⁴ John Robert Colombo, Ken Reynolds, and Andrew McIntonish, "Canadian Red Ensign," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/red-ensign>.



Figure 1. “This is Your Flag” recruitment poster. Source: The Canadian War Museum, “Recruitment Posters- This is Your Flag,” Wartime Recruiting Poster CWM 19820376-008.

In contrast, a significant proportion of the few recruitment posters that directly mentioned being Canadian, or emphasized it more than the British ties, were French-Canadian recruitment posters (Figure 2). This is likely due to the lessened sense of British loyalties held by French-Canadians compared to their English counterparts and their stronger distaste towards Canada’s involvement in what they perceived as a British war. Moreover, the only poster found that depicted Canada as separate from the British or the Empire that was not French-Canadian is the “Enlist! New Names in Canadian History” recruitment poster (Figure 3).¹³⁵ This poster would have been produced after May of 1915.¹³⁶ This is important because, as noted by Thompson, the trauma and experiences of the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 and especially the Battle of the Somme in 1916 “led to a palpable shift in sentiment” and “reflected a growing belief that the Dominion’s immense sacrifice

¹³⁵ It is also necessary to note that not all recruitment posters are made available online or survived in records, therefore there may be more in existence that were not found. However, it can still be asserted that there is a much greater focus on Britain and the Empire than on Canada itself based on the collection available for reference.

¹³⁶ Although the dates recorded for this poster is listed as 1914-1918, which would make contributing the poster as sufficient evidence to a move towards Canadianness as a result of the war difficult, a more concise time frame can be deduced from the text on the poster. The poster lists “Langemarck; St. Julien; Festubert; Givenchy” on what appears to be a version of the Red Ensign and declares that these are “new names in Canadian history” and that “more are coming.” These are battles in the Second Battle of Ypres in April to May of 1915, the first major battle that Canadians fought in in the First World War.

went underappreciated in Britain.”¹³⁷ The inclusion of the Red Ensign and the words “Canadian history” demonstrate, to some extent, a sense of Canadian nationalism that is separate from Britain. Although they were fighting alongside Britain, Canadians were contributing to their own national history. Expanding on this, the reorganization of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1917 to have Canadians in senior positions demonstrated “the war’s influence on the development of ‘a more robust and self-confident Canadianism’.”¹³⁸ Events of the war, such as the battles at Ypres and Sommes, led to an increased sense of Canadianness and self-governing, as evident by the posters and actions taken during the war. This, however, did not equate to the overwhelming desire of all Canadians or all of the political parties in Canada to completely cut British or imperial ties.¹³⁹ The process of the dissolution of the British Empire, using Canada as a case study to represent the British Dominions, was a gradual process in which the involvement and experiences in the First World War and the Second World War played a great role.



¹³⁷ Thompson, “Reframing Canada’s Great War,” 106.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Thompson, “Reframing Canada’s Great War,” 106.

¹³⁹ Thompson describes the political debate in Canada between the Liberals and the Conservatives over the essential Britishness of Canada before, during, and after.

Figure 2. French-Canadian recruitment poster from WW1. Source: The Canadian War Museum, “Recruitment Posters- 150^{ième} Carabiniers (150th Battalion)” Wartime Recruiting Poster CWM 19820376-009.



Figure 3. “Enlist! New Names in Canadian History” recruitment poster. Source: Government of Canada, “Enlist! New Names in Canadian History: Recruitment Campaign,” Library Archives Canada Item 2894450.

In comparison to the recruitment posters in Canada during the First World War, which heavily alluded to Britain and the Britishness of Canadians, the recruitment posters used during the Second World War have a greater focus on Canada. For example, although the “To Victory” (Figure 4) and “Let’s Go Canada” (Figure 5) recruitment posters both include imagery of Britain, in the form of a lion with a crown and the Union Jack respectively, Canada is represented as an identity independent of Britain. In “To Victory” the beaver, a national symbol of Canada, wears a sash with ‘Canada’ written on it and “Let’s Go Canada” depicts a soldier in uniform with ‘Canada’ written on the arm patch, calling for the rest of Canada, by name, to fight with Britain as Canadians. This demonstrates that although Canada is fighting alongside the Crown, they are not primarily British nor fighting for Britain as they had in the previous war. There is a stark difference in imagery and message when comparing the symbolism and sense of nationalism to that presented in the First World War. This offers contemporary demonstration that the totality of the First World War and the consequences of it, such as the Statute of Westminster 1931, affected the British Empire, contributing to its gradual dissolution.



Figure 4. “To Victory” Canadian propaganda poster from WW2. Source: Priscilla Roberts, “Canadian Propaganda Poster of World War II,” Research Gate.

Figure 5. “Let’s Go Canada” recruitment poster. Source: Henry Eveleigh, “Let’s Go... Canada! Recruitment Poster by Henry Eveleigh, 1942,” The Weiner Holocaust Library, Poster 19.

The increased nationalism in the Dominions that stemmed from the First World War is evident in the Second World War as well, especially in Canada. As a result of the Westminster Agreement of 1931, the self-governing Dominions were given control over their foreign affairs, meaning that when Britain declared war on Germany on September 3rd 1939, they were not automatically declared to be in a state of war as they had been in 1914. Despite this, Australia followed Britain’s declaration of war against Germany just three hours later; New Zealand also declared war simultaneously with Britain. Three days later, on September 6th, South Africa declared war on Germany. Ireland, a reluctant member of the British Commonwealth, remained neutral throughout the war.¹⁴⁰ Canada, on the other hand, did not declare war on Germany until September 10th 1939. Although Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King took a firm stance against the actions of Hitler and his Nazi regime in his speech after Britain declared war on September 3rd, he did not declare a state of war for Canada.¹⁴¹ In both his speech and his diary entries, Prime Minister Mackenzie King emphasized that Canada’s actions were her own, stating, “Canada, a free nation of the British

¹⁴⁰ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*; xi.

¹⁴¹ William Lyon Mackenzie King, “Canada Declares War on Germany,” Speech, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, CBC Archives, accessed on March 25, 2022, from <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1402779919>.

Commonwealth, is bringing her cooperation voluntarily.”¹⁴² He wrote in his diaries that “...we should take means of defence and should not go beyond the defence of Canada at present....”¹⁴³ and that he was glad that he had “made it clear that our action was voluntary and for a principle; not because of any attitude of subserviency to either the Crown or the Empire.”¹⁴⁴ This last statement in particular is very telling of the changing attitudes towards Britain and the Empire as a consequence of the First World War. Canada was going to be involved in the war not because she had to or because of British loyalties, but because it was necessary to take a stand against the evils that threatened the peace and liberties of mankind.¹⁴⁵

Australia stands as a strong example of how remaining loyalties to Britain and the British Empire can be intertwined with a greater sense of nationalism and imperial sentiment after the First World War. Australian Prime Minister W. M. Hughes remarked that “Australia was born on the shores of Gallipoli.”¹⁴⁶ Similar to Vimy Ridge for Canada, Gallipoli marked an increase in self-recognition as Australians. However, this sentiment did not “eclipse imperial loyalty” in Australia.¹⁴⁷ Imperial loyalty remained the dominant value for Australians as it was mixed with national pride.¹⁴⁸ Australians saw this battle and their war effort as proof that they were “worthy sons of empire.”¹⁴⁹ Although Prime Minister Hughes had pushed for greater autonomy in foreign policy for Australia after the war, the importance of the British Empire was not overlooked by Australians. Referencing the Australian press

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ William Lyon Mackenzie King, September 3rd 1939, pp. 6. Diaries of William MacKenzie King, Item 20689, Library and Archives Canada, 958.

¹⁴⁴ William Lyon Mackenzie King, September 4th 1945, pp. 1. Diaries of William MacKenzie King, Item 20690, Library and Archives Canada, 959.

¹⁴⁵ Upon hearing President Roosevelt’s address on September 3rd 1939, Prime Minister Mackenzie King wrote in his diary “I came away from the radio feeling an almost profound disgust... And professing to do so in the name of peace when everything on which peace is based is threatened... Their word, at the moment, might have helped save millions of lives.” Diaries of William MacKenzie King, Item 20689. This passage exemplifies the importance of morality and fighting for peace in the decision of Dominions (specifically here, Canada) to join the war effort.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Beaumont “United We Have Fought,” 410.

¹⁴⁷ Beaumont “United We Have Fought,” 399.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 402.

during the post-war period, whom were uneasy about the potential damage to imperial relations, Beaumont observed that “the impetus for structural change in imperial relations was therefore being generated by Hughes, fuelled by the frustrations of his marginalization in London rather than from within Australia.”¹⁵⁰ This is further exemplified by the lack of eagerness towards obtaining and utilizing the opportunities given for greater independence for the dominions by Hughes’ successors.¹⁵¹

This sentiment remained through to the beginning years of the Second World War as well. Just hours after Britain’s declaration of war, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies stated that “in consequence of a persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and ... as a result, Australia is also at war’.”¹⁵² This was in part due to the fact that the Statute of Westminster was not ratified by Australia until 1942, but also due to the continued loyalties to Britain.¹⁵³ The long-standing loyalties to Britain and the British Empire are important to note because it highlights that not all Dominions and Colonies of the Empire had the same experiences and reactions to the consequences of the total war effort in the First World War. This does not refute the argument that Britain’s total war efforts played a role in the changing policies of the Empire. For instance, the ratification of the statute in 1942 is still, in effect, a consequence of total war. The statute existed because of changes made after the First World War and experiences in the Second World War led to Australia ratifying it. Rather, it demonstrates that the process of dissolution of the British Empire as a result of the totality of the World Wars was gradual and at a different pace for each nation.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 410.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 412.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ In addition to the Statute of Westminster 1931 not being ratified by Australia at the time of declaration, there may have also been some confusion among Dominions about what Britain’s declaration of war meant for them. In Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s diaries, he remarks that some politicians questioned whether they were in a state of war against Germany automatically. William Lyon Mackenzie King, September 5th 1945, pp. 2. Diaries of William MacKenzie King, Item 20693, Library and Archives Canada, 962.

The Abandoned Empire

The desire and commitment to hold the British Empire was still strong for Britain after the First World War, however, as Raymond Callahan stated, “the power to sustain them adequately was no longer there.”¹⁵⁴ Fighting the First World War totally had consequences on Britain and her Empire that continued to manifest long after the end of the Great War, proving disastrous as their effects stretched into the Second World War. In addition to the financial and economic costs of war, Britain also lost her naval supremacy following the end of the war. As such, the United States emerged as a fierce competitor for command of the seas. Due to the financial burden of the war, Britain set out a plan to cut spending budgets on the navy significantly, with a drastic drop from 171 million pounds in the 1919 to 1920 period to a mere 60 million for the following year.¹⁵⁵ The financial effects from the war, upon which this decision was to be based, did not end there. Cutting the budget on the navy would ensure the overtaking of Britain’s naval power by the United States, but it was a race in which Britain could not afford to partake. Additionally, the United States had the capability to engage in a naval race “insupportable by demanding the repayment of the immense British war debt.”¹⁵⁶ The cost of total war had left Britain in a very difficult situation. The British government chose to appease the Americas, leaving themselves with only power over European seas. In doing so, they also had to give up their alliance with Japan due to American suspicions and pressure from some of the Dominions. This, however, resulted in Japan becoming a potential threat to the security of the Asia-Pacific Colonies and Dominions, a threat which Britain did not have the resources to deter alone.¹⁵⁷ The total war effort that the British expended during the previous years had thus resulted in a loss of power and security of the British Empire.

¹⁵⁴ Raymond Callahan, “The Illusion of Security: Singapore 1919-42,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9, no. 2 (1974): 70.

¹⁵⁵ Callahan, “The Illusion of Security,” 73.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 75.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 76-78.

The consequences of these diplomatic and policy changes in the interwar era emerged more disastrously for Britain and the British Empire during the Second World War. In unavoidably choosing relations with the United States, Britain was unable to afford to build and maintain a permanent fleet in the Pacific. As such, Britain expectedly prioritized naval control of the seas in Europe and her own security over that of the Asia-Pacific. However, during the interwar years and the beginnings of the Second World War, Britain assured her Asia-Pacific Dominions that, if necessary, a fleet would be sent to the new stronghold base in Singapore, whose defence was vital to the defence and security of the British Empire in that region.¹⁵⁸ The realities of yet another world war went beyond what Britain expected. Britain was fighting with a war effort arguably more total than that of the First World War. Britain's resources were stretched even further when France surrendered and Italy entered the war, all while Japan's threat to Singapore and Malaya (modern-day Malaysia) increased.¹⁵⁹

Despite the vast military assistance and resources provided by the British Empire, Britain was unable, or unwilling, to provide adequate defences to the Pacific theatre when it had been requested. The new Commander-in-Chief Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, an RAF retiree who had been recalled for active service at the start of the war, attempted to receive reinforcements and updated equipment and aircraft replacements.¹⁶⁰ These attempts were unsuccessful. Winston Churchill "was determined to prevent the diversion of men and equipment from the Middle East, where Britain was fighting the Axis, to the Far East, a theatre that was currently inactive...."¹⁶¹ Throughout 1941, important materials to the war effort were sent to the Middle East and Russia. Among these materials included two thousand aircraft (850 of which were modern fighters) to the Middle East and 600 modern fighters to

¹⁵⁸ Ong Chit Chung, "Major General William Dobbie and the Defence of Malaya, 1935-38," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17 no. 2 (1986): 282. Also see Nicholas, "The Strategy of Singapore," in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 no. 2 (1929): 320.

¹⁵⁹ Callahan, "The Illusion of Security," 81.

¹⁶⁰ Callahan presumes that he was chosen because "of an understandable reluctance to spare a senior officer with up-to-date combat experience for the" Pacific theatre. pp 85.

¹⁶¹ Callahan, "The Illusion of Security," 85.

Russia, in addition to American supplies diverted from Britain to Russia.¹⁶² Fighting a total war, especially contributing to all theatres of war, left Britain short on resources to spare for Malaya and Singapore.

In the late 1930s, officials on the defence strategy of the Pacific recognized the serious threat to security Japan posed due to increasing strength and knew that the defence of Singapore would be intertwined with the defence of Malaya. They also recognized that it was becoming increasingly likely that Malaya and Singapore would have to hold out on their own without the British fleet for an extended period of time.¹⁶³ Despite this, in December of 1941 when the Pacific theatre became active, there were only 158 aircraft (none of which were modern), no tanks, few anti-tank guns, and not enough soldiers available.¹⁶⁴ A new battleship and an old battle cruiser finally arrived at the Singapore base on December 2nd 1941. However, the fleet which had been promised, and which the defence of the British Empire in the Pacific largely relied upon, was rather ineffective. Both the battleship and the battle cruiser were sunk by the Japanese on December 10th, largely due to the lack of air cover and support.¹⁶⁵ If the aircraft and re-enforcements that were requested by Sir Brooke-Popham and the British Empire representatives in the Pacific had been met earlier the fate of Singapore may not have been such a devastating loss. Unfortunately for the Asia-Pacific colonies, many of whom fell under Japanese occupation, the totality of the First and the Second World Wars rendered Britain unable to sustain the entirety of her war efforts and ensure the security of her Empire.

It is easier to criticize the decisions of the British government to withhold resources from the Pacific theatre of war with the benefit of hindsight. Britain's attempt and responsibility to fight in all theatres of the Second World War increased the totality of its war

¹⁶² Ibid. 86.

¹⁶³ Chung, "Major General William Dobbie and the Defence of Malaya, 1935-38," 296-298.

¹⁶⁴ Callahan, "The Illusion of Security," 86.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 86-87.

effort. This, however, does not negate the feelings of abandonment that arose from the lack of defence of the Pacific theatre, especially when the colonies and Dominions had offered so much of their own resources to support Britain in other theatres of war and had been promised and led to believe that the defence of the Asia-Pacific, specifically Singapore, was second in priority to that of the British Isles.¹⁶⁶ The wavering loyalties that arose in some colonies, which stemmed from the British total war effort, were also paired with an increased desire for self-governance.

During and after the Second World War, Britain was faced with the difficult task of preserving the Empire. Burma (modern-day Myanmar), a British colony, sought self-governance during and after the war. However, the British were unprepared and unable to commit to the permittance of self-governance right away. Instead, Britain proposed a period of several years of direct rule before allowing Burma independence.¹⁶⁷ Some believed that this “would ‘create a deep sense of despair, distrust and desperation’ among the Burmese” which would cause them to “conclude that the Britishers have no faith in [their] loyalty, integrity, efficiency, political ability or intelligence.”¹⁶⁸ While the British had only made vague promises of granting Burma Dominion status throughout its long rule, the Japanese granted some form of independence to Burma in 1943.¹⁶⁹ Tin Tut, one of the leading figures in Burma, demonstrated the conflicting feelings towards Britain and the Empire when he stated that an ordinary cultivator would say that “the British abandoned the country and never did us any good. We now have independence, our own national flag and our own rulers. There is much scarcity now, but this may be a result of the war. Let us fight to retain the independence that we have attained.”¹⁷⁰ The sentiment of abandonment was common in the

¹⁶⁶ See Callahan, “The Illusion of Security.”

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas Tarling, “‘An Empire Gem’: British Wartime Planning for Post-War Burma, 1943-44,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13 no. 2 (1982): 348.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Tarling, “‘An Empire Gem,” 312.

¹⁶⁹ Won Z. Yoon, “Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1978): 248.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Tarling, “‘An Empire Gem,” 312.

British Empire's colonies which had been invaded and conquered by the Empire of Japan. As stated previously, the colonies and Dominions in the Asia-Pacific provided Britain substantial support which, due to the burden of total war, was not shown in return, leaving little resources for themselves. The ramifications of war in Southeast Asia, in particular, resulted in the destruction of colonial administrations and a loss of loyalty to the British Empire.¹⁷¹ Britain's total war effort was a contributing factor towards the move to decolonization that gradually increased in the post-war period, thus bringing about the dissolution of the British Empire.

The Cost of War

Ultimately, the dire need for resources and support to sustain their total war effort forced Britain to promise and barter policy changes and post-war reforms to appease some of the colonies of the Empire. For instance, in May of 1943, Sri Lanka, a strategically vital area and important source of rubber after Malaya was taken over by the Japanese, was assured by Britain that it would "be granted full internal self-government at the end of the war."¹⁷² India and Burma were also promised that self-governance would be permitted after the war was over. The importance of these colonies to the war effort and resistance to opposing powers would have been a large factor in Britain's decision to make such promises. These promises would be expected to be fulfilled after the war thus threatening the existence of the Empire as it had existed previously. The totality of the war and its cost on Britain enhanced the argument for independence in colonies such as India which was a creditor of Britain by the end of the war.¹⁷³ Before the start of the war, India owed Britain £350 million. By the end of the war, Britain owed India £1200 million and her debt to the Colonial Empire was £454

¹⁷¹ Von Albertini, "The Impact of Two World Wars on the Decline of Colonialism," 28-29.

¹⁷² Allister Hinds, "Sterling and Decolonization in the British Empire, 1945-1958," in *Social and Economic Studies*, 48 no. 4 (1999): 100.

¹⁷³ Hinds, "Sterling and Decolonization in the British Empire, 1945-1958," 101.

million, an increase from £150 million.¹⁷⁴ Britain was “forced to accept the inevitability of independence”¹⁷⁵ of her colonies, especially those which played a large role in the war or whose rule was no longer justified due to circumstances brought about by the war.

Much like after the First World War, Britain was drained greatly from fighting a total war. After fighting two total wars in less than half a century Britain was weakened and could not manage the entire Empire. In this case, the Empire was a great resource of vital importance to the war effort, while also being a sort of burden to the British. Jackson makes an interesting note that the British would not have had as great of a sense of responsibility to fight in the Pacific theatre during the Second World War if it were not for the colonies and Dominions of the Empire which it had to protect.¹⁷⁶ In this sense, Britain would not have had to engage in a total war in all of the theatres, potentially limiting the burden on their economy during and after the war. In some cases, it would have been more beneficial to alleviate the responsibility of maintaining and securing yet another territory while simultaneously trying to rebuild herself after the total cost of the war. However, some key colonies of the Empire were also essential to Britain’s recovery. In a period when economic contribution from the Empire was vital to Britain due to the post-war economy, many colonies of the British Empire sought self-governance or independence from Britain. However, two of Britain's post-war needs relied on the Empire- restoration of the sterling to international convertibility and reconstruction of Britain’s war-torn economy. To do this, Britain had to control access to colonial balances by ensuring that “political reform in the colonies did not jeopardize Britain's economic interest.”¹⁷⁷ It was due to this need for support in the British economy that Britain did not want to give up full political control over the colonies that were her main dollar earners and contributors to the economy, such as Malaya.¹⁷⁸ Despite this, the process of

¹⁷⁴ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 47.

¹⁷⁵ Hinds, “Sterling and Decolonization in the British Empire, 1945-1958,” 101.

¹⁷⁶ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 4.

¹⁷⁷ Hinds, “Sterling and Decolonization in the British Empire, 1945-1958,” 100.

¹⁷⁸ Hinds, “Sterling and Decolonization in the British Empire, 1945-1958,” 115 and 107.

decolonization occurred gradually due to the social, economic, and political consequences of the war.

The consequences of fighting a total war on the British Empire can also be seen through other classifications of total war. Britain fought the war with the ideology of liberation against Nazism and the Japanese.¹⁷⁹ This goal can be classified as a characteristic of total war under the category of total war aims. Britain fought fiercely and aided in all theatres of war to achieve the total war aim of defeating the threat to peace and liberty posed by these belligerents. When connected to the quote by Somerset de Chair “... in 1945, we hope, we shall be returning to Burma as liberators, not as conquerors as in 1885, and it is in this spirit of liberation that I hope that the problem of the future of Burma will be approached...”¹⁸⁰ it can be presumed that this total war aim of liberation hindered their imperial claims on the colonies and played a role in their decisions. It would be with much difficulty for Britain to justifiably maintain control of the Empire in an era of anti-colonial pressure, especially from the United States.¹⁸¹ Moreover, Von Albertini argued that the “political and social implications and repercussions” of the war were “enough to break the stagnation of the interwar years and hasten or set in motion the process of decolonization” even without American anti-colonialism.¹⁸² This reinforces the role Britain's total war efforts, in all respects, had on the existence of the British Empire.

Conclusion

On August 4th 1914, amidst learning of the news that Britain had declared war on Germany, Sir William Lyon Mackenzie King wrote in his diary, “The British Empire will be changed in complexion, the mother country will be crushed by the burden of the war, the

¹⁷⁹ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, ix.

¹⁸⁰ Tarling, ““An Empire Gem,” 344.

¹⁸¹ Manish Sinha, Nripendra Kr. Shrivastava, “The Fall of Singapore and the Anglo-American Conflict over the Indian Question,” in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 64 (2003): 1295.

¹⁸² Von Albertini, “The Impact of Two World Wars on the Decline of Colonialism,” 28.

outlying Dominions will by their resources rise in importance, a new Federation will arise, but it will be self-government & cooperation not centralization on a militarist model, for Germany is the 20th Century reproduction of Rome and if she is overthrown or crushed, as seems inevitable, the imperial model for governments & men will surely disappear from this world for good.”¹⁸³ Although the complete collapse of this imperial model, and thus the British Empire as it was, took decades beyond the writing of this statement, Mackenzie King was right. Fighting a total war cost Britain dearly, both during and after the war, which, in turn, increased the importance of the Dominions and colonies of the Empire. The war had dire consequences on Britain and the British Empire which began during the First World War. Raymond Betts made this observation as well in the chapter “Decolonization: A Brief History of the Word,” in which he stated that although many scholars typically restrict “their analysis... to the widespread upheaval beginning with the end of World War II,” some scholars note that the “first major disruption of the European order of things was marked by World War I, with enormous losses in manpower, finances, and confidence, while anticolonial resentment grew and was widely expressed in literature and strikes.”¹⁸⁴

The effects of total war in the First and Second World Wars made the gradual dissolution of the British Empire inevitable. The experiences of and responses to Britain’s total war effort can be represented by the Dominions of Canada and Australia, India, and colonies in Southeast Asia. The contribution of the Empire to Britain’s war effort was substantial. This affected Dominions and colonies alike, although in different ways. From the total war efforts of Britain and her Empire emerged growing nationalism and changes in society, economics, politics, and policies. The economic ramifications of the totality of the First World War had dire consequences on the events of the Second World War. Unable to

¹⁸³ William Lyon MacKenzie King, August 4th 1914, Diaries of William MacKenzie King, Item 4968, Library and Archives Canada, 37.

¹⁸⁴ Raymond F. Betts, “Decolonization: A Brief History of the Word,” in *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian Societies, 190s-1970s*,” edited by Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 24.

fully recover, Britain was unable to fully defend her Empire from the Axis Powers, especially in the Pacific theatre. This, in turn, affected the colonial sentiment toward British rule, destroying the administration and sense of loyalty in many of the occupied colonies. The consequences of these wartime experiences brought about by the totality of war affected the existence of the British Empire, resulting in its gradual dissolution during and after the World Wars.

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