

France and Britain To-day

TWO STUDIES OF IRON AND IMPERIALISM

Editor's Note: The following articles, reproduced from "The Plebs" (London) were written before the French occupation of the Ruhr.

IN 1914 the weight of France in world affairs was very much less than that of either Britain, Germany, or the U. S. A. There were several reasons for that, but the most important by far was France's industrial weakness—she lacked a big heavy industry. If we compare her iron and steel industry with the of Britain, Germany or the States, we find she was very far behind, and the same was true of her coal output. The following figures taken from the Labour International Handbook, show her inferiority at a glance:—The monthly averages in thousands of metric tons in 1913 were:—

	Coal.	Pig Iron	Crude Steel
France	3,404*	434	368
Germany	14,383†	1,074‡	1,276‡
Britain	24,343	869	649
U. S. A.	43,100	2,623	2,651

France's industrial weakness did not arise as a result of lack of iron. Of that she had plenty: she had in fact more than she could use. In 1913 she produced twenty-two million tons of ore, nearly half of which she had to export. What France lacked was coal; she had to import about one-third of the fuel she used.

Moreover, although France had the advantage of three protective sea frontiers, as well as of a practically impregnable mountain barrier cutting her off from Spain, her north-eastern frontier was a source of weakness. Here, not merely was there no natural obstacle between Germany and herself, but her principal industrial district was jammed right up against the exceedingly weak frontier. France had another serious handicap. Her population was practically stationary, while that of Britain, Germany and the States was increasing.

In Germany, for instance, the birth-rate in 1913 was twenty-eight per thousand, in France nineteen*, with the result that 65,000,000 Germans, ever increasing in numbers, confronted 40,000,000 Frenchmen, whose numbers refused to grow. In consequence, France was becoming relatively weaker in military and industrial man-power and France's future looked anything but reassuring.

The war came, and after it the Peace Treaty. To what extent did the latter help France to overcome her three great weaknesses? The addition of Alsace-Lorraine gave her a population of nearly 2,000,000 which more than made up for her war losses, and, of course, weakened Germany. Moreover, it put France in possession of by far the biggest ore field in Europe, and second biggest in the world, according to Eckel (Coal, Iron and War). In 1913 the Lorraine output had reached the colossal figure of 40,000,000 tons. The whole of that field, along with some of Germany's most modern and scientifically equipped steelworks, was now entirely in French possession.

The addition of so much iron ore alone would have been little help to France, for what she needed above all was coal. That, however, was not overlooked, and the Saar mines, with an output in 1913 of 17½ million tons, were also handed to France; and in addition Germany was compelled to send France some 20,000,000 tons per annum for a considerable number of years as part of the reparations. Besides, thanks to the fact that the left bank of the Rhine was to be occupied by the Allies, with France as the chief occupant, for a period up to fifteen years, the Rhine now became temporarily the French frontier, and the Rhine as a natural obstacle is in these days of machine guns, as Marshal Foch said, a very formidable barrier. Altogether, then,

the Peace Treaty went far to strengthen France materially. It gave her a good frontier temporarily at least; it gave her an increased population; and, moreover, it gave her the coal and the iron that offered her an opportunity of challenging Britain's dominant industrial power over Europe. France had now the chance of developing into a new and more formidable Germany, and that is the alluring prospect that beckons her on today.

Of course, there are difficulties in the way. First of all, there is hardly any world market for iron goods at present, and France, because of the relative strength of agriculture as compared with industry, has no extensive home market for iron and steel wares to give a really strong impetus to great extensions in the French heavy industries. Besides, iron pigs and steel billets are little use in themselves; they require to be turned into machinery, etc., and France has yet to develop an extensive engineering industry.

But there is a more serious difficulty. Saar coal cannot provide sufficiently hard coke for smelting the Lorraine ore. That means that the Lorraine iron and steel industry is being kept alive on the coke coming from the Ruhr under the provisions of the Peace Treaty. "For seven to ten years to come Germany will be under obligation to deliver coal and coke from the Ruhr. After that the deliveries will cease. When that takes place the position in the Lorraine may well become catastrophic." If France is to have the golden future that her new circumstances promise her, she must have coke from the Ruhr.

Were France to get the left bank of the Rhine her position would be strengthened enormously. It would give her a permanent frontier on the Rhine, a great increase in population (about 5½ millions) and the increase would be in the highly industrialised population she requires, besides putting under her control one of the most highly developed parts of industrial Germany.

It may be suggested that the fact that the left bank is under allied occupation is a guarantee against permanent French occupation. That argument can only apply to the presence of American and British troops, for obviously the presence of French troops and those of her close ally Belgium is no guarantee. According to a recent Guardian article, there are only some 1,200 American troops there; and the British troops, though they certainly exceed that number are a mere handful as compared with the estimated 150,000 French troops in occupation. Besides, does not history show that temporary occupations have a habit of becoming permanent occupations?

Some recently published notes, prepared by Marshal Foch for use at the Peace Conference, leave us no doubt about his view. The Rhine, he said, in effect is the only satisfactory frontier for France and the peoples to the west of that river should, in his view, be under "the same military organisation." Clemenceau also shared this opinion as a tion." Clemenceau also shared this opinion and the notes drawn up for his use at the Conference laid it down as a first point that Germany's frontier should stand "fixed at the Rhine." The allied occupation was a compromise that allowed France to put one foot on the left bank.

But perhaps the French interests have dropped that ambition? Perhaps—and perhaps not. French statesmen have already announced that so long as Germany does not fully comply with the impossible Versailles Treaty France will maintain her watch on the Rhine. It is well known, too, that the propaganda conducted in the Rhineland with a view to persuading the population to demand autonomy from Germany has not been carried on without the assistance of the French authorities. Besides, thanks, to the Guardian, we know that recently Prime Minister Poincare sent a Monsieur Dariae to report on the eastern situation, and the latter recommend-

ed that a Customs barrier be placed on the east of the occupied area (i.e., cutting it off from the rest of Germany) and the razing of the Customs barrier on the west facing France; that the left bank should have a separate budget from the rest of Germany; and that the mark currency should be replaced by another. In addition to these economic means for detaching the left bank from Germany and adding it directly or indirectly to France, he urged that the Prussian Officials should be replaced by local officials, who have all been taught, no doubt, the value of obeying the French army of occupation. "These are doubtless ambitious projects," reports M. Dariae, "but if executed wisely and discerningly in proportion as Germany slips out of her engagements they would be amply justified. It is a long-drawn out policy, in which a well-considered diplomacy must apply one after another the successive links of a well-thought-out course of action which, little by little, will detach from Germany a free state under the military control of France and Belgium."

Although the permanent control of the Left Bank would increase France's industrial power, it would not give her the Ruhr coke. That, alas, is over the Rhine. But if France got that—and it is only just over!—not merely would she have the precious coke and system, for the Ruhr is the headquarters of the great German metal trusts. It produces not merely coal, but iron, steel and dye-stuffs and manures. In Germany, it is said, even the humble potato is a by-product of the coal industry.

But surely France will never attempt to cross the Rhine, it may be urged. Necessity knows no law. Without Ruhr coke France cannot develop her industrial might—she cannot make use of the "talents" that Fortune has placed in her hand. Ruhr coke is the magic wand that can turn the otherwise practically useless Lorraine ore into steel billets, machinery, big guns and—profits. Capitalist France must therefore come to an understanding with Krupps, Thyssens, and Stinnes or she must get control by force.

And please note that France is already in the Ruhr. In May last the Allies sent Germany an ultimatum on the reparations question and at the same time the French army crossed the Rhine and occupied Dusseldorf and two other important Ruhr towns. That was illegal. Germany accepted the ultimatum. Did France withdraw? Not a yard, and thus, in the words of a British capitalist daily, the occupation became doubly illegal.

M. Dariae in the report already referred to had also something to say of the Ruhr. After pointing out France's need for Ruhr coal, he said that in the existing French occupancy of part of the Ruhr, France had a pledge which she must not give up. By means of it, he said, France can "utterly destroy" the whole industry of the Ruhr, if she desires to. France, he urged, must get a definite control over the Ruhr industries.

In January, Germany owes France an indemnity payment which the latter well knows Germany can't pay and even now (December) France is threatening to occupy the remainder of the Ruhr, unless Britain helps Germany to make the payment. Thus is France placing British capitalism on the horns of a dilemma. It is being invited either to pay France an instalment of her German indemnity or allow France to become the possessor of Germany's coalfields.

Is Britain anxious to see France owner of the Ruhr? If France either now or later is able to unite Lorraine ore with Ruhr coke, she will have the basis on which to build up an industrial power that will enable her to dominate Europe and as an iron and steel state leave Britain far behind. That is a prospect anything but pleasing to capitalist Britain. Said the Guardian in a leading article on M. Dariae's report: "The report is a nightmare of brutality" (not of course to the French to whom it is a pleas-

* Including Lignite. † Excluding over 7,000,000 tons of Lignite. ‡ Exclusive of Alsace-Lorraine and Luxemburg.

* The Labour Year Book, 1916.