

What Were the Forces of Change Resulting in the Decline of 'British Greatness'?

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Political
Issues

I would like to talk about the political issues of this question, because in my opinion, the most important meaning of 'British Greatness' is the political power of the British Empire in the nineteenth century and if we are talking about the Decline of 'British Greatness' in the twentieth century we usually mean it in the political sense.

In the mid-Victorian era Britain had become the greatest world power in history and after the First World War the first industrial nation ruled nearly a quarter of the Earth's land surface and a similar proportion of its population.(1) A half-century later she was not even one of the leading countries of Europe any more. In order to find the reason for the decline in Britain's power, firstly I would like to explain the notion of 'power'.

Power can be characterized not as a possession but as a relationship, "one in which A gets B to do something that B would not otherwise do".(2) It includes outright war, coercion, manipulation, inducements and influence. Its 'tangible' sources are military might, natural resources, population and economic strength while there are some 'intangible' elements such as national unity and morale, the coherence of the governmental system, the quality of leadership or diplomatic skill.(3) These elements are all very important and if a country lacks one of them it may not be able to take advantage of the others.

Britain's power in the nineteenth century depended on the weakness of continental Europe. This enabled the British to exploit their naval advantage to consolidate their trade and empire. But soon their rivals recovered and from the late nineteenth century they had to

face a wider range of enemies, with greater military strength.(4) The end of this hiatus was one of the main forces of change.

In the first half of the twentieth century Britain tried to defend its global position. Fears of French hegemony were significant in the 1920s and 1960s while outside Europe there was an acute Japanese challenge in the 1930s and early 1940s, but the most important rival of Britain was evidently Germany. Its challenging the European status quo and its bids for a continental empire led to the two world wars. Outside Europe there was America, Britain's rival for global economic leadership and finally we have to mention Russia, which had been a threat to Britain's Indian empire in the early part of the century and became an imperial power in Europe for four decades after the Second World War.(5)

Secondly, I would like to describe the most important characteristic features of the British Empire according to the sources of power, which I have mentioned above. At times of crisis the Empire could be a vast resource of material and manpower: in the First World War 3 million men contributed to the British Army from the Empire and this number raised to 4.5 million in the Second World War, while the number of British soldiers reduced from 6.7 million to 5.9 million.(6) But this empire was not a contiguous one like Russia for example, and this basic weakness is the reason why we can say that the British Empire was an artificial worldpower. As the German commentator Constantin Frantz said in 1882, the colonies were only held to Britain "through the threads of the fleet, and these threads could all be broken or cut".(7) We also have to mention that Britain did not 'own' this 'ragbag of possessions', because in most cases British control was only skin-deep. In my opinion, although the British Empire had all the 'tangible' elements of power, even if military might and economic strength was continuously weakening, the greatest problem was that it lacked the 'intangible' ones, especially a cohesive governmental system, the absence of which was another important force of change resulting in the Decline of 'British Greatness'.

"In the nineteenth century Britain struck out. In the twentieth century the empire struck back."(8) Owing to peaceful and violent political movements on British dependencies the control over local policy and resources progressively reduced. The great wars in the first half on the twentieth century required far greater

exertions by Britain to safeguard global possessions, particularly the second because it was truly a global crisis. Then as the twentieth century progressed indigenous political power made it harder to exploit the empire's resources and at the same time local protest and international rivalry made it more expensive to hang on. It was already a phase when the "game of formal empire was no longer worth the candle - as it had been in the Victorian era."(9)

Thirdly, I would like to talk about Britain's wealth, because of the fact that 'wealth is usually needed to underpin military power'.(10) There is a strong relationship between a nation's wealth and its power. In 1880 Britain produced nearly 23 per cent of total world manufactured goods, only 10 per cent in 1928 and 4 per cent in 1980.(11) One of the reasons for this decline was certainly the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century other nations, especially Germany and America, industrialized and Britain's advantage, which was a result of an early start, reduced. This 'early start' actually became a disadvantage, because the country was tied to outdated technology and working practises. We also have to mention that comparing to its rivals Britain's industrial sector was far less efficient: by 1840 when British per capita income was equivalent to US\$550 only 28.6 per cent of the male workforce remained in the agriculture, while it was around 50 per cent in most European countries at the same stage. It was an industrial revolution in the structural sense, but not so much in the technological sense.(12)

Power is relative and Britain's power in the late Victorian era was also due to the weakness of others. Concerning economic leadership the case is very similar, after the rivals recovered they could catch up with Britain, Germany even took over Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century in steel production for example. It is evident that the weakening of economic strength and military might were also the signs of Decline. It is also very important to pin down that while it was a great advantage for Britain that it is an island in the nineteenth century, when seapower was the dominant military technology, this advantage disappeared as the emphasis moved on to aircraft in the twentieth century.

There were underlying weaknesses, comparing to its rivals Britain was under-industrialized and heavily reliant on foreign trade. "It was unlikely that a nation with only 2 per cent of the world's

population could control over a fifth of its land surface, maintain half its warships, and account for 40 per cent of its trade in manufactured goods for very long."(13) Considering this, Britain's twentieth century metamorphosis is less surprising. To a considerable extent what happened was determined by the changing parameters of power: wealth, rivals and empire, which have to be regarded as forces of change resulting in the Decline of the British Empire.(14)

Finally, I would like to mention the fact, that this Decline was not a steady twentieth-century slide. Although the two wars weakened Britain's position compared with that of the USA, in military terms Britain was unquestionably the leading European power for a decade after 1945, achieving a nuclear capability years earlier than France.(15) Britain's weakening international position became obvious only in 1956, when the loss of the control over the Suez Canal took place. After Suez Britain was no longer able to deal with the United States and the Soviet Union as an equal and some weaker countries in Africa and Asia, particularly the Arab countries started to challenge Britain's authority more openly.(16)

The definitely wrong policy of staying out of Europe and De Gaulle's anti-British attitude only enabled Britain to join the European Common Market in 1973.(17) But it still did not mean a European integration, because of Britain's strong relationship with the USA, especially in military terms. In my opinion Britain's situation between Europe and the USA also makes it difficult for her to develop her economy in order to become more powerful and can be regarded as a negative force.

(1) D. Reynolds
: Britannia Overruled, Longman 1991, p.25
(2) Ibid.;

p.5
(3) Ibid.;

(4)
Ibid.;

p.19
(5)

Ibid.;
p.21

(6)
Ibid.;
p.25
(7) Ibid.;

p.26
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(16),(17) D. McDowall : An
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