

English Defeat and the Hundred Years' War

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In 1337, with King Philip VI of France reclaiming the Gascon fief from the English and Edward III's declaration of war, ensued a 116 year period of war, conflict and unsuccessful truces. The significance of the war not only comes from its length but also from the fact that it contributed greatly to the formation of Europe as we know it. Though until the death of Henry V of England in 1422 the English seemed to have the upper hand, the French eventually managed to expel the English armies from France and regain control of almost all French territories. This essay intends to argue that despite England's initial military success, a French victory was ultimately inevitable. In order to do this, one must return to the roots of the conflict and explain how many of the causes of English defeat go back to the very beginning of the conflict.

The outbreak of the Hundred Years' War in 1337 had a number of reasons behind it. First of all, at the beginning of the 14th century, The King of England still controlled Gascony, an important region that contributed greatly to the English economy through its salt and wine trade¹. The English also had a lot of influence on Flanders who depended greatly on English wool². The problem arose from the tension between The King of France and the King of England. When Philip V of France died, the Capetian line ended as for the first time in 4 centuries, the King failed to produce an heir. This led to great tension as Charles of Valois' son became King Philip VI of France despite Edward III of England having a claim to the throne through his mother Isabella, who was Philip V's sister³.

¹ Perroy, E. (1951) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 60-61.

² Curry, A. (1993) *The Hundred Years War*, p. 47.

³ Curry, A. (1993) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 44-46.

Though Edward III didn't make a claim to the throne at first, supposedly due to the fear of a possible Scottish invasion⁴, he was displeased by the fact that the King of England and someone with a claim to the throne of France had to do homage to the King of France as he was the latter's Vassal through his control of Gascony⁵.

Edward III's power was more than the King of France wanted to deal with, leading him to reclaim the fief of Gascony, claiming that Edward III had failed to keep his oath and satisfy the needs of the French overlord⁶. Thus a 116 year period with multiple wars, truces and crises ensued in which the English experienced a great success early on with the tremendous victory at the battle of Crecy on the 26th of August, 1346⁷ but ended up failing miserably with the great defeat at the battle of Castillon on the 17th of July, 1453⁸.

The first reason why England seemed pre-destined to lose the Hundred Years' War was the strain the war had on England's economy. At first, the English crown seemed to prosper under the riches brought back to England from pillages and ransoms⁹. This revenue however failed to cover the extremely large war-expense partially due to corruption, while still giving the English a false sense of prosperity. When this sense of prosperity wore off, the King had to find new ways of financing the war, which included taxing the people and cutting soldiers' wages¹⁰. As the war went on, it became harder for the King of England to convince the parliament of a need to raise taxes and pursue the war. The economic situation led to great social unrest which became clear during the peasant revolt led by Wat Tyler in 1381¹¹. In addition to social unrests, the war became tougher as corruption and cuts brought down the soldiers' moral as well as having a destructive impact on the English tactics that could no longer be pursued given the English's inability to maintain garrisons and push further in to

⁴ Curry, A. (1993) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 47-49.

⁵ Perroy, E. (1951) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 82-83.

⁶ Perroy, E. (1951) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 86-88.

⁷ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 15-16.

⁸ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 66-67.

⁹ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 44-45 & 111.

¹¹ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 23-25.

France. By the mid-15th century, the English crown had a debt of £25,000 which for the time was immense¹².

The second reason behind England's failure was its unreliable and superficial allegiances. England was allied with Burgundy and Flanders as well as having Gascony rule under English authority¹³. The alliance with Burgundy was vital, it was Burgundy that first turned Joan of Arc over to the English and put constant pressure on the French¹⁴. When Philip of Burgundy joined the French King in 1435, it gave France the necessary time to recover, stopping the English from delivering the final, necessary attack to force the French in to negotiations¹⁵. England also had a lot of trouble controlling Gascony as the Gascons didn't firmly support one specific ruler but rather changed their support between the English and French King opportunistically. This was a big problem for Richard II who depended greatly on Gascon wine exports¹⁶. The same problem occurred with Flanders who despite being allied to the English, resist the French as much as Richard II had hoped. Flanders was vital for the English because of its great wool trade that contributed a lot towards the financing of the war. The English also had a lot of trouble with the local people, especially in Gascony. Under the Black Prince, taxes were so high in English-ruled French territories due to his desire to make the war finance itself, that the Gascons tended towards the French king rather than the Black prince¹⁷.

Many argue that the birth of French nationalism throughout the war was the key reason why England was never going to conquer France. The French were fighting for their home against a foreign body that wanted to conquer and control them¹⁸. The first signs of French nationalism can be traced back to the fact that Philip of Valois was chosen as the successor of

¹² Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 130-131.

¹³ Neillands, R. (2001) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 24 & 37.

¹⁴ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Neillands, R. (2001) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 164-167.

¹⁷ Neillands, R. (2001) *The Hundred Years War*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 26-29.

Philip V, instead of Edward III. This clearly shows that the French identified with a French king rather than an English one¹⁹. England's many victories at the beginning of the war completely destroyed French morale. At the beginning of the war, French power was divided amongst Dukes, vassals of the King of France who often worked in their own selfish interests as though they were separate states²⁰. When the French were at their lowest point, they gained hope through the rise of great generals such as Bertrand du Guesclin and Joan of Arc and united. The latter and her divine visions boosted the French morale and gave the entire nation the idea that unity was necessary to defeat the English²¹. Joan of Arc died 20 years before the end of the war but she had a major impact by enforcing a French sense of nationalism. This nationalism came from the terrible conditions brought upon them by the English. This unity had two major impacts on the war; firstly, it made the French fight and push back English troops and take advantage of their greater numbers. Secondly, it made it almost impossible for the English to have control over parts of France because the locals were no longer ready to accept English rule²². Once the French had modernised their military tactics, the English had neither a tactical, nor a moral advantage.

French nationalism aside, the English ruined their chances by taking the wrong tactical approach. The English Kings focused too much on gaining territory rather than making sure that the gained territory was stable and properly under English control²³. This led to England covering vast amounts of land, but only holding it superficially, which is why the French could chase the English out of vital strongholds such as Poitiers in 1372 and Bergerac in 1377²⁴. It seems as though Edward III should have focused on forcing the French in to negotiations rather than be so ambitious as to attempt conquering the entire country.

¹⁹ Perroy, E. (1951) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 74-76.

²⁰ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 39-41.

²¹ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 57-58

²² Perroy, E. (1951) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 279-282.

²³ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, pp. 22-24.

²⁴ Neillands, R. (2001) *The Hundred Years War*, pp. 170-172

England's tactical failures are closely related to one of the main underrated reasons behind their defeat. Simply put, France was just too big to be conquered by a country of England's calibre. No matter what the situation, except for in local battles, France never lacked in manpower or resources²⁵. The English were clearly outnumbered and only progressed so much at the beginning of the war because the French weren't militarily as advanced as the English. As General Fuller once said, "the size of France prohibited lengthy, let alone permanent, occupation". France was too difficult for the English to invade as it was much larger, had a population that was 4 times the size of that of England and was much richer and had many more resources. It seems as though English occupation would have been impossible from the very start²⁶. This situation was not helped by the fact that England could never deliver the final blow to force the French King in to negotiations. Multiple truces and periods of peace such as the first peace from 1360 until 1369 and the second peace between 1389 and 1415 as well as the peasant revolts and the Black Death, stopped the English from focusing entirely on the war, which would have been necessary if the English were ever going to establish a hold on France²⁷.

By analysing the roots of the conflict and the state of the two kingdoms before the war, one can quickly determine that England never had the means to win the war. There are many reasons behind England's defeat and most of them seem to have been inevitable, namely the birth of French nationalism and the fact that England never had the resources or power to conquer a country like France. It therefore seems correct to claim that English defeat in the Hundred Years' War was inevitable.

²⁵ Fuller, J.F. (1954) *The Decisive Battles of the Western World*, pp. 449-451.

²⁶ Fuller, J.F. (1954) *The Decisive Battles of the Western World*, p. 449.

²⁷ Allmand, C.T. (1988) *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, p. 16.

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