Prologue: A Bigger Britain

The War brought empires crashing down ... except one.

Britain’s ended, bigger than ever.

Was Britain in a better position in 1919 than before the war?

In a world power sense, yes.
It had a bigger empire.
And the empire was safer from outside challenge than ever.

Competition with Germany – gone

The Russian menace – gone.

The US – not eager for empire anywhere outside of America, and ready to withdraw from world affairs.

And France was a British ally.

Productivity in Germany, France and the Soviet Union were down, compared to Britain’s.¹

In Asia, for the first time, there WAS no great game.
   England had won it.

The game was over.

The Imperialists making policy at home would have a say in peace terms.

   Curzon was Foreign Secretary

   Milner was Colonial Secretary.

As the peace makers gathered in Paris to settle the estates of the German, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires, the Colonial prime ministers joined them.

If anybody, they were the ones with an imperial vision.

   They knew what they wanted, and it included whatever German colony lay close to theirs.

And if Prime Minister Lloyd George had no taste for new colonies, their appetites were thousands of square miles from being slaked.

I. SMALL PAX BRITANNICA?

A. VERSAILLES

To hear Americans tell it, the peace conference in Paris pitted an idealistic President against the cynical, rapacious power-politicians of Europe.
... hard, relentless Georges Clemenceau of France, for good reason known as “the Tiger,” and scornful of any idealistic talk of “peace without victory,” or high-flown principles and international peacekeepers.

“Moses had his Ten Commandments, and we broke them. Wilson has his Fourteen Points and – well, we’ll see.”

... and that cunning Welshman, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, charming, glib-tongued, ever resourceful, a political magician full of expedients.

“Is it upper or lower Silesia we are giving away today?”

Brushing off the Irish, who wanted recognition.

The truth is that Lloyd George, hard headed realist though he was, stood pretty much where Wilson did.²

Wilson wanted a just peace...

– self-determination for peoples to rule themselves

– open treaties, openly arrived at

– freedom of the seas and freedom to trade

– an end to colonial grabs and power plays

– and, to make a just peace and keep it, a League of Nations.

² In fact, he got there first. His speech of war aims came three days before Wilson delivered his Fourteen Points address, and was so like it in what it covered that the President considered cancelling his own remarks as unnecessary. See Allen, *Great Britain and the United States*, 698-99.
Clemenceau had seen German soldiers on French soil.
   It must not happen again.

   He wanted protections to keep Germany from rising again:

   – a crushing fine on the warmongers: reparations

   – a set of strong buffer states around Germany, and military alliances with them

   – a Germany disarmed and stripped of some of its most useful coal and iron lands in the east and along the Rhine

Both of them got most of what they wanted.

Between them, Lloyd George tried to work out a balance, and as far as he could, soften the terms put on Germany.

This far he would go with France:

   – Germany would have to help pay for the damage done.

       British taxpayers had given heavily; and they stood to give even more heavily in the future.

       The Empire owed an immense debt to the United States.

   – Germany’s power to make war must be taken away.
But beyond Germany’s own borders, his sympathies lay with Wilson, not for sentimental reasons, but because they fit the Empire’s needs the best.

– the empires of the past couldn’t be put back on their feet.

A lot of small countries had to come into being.

But they were sure to be weak. Too weak to really fend off a Germany when it rose again.

– occupation of some of German territory, perhaps; but no annexation.

France couldn’t take a slice of Germany for itself, say, in the Rhineland

Turning France into the dominant power of continental Europe would be as dangerous to Britain as Germany had been.

– creating a League of Nations

The war had made all too clear...

The United States was an essential prop for the Empire.

Without it, the war in Europe couldn’t have been won.

Without it, British interests in the Pacific couldn’t be protected.
Even now, the great white Dominions – Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia – wanted American friendship, and most of them felt closer to America than to Britain.

Between American and British sea-power, an alliance would be able to shake the whole world.

What did England get out of the terms of peace?

It got more than Lloyd George fought for, as far as Germany itself was concerned.

The most important gain was the complete destruction of German seapower.

Its navy, hereafter, was to have just 6 obsolete battleships

6 light cruisers
12 destroyers
12 torpedo boats.

Submarines? Not a one.

Any new ship, built to replace an old one, could be 10,000 tons... no more.

Germany must dismantle its every fort and naval base within 50 kilometers of its coasts.
Down came its forts on Heligoland – and that island was the outer protection to the bases Germany had, on the North Sea.³

Germany could have no naval aircraft, and no military planes.

That left Britain as the #1 naval power in Europe.

61 battleships ... more than France plus the US together.

... twice Italy and Japan’s, together

120 cruisers and light cruisers
466 destroyers

... twice what France and the U. S. combined had

... three times what Japan and Italy together had.\textsuperscript{4}

Germany would also be disarmed of its army.

It would be allowed 100,000 long-service soldiers

No tanks –

no heavy artillery

No general staff

Germany could not manufacture munitions or guns.

Allied forces would hold the Rhineland, the one place where Germany


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could launch a war from.

There, under the treaty, they were to stay till 1935.

The Rhineland was demilitarized.

No permanent camps –
No barracks
No supply dumps
No military railways or roads
No forts

And this zone would go east of the Rhine river, 50 kilometers.⁵

Guarantees like this would mean a Germany that could never endanger the peace... assuming the Allies enforced it.

But something else would enforce the peace: a League of Nations.

A federation of world powers, committed to peaceful solutions.

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**Mandates**

The one place where Lloyd George and Wilson pulled apart was when it came to the fate of the Germany colonies.

And even there, the impetus wasn’t Lloyd George’s own.

He didn’t WANT any new colonies for Britain. Its power was stretched too thin as it was.

It wouldn’t even have been acceptable to the man in the streets in London or Liverpool.

“Self-determination” was the concept of choice.

That was at the heart of the Fourteen Points and of the League of Nations.

It was the Dominions that insisted on collecting the spoils.

Especially from Australia’s Prime Minister, blunt Billy Hughes.

He wanted to spread his country’s domain up to the Equator. German islands gave him the chance to do it.

Woodrow Wilson was shocked:

“Mr. Hughes, am I to understand that if the whole civilized world asks Australia to agree to a mandate in respect to those islands, Australia is prepared to defy the appeal?”

Hughes: “That’s about the size of it, President Wilson.”

It was only under pressure from them that the colonies were put into Mandates.  

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7 There were three kinds, and they got different kinds of letters: A, B, and C. The Ottoman Empire territories
Essentially, neighboring colonies would hold them as trustees.

The League would decide who got what.

It would play policeman there, and could take away a territory that was misgoverned.

But it never did.

As far as the pink bits on the maps go, the Empire was a million square miles more to the good.

It had 13 million new subjects.

Australia got most of the old German colonies in the Pacific.

South Africa got hold of South-West Africa.

Tanganyika went British, too.

were classified as A. They would be independent nations, mostly, with a fair bit of oversight. The B mandates were the ones in tropical Africa, and they would need constant and thorough supervision from London. As for C – those were colonies of the colonies: the ones that Australia and New Zealand and South Africa were to manage, because they were next door to them.
Now, at last, the red color went Cape to Cairo.

As for the Middle East, Transjordan and Palestine were made into British Mandates.

Persia was all but a British protectorate.

So from Suez to India, the Empire had a commanding voice.

**B. RESTIVE DOMINIONS**

Or, rather, a bunch of commanding voices. Look at those Prime Ministers, sharing in the Peace.

Maybe their presence was the most ominous sign about Empire.

Before, a British official had spoken for all.

Now they were starting to speak for themselves ..

not out loud, not to Americans and French and Italians, but to Britain’s Prime Minister, and not in a begging tone, either.

and, in Billy Hughes’s case, very much out loud, too.

It was intolerable, he shouted, to let Wilson get away with dictating “to us how the world should be governed,” for he has “no claim to speak even for
They were turning into autonomous nations.

Their insisting on their way, on the German colonies, showed that.

The very language of the peace conference had an unsettling cast, too.

Because if there were two phrases that came up over and over, they were...

“Self-determination”
“a Covenant.”

A covenant is an agreement that equals enter into, setting the terms for how they will get along with each other in the future.

... what if these colonial dominions chose to become equals?

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Self-determination meant the right of Poles to have a Poland, Czechs to have a Czechoslovakia, Albanians to an Albania.

... when would Ireland, India, and South Africa have self-determination, too?

Something had drained out of the old imperial spirit, beyond England.

It had bled out on the fields of Passchaendale and the shores of Gallipoli.

There wouldn’t be much of the old sentimentality after this, for the Empire.

There was a lot more cold-eyed understanding of the short-sightedness, the outright stupidity of British commanders.

C. Restless Subjects

There was also a clear sign that the Empire would find it a lot harder to make its authority stick.

Before the ink was dry on the Treaty of Versailles, England faced a series of brushfire wars by countries that didn’t want to be brought into the new imperial order.

1. Egypt
Rioters cut Cairo’s railroad and telegraph lines.
Riots broke out in all the big cities.
British military personnel were murdered.
It took all spring to suppress the violence.

2. Afghanistan

The Emir was assassinated, and his third son declared Afghanistan free and independent.

That meant, no more British oversight of his foreign policy.

And it meant mounting an attack through the Khyber Pass on India.

They actually did get into India, and did grab one border town and a pumping station for a military post not far off.

They were driven back soon enough.

But before long, British fighter planes were strafing Afghan villages and bombers were unloading on them.

3. Arabia

In the spring of 1919, Ibn Saud, the lord of the Nejd (most of Saudi Arabia) got into a religious war with Britain’s client Arab king, Hussein, King of the Hejaz.  

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9 It was a sectarian dispute. A religious revival, that Ibn Saud became the head of, made him master of the Bedouins and the strongest military force in the Arabian peninsula. Ibn Saud was always on the evangelical side; he had been a champion of the teaching of the long-dead Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, and the Wahhabis were very
puritanical, even fanatical. Hussein, by contrast, was an orthodox Sunni, and had no patience with Puritanism. (Think, as an analogy, of the difference between Cardinal Laud’s Anglicanism and the Puritanism of the Rev. John Cotton). As the evangelical movement shoved into Hejaz, of course, it was a threat to Hussein’s rule. As a result, there were fights over disputed border areas, that turned into essentially a Holy War. See Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace*, 424-25.
Hussein was only propped up with British planes and guns.

In the end, in 1924, he would be beaten, driven into exile, and Hejaz would become part of Saudi Arabia.

But how do you stop Saud? With what?

Shell his ports along the Arabian coast, as a warning?

The Royal Navy couldn’t find any that were worth as much as the shells they were firing.

4. Palestine

There were riots against the Jews in Jerusalem and Haifa

5. In Mesopotamia the people rose against British rule in city and village,

in Sunni and Shi’ite areas

and it took a great deal of force to put them down.

6. In India, protests got so violent that soldiers had to massacre hundreds of people at the enclosed market in Amritsar

7. In Ireland, disputes over home rule turned into a fight for independence and into an endless civil war.

There’d been little wars before. What happened now, though, was that England flinched.
It couldn’t afford the expense of garrisoning armies in Palestine
and Mesopotamia
and Afghanistan
and India
and Egypt

Plans had to be scrapped or changed...

– Ireland had to be let go

– Iraq had to be allowed a king of its own

So did Transjordan

– Egypt had to be declared free

– as for Afghanistan, it was given the full independence its
new Emir wanted. No British oversight, no
right to exclude foreign powers like the Russians
from setting up consulates.

– Afghan and Soviet agents had a free hand to egg on
border tribes against British rule in India; and
the Empire had to let it happen, and do nothing.

The Empire wasn’t holding onto less than before. But its grip was weakening;
and it took less force than before to make it let go completely.

This isn’t a sign of a really bright future.

II. DOMINIONIZATION OF THE EMPIRE
A. Chanak

In September 1922, there was a blow-up across the Dardanelles between Greece and Turkey.

It was the last act in more than a year of ferocious war.

Greeks held bits of Asia Minor under the Versailles treaty.

There were British garrisons at the straits.

But the new Turkish state was under tough, strong leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

He had faced the British before, at Gallipoli, as a general.

The peace terms, he now declared, were waste paper.

Turkey would have no foreign troops on its soil!

Both sides behaved like brutes.

Greeks, landing at Smyrna in 1919, had butchered unarmed Moslems.

Turks, taking back the city, repaid the favor, burning their houses one by one, so that they could savor the moment.

They skinned the corpses of their enemies.

They took the Archbishop, carried him to a barber shop, and cut him up thoroughly in selective places, before killing him.
Just about none of the city, outside the Turkish quarter was left.

Tens of thousands of Christians died.

By the end of 1922, some 1.5 million Greeks had been driven out of Turkey.

Processions of refugees stretched twenty miles long.\textsuperscript{10}

The Greeks were driven out. Now came the British.

Their main installation in Asia Minor stood at Chanak.

the port of entry to the Strait

with its fortress and foreign consulates

Turkish armies marched on it.

Could a challenge to British authority like that be allowed?

... Britain, the one superpower of the 1920s?

Not if the Colonial Secretary could help it.

It was the irrepressible Winston Churchill.

\textsuperscript{10} David Fromkin, \textit{A Peace to End all Peace}, 545-46.
He sent an inquiry to the Dominions: if war broke out there, would they rally to England’s call?

(And he told the press about it almost at once).\textsuperscript{11}

The publicity alone was enough to kill the whole idea.

The Dominions hadn’t been consulted, and here they were, being

\textsuperscript{11} Ironically, Churchill had, up to that time, been one of the foremost doubters of Lloyd George’s policy of trusting to the Greek empire-builders. Peace in the Moslem world, he had told the Cabinet, really would depend on the Turks getting a fair deal in Asia Minor; in fact, British credibility in the Middle East and in India would depend on it, too. It was the switch-around that helped make so many British leaders see Churchill as unstable, a chaser after exciting wars. Robert Rhodes James, \textit{Churchill: A Study in Failure} (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 155-59.
dragged into what looked a lot like a war about to start.\textsuperscript{12}

Australia, New Zealand had left plenty of their boys beneath the soil along the Straits.

And here they were being asked to do more?

It was déjà vu, all over again.

By making his pitch through the press, Churchill wasn’t asking them – he was telling them.

They very quickly told him.

New Zealand and Newfoundland were ever faithful.

They offered to send troops, if needed.

The Australians gave a very sullen consent.

But Canada – our Lady of the Snows – froze the whole notion cold.

Its Prime Minister heard about the request when he opened the Sunday paper over breakfast.

He wired back that he couldn’t promise a single man.

\textit{that} the Canadian Parliament would have to decide for itself.

\textsuperscript{12} David Fromkin, \textit{A Peace to End all Peace}, 549-550.
Only by purest luck did Britain escape a war that it would have had to fight virtually alone, for no good reason that anyone could think of.

The Cabinet sent the Turks an ultimatum.

Diplomats on the spot pocketed it and opened up talks. The storm blew over.

In a way, it was really a win for Lloyd George and Churchill.

Turkey’s willingness to hold back an attack was because it had been convinced that doing so would bring on war with England... and that war, it wasn’t about to risk.¹³

Wins like this are like getting killed in a traffic accident, but knowing, as you die that you did have the right of way.

Lloyd George’s Government had been a coalition of Tories and Liberals.

Most Liberals had written off the Welsh Wizard as a welsher long since.

¹³ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace*, 550-52. The other price of the crisis was a military coup in Greece just at the end of September 1922. King Constantine, who had pushed on the disastrous war, abdicated, and his son George II took power. Revolutionary officers rounded up the leading figures in the previous government, putting two in prison and sentencing six of them to death, including the Prime Minister. The sentence was carried out on November 28th, a few hours after the verdict had been found.
Now the Tories cut and run. Ever since Disraeli’s day, they had been the Turks’ best friends.

They’d never liked Lloyd George’s romancing the Greeks.

And this — it sent cold chills through them.

And not just through them. Because Chanak undercut the one great theme that had run through Lloyd George’s last three years in office.

It wasn’t a theme of Empire on the Rise.

It was a theme of Cutting Your Losses.

The country didn’t want adventures. It wanted peace and quiet.

That’s what Lloyd George seemed to give them.

To get it, he gave ground to the people in India.

He gave Egypt its independence – at least on paper.

He pulled back from turning the Middle East into a British empire.

He gave Ireland its independence — except on paper.

He tried to soften the harsh burdens on Germany that the Versailles Treaty had imposed, the better to bring a lasting peace on the Continent.

He cooled off the arms race in the Pacific.
Again and again, when England could have taken the lion’s share, Lloyd George had taken a quick and easy peace, instead.

What he saw, everybody saw.

The Empire had over-committed itself.

Taxpayers needed a break.

It wasn’t an outright retreat from Empire. But it was a plain sense that England knew its limits...

in Mesopotamia
in Ireland
in Africa

For a while – a very short while – the Tories, who had thought of Lloyd George as that crazy, unreliable wild man began to think that maybe they had a statesman after all....

... until he and the other wild cards of politics –

the Churchills
the Birkenheads

all made a pell mell scramble to get into a nice, big war to uphold God Knows What Greek Government today.

Here was the great political gambler, betting not just his own shirts, but everybody’s.\(^{14}\)

The crisis toppled Lloyd George’s government, and put his Liberals out.

They were never to return.

Nor, though his career lasted twenty years more, was Lloyd George.

Churchill lost his appendix and his Cabinet post all in the same night.\textsuperscript{15}

From here on, things would be different.

England wouldn’t try to be the world’s policeman.

It wouldn’t try keeping the peace by building up military and naval guarantees for its friends.

It wouldn’t try to lead, when a crisis came.

It would call summits and see if everybody would take action together.

It would go to the League of Nations, and see if it could get the world to act.

But it would stay out of commitments.

It would tend to the Empire.

But that was ALL that England, on its own would attend to.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} For this point, of Chanak as the birthplace of appeasement and the turning point in Britain’s sense of itself as a world power (or – to put it simpler – its failure of nerve) see Kenneth O. Morgan’s \textit{Consensus and Disunity}, 327-29.
Poor Old Britannia, the Universal Aunt

One of the unexpected things is that some of the boldest imperialists were the biggest isolationists and appeasers.

It seems odd, when you think of blustering beet-red Indian army colonels.

But there’s nothing odd to it.

Those who thought globally didn’t think continentally.

Europe was too small a stage for them, and it had never been one where they treated the boards comfortably.

It wasn’t the place that you won wars.
    You won them in the Empire.
    You lost them on the Continent.

The kind of forces you needed to keep an Empire together were, first of all, a Navy.

But Europe? Only an army – and not some imperial army of coloured people rallying to the colours – could bring victory there.

Besides, those who cared most about Empire knew that England had its hands full, just coping with half a billion subjects jabbering in half a thousand languages.

I’m tired of Lithuania,
I weary of the Lett,
I never had no mania
For Pole or Prussian yet.
Old England is an island,
And this is my complaint,
Why does old England mess about
With continents which ain’t?

Poor old Britannia, the Universal Aunt!
Think you can mother everybody? Well, you can’t.
What d’you want with Europe? Why d’you wish to roam?
Ain’t you got enough misfortunes in the home?

The foreigner’s an alien,
He does not rule the waves;
Give me the good Australian
Who cleans his teeth and shaves.
Oh, let the hairy Magyar
Stew in his horrid juice,
And scrap the Foreign Office,
For it ain’t no kind of use!

The paper’s all Croatians
And Yugo-slavs and Czechs,
In all these bearded nations
We’re buried to the necks;
But it takes a flood or earthquake
Or other nasty mess
To get the British Empire
Into the British press!

Poor old Britannia! Excuse a little sob:
Ain’t your far-flung Empire a whole time job?
Less of this Locarny-blamey! Why d’you want to roam?
Ain’t you got enough misfortunes in the home?

– A. P. Herbert
**B. A Lost Generation**

Did Britain decline? Certainly. Every nation does. No Empire lasts forever.

But what is impressive is how slow the fall was.

Soviet expansionism was nowhere near as fast or as dangerous as Tsarist expansion had been.

The French didn’t want to expand their empire.

THEY were no threat in Asia, either.

Yet this superpower position did begin to crumble. Why?

One reason is that the balance of power at Versailles failed.

Another is the PSYCHIC expense of the war.

What other European country had a “Lost Generation”?

What other country used the Somme as an emotional shorthand for not getting into anything that might risk war?

Great Britain lost less than Germany or Austria-Hungary or France.

But only in Britain did the plea come that “the best and the brightest” were gone, mowed down by machine guns, and that therefore they could not act in the future.
Britain declined because it THOUGHT it was declining.
Because it lost its nerve.

Because it lost confidence in itself.

What was the real force for decline in the 1920s?

– the loosening grip of empire.

– empire is the only thing that made Britain a serious power in Europe.

Without it, it wouldn’t be a world power.

It would just be an island off the coast of Europe.

– and after 1919 the grip of empire was loosening.

There was a harder fight, to keep it.

And this meant that British power was living on borrowed time.

This, not economics, is the real story of Britain’s worst danger in the 1920s, to major power status.

C. Dominion, Not Domination

1923
Statute of Westminster (1931)