

Edward J. GILLIN

Entente Imperial: British and French Power in the Age of Empire

Stroud 2022

288 pages

The book *Entente Imperial: British and French Power in the Age of Empire* by Edward J. Gillin provides a new and interesting perspective on developments in the field of international relations in the 19th century. The author focuses on key aspects of mutual relations between Great Britain and France in the context of international politics. The main part of the publication is focused on the period between the years 1852 and 1870. The book is thematically divided into several chapters that gradually follow the dynamic transformation of British-French relations in the 19th century. The author is questioning the generally accepted concept of the policy of splendid isolation, by which modern historiography traditionally understands the politics of Great Britain in the 19th century, i.e., the political approach defined by the effort to minimally interfere in European politics with the aim of preventing the involvement of the British Empire in the alliance structures of the European great powers.

A relatively simple narrative is followed on the background of British-French cooperation during the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the Second

Opium War (1856–1860), trying to present evidence for the claim that the relationship between Great Britain and France was so intense that the policy of splendid isolation was practically violated. The author widely uses the term “The First Entente Cordiale,” by which he means the political cooperation between Great Britain and France between 1852 and 1870, rather than a specific international agreement. “The First Entente Cordial” is therefore put in parallel with the period of British-French relations after the signing of the true Entente Cordial in 1904. The development of relations between France and Britain in the second half of the 19th century is then portrayed as a logical precedent on the way to the year 1904. The period between the years 1870 and 1904, including rivalry in the colonies, is then understood as a transitional period between 1852 and 1904. Gillin claims that Great Britain had always been strongest when it cooperated with its biggest European rival, France. Likewise, France knew that it could best expand its global influence in cooperation with Great Britain. According to Gillin, at the beginning of the

20th century, France and Great Britain came to the realization that they were each other's natural allies. This realization was reinforced in the context of Great Power politics before the First World War, especially by the growing power of Germany, which began to threaten both British and French great power interests. The author thus comes up with the theory that the British French rapprochement was the result of joint efforts to weaken the Russian position in the Crimean War, the Chinese position in the Opium War, and the German position in the First World War. Practically, according to the author's concept, it can be stated that Britain and France found a *modus vivendi* thanks to the joint action against Russia, China, and Germany in the time horizon of 1852–1918.

Gillin presented the reasons with which he supported his arguments. Immediately in the first chapter, quite a lot of attention is paid to the British reaction to the accession of Napoleon III. to power and the proclamation of the Second French Empire in 1852, which, after all, Gillin considers to be the starting point of his main thesis. The book presents a relatively accepted fact based on the argument that after the declaration of the Second French Empire, the European political representation was dismayed by the vision of the future development of the international political situation in Europe, where the primary concern was mainly caused by reminiscences of the Napoleonic Wars, which were inextricably linked with the name of the new French Emperor. The great-

est degree of concern prevailed on the side of Great Britain, which feared that the policy of the new French Empire could lead to a disruption of the European balance of power, which could ultimately seriously threaten the applied principles of the policy of splendid isolation. Gillin considers the moment when Palmerston was dismissed as Foreign Secretary after congratulating Napoleon on the coup d'état as proof of British fears.

In a chronologically assembled structure, Gillin continues with a chapter on the Crimean War, which he considers to be crucial in the development of British-French relations. According to Gillin, the Crimean War practically led to the debilitation of the traditional British-French antagonism, which receded into the background in the face of a common enemy in the form of Russia, thus opening up space for a mutual rapprochement between Paris and London. Gillin considers the Crimean War as the beginning of British French cooperation, which he then develops in the following chapter on the background of the Second Opium War. He interprets the war years 1856–1860 primarily from the perspective of Great Britain. He traces British imperial interests, briefly recounts the development of British-Chinese relations, and *ipso facto* summarizes the results of the first Opium War, forming a scheme in which he attempts to place the French position in the Far East. From Gillin's interpretation, one can get the impression that the French position in the Far East was practically not primarily driven by

missionary activities, Christian interests, or commercial potential, but was rather intended to be a kind of supporting construction for a diplomatic approach whose goal was rapprochement with Great Britain. According to Gillin, the French motivation to enter the Second Opium War was not a priori the result of the murder of the French missionary Auguste Chapdelaine, but rather motivated by the perceived gain of British sympathies.

Gillin considers the signing of the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty in 1860 to be the peak of British-French cooperation. The treaty established trading conditions on an almost free market basis between the signatory states. It was then that political and military cooperation, free trade, and the sharing of scientific and cultural structures between Britain and France were ultimately the principles on which “The First Entente Cordiale” described by the author stood.

The author understands the years 1871–1904, i.e., the period after the fall of the Second French Empire to the signing of the Entente Cordial, as a transitional epoch, as a time of “searching” for a suitable ally. The chapter about the mentioned period provides a chronological and fractographical description of the colonial disputes between the British and French empires. The book gradually comes to the creation of Germany and the issue of British-German naval rivalry, which in the author’s eyes was one of the main reasons for signing the Entente Cordial in 1904. It is a pity that the author does not consider the in-

fluence of the Russo-Japanese War in the context of the British-Japanese and French-Russian alliances.

The last chapter of the book is a short reflection on the position of Great Britain in the modern world. Gillin compares Great Britain’s relationship with Europe under the epoch of the policy of splendid isolation with Great Britain’s position in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. The book practically opens the question of British identity and tries to answer whether it is even possible to consider the island kingdom as part of Europe. Due to the extent of its empire, Britain stood outside of European politics in the 19th century but was gradually drawn into it precisely through cooperation with France, which was the result of a shared concern about the growing power of Germany. After two world wars, Great Britain lost its dominant position in the world. Gillin argues that as a result of the loss of great power status, Britain is still at a crossroads – on the one hand leaning towards the United States of America, on the other hand entering European politics. As a result, Britain relies on only one “natural” ally in the European political field: France. Gillin believes that if one could thus trace a moment in history during which two ancient enemies became allies, it would be the period of “The First Entente Cordiale” (1850s and 1860s) and the “Second” Entente Cordiale after 1904.

As a result, however, it could be stated that the main idea of the book, i.e., the cooperation between Great Britain and France in the 1850s and

1860s, cannot in any case be considered a violation of the policy of splendid isolation since no agreement was signed between the two countries or a contract similar in nature that would bind the signatories to a common course of action. Although Britain violated the splendid isolation by entering the Crimean War, limiting this decision purely to necessity, or the need to cooperate with France, cannot be taken too seriously. British-French cooperation in the Far East needs to be approached with similar caution. The cooperation between Great Britain and France can be considered more of

a cooperation of reason than an effort to create a power block, in the spirit of the idea presented by the author as “The First Entente Cordiale”.

On the other hand, the author’s analogy with British-French relations in the 20th century and the idea of Britain’s search for a political identity after 1945 is an interesting concept that lives on in the interest of historians to this day. For this reason, Gillin’s book can be considered a great contribution to the history of the development of international relations.

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