

The Hundred Years War

The English in France, 1337-1453

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What business did the English have in France? The English themselves were famously conquered by a French fief - William, from Normandy, and naturally enough Normandy remained part of his realm, although eventually its center of gravity would eventually move across the English channel. As a consequence England instead of being an adjunct to a French dominion, England itself had a continental possession. Actually Normandy was lost to the French already in the early 13th century, although the Channel Islands remained in English custody and has since then; while the great English territorial claim was on the great swab of Aquitaine, centered around Bordeaux, and occupying the better part of Southwest France. But the ambitions of the English were greater than that, nothing short of the French throne would satisfy them, and as a consequence a succession of English Monarchs, some of whose claims on even the English throne were dubious, made claims to be the rightful heirs. Basically it was a war of conquest and subjugation, perpetrated by no higher aim than that of greed and plunder.

It started with Edward III who crossed the English Channel with the express purpose of getting the French crown. The French had harassed the English coast, their navy actually being stronger than the English and thus threatening the supply routes between England and its French colony. Edward III managed to beat the French fleet at Sluice in 1340 and more significantly the French King Philip VI floundered at Crécy in 1346, ineptly attacking a much smaller English army at night and suffering a devastating defeat. However, soon the black death would descend upon Europe, and cause much more havoc than the wars themselves, at least when it came to casualties. A few years later Philip would be dead succeeded by John II, while the British forces were very active in Aquitaine, especially the Black Prince, so called because of the tint of his armour. In fact he managed to take the French King captive and send him to London, where he would eventually die. The third son of Edward III - John of Gaunt, who would later play such a pivotal role, if posthumous, in the dynastic strifes of late Medieval England, then entered the fray, leading armies into the south west of France. The Black Prince would die a year before his father, who was hence succeeded by his grandson Richard II, who was quite a different fellow from his father and grandfather, showing little aptitude for war or martial arts. During his reign there was essentially a cessation of hostilities, and those would not be renewed until he was disposed by his cousin after his mentor and protector - John of Gaunt, had passed away in 1399. The usurper, the future Henry IV, would have his predecessor killed and once again land in France with a big army. His achievements on the battle field would not be decisive though, and soon he would deteriorate rapidly, both physically and mentally and die already in 1413 to be succeeded by his son Henry V, who once again led an army into French territory. Rather than to land at Calais, he chose Honfleur, managed to take the fortress after a short

siege and then proceeded towards Calais. However, he was interceded by a multiply larger French army and decided to battle at Agincourt, where he managed to achieve a smashing victory in 1415, a date engraved in British history. Subsequently he started to conquer Normandy capping it by entering well-defended Rouen, which nevertheless being starved into submission, had no choice but to surrender. The next year Paris fell as well, and Henry was recognized as the heir to the French crown and as the rightful Regent in the meantime. A few years later, both Henry V and the French king would die and the son - Henry VI, of the former, would at least by part of the French realm be accepted as the King of France. The English subsequently have more military successes and control an ever bigger chunk of French territory. The reason for those spectacular military successes is that France at the time of Henry V's ascension is rendered apart by a bitter civil strife between the Burgundians and the Armagnacs, who literally cut each others throats, and make tactical alliances with the British, who are than able to reap all the benefits. In 1429 the English are at the zenith of their power. Then the legendary Joan of Arc appears, a teenage maiden, dressed like a man, rallying the French, driven by religious visions. Or at least this is conventional wisdom, but the author will have none of it. She may actually have won a battle or two, and temporarily stemming the tide, but her time ran out, and she was captured and burned on the stake as a witch by the English. Yet, during her campaign, the French King Charles VII is crowned at Rheims, but as he has not control over Paris, his status is unsure, while Henry VI is crowned in the French capital. A few years later the English alliance with the Burgundians is repudiated, and once the French have made peace between themselves it is just a matter of time before the English will be driven out. And driven out they eventually are, although it takes almost twenty years, the process stalled by a temporary truce. Henry VI is like Richard II a ruler, of no martial temperament, and not only that, he is a most ineffectual one. By 1453 the English have lost all their French possessions save Calais, which they were able to hold on to, for another hundred years. The aftermath of the Hundred Years War is a Civil War in England, but unlike that of the French, without any foreign intervention.

So this is a bare sketch of the events and it gives scant illumination of what was really going on. The basic question followed by the first one is why the English were so successful. After all France was a much richer and more populous country, being able to set up more powerful armies. The English armies were consistently much smaller and the secret of their success, if such a thing makes sense, is according to the author, their longbows. The longbow was a versatile weapon delivering arrows with great precision and above all with devastating rapidity; while the crossbow, the weapon of choice on the continent, may deliver with greater force, but is on the other hand rather unwieldy and hence encumbers its users and prevents them from maintaining a steady and rapid fire. This tipped the balance at crucial battles. Otherwise the English gained a reputation for ferocity, in fact being feared as the most gruesome and effective fighters in Europe. It is questionable to what extent this actually made a difference at the battlefield. Valor and intrepidity may be inspired in the most timid of men, provided that there is enough desperation. However, battles were rare interludes in campaigns which were mostly conduced through so called *chevauchées*, when the armies plundered defenseless peasants, setting fire to their possessions, killing them outright, with the express purpose of inspiring as much terror as

possible. Clearly the cruelty displayed would well match, maybe even outdo, what modern armies have been capable of in terms of ethnic cleansing. The main difference between now and then not being the moral fibre of the soldiers, but the effectiveness of their weapons. Thus if lucky people may be out of the way of marauding armies, at least for the time being, but sooner or later, considering the extended duration, events would catch up with them.

Closely related to the plunder was the besieging of fortresses and cities. Obviously those had strategic value in addition to their wealth, the latter at least present in the case of cities. Besieging a city or a fortress was one of the major occupations of a medieval martial campaign. Usually the fortresses were too strong to yield to an outright attack, the defenders having all the advantages save time on their side. One could try to pound the walls with artillery, but the cannons at the time were too weak and unreliable. More effective methods were so called mining, where tunnels were dug underneath the ramparts, temporarily held up by wooden scaffolding, which when burnt made the tunnels collapse, and with them the walls on top. However, the defendants could as well counter-mine, and those efforts eventually ended up in stalemates. The most effective strategy of the besiegers were to isolate the citadels from the outside world, because sooner or later the supplies would run out, reducing the defenders to starving desperadoes, first eating all the horses, then all the dogs and cats and finally chasing mice, before they had to resort to downright cannibalism.

Now the real motive for war was not so much the pursuit of spurious dynastic claims, as outright plunder. Some of it was necessary, just as in the case of the Thirty Years War, to support the roaming armies, but the English plunder went well beyond that necessitated by logistics, it became an end by itself. Many a commander made a fortune, and the English countryside is littered with manors and castles, made possible by foreign adventures during that century. This wealth trickled down, so in effect even humble soldiers were able if not to make a killing at least reap handsome benefits, no wonder why the war was so popular at home, and why it was possible to raise money and obtain loans, when the dividends of such lendings and gifts paid off so well. Still, the enthusiasm notwithstanding, and with all due respect for the longbow, English supremacy would not have been possible, had it not been for the internal division among the French, as already noted, when this was healed, the French could press their inevitable advantage.

Cruel as the wars no doubt were, there was also the notion of chivalry. This however, only benefited the top of the echelons, the captive king or his commanders, while lowly people, could expect no pardon and were, as hinted above, summarily made short shrift of. Not exceptionally, as in the aftermath of Agincourt, prisoners of war, if too numerous and hence unwieldy to handle, were simply executed. In many ways it made sense, and what makes sense, especially in war, is sooner or later accepted.

From a military historical point of view, there may have been little development as to warfare during the period. Notably no real concerted effort of the French to replace their unwieldy crossbows with the superior longbows seems to have been made. Certainly strategies of warfare developed somewhat, making the difference between one commander and another not entirely a matter of plain luck and material superiority. The armor also underwent some development, if such development can be thought of as progress at all.

Initially protection was given by shields and mallets, but as the concern for better and better protection grew, those light malleable suits transformed into regular armor. What was gained in protection was more than compensated for by the loss of mobility. Armor to become effective has to be heavy and rigid, making their users clumsy. It is one thing to be mounted on an armored horse, a veritable medieval tank, making a frontal attack, and to be on your own. But even then the armors gave no reliable protection against arrows fired at relatively close range, and once an armored soldier had been felled from his horse he was an easy victim, the metal plates giving little protection against halberds, which even if they did not penetrate the metal shield itself, surely crumpled it and the flesh inside equally forcefully. There was no doubt also armoured infantry, which could be effective, when marching in columns, but just as with the displaced rider, once on their own, isolated from their comrades, clumsy fellows as the mercy of determined footmen. As already noted, plunder made not only wars tolerable but even desirable, and any wounded helpless soldier was the lawful prey of treasure hunters.

What was the aftermath of the Hundred Years War? Seward supports the classical argument that the war instilled in the French a sense of nationhood, which supposedly had been absent before, simply as a consequence of their hatred of the English. If so, it made the true beginning of France as a major continental power, not only in fact, but also in mind. The country suffered devastation, but nevertheless seem to have been quick to lick its wounds and rebound, unlike the case of the German states some two hundred years later. The scorched earth does not lose its fertility, it might even in the long run be enhanced, it only declines to deliver short term benefits.

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