CHAPTER FOUR

THE FASHODA CRISIS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN NAVY

The jeune école’s return to power was aided by shifting alignments in international politics. Competing imperial projects in Africa caused a dramatic crisis between France and Great Britain. The relationship reached its nadir with the Fashoda Crisis in 1898. The naval establishment would, however, only reluctantly admit that the Royal Navy could turn out to be a more likely naval enemy of the French Navy than the navies of the Triple Alliance, especially the Italian. The very determined naval Minister of Marine, Lanessan, did manage to convince most of the admirals in the aftermath of the Fashoda crisis that the French Navy needed a thorough reform of its strategy, doctrines, material, organisation and the composition of the fleet, and that the Royal Navy should be the standard against which it should measure itself. Lanessan, aided by Admiral Fournier, designed a programme for modernising the French Navy that was inspired by the jeune école’s ideas of how to fight a superior enemy, but at the same time retained many of the traditional elements of naval policy. Lanessan’s programme thus resembled many of the ideas put forward by the predecessor of the jeune école, Richild Grivel.

CONFRONTATION BETWEEN FRANCE AND GREAT BRITAIN

French ambitions to acquire an empire showed a remarkable continuity during the 19th century. Robert Tombs has identified four phases of expansion: from 1820 to 1848; the 1850s and 1860s; the 1880s; and from 1890 to the end of the First World War.1 In the 1880s young republicans, led by Léon Gambetta and Jules Ferry, were determined to restore French greatness. They promised a “French India” somewhere near the Sahara desert. The defeat in 1870–71 had, however, created a widespread fear of any act that could lead to another major war. There was a strong, prevalent notion that the French military effort should

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1 Tombs: France 1814–1914, pp. 204–207.
be concentrated in Europe. Hence, Gambetta and Ferry’s proposals met vigorous opposition in parliament and the press, leading to Ferry’s political downfall in 1885. The ambivalence of public opinion in this period was, however, such that the abandonment of Egypt to British influence three years earlier, in 1882, had been so unpopular that it brought down the Freycinet government and poisoned Franco-British relations for a generation.

During the renewed expansionist wave from the 1890s, journalists and politicians increasingly backed the colonial lobby’s views. The “scramble for Africa” convinced many that if colonies were important for France’s European rivals, they must be valuable to her too. From the 1890s onwards those in charge of policy in Paris were the leaders of the Parti Colonial. The most prominent was Théophile Delcassé who was appointed under-secretary for colonies in 1893, later minister for colonies (1894–95) and foreign minister (1898–1905). In both Siam and West Africa Delcassé saw French expansion as a race against Great Britain. His most ambitious project was a plan to challenge the British presence in Egypt. In the context of African expansion the logical way to make this challenge was to take up a position near the headwaters of the Nile.

Delcassé had by the spring of 1893 decided on a plan to send an expedition to Fashoda on the White Nile. A first expedition was launched, but later called off. A second expedition, commanded by Captain Marchand, was authorised by the French cabinet in November 1895. A year later Great Britain decided to begin the reconquest of the Sudan and a large Anglo-Egyptian army, commanded by General Kitchner, started a slow progress towards the upper Nile. Signals of the future confrontation between France and Great Britain due to colonial rivalry were already evident. A few months before Marchand’s departure, in March 1895, Sir Edward Grey, then under-secretary at the Foreign Office, gave a public warning in the House of Commons that a French expedition to the Upper Nile would be considered an unfriendly act. Still, successive French governments took little account of the possible outcome of the Fashoda expedition. Once the decision had been taken to send Marchand to the Nile, the purpose of the expedition was never again discussed by the French until after its arrival at Fashoda.

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