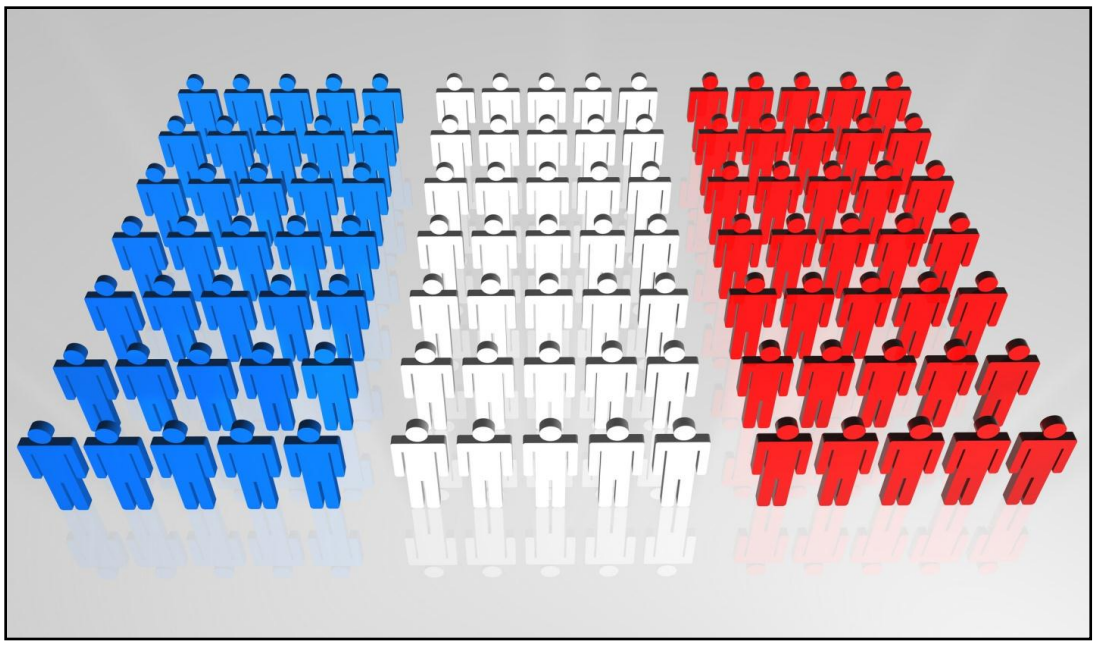

Strategic Implications of Declining Demographics: France 1870-1945

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Too few children, too few arms, and too few allies – those were the reasons for our defeat.
-Marshal Philippe Pétain, Vichy France Chief of State, 1940

Technological and economic developments in the latter half of the 19th century altered the character of war and the balance of power in continental Europe, causing France to lag behind her British and German neighbors. A declining birth rate proved an even more significant factor in the loss of French power and prestige. While national power remained dependent on military strength, the genius of a state's generals and superiority of its armaments—formerly France's stock in trade—were no longer the crucial determinates of the potency of its armed forces. Differences in rifle and artillery technology, while important, did not determine the outcome of wars. Rather, the size of nations' military-aged male populations became the vital determinant, as conscription, railroads, and the telegraph allowed states to mass huge armies, move them quickly to the front, and exercise improved command and control from the rear.[1]

France, once the most populous nation in Western Europe, saw its population growth inexplicably slow in the early 1800s. Awareness of population decline in the halls of government and in the popular press led to strategic heartburn. The leadership class fretted over potential threats from the faster-growing Germans and pondered "the end of France as a nation."[2] In 1870 a larger Prussian

conscript army defeated a smaller French professional force and seemed to validate earlier concerns in France over population decline. The new government of the Third Republic took short- and long-term measures to mitigate the "birth dearth's" strategic repercussions. Most French leaders, concerned that conscription was both politically difficult and societally controversial, nonetheless, allowed France to raise a standing army nearly equal in size to Germany's at the outset of World War I. Even after the survival of France in the Great War, however, concern over future German militarism, industrial strength, and especially demographic superiority continued to affect French strategic thought on conscription and mobilization.

Striking parallels exist between the decline of France as a great power in the 19th century and declining powers in the world of today, where states such as Russia confront falling birth rates and populations. Will strategic irrelevance ensue if their demographic dives continue? Certain foreign policy "realists" assert national power and global influence derive primarily from population growth and rising aggregate incomes that feed military spending and mobilization.[3] In response, present-day Russia is pursuing a strategy not unlike historic France's, yet success is uncertain.

Census Results Show France Trending Downward

France's 1800 population of 27 million was Western Europe's largest, bested on the continent only by the vast, multi-ethnic Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. By the 1850s, however, French economists—who earlier had worried about overpopulation caused by the Revolutionary/Napoleonic era baby boom—began noticing a considerable reduction in the rate of population growth.[4] The French birth rate peaked in the first decade of the 1800s at 33 births per 1000 inhabitants but fell continuously the next 100 years, rising only for a short period following World War I. Meanwhile, British, Italian, and especially German fecundity spiked. On the heels of unification and victory over France in 1871, Germany's birth rate reached its zenith in the ensuing decade at 40.4 per 1000 and thereafter gradually declined to around 35 per 100.[5] Imperial Germany's cobbling together of various minor states with the Prussian Kingdom, combined with subsequent population growth, resulted in a German population in 1910 of 65 million. This was in sharp contrast to France's 35 million. In economic output, the Germans surpassed their Gallic neighbors by an even larger margin, as French peasants, satisfied with land rights won in the Revolution, resisted German-like levels of urbanization necessary for industrialization and higher growth.[6]

Agreement on Existence and Effects: Discord on Causalities

Little consensus exists over the cause of France's drop in births, either among current scholars or demographers of the day. Emigration contributed, yet Germany and Britain concurrently exhibited great population growth even as they sent millions of persons to the New World and elsewhere. One theory (later debunked) claimed Frenchmen possessed a gene that limited their fecundity beyond a certain level and produced an alarming level of birth defects, including sterility. An increase in the use of contraception and abortion played a part in the growth drop, as did a sense of growing emancipation among French women who resisted the then-in-vogue assertion that "the [womb] is the crucial vehicle for the survival of the French nation."[7] Finally, French pundits in the late 1800s blasted "selfish" young adults whose alleged preference for leisure and frivolity distracted them from their natural—and national—duty to procreate.

Alarms first sounded over the birth decline's strategic implications in 1842, when the director of the French statistics bureau warned of growing, potentially hostile populations "in the East."[8] It was defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 that drove the fertility issue to the fore, however. A much-

larger conscript army had defeated France's vaunted professionalized force, and Prussia and neighboring German states enjoyed far greater manpower pools than France, boding poorly for future conflicts on the continent. Once the domain of sociologists and demographers, France's slowing growth, deemed *dénatalité* at home, became a concern for its strategists and politicians as well. In fact, this concern would continue well past World War II, with French politicians linking *dénatalité* to declining national prestige, war losses, and the loss of colonial possessions in Asia and North Africa.[9]

Concern over the declining French birth rate eventually spread beyond France's borders. A decade prior to the outbreak of World War I, for example, commentators in the United States labeled the stagnant population figures injurious to European balance-of-power calculations. Were growth to remain flat, the *New York Times* posited, France would soon lose the ability to field two army corps (100,000 men), tilting the continental power scales Germany's way. As to recommendations, one *Times* journalist suggested weaning France from the evils of absinthe, which "saps the life and strength, contributes to lunacy, increases suicides and vitiates the morals."[10]

Taking Aim at the Population Problem: Root Causes and Possible Fixes

Alarming statistics from four successive censuses in the 1890s spurred Paris to tackle the demographic decline in earnest, couching it as an emergent threat to France's long-term survival.[11] Politicians across the ideological spectrum, with the support of 80-odd organizations dedicated to increasing the birth rate and protecting the rights of large families, introduced legislation that aimed to raise fertility to German levels and beyond. Measures proposed included

- Enacting taxes on all or selected bachelors 25 and older;
- Removing barriers to marriage, while making divorce more difficult;
- Changing inheritance practices to allow non-firstborn sons to benefit;
- Providing cash benefits to parents with multiple children;
- Prescribing mandatory maternity leave for women in the workforce; and
- Establishing government job quotas for parents with multiple children.

Despite such broad-based backing for the strategic end of raising French fecundity, agreement on specific means proved elusive, and significant legislation did not pass until after World War I and the resulting decimation of France's young male population. Then, the National Alliance for the Increase of the French Population rose to prominence. Cloaking itself in *dénatalité*, the Alliance, enjoying support from the French president and prime minister as well as famous novelist Émile Zola and industrialist André Michelin, focused on the most controversial aspects of the birth dearth debate, such as banning contraception and abortion. Its lobbying prowess led to passage of a draconian anti-abortion law in 1920 and an amendment 22 years later that made abortion a crime against the state equivalent to treason.[12]

Targeting the Emergent Strategic Threat: Military Measures

Confronting the balance-of-power implications of France's demographic infirmity demanded more than long-term efforts to increase births. Until the population rose significantly, matching the size of opposing armies meant increasing the percentage of Frenchmen serving or lengthening their service period, or a combination of the two. Both figured highly in a national debate over several conscription laws introduced after the French defeat in 1871.

Conscription had a long history in France with the *levée en masse* (an emergency mobilization in 1793), widely credited with ensuring the success of the Revolution.[13] The Jourdan Law of 1798 that regulated annual conscription classes of French males, allowed Napoleon's armies to reach hitherto

unimaginable sizes. Between 1800 and 1812 over two million citizens served in his ranks. Draft-dodging and desertion were common in those years, driven by the mandatory nature of service for all males aged 18-25 and the lengthy five-year term. After Napoleon's fall, France replaced universal conscription with a lottery-based system and seven-year enlistment; numerous exemptions and deferments existed, however, and even those called for duty could buy their release. The result was a "professionalized" military comprised predominantly of poor youth paying their "blood tax."[14] It was this force that met defeat at Prussian hands in 1870.

The Draft is a Must, but Disagreement on Specifics

Humiliated on the battlefield, and facing a demographic decline, French leaders began to remake the military, especially its personnel system. They sought to emulate the Prussian model of conscription, aiming for greater universality, shorter length of service, and fewer opt-outs. Consensus was short-lived, however, and fell victim to the class-based politics that had permeated French democracy since the Revolution. Distrusting the upper-class and reactionary high command of the army, left-wing politicians promoted obligatory service for short periods in aims of "democratizing" the military. The conservative officer corps preferred long-serving enlisted ranks, fearing the rabble and doubting the "new army's" capabilities against foreign counterparts.[15]

Adding further complexity to the debate on conscription, which all agreed was vital to meet the strategic threat from across the Rhine, was its potential negative effect on future population growth. Eliminating exemptions and lengthening service requirements increased the numbers of recruits and serving soldiers but also delayed military-aged males from marrying and procreating. With women's reproductive spans relatively fixed, demographic experts envisaged a meaningful drop in the number of births per female on account of expanded conscription.[16] As such, numerous *dénatalité* riders appeared on the plethora of draft-related bills introduced between 1871 and 1913.

Legislators passed four separate conscription laws during this period. Service length dropped, climbed, fell again, and rose to three years on the eve of World War I. The age of intake for recruits wavered between 20 and 21 and alternative service provisions disappeared. Lawmakers attempted various schemes to eliminate buy-outs and restrict deferments/exemptions but with only partial success. In the end, raising an army equal in size to Germany's necessitated inducting successively higher percentages of recruits from each coming-of-age class (rising from 43 percent in the late 19th century to 53 percent in 1909), accepting the less physically fit, and taxing the populace at a much higher rate than across the frontier.[17]

Deepening the Talent Pool by Looking Elsewhere

France also sought to increase the size of its conscript army by recruiting from its many overseas colonies. Behind this push was Charles Mangin, the celebrated commander of a French Colonial Expedition to the Sudan.[18] Mangin in 1907 urged the creation of an African reserve in case of large-scale European war, claiming the local populations were robust and willing to fight for France. Racial theories prevalent at the time peppered his pitch; the Africans were inherently fearsome, had less developed nervous systems and could tolerate great pain, and placed little value on human life.[19]

Mangin's proposal spurred controversy in France. Prominent journalists and politicians questioned the Africans' intellectual capabilities and ability to adapt to cold-weather climates, as well as the significant cost in transporting them north. Social scientists worried about long-term repercussions from "racial mixing." Nevertheless, military expediency trumped societal angst, and the high command decreed in 1912 the incorporation of colonial troops into the French army, not only sub-Saharans but

Arabs from the Maghreb as well. Initially conducting garrison work in North Africa, they saw little actual combat until 1915, when mounting French losses necessitated the use of reinforcements. The African soldiers deployed under both Colonial and Metropolitan (mainland French) Army control, segregated at the company or battalion level.[20] Opinions differed on their effectiveness, with military analysts claiming the sub-Saharan African soldiers performed fearlessly on the attack but tended to retreat in a haphazard fashion. They estimate total African casualties during World War I of 31,000.[21]

Victory in the Great War, but Demographic Challenge Remains

French efforts to address the near-term strategic effects of the declining birth rate by reforming conscription practices generally succeeded. By 1911, the French standing army numbered 593,000 officers and men, while the corresponding figure for Germany was 612,000—an impressive achievement when one considers the overall population disparity between the two nations.[22] The expanded universality and longer service requirement contained in the final pre-war conscription revision (1913), as well as incorporating African colonial troops in the force, allowed France to mobilize 3.5 million men during the conflict--three times as many as in the Franco-Prussian War 45 years earlier.[23] The existence of mass-conscript armies allowed the French military to endure four years of grueling modern warfare against a formidable opponent.

The carnage of World War I exacerbated France's long-term population problem. While Germany's battlefield death toll greatly exceeded France's (2,050,000 to 1,397,000), the former's much greater population meant relative French losses rated higher.[24] The number of French wounded exceeded the German total by 20,000, and the casualty gap widens even further when considering civilian losses, since much of the Western Front fighting took place on French soil. All told, not only was existing French manpower decimated by the death and incapacitation of so many males, but what this loss entailed for marriage and procreation meant the strategic effects of the Great War would plague France decades later. The number of males reaching conscription age in 1935 was just half that needed to maintain force levels, for example, leading alarmists of the time to speculate that Germany or perhaps even Italy would choose to attack that year.[25] French leadership was cognizant that the nation had not overcome its population-related security challenges with one prominent cabinet minister lamenting France would lose a war each generation until its birth rate rose.[26]

Threats Change but Census Still Matters: Parallels to the World of Today

Might modern-day Russia, whose birth rate weakness exceeds even pre-World War I France's, face the exact fate of France in the twentieth century? It, too, harbors fears of its largest neighbor; Russia's vast, resource-rich, and under-populated east abuts a robust, populous, and resource-hungry China. The military continues to rely on conscription for the able bodies necessary to guard its lengthy borders, despite a pool of military-aged males that will drop 40 percent by 2017.[27] Long-term efforts to reverse Russia's demographic decline will require a generation to take effect, even as its security challenges multiply. Domestic opposition precludes extending the conscription period and recruits from Russia's "near abroad" already are overrepresented in the ranks. From where, then, will the additional troops come?

Or are more soldiers even the answer? Ultimately, it was not France's efforts to raise the population of military-aged males, conscript more youth, and enlist more colonials that reduced the perceived threat from more populous Germany. Rather, it was France's efforts at diplomacy. Allied victory over the Nazis in 1945, the subsequent establishment of supranational bodies like the European Coal and Steel Community and NATO, patient diplomacy and a growing spirit of European

interdependence have all made France more secure than ever before. France's preoccupation from 1870 over diminished national power and prestige on account of slow birth rates put it in the vanguard in tackling what has now become a pan-European problem: flat or declining populations.

Russia is unlikely to find a similar multilateral or collective security solution to its demography-induced troubles. A European Union suffering enlargement fatigue and financial crises in its weaker states doubtfully would extend an invitation to relatively poor, populous Russia, for example. And the return of ultranationalist Vladimir Putin to the presidency does not augur improved relations with NATO. In the not too distant future, and in more favorable circumstances, if the European Union and Russia forge closer relations, they might avoid the strategic challenge of declining birth-rates.

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