

## Honour and Foreign Policy

At WDF we have seen the code of honour take many forms, whether it was in the wars launched by Louis XIV or British justification for entering the FWW, the code of honour, national honour and a number of other titles which the concept went by has been a constant companion of ours throughout our coverage. This episode here is essentially a review of the concept in the 400 years or so that it was in use during our narratives. In this episode I want to examine its development over time, its transferral from the person to the state, its use by imperialists and identification with those that advocated a furthering of Empire and its consistent appearance in foreign policy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, culminating arguably in the conflagration that was the FWW. Why do I do this? I felt as though it would serve as a useful survey of one of the most underrated, but arguably one of the most important, foreign policy devices. Not only that but as we're at 5 years old, and the concept has served such an important role for both MA, my book and just my general interest over the years, I felt it was only right to denote the prevalence of the concept for us during that period by doing the concept some justice in its own dedicated episode. So I hope you enjoy it, as this episode of WDF Thinks takes you to the school of pondering and deep, reflective thought...

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The code of honour, as I quickly learned, is less about the scientific meaning and how we can break it down into a digestible definition, or if indeed such an exercise is possible or necessary, and more about the stories of the people whom that concept ensnared. Those that felt effected by the code, who changed their stance, altered their plans, brought about transformations in other people's lives and threw whole continents into flux. This is because even though by its very nature national honour seems connected to the state and appears on the surface to have moved on from its knightly origins, the reality is that national honour meant different things to different people and, in the words of Norman Angell writing on the eve of the FWW, national honour is:

...like an oath, serving with its vague yet large meaning to intoxicate the fancy. Its vagueness and elasticity make it possible to regard a given incident at will as either harmless or a *casus belli*... We call it 'maintaining the national prestige', 'enforcing respect' and I know not what other high-sounding name, but it amounts to the same thing in the end.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, national honour plainly represented so many overlapping and traditional ideas critical to large empires on the cusp of the international system before 1914 that it couldn't be

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Angell, *Europe's Optical Illusion* (London, 1909), p. 97.

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ignored even if a natural cynicism promoted one MP to note in 1914 that national honour was ‘always the excuse.’<sup>2</sup> Whether it was a convenient tool or a code of principles which was passionately believed in by European statesmen, is largely up to the historian to decide, but what really drew me in and what continues to fascinate me about the concept is that it brings us so close to the human elements of diplomacy which the more traditional surface surveys of foreign policy allow. We can’t know what the FS of Britain was really thinking in 1878 when it seemed as though Britain would soon declare war on Russia, to take one example, unless we delve into the complicated and sometimes horrifying ideology of the era, and national honour made up a fundamental building block of that ideology, in fact to some statesmen it was not merely a building block, but represented the entire house.

So what do we know about national honour outside of Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Well we know that it was of critical importance to Louis XIV during his wars from 1667-1714, even if he called national honour something different back then. To Louis, war was a quest for what he called *gloire*, but which we roughly translate as ‘glory’. Yet glory as we understand it doesn’t quite address the high minded sentiments which Louis attached to the term, nor does it explain why the idea so motivated him to seek battle with his neighbours, often to the detriment of the very kingdom that he led over. *Gloire* in Louis’ mind was a concept born of the circumstances of the time, where the nobility lived to distinguish themselves in battle through a heroic deed or grand sacrifice. It was through such actions that the nobles would achieve fame, and thus their names would be known throughout the realm and associated with great and honourable feats. It’s not hard to recognise this belief system as one which descended from the chivalric practices of knights, especially when we consider that the nobility viewed themselves as the quintessential ‘warrior caste’ of France.<sup>3</sup> Through the dual channels of this class and the king himself, glory through battle became the staple resource of 17<sup>th</sup> century France; a resource worth sacrificing so much for, owing to the benefits it could bring to your house, your name and your legend.

To the nobility this cause was essential, but to Louis such a cause was sacred. He fully appreciated that in order to advance the renown of his reign it would have to be christened on the battlefield, and that no greater glory could be won than that won in war. In line with these beliefs, Louis would attack the Dutch Republic in 1672, not so much because, as the

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<sup>2</sup> Keir Hardie, ‘Commons Sitting of Monday, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914’, *House of Commons Hansard*, George V, year 5 (5<sup>th</sup> Series, Vol 65), cc 1839-1843.

<sup>3</sup> This transition from the knights of medieval England to the person and the nation in the king is examined well by Nigel Saul in his book *For Honour and Fame 1066-1500* (London, 2011).

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traditional historical narrative has it, he was seeking revenge, but in actual fact because he sought more glory for his Bourbon house and a greater respect for his name. This search of immortality, of acquiring fame and of engaging in war for the sake of glory are all variants of national honour, but Louis was far from alone in his pursuit of them at that time.

Alluring though he was as a national figure, King Frederick II of Prussia, otherwise known as Frederick the Great, also saw the value in launching wars for the glory of his reign. In 1740, the national honour of Prussia was twinned with the national interest, as taking Silesia from a vulnerable Austria would prove a great boon to Prussian fortunes, and essentially kick start its rise to the top of the European food chain. Louis XIV's great grandson also got in on the action, waging the war of the Polish succession in the 1730s in search of triumphs and glories in Austrian owned Italy. When the British proved unable to appease the colonials, an American Revolution was the result, and this revolt was seen as endangering British prestige and security – two more concepts so often twinned with national honour. The British failure to defeat the Americans led to wars with France, Spain and the Dutch simultaneously, and the security of Britain seemed to be in a crisis. Thus the importance of maintaining its dominions abroad lest its façade of power at home cracked was inculcated in the British psyche – it was *because* Britain had been weak in its dealings with the Americans that its rivals had taken advantage.

The French Revolution brought about what is generally seen as the transferral of national honour from the person to the nation. This transferral was made possible due to the heaving numbers of soldiers involved in national defence. It had the result of making the soldier care about his country's reputation and image abroad; though one could argue that the soldier already cared for such qualities in the previous centuries, it is from 1815 onwards that national honour, the national interest and civilian involvement in foreign affairs became so intertwined.<sup>4</sup> This enmeshing of the public with the policy had the effect of granting policymakers a new opportunity – like never before, the public could be motivated to support a war by appealing to their patriotism, to their sense of national pride, and to their concern for how the country was being treated abroad. This development was virtually completed by 1839, when Britain waged its first war of the Victorian Era – the First Opium War. By this stage, whereas a duel would have been invoked between gentlemen to defend any insult or challenge to one's personal honour, these practices were now viewed in terms of nation-

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Shoemaker, 'Male Honour and the Decline of Public Violence in Eighteenth-Century London'. *Social History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May, 2001), p. 195.

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states. As one historian noted, when it came to rectifying the situation between states, and when a nation felt slighted rather than merely a gentleman:

The remedy is violence...preceded by the polite manoeuvres and language of diplomacy. If 'satisfaction' is denied, there is a loss of reputation, status, honour. The violence is then redirected and internalised as humiliation and shame.<sup>5</sup>

With this background system of insult and satisfaction in place, it becomes possible to see the First Opium War as a desperate solution launched by the British Empire to recoup national honour in a far off Asian land while its European rivals continued to challenge its position. As Glenn Melancon in his article connecting the code of honour and the FOW noted:

Honour governed what we today call 'linkage' or credibility because loss of honour would affect...Britain's 'moral power' to influence the actions of other states by undermining confidence in its ability to follow through on its decisions. These states must not forget, when facing a British frigate, however small, for example, that the Flag of England must be respected.<sup>6</sup>

Facing challenges at home, the FOW was seen in London as a chance to strike out and achieve a triumph abroad, to prove to its rivals that British power and prestige remained supreme. This pressure to act revolved around the belief that if Britain was *not* seen to act, its prestige, its national honour, its moral fibre and the other associated qualities would have been seen to dip. From my understanding, when a nation came to the defence of its national honour, it essentially served as an exercise launched to prove that that nation was not a paper tiger. This motivation may appear strange to us today, but in the absence of a recognised system of international law and without any overarching institutions in place to protect the rights of states, pure military power and the reputation of that military's prowess were some of the only guards many nations felt they had against the predatory instincts of their rivals. Britain, for one, had been taught in the 1770s that its difficult would be made into political gain by its European rivals, and in an atmosphere where it was believed that all powers plotted the downfall of one another, it's not difficult to see why British statesmen acted as they did.

This belief that prestige was consistently on the line, as though British policymakers operated within a wall street of world opinion, within which one's power could be said to dip or rise

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<sup>5</sup> Avner Offer, 'Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honour?'. *Politics and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June, 1995), pp. 214-220; referenced in this case is p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Melancon, 'Honour in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China, 1839-1840'. *The International History Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec, 1999), p. 857.

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depending on your actions within it, led further British statesmen to do incredible things during the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Take the prestige minded Conservative PM Benjamin Disraeli for example – in the 1870s it was Disraeli who firmly argued that Britain would *lose* prestige if she was not seen to have a say in virtually all foreign transactions. Not a soldier could march in Africa, nor a state be annexed in Europe, nor a merchant be expelled in Asia, without Disraeli's government either playing a role in it or having something significant to say about it. This was part of building the impression that the British influence was everywhere, which in Disraeli's mind would create the belief that so prevalent was the British presence, its power must be unassailable. This formula would, in turn, increase British power in the minds of its rivals, and affect a great increase in her security. Thus, when the Turks were threatened by an aggressive Russian advance during the RTW of 1877, Disraeli argued forcefully and repeatedly for a stiff response, and then for straight up war with St Petersburg.

Throughout this experience Disraeli argued from the position that if Britain could be effectively ignored in foreign affairs, and if it proved unnecessary to contact her during various crises, then her image as a far-reaching and unassailable empire would be in jeopardy. This view was challenged at every turn by the British FS, Lord Derby, who argued passionately for an adoption of true Conservative principles in British FP and an abandonment of such a reactionary and belligerent – not to mention expensive – policy line. Derby reasoned that British power was safe because nobody *could* question British power, since it was not in doubt. It wasn't as if she had been defeated militarily in a war; Britain maintained its net of agreements and contracts across the world, and no power would dare question this system or attempt to interrupt it, since its pre-existing reach was enough to cast out all doubt. This, in essence, was what the Conservative FP line had always been – a maintenance of the status quo and a consolidation of what had already been gained. Yet, Disraeli's efforts to redefine what Conservative FP looked like, and his edging out of Derby from the party altogether, had the effect of pushing the concepts like national honour and prestige to the fore, and transforming Conservative ideas of FP in the process.

It soon became impossible to talk about Conservative FP *without* mentioning national honour, and thus when the epic and embarrassing failures abroad in the Zulu Wars cast unfavourable lights upon Disraeli's proud regime, the pressure was on his premiership to rectify the situation. When his premiership proved too slow or unsuccessful in achieving either of these aims, they lost the election and were pushed from office by the same British

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people who had been convinced by them that such qualities were essential to the British Empire. Disraeli had, in a sense, been defeated by his own ideological monster.

The failure of British arms and the defeat at the hands of Zulus reaped on the British name that opposite end of national honour – shame. Shame as a resource in international affairs and the rhetoric of national honour represented the no-go area. Incurring shame meant weakness, it meant vulnerability and the decrease in your power, which of course meant vulnerability. Shame can be defined as:

...A sentiment, a state of mind, an emotional disposition experienced when one feels depressed, dishonoured or belittled, or when one sees oneself exposed to criticism or even disgrace by a certain deed which has been uncovered.<sup>7</sup>

Shame was thus a powerful incentive for action – it has even been studied in terms of the modern day pressuring of other states to act along with the societal norms of the international system.<sup>8</sup> Just as honour was associated with issues like prestige, justice, morality and reputation, so too could shame be associated with humiliation and weakness. The association of a state with shame detracted from its reputation, standing and honour on the international stage, and thus states sought to avoid being associated with it wherever possible.<sup>9</sup> Honour could not be gained or half-lost, it was either possessed by a state (or person) or it was perceived to be absent.<sup>10</sup> It could thus be claimed that to be in possession of honour ‘...implies not merely a habitual preference for a given mode of conduct, but the entitlement to a certain treatment in return.’<sup>11</sup>

Fear of shame led statesmen to do incredible things, as the race to the bottom was feared to represent the ultimate decline in one’s powers to resist their neighbours. One should bear in mind that the historical experience of statesmen before 1914 had greatly aided these beliefs. Poland, partitioned into oblivion in 1795, had ceased to exist because it had become controlled by foreign powers, because its ability to resist had vanished, because its national honour had been replaced by subservience to Russia. Poland’s example, the ideology went,

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<sup>7</sup> Nathan Rotenstreich, ‘On Shame’. *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Sept, 1965), p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> See Alan M. Wachman, ‘Does the Diplomacy of Shame Promote Human Rights in China?’ *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April, 2001), pp. 257-281.

<sup>9</sup> Rotenstreich, ‘On Shame’, pp. 56-58.

<sup>10</sup> Ute Frevert, ‘Chapter 13: Honour, Gender and Power- the Politics of Satisfaction in Pre-War Europe’ in *An Improbable War?: The Outbreak of World War 1 and European Political Culture Before 1914* (ed) Holger Afflerbach, and David Stevenson (Oxford, 2007), p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers, ‘Chapter One: Honour and Social Status’. In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (ed.) John G. Peristiany (Chicago, 1965), p. 22.

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was the logical conclusion to a neglected prestige or national reputation. There were further contemporary examples of declining states during the timeline as well though; think of the Ottoman Empire, for so long the sick man of Europe, or the Austrian Empire, by 1914 teetering on the brink of disintegration due to the national pressures which threatened to tear it apart. The Ottoman case demonstrated what was in store for those states who neglected their security – it was only inevitable that this decline would be capitalised on by one's rivals. Because of the linkage of national honour to perceptions of national prowess, it was presented as logical and inevitable that a loss in one would result in a loss of the other.

This fear of incurring further shame and a loss in reputation compelled Austrian statesmen to make war on Serbia in pursuit of its gradually building sense of paranoia and shame. If Vienna was not seen to act in the face of the Serbian assassination of its Archduke, then Europeans all over would know that the Habsburgs had not the capabilities to defend its interests. Then it was merely a case of how long the Empire could possibly last if it was proved so unfit to maintain even its limited reputation by 1914. Thus it was less for revenge at perceived Serbian slights than due to the fundamental belief Austria *had* to be seen to act which led to the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914.

Yet it wasn't merely threatened or declining powers that invoked the code of honour. In perhaps the most infamous of speeches made at the time of the outbreak of war, the British FS Sir Edward Grey would present a speech to his peers in the HOC on the afternoon of 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914. During the course of this speech intended to persuade those present of the need for British intervention in the war, Grey consistently argued the point that if Britain remained neutral, her prestige and sense of national honour would suffer. Grey said that:

For many years we have had a long-standing friendship with France...But how far that friendship entails obligation...*let every man look into his own heart*, and his own feelings, and construe the extent of the obligation for himself.

And added shortly thereafter in reference to the issue of Belgium noting that if, as he put it:

...in a crisis like this, we run away from those obligations of honour and interest as regards the Belgian Treaty, I doubt whether, whatever material force we might have at the end, it would be of very much value in face of the respect that we should have lost.

Grey then concluded by saying 'that our moral position would be such as to have lost us all respect' if Britain remained neutral. Only a few minutes later Grey emphasised that outcome again, should Britain absolve itself of the Belgian Treaty and denounce its obligations

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altogether she would sacrifice 'respect', her 'good name' and her 'reputation before the world'.<sup>12</sup>

We can thus conclude that in the case of the FS by 1914, national honour was a critically important aspect of international relations, and seems to have motivated the likes of Edward Grey to argue for a policy course that would safeguard Britain's national honour and prevent any incurring of shame. Yet Grey wasn't the only statesman in Britain to adhere to this formula. In September 1914, Grey's colleague and the Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George delivered a speech that heavily emphasised the esteem he held for honour:

I am fully alive to the fact that whenever a nation has engaged in...war she has always invoked the *sacred name of honour*. Many a crime has been committed in its name; there are some crimes being committed now. But all the same, *national honour is a reality, and any nation that disregards it is doomed*.<sup>13</sup>

That Britain would have been doomed had it neglected its national honour was a belief so ingrained upon the government's psyche that its statesmen felt compelled to intervene in the FWW largely because of it. Much like the code of honour was found in the quests for glory launched by Louis XIV, in the Ottoman fear of their own decline, and even in the romantic ideas of Pan-Slavism, so too could it be found in Britain's decision to enter the FWW. Such a conclusion demonstrates that national honour was a concept of much value and importance throughout the early modern period, yet it also shows that it is a concept much in need of a proper, comprehensive survey which takes account of the idiosyncrasies which different nation states applied to that code. Through such a survey the true extent of that concept's impact on the course of human history can be better assessed, but until then, we'll just have to make do with the more limited studies at hand.

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Bringing our coverage up to the FWW necessitates a friendly reminder that I have written a book on the subject, which you can find by searching Matter of Honour in Amazon or simply Google. I should also add that Patrons get the book as per their rewards if they become a FS, which may or may not be your thing, but I will also sell you a signed copy of the tome if you go to [wdfpodcast.com/shop](http://wdfpodcast.com/shop).

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<sup>12</sup> Grey's speech in its entirety is available in Mombauer, *Origins*, pp. 547-557. See also Sir Edward Grey, 'Commons Sitting of Monday, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914', *Hansard*, cc 1809-1827. Emphases are my own.

<sup>13</sup> David Lloyd George, full speech cited in *The Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1914; emphases are my own.



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In line with the idea that the code of honour is in need of a more in depth study, perhaps you'd be interested to know that for my planned PhD dissertation, if Cambridge or anywhere else will accept me again, I plan to examine the code of honour in British foreign policy from 1839-1914. As you know, that era is rich with examples of the code of honour being bandied about for all sorts of reasons, though it may surprise you to learn that very few actual examinations of the concept exist today, and no surveys of the concept throughout the centuries exist which I am aware of. So through undertaking those studies somewhere down the line, I hope to add significantly not just to the literature on foreign policy in the British Empire, but also to build upon our understanding of how human emotions and deeply ingrained beliefs impacted such policies, and the true extent to which the code of honour caused statesmen to argue for this or that policy line. I hope you'll join me and keep pace with my progress in the PhD when the time comes. So I hope you enjoyed this episode of WDF thinks, as we sought to peel off some of the wrapping that surrounds the code of honour in international relations. In time, I hope to be able to unwrap the concept completely, but until that time comes, I'll have to say thanks for listening, and I'll see you soon.