

The Rise and Fall  
of the  
Great Powers  
(1987)  
by Paul Kennedy



Excerpts

Once their productive capacity was enhanced, countries would normally find it easier to sustain the burdens of paying for large scale armaments in peacetime and of maintaining and supplying large armies and fleets in wartime.... Wealth is usually needed to underpin military power, and military power is usually needed to acquire and protect wealth. If, however, too large a proportion of the state's resources is diverted from wealth creation and allocated instead to military purposes, then that is likely to lead to a weakening of national power over the longer term. In the same way, if a state overextends itself strategically--by, say, the conquest of extensive territories or the waging of costly wars--it runs the risk that the potential benefits from external expansion may be outweighed by the great expense of it all--a dilemma which becomes acute if the nation concerned has entered a period of relative economic decline. The history of the rise and later fall of the leading countries in the Great Power system since the advance of western Europe in the sixteenth century--that is, of nations such as Spain, the Netherlands, France, the British Empire, and currently the United States--shows a very significant correlation over the longer term between productive and revenue-raising capacities on the one hand and military strength on the other (*xv-xvi; First Vintage edition; see also p. 539*).

There is detectable a causal relationship between the shifts which have occurred over time in the general economic and productive balances and the position occupied by individual Powers in the international system. The move in trade flows from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and northwestern Europe from the sixteenth century onward, or the redistribution in the shares of world manufacturing output away from western Europe in the decades after 1890, are good examples here. In both cases, the economic shifts heralded the rise of new Great Powers which would one day have a decisive impact upon the military/territorial order.... Similarly, the historical record suggests that there is a very clear connection in the long run between an individual Great Power's economic rise and fall and its growth and decline as an important military power (or world empire). This, too, is hardly surprising, since it flows from two related facts. The first is that economic resources are necessary to support a large scale military establishment. The second is that, so far as the international system is concerned, both wealth and power area always relative and should be seen as such. Three hundred years ago, the German mercantilist writer von Hornigk observed that whether a nation be today mighty and rich or not depends not on the abundance or security of its power and riches, but principally on whether its neighbors possess more or less of it. (*xxii*)

## Comments

Kennedy applied these ideas to Russia in the 1800s. Russia in the early 1800s had the reputation as a military colossus, with Tsar Nicholas I having the nickname of the “Gendarme of Europe.” Russia’s army in 1815, after Napoleon’s fall, was by far much larger than any other nation, which allowed the Russian tsar to directly rule Poland as its king, against the wishes of other powers in Europe, in the 1800s. In 1849, the Austrian empire lost some battles against Hungarian independence forces, and appealed to Russia for help. Russia responded by sending 200,000 troops to crush the Hungarian rebellion.

But Russia’s economic position relative to western Europe grew much weaker in the 1800s, as western Europe rapidly industrialized, while Russia did not. As early as 1830, Britain’s per capita Gross Domestic Product was almost twice as high as Russia’s was; by 1890, Britain’s per capita GDP was four times as high. Russia did double its iron production in the early 1800s, but Britain increased its iron production thirtyfold during this same time (171).

The Crimean War (1853-56) revealed the backward status of Russia’s army. When an Anglo-French assault on the Crimea (a peninsula in the Ukraine) was made, Russia was unable to repel it. Russian supply lines were antiquated and overstretched. Horse drawn supply wagons had hundreds of miles of steppes, and of course the horses required much food and water themselves. “Allied troops and reinforcements could be sent from France and England by sea to the Crimea in three weeks, whereas Russian troops from Moscow some times took three months to reach the front (174).” After losing that war, Russia could not avoid a pessimistic conclusion. In the words of Grand Duke (and younger brother of Tsar Alexander II) Konstantin Nikolayevich: “We cannot deceive ourselves any longer... we are both weaker and poorer than the first class powers (177).”

Another major point Kennedy made was to emphasize the power of coalitions, in bringing down individual Great Powers.

There have been a few times in recent centuries, when one powerful European state was trying to dominate Europe. Spain and Austria were under one (Habsburg) monarchy in the early 1500s, which was also ruling southern Italy, as well as the wealthy Spanish American empire. They fought France, Britain, the Dutch, Sweden, and various German states. This struggle lasted off and on from 1521 to 1659. The second major attempt at European domination was that of Louis XIV of France. This took place from 1701 to 1713. France and Spain fought Britain, the Netherlands, and many German states. The third major attempt was by revolutionary France, from the 1790s until Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in 1815. France during those wars fought Britain, Austria, Prussia (a very powerful German state), and Russia.

One major theme stands out in each of these phases: the power of a coalition. Each Great Power trying to dominate Europe, was opposed by a coalition of smaller, weaker states. And when these states united into a coalition, their economic and military power was much greater than the Great Power that they fought. Even later attempts (Germany in World War II, and the USSR against NATO) show the power of economic strength in a coalition.