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## FRENCH PORTS IN NORTHERN AFRICA.

*By Colonel G. A. FURSE, C.B., Ret. pay.*

IN the wars between Great Britain and France, at the end of the last and at the commencement of the present century, the French had no special interests to safeguard on the northern shores of the African continent. The civilised nations were at that period too much occupied by what was occurring in Europe to pay much attention to the depredations of the deys of Algiers, to the frequent ill-treatment of their consuls, and to the capturing of their merchantmen, which led to the cruel bondage of their luckless crews.

The rapacious rulers of Algiers, though frequently punished for bad faith, nevertheless persevered in their extortions, and their arrogance seemed ever to be on the increase, so confident were they in their strength. Their corsairs continued to infest the seas, and day by day the most solemn obligations were set at naught. They had, however, filled up the measure of their crimes, and the day of reckoning at last came. On the 14th of June, 1830, the French landed an army at Sidi Ferruch to punish Hussein-Khoja, the dey, who stubbornly refused to make reparation for an insult inflicted on their consul. All opposition was overcome, and on the 6th of the following month the Tricolour floated over the city and forts of Algiers.

Possibly guided by the experience that Frenchmen do not relish to live for a long time out of their country, the Government of Louis Philippe hesitated whether it should retain possession of Algeria or not, but the question of annexation was decisively settled in 1833. The French were not left in quiet possession of the newly acquired territory; much resistance and fighting followed. Abd-el-Kader raised the standard of a holy war, and many other chiefs of note placed themselves at the head of their tribes. For a period of years Algeria was a regular war school for the French Army. To put down risings and to crush all opposition, the original conquest—as it is generally the case—had to be considerably extended.

From the moment it was decided to hold the country, it became of importance to have on the African shores of the Mediterranean, not only good harbours in which French merchantmen might find a safe anchorage, with all the commodities required for loading and unloading their cargo, for taking in coals, water, provisions, etc., but also some port and naval arsenal for the French squadrons. It may appear somewhat strange that for over sixty years comparatively little should have been done in this direction, but at the bottom of this no doubt was the configuration of the coast, which is devoid of those estuaries and deep bays which lend

themselves so much to the formation of a thoroughly good military port. The best was done that was possible to improve the anchorage at Oran, Algiers, Bougie, Philippeville, and Bone by the construction of extensive breakwaters made of concrete blocks. In this manner protection has been obtained against the prevailing winds, and excellent harbours of refuge have been formed.

In the month of May, 1881, the French established the protectorate of Tunis. Various reasons have been assigned for their doing so, the most plausible being some irruptions of the Kroumirs, or Khomair, though, up to that moment, no one seems to have troubled himself to take any serious notice of the many petty raids of that tribe. These people lived between Algeria and the territory of Tunis, on the Tunisian side of the border, and plundered indiscriminately the subjects of the Bey and the Arabs of Algeria. The question had been discussed at the Berlin Congress, when it was understood that the French would be allowed a free hand in Tunis as a set-off against the British occupation of Cyprus. For two or three years nothing was done, but as the Italians were getting very influential in Tunis it was considered that the time had come for the French to assert their superiority. The thing was accomplished so easily that the French troops were recalled, but the people refused to obey any longer a ruler who had handed them over to the foreigner; an insurrection broke out, which compelled the French to send a second expedition to subdue and hold the country. By this move the French extended their seaboard from La Calle to the frontier of Tripoli. In one sense their new acquisition was not more profitable than the former, for it gave them no port adequate to the wants of a fleet. There does not exist on the whole extent of coast from the frontiers of Morocco to those of Tripoli, in the north of Africa, for about twelve hundred miles, a good naval harbour which can serve as a good base of operations, or where a squadron could put in in safety and repair damages. The port of Algiers, the largest of all, has only two open refitting docks, but has not all the machinery indispensable to execute large repairs.

With the territory of Tunis, France, nevertheless, acquired the possibility of establishing on the North African coast a first-class naval port, for not far from the City of Tunis lies the inland Lake of Bizerta with an outlet into the Mediterranean. All the harbours in Algeria are artificial, and made to serve their purpose by breakwaters run out from the land; at Bizerta, however, nature alone was the engineer. This magnificent piece of water forms a perfect land-locked harbour; it measures from east to west over eight miles, with a width of nearly six miles; it has a depth of from five to seven fathoms, and contains fifty square miles of anchorage. The lake communicates with the sea through a narrow outlet not far from the walls of Bizerta, with a width of one hundred and ten yards at the water-line and seventy yards at the bottom. The sides of this canal are lined with masonry, and form convenient quays. Beyond this canal lies the outer harbour, a triangular sheet of water bounded by the land and by two convergent breakwaters one thousand and ninety-four yards in length. The area thus enclosed measures

two hundred and twenty acres. These breakwaters were constructed to keep the canal from being choked by sand; but the desired object will not be attained without periodical dredging. The entrance to the outer harbour and to the canal are well lighted, and the passage for the ships has been carefully buoyed. It is intended that the Bay of Sebra will form the mercantile port, the Lake of Bizerta the naval.

It was on the 11th of May, 1890, that a concession was obtained from the Bey for the construction of the new harbour and canal. The work was taken in hand and completed in 1895, but up to the present moment nothing has been done to turn the Lake of Bizerta into a naval port and arsenal. On land, however, the engineers are busy throwing up a chain of redoubts for the defence of the port and approaches. It should cause little surprise that no serious beginning of the naval establishment has been made, for the cost must be exceedingly heavy. It cannot be otherwise when we reflect that all the timber, all the iron, all the cordage, all the machinery, all the fuel, in short all the materials and all the skilled labour will have to come over the sea from France.

Had it not been for the senseless jealousies between the different places, matters would have been further advanced. Tunis, however, afraid lest the development of Bizerta might be detrimental to its trade, pronounced itself in favour of a canal from the Goletta through the El-Bahira, and now sees merchant-ships of a large size making fast at the foot of the city. With Bizerta as the sea-port of Tunis, all the goods after being landed would have had to be transported sixty miles by rail.

It is expected that Bizerta will play an important part in the naval history of the future. It certainly has a very commanding position in the Mediterranean, being situated where that sea narrows most between the coasts of Africa and of Sicily, on the great highway between Gibraltar and Port Said. It lies 240 miles N.W. of Malta, 420 S. of Toulon, 443 S. of Spezzia, 300 S.E. of Naples, 714 from Gibraltar, and 1,168 from the Suez Canal. All the ships making for the Suez Canal or for the Atlantic try to sight Cape Blanc, consequently pass within a short distance of Bizerta.

In a war the French may not have the command of the sea, nevertheless it is well to bear in mind that in the last war Great Britain had with France, even after the latter's fleet had been destroyed at Trafalgar, British commerce suffered considerably from the action of French privateers. A French fleet lying snugly in the waters of Bizerta could be informed by signals from the top of Djebel Remel of the approach of any commercial steamer; and nothing could prevent it sending on this information one or two fast cruisers to give chase.

It might be misleading to base our estimate of the probable performances of the French Navy in a future contest on what took place in our last war with France, for it is universally acknowledged that her naval service had been ruined by the injudicious acts of the Revolutionary Government. Neither can we form our ideas from the little the French Navy did in the war of 1870-71, because the Prussians withdrew their ships to place them under shelter, and the French, having no landing

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Great Britain, which, after France, does most trade with Algeria, has a large fleet of merchantmen passing backwards and forwards in sight, we might say, of the whole of the North African coast. A most important point for one nation is to secure the protection of a long stretch of coast, for the other the safety of one of its most important trade routes.

There cannot be the least doubt that the development of the natural resources of Bizerta is a danger for England. It is all very well to say, let the French put a fleet in there and we shall shut it up in the place. This is making too sure of the result. To speak thus is very questionable taste, to say nothing that the despising of the adversary has often led to lamentable consequences. Besides, we cannot help thinking that the French Navy has thoroughly appreciated the lesson which the British admirals taught it in its last war with us, that to obtain the mastery at sea it is indispensable to keep out on the ocean, to seek the enemy and bring him to battle. To stick in port is tacitly to acknowledge the adversary's superiority, whilst it deprives the crews of every opportunity for manœuvring.

Already foreseeing a maritime war—of course, against their old rivals—the French are not satisfied with their efforts in the East, and meditate the establishment of another naval port in the West. Combined with this is a desire to discover a cheap route for their trade going to Morocco. To get their goods to reach that country at a moderate cost, it is necessary for France to have a port not far from its frontier with a short line of railway leading thereto. Neither Nemours, Beni-Saf, Oran, nor Arzen has been found well adapted for the first, and now Rachgoun, at the mouth of the river Tafna, is suggested. A naval committee is at this moment studying the question, and the possibility of creating there, at ten hours' steaming from Gibraltar, a suitable war port with an inland anchorage. The settlement of the question has been retarded by a petition made by the Municipal Council of Oran to the effect that this *port militaire* should be established at Mers-el-Kébir (the Portus Divinus of the Romans), about four miles from the city of Oran.

It is proposed to make at Rachgoun both a military harbour and a harbour of refuge, which should comprise :—

1. An outer harbour affording an easy anchorage to the fleet in time of peace.
2. A canal leading inland.
3. One or more basins constructed sufficiently far from the sea, in such positions as to afford shelter from bombardment by an enemy to a French fleet taking shelter in them.

Plans for the construction of such a harbour of refuge have been prepared by M. Milsom, the Civil-Engineer of the Domain of Siga, near Rachgoun, and have been laid before the Government, as fulfilling the necessary conditions. M. Milsom utilises in his project the natural facilities which exist already at Rachgoun, and his scheme includes the construction in the Bay of Rachgoun of an outer harbour with a superficial area of fifty hectares (about five hundred thousand square yards) by means of breakwaters, which can be built at little expense in a moderate

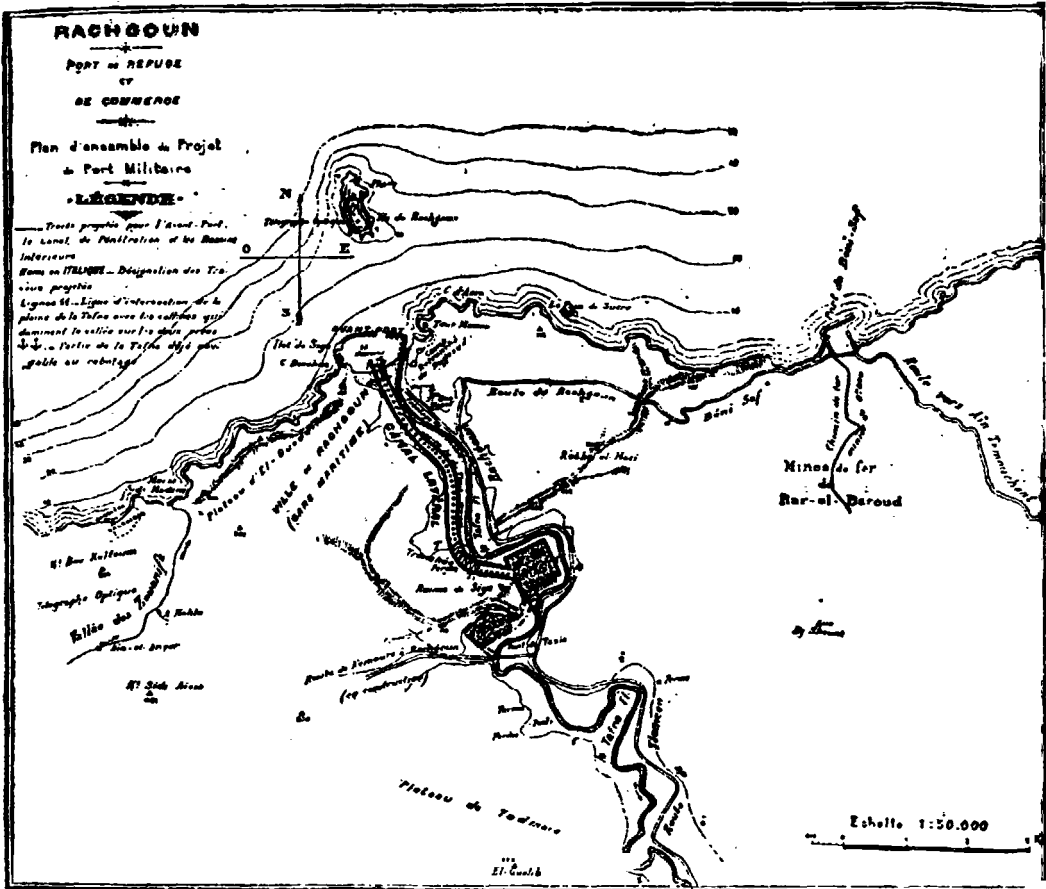
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into the eastern part of the bay, while the course of the river itself will be diverted to the eastward by means of artificial banks and a special breakwater.

The canal to lead from the outer harbour inland to the proposed basin, can be constructed by using the actual course of the Tafna itself, which would have to be dredged, or by excavating it in the old bed of the



river, at present dry, in a direction parallel with its present channel; the canal would have to be some 5,000 yards long with a uniform depth of thirty-three feet. The second proposal has the advantage, that the canal could be navigated with care under any circumstances, while strong freshets often come down the Tafna, which might render navigation difficult, if not dangerous, if the river itself were used as the proposed channel.

The inner harbour or basin would also be built with a uniform depth of thirty-three feet in the peninsula situated at the foot of the ruins of the ancient Siga, and with the necessary establishments would be at a distance of some two miles and a half, as the crow flies, from the

shore, and some four miles from the Island of Rachgoun, while they would be protected from a possible bombardment by the chain of hills, which run parallel to the coast, and which are sufficiently high to prevent projectiles from touching any ships lying in the basins behind them.

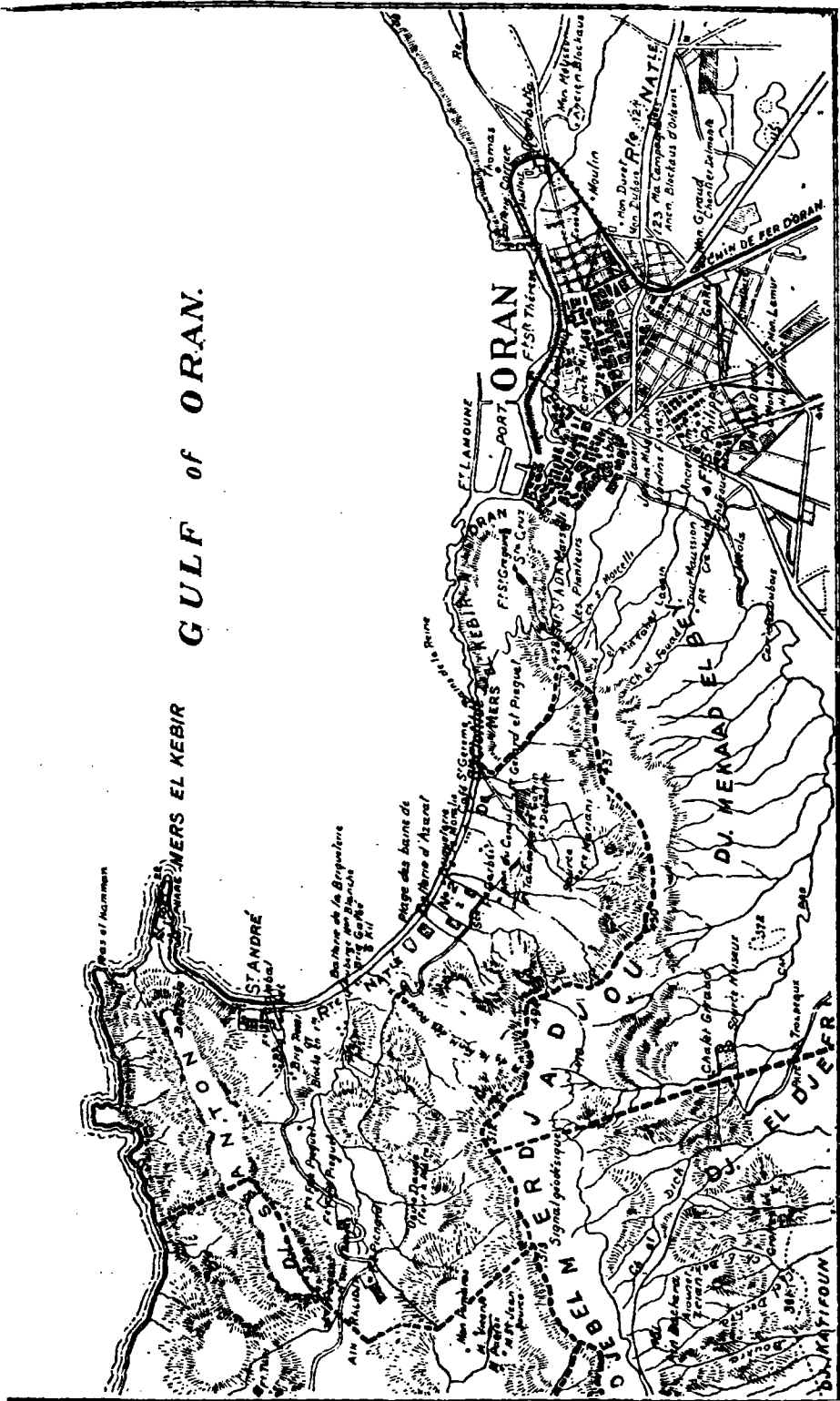
The necessary works could be carried out without any great difficulty and at a moderate cost, because the sea dredgings would be in sand or mud, and the land excavations in light soils, with but little stone or pebbles. The outer harbour, including dredging and the breakwaters, should not cost more than nine million francs, while the cost of the whole undertaking, including the inner basin with an area of three hundred thousand square yards, should not exceed fourteen millions; and for this relatively moderate sum, France would obtain a military harbour of the first rank, easy to defend by land or sea, and admirably situated as a check to Gibraltar. All the region west of Oran would thus have a commercial harbour, the want of which has long been felt, and the necessity for which was pointed out long ago by Marshal Bugeaud.

Rachgoun as a military and commercial port, connected with Tlemcen by a railway, with a branch to Marina, ought to satisfy, in the opinion of experts, all the present and future military requirements relative to the frontier of Morocco, as well as the economic needs of the region west of Oran, and should permit French commerce by way of Marina and El Archa to peacefully penetrate into Morocco.

Should it come to a war between the two nations, France, with her commanding position in the Mediterranean and with military ports at Bizerta and Rachgoun, would seriously menace British trade going through the Suez Canal; there can be no question about this. However, it is well to look and see as to which of the two nations would be likely to be the greater sufferer.

Great Britain has an alternative route to the Far East, and her merchantmen are not bound to avail themselves of the Suez Canal. The trading-ships which make use of this route are all steamers, and, though they would take longer time to reach their destination by proceeding round the Cape of Good Hope, would escape not only the canal dues, but the very high rates of insurance which would certainly be imposed on ships having to run the gauntlet of the Franco-African coast. Whilst the British merchant-ships would steam round the Cape in relative security, the canal would be entirely closed to the French, which would mean the entire stoppage of their Far Eastern Trade. All trade, moreover, between France and Algeria would be menaced by our fleets and cruisers in the Mediterranean, with naval bases at Malta and at Gibraltar, on either flank of the French colony, and this would entail a tremendous loss on both of those countries.

The present state of the Colony of Algeria will convey some idea of what effect a war would have on its trade. At this moment that colony is in anything but a prosperous condition. In 1897 the farmers were sorely tried; in the upper lands and in the south their crops suffered severely from an incursion of locusts and from drought. The scantiness of grass, the result of the absence of rain in the autumn,



GULF of ORAN.

killed a large number of their cattle. There was much distress, and many of the native cultivators were without resources. The mother country was compelled to come in aid of the sufferers, and a loan of 1,200,000 francs was voted by the two Chambers. The year before 900,000 francs were voted for the same purpose.

Once the granary of Southern Europe, it is now admitted that the cultivation of cereals in this part of Africa is not likely to prove remunerative. Several reasons are assigned for this; amongst the principal are that the land is not deeply ploughed, that it is not enriched by fertilising manures, and that it is not cleared of noxious weeds which choke the growing corn and exhaust the soil.

Last year the total production of wine in the colony amounted to 4,367,758 hectolitres, made up as follows:—

From the province of Algiers	..	..	2,186,289
"          Constantine	..	..	762,812
"          Oran	..	..	1,418,657

Out of this total, 2,923,998 hectolitres were shipped to France. Complaints are heard that this industry, which some years back promised so well, is not remunerative now that the French vineyards have been replanted with vines from the United States. With regard to quality, possibly Algerian may not compete against French wine, for it is said to be insipid or acid. This appears to be due to the fact that the fermentation of the must is affected by the temperature, which is too high.

The cultivation of plants not indigenous to the soil, such as sugarcane, coffee, cotton, indigo, cocoa-tree, and spices, has yielded no very good results. The olive-trees are allowed to grow wild, the oranges and bananas are of indifferent quality, the cattle degenerate very soon, and the poultry is lean and tough.

An article of export which was once in great request for the manufacture of paper, the alfa fibre, is being rapidly supplanted by the adoption of wood pulp.

Much of the bad success of agriculture is attributed to the temperature, which at times is too great and at times insufficient. In general parlance the colony is under the influence of three scourges, viz., locusts, the drought, and the Jews, and of the three the second has much to do with the unsatisfactory results of agriculture.

In ancient days the Atlas mountains were covered by immense forests, which extended to the sands of the Sahara, and sheltered elephants, giraffes, and other animals now found in the centre of Africa. The Vandals began to destroy these forests, and the Arabs have continued to do so on a much larger scale. This is one of the causes assigned for the diminution of the rainfall. What rain falls, however, is not turned to account, but is allowed to run through the many *oueds* and lose itself in the sea. All over North Africa there are remains of canals and dams constructed by the ancients, and this accounts for the extraordinary fecundity of these provinces in the past. Now barely one-tenth of the territory is under cultivation. It is acknowledged that to re-wood the country, to

economise the rain, which falls in as great a quantity as in many parts of Europe, by constructing a system of dams and canals that will not allow a single drop of water to run waste, are the only measures which will bring Algeria back to the flourishing state it was in when under the rule of the Romans, as vouched by Pliny.

For all that a well-known engineer states, that what is needed to improve the country are means of communication, safe, rapid, and economical, the railways—single lines, evidently strategical routes for the speedy transport of troops—for want of sufficient traffic, have to be subsidised. The native finds the tariff exorbitant, and as to him time is not money, he prefers to adhere to the old method of animal transport.

In sixty-eight years France has spent three milliards on Algeria. There is a system of annual deficits (*insuffisances annuelles*), and matters would certainly not be improved by a war. It can be left to imagination what would be the upshot were the colony entirely isolated from the mother country, and were the principal mercantile harbours along the coast, which are quite open to bombardment—so much so, indeed, that the French call them *de vrais nids à bombes*—made to experience the resentment of the enemy. Possibly matters would be aggravated by local risings, for the native population of Algeria have already shown, in 1848 and in 1871, how ready they are to take advantage of any troubles which may disturb the peace of France. According to one of their best generals, "in Algeria, revolution is always in a latent condition," and warning notes of discontent have resounded through the land from time to time. The Semitic question has added to the difficulties of keeping the peace. Quite lately the City of Algiers was the scene of disgraceful rioting, when a feeble police, badly directed, permitted a students' demonstration to degenerate into acts of uproar and pillage. Might not the native element at any critical moment take advantage of such a state of things?

We can well conceive that no war would be so popular with the French people at the present moment as one against their old perfidious competitors across the Channel; nevertheless, if the people only knew their own interest, they would realise that no other war could be so detrimental as this to their sea commerce, to their finances, and to their colonies. It would be far different from what occurred in 1870-71; then the coasts of France were not threatened, and there were no fleets at sea to keep French merchantmen in port. It was owing to this freedom on the ocean that Gambetta was able to draw from other countries the arms, materials, and provision he so much needed for equipping the newly-raised armies of the Loire.

Naturally, if we take things as they are, Great Britain has more power for doing damage by sea than France. The latter, nevertheless, might gain the co-operation of allies, which would greatly influence the nature of the war. At present France is very hot on the Russian alliance, and of the two nations she is by far the more enthusiastic on this point. Independently of the known fact that there exists a powerful party in the country which has never cordially approved of the Russian

alliance, who can ever tell what turn her policy may not take in the course of a few months? We do not believe that the French can persuade their present ally to join issue with them simply on a question of *amour-propre*, or of national jealousy.

The Powers in the east and centre of Europe, actuated as they are by selfish aims, might possibly stand aloof, not much grieved to see France weakening herself by engaging in such a senseless war.

Dismissing all further speculation on these possibilities, we conclude that the officials who have to guide her destinies must be well aware of all the risks involved in a war with Great Britain. We trust that they may share our opinion that real patriotism lies in calming the irritation of the people, and in trying to devise some way for making the interests of the two neighbouring nations accord. If the assertion is true that the scheme for the defence of our trade routes has been prepared, and that the plans are complete, France would have nothing to gain, but much to lose, in a trial of strength with Great Britain.