

# France: The Marine Nationale

## I. BACKSTORY

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### A. HISTORY

**T**raditionally France was the dominant mainland power of continental Europe. Its principal maritime opponent until the beginning of the twentieth century was Great Britain. Like Britain, France had become a world power through the acquisition of a vast overseas empire, but the French navy (latterly known as the Marine Nationale but still often referred to as “La Royale”) lived in the shadow of Britain’s Royal Navy, even during those periods when French armies held sway over the continent. Failure to dominate the seas thwarted broader French political ambitions.

There were periods when the Marine Nationale attempted to contest British maritime supremacy ship for ship, but in the latter half of the nineteenth century policy shifted toward a two-tier strategy: the defense of the French coasts and the prevention of blockade on the one hand, and the construction of powerful long-range cruisers which could disrupt British commerce on the high seas on the other hand. This asymmetric strategy is closely associated with the thinking of Admiral Hyacinthe Aube and a group of admirals known as the *Jeune École* (young school). Aube and his associates were of the view that squadrons of British battleships attempting to blockade French ports could best be countered by employing large numbers of cheap surface ships and submersibles (*la poussière navale*—literally, “naval dust”) armed with torpedoes, which would operate close to their base ports under the cover of powerful batteries of coast defense guns.

These ideas became irresistible for economic reasons during the 1880s and 1890s, when the British Royal Navy of the late Victorian period became a force capable of defeating the fleets of any two of the continental powers at sea. With the Entente Cordiale of 1904, Britain became a potential ally against a newly resurgent Germany, and the Marine Nationale again began