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# ‘I am the Servant of the Council’: Lord Ismay and the Making of the NATO International Staff

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## Abstract

Based on analysis of Lord Ismay’s private papers and on documents from the NATO archives and the Foreign Office archives, this article examines the role of Lord Ismay as the first Secretary General of NATO. As the first person to occupy the role, with little guidance from the national governments and no previous examples to use as a guiding light, Ismay had the opportunity – and the challenge – to shape the new role and to lay the basis for the long-term development of the International Staff. This article argues that Ismay’s careful approach was essential in cementing political consensus within the North Atlantic Council at a time in which the members of the Alliance were still learning to work together.

Lord Ismay became the first Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on 24 March 1952. At the time he had a distinguished military career behind him and was looking forward to retirement. As discussed in this article, Ismay was reluctant to lead an organisation that he considered convoluted and ineffective. Yet, after a cautious start, Ismay became a confident leader and laid a solid basis for the future development of the alliance.

Based on an analysis of Ismay’s private papers and on documents from the NATO archives and the National Archives in Kew, this article examines the challenges faced by Ismay when he arrived at NATO’s Paris headquarters. It focuses on Ismay’s priorities in shaping the new International Staff and it investigates what examples, experiences and ideas drove him. By combining historical methodology with studies in international public administration, this article examines how everyday decision making shaped NATO’s institutional culture, ethos and *modus operandi*.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, this article contributes to the debate on the historical study of international bureaucracy as a tool to sustain the development of political, military and economic cooperation. It demonstrates how, over time, international organisations develop an institution specific culture that shapes the way in which the members cooperate, develop a shared assessment of their own role within the organisation and create a vision for the organisation’s long-term role and action.

This is an exciting new field of study that brings together diplomatic history, sociology and management studies. Perhaps the most successful example of this new approach is the work of Karen Gram-Skjoldagen on the League of Nations. Gram-Skjoldagen has applied convincingly Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory approach to the study of the early years of the League of Nations and of the role of Eric Drummond, the first Secretary General. According to Gram-Skjoldagen’s preliminary assessment, the core characteristics of the League’s institutional framework and identity were

<sup>1</sup> For up-to-date discussions of this issue, see Marcel Piquemal, *The International Civil Service: Current Problems* (Montreuil: Editions du Papyrus, 2000); Jarle Trondal, Marcussen, Torbjörn Larsson and Frode Veggeland, *Unpacking International Organisation: The Dynamics of Compound Bureaucracies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). Hans Mouritzen, *The International Civil Service: A Study in Bureaucracy: International Organisations* (Dartmouth: Dartmouth University Press, 1990); Thomas G. Weiss ‘International Bureaucracy: The Myth and Reality of the International Civil Service’, *International Affairs*, 58, 2 (Spring 1982), 287–306.

produced through the institutionalisation of recruitment and working practices, which ultimately created a well-defined and recognisable institutional culture.<sup>2</sup>

The history of NATO has recently been at the centre of exciting new research which looks at the Cold War and the post-1989 period. Over the past thirty years NATO expanded both in terms of membership as well as in terms of its mission and geopolitical reach, yet some of its core principles – like burden sharing and the need for an integrated allied command structure – remained the same.<sup>3</sup> As far as the history of NATO International Staff is concerned, little research has been carried out to date. In 1967 Robert Jordan published a monograph on the creation of the International Secretariat in which he examined the issue of leadership within NATO. Jordan's work offers helpful insights into the complex issues Ismay faced at the time, but it does not delve into questions of institutional culture and ethos. In *The First Five Years*, a key reference text for anybody exploring the history of the alliance, Ismay himself discusses the political and military history of the alliance. Yet, because the book aimed to foster knowledge of NATO among the general public, it is sketchy on the details of the critical and most divisive episodes in NATO's early history. Ismay's autobiography relegates his experience at NATO to a short – and rather scant – chapter at the end of the book. His biographer, Roger Wingate, who interviewed Ismay and spoke with several of his collaborators in Paris, produced a vivid portrayal of life at the headquarters and of Ismay's own experience. The biography was published in 1970 and thus the author was not in a position to evaluate the long-term legacy of Ismay's leadership.<sup>4</sup>

This article re-examines known and lesser known aspects of NATO's early years from a new perspective that combines institutional history with the study of institutional culture, self-perception of the organisation's own role in world affairs. It places the origins of NATO International Staff in the wider context of the history of post-1945 international bureaucracy, and it demonstrates the critical role of key individuals in laying the foundation of new institutions that played a prominent role in shaping post-1945 multilateral order.

The article approaches this complex set of topics through the analysis of the role of Lord Ismay. It demonstrates the pivotal role that he played in shaping the early development of the alliance and how his decisions had long-term effects on the history of NATO. Before proceeding any further, however, it is important to point out that this article does not see Ismay as an 'innovative ideologist' as defined by Quentin Skinner. According to Skinner, at times of great change, individuals with deep-rooted visions who find themselves in key positions, attempt to shape their own role so to be able to legitimise their action and to push forward their own vision and agenda. They do so by making use of pre-existing ideological arguments in new ways to legitimise their actions and to foster their own vision.<sup>5</sup> However, during his time at NATO Ismay never perceived himself as a political leader on a mission to make NATO a strong independent actor on the world stage. Instead, Ismay saw himself as a facilitator. In his eyes, the Secretary General's duty was first and foremost to help nations to understand each other and to work together to effectively deter aggression.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Haakon Ikonoumou, 'The Construction of the League of Nations Secretariat. Formative Practices of Autonomy and Legitimacy in International Organizations', *International History Review* (2017), 1–23. Published online 21 Dec. 2017. For information on Gram-Skjoldager's project, see *The Invention of International Bureaucracy* at <http://projects.au.dk/inventingbureaucracy/browse/1/> (Last accessed on 20 Jan. 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). Linda Risso, ed., *NATO at 70: A Historiographical Approach* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Robert S. Jordan, *The NATO International Staff/Secretariat, 1952–57* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Robert S. Jordan, *Political Leadership in NATO: A Study in Multinational Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979); *The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Lord Ismay, *The First Five Years, 1949–1954* [www.nato.int/archives/1st5years/chapters/6.htm](http://www.nato.int/archives/1st5years/chapters/6.htm) (last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018); Sir Ronald Wingate, *Lord Ismay: A Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1970). The work of Lawrence Kaplan is of course a crucial reference point, in particular Kaplan, *NATO before the Korean War: April 1949–June 1950* (Kent State University, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Vision of Politics. Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

### The Appointment of Lord Ismay

When the Washington Treaty establishing NATO was signed on 4 April 1949, there was no mention of a Secretary General. The Treaty was vague about the administrative structure, and Article 9 simply stated that all members would be represented in the Council and that the new body would ‘consider matters concerning the implementation of this Treaty’.<sup>6</sup> This Council of Deputies was established in May 1950 and it gathered representatives from each member state. Tasked with executing the North Atlantic Council’s directives in intervals between the sessions of the North Atlantic Council, it met for the first time in London in July 1950 and elected the US Deputy, Charles Spofford, as its Chairman. A small International Secretariat provided basic administrative support. The lack of a civilian budget, however, meant that civilian personnel were seconded by the member states on an ad hoc basis, very often on short assignments. Given the location and the leading role played by the United Kingdom the United States and Canada in launching the alliance, civilian personnel were initially almost exclusively Anglophone, with the occasional French-speaking colleague. The majority of continental European countries were not represented.<sup>7</sup>

It took almost one more year for a civilian budget to be finally approved, which allowed a permanent administrative structure to finally start taking shape. The International Staff worked under the supervision of the Executive Secretary and of the Chairman of the Council of Deputies.<sup>8</sup> The Korean War impressed a new sense of urgency on to NATO members both in terms of strengthening of their military forces as well as in terms of creating a permanent and more efficient administrative structure to support the decision making process. While the Korean War may have acted as a catalyst, it ultimately only accelerated a transformation of NATO which was already underway, including increased US military commitment to Western Europe and the restructuring of NATO’s command structure.<sup>9</sup>

Things changed at the Lisbon Council meeting of February 1952. The meeting in Lisbon is usually remembered for agreeing the ambitious Force Goals, whereby by 1954 NATO should be able to count on a total of ninety-six divisions in ninety days from the beginning of the hostilities, with almost half of them ready at the very start to be able to respond to what many at the time thought was an imminent Soviet military attack.<sup>10</sup> However, it was also in Lisbon that the members agreed to establish the role of Secretary General along with the creation of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The Council of Deputies was replaced by Permanent Representatives, who – as the name implies – would be permanently stationed at NATO to ensure continuous contact among the members. This new format also allowed substantial groundwork to be carried out on a weekly basis and for permanent channels of alliance-wide consultation to be established. The Permanent Representatives provided ‘proper representation of national interests at the highest level and at the same time allow speed in action and decision’.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The only exception was the Defence Committee, which according to Article 9 should be established immediately so to be able to implement Articles 3 and 5. The Committee’s executive body was the Standing Group (representatives of Chiefs of Staff of France, United Kingdom and United States), which formulated military policy for the Alliance.

<sup>7</sup> John C. Milloy, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 1948–1957: Community or Alliance?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006); Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO before the Korean War: April 1949–June 1950* (Kent OH: Kent State University, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> The international budget was approved in May 1951 and the International Secretariat was set up in July of the same year. For the terms of reference, see ‘Composition and Terms of Reference for the Working Group for the Establishment of an International Budget for NATO’, 13 Feb. 1951, NATO Archives (henceforward NATO), DD(51)45.

<sup>9</sup> Historians have amply shown this. See, for example, Walter Lafeber, ‘NATO and the Korean War: A Context’, *Diplomatic History*, 13, 4 (1989), 461–77; Kaplan, *NATO before the Korean War*. See also Lawrence Kaplan, *NATO Before the Korean War: April 1949–June 1950* (Kent: Kent University State Press, 2013) and John Milloy, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1948–1957: Community or Alliance?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Standing Group memorandum (NATO archives online) SGM-0545-52, 17 Mar. 1952. [http://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/2/121172/SGM-0545-52\\_ENG\\_PDP.pdf](http://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/2/121172/SGM-0545-52_ENG_PDP.pdf). NSC 135, N. 3. Report prepared by the Office of the Director of Mutual Security (Harriman), 18 Aug. 1952. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v01p1/d162> (last accessed 29 Apr. 2019).

<sup>11</sup> ‘North Atlantic Council, Rome, 14–28 November 1951, Final Communiqué’, 28 Nov. 1951.

At Lisbon, it was agreed that the Secretary General would be appointed by and responsible to the NAC as its chief executive officer. He was to provide political leadership and therefore he had to be impartial and did not have a vote in the Council's decisions. The Secretary General was to direct the work of the International Staff, to prepare material for Council meetings and to assist the Council during the discussions. Finally, the Secretary General was also supposed to oversee appropriate follow-up action.<sup>12</sup> The International Staff and the Secretary General ensured continuity of service and support for the members of the alliance. They cut across political, military and economic affairs and their competences, duties and responsibilities were clearly defined.<sup>13</sup>

It may be worth pointing out that in the run up to Lisbon two views regarding the nature of the International Staff had developed. The Americans favoured the appointment of a strong leader to head the Council and a centralised and well-funded civil service to support his action, while the British preferred a looser institutional framework to allow members as much room for manoeuvre within the Council as possible. As discussed elsewhere, disagreements of this kind had emerged at various points in the post-war years and reflected radically different views of how international structured cooperation should take shape. Eventually, the British – with their more cautious and less centralised approach – prevailed thanks to the support of several European members who were concerned that excessive centralisation could undermine their sovereignty and independence.<sup>14</sup>

The question of who should be appointed to the role of Secretary General was also raised in Lisbon, and the decision was not an easy one. The ideal candidate needed to be a seasoned diplomat, to be respected in military circles and to share the vision of the founding members regarding the future of collective defence. He had to tick several other boxes in terms of political support, language competences and charisma, too. However, the Secretary General should not be so ambitious and politically driven as to become a political leader in his own right or he would risk undermining the national governments.

The decision about who would be the first Secretary General became entangled with the discussion about where to locate the NATO headquarters. The alliance had initially been hosted in London and Washington. At Lisbon, the question of where to house the Permanent Delegations and the International Staff became urgent. The member states hope to find a prestigious location that could enhance the profile of the alliance.

Being selected as the site of the NATO headquarters was seen as a tool to enhance the prestige of the hosting nation. The headquarters allowed for easy access to the Permanent Delegations and, indirectly, to their national governments. The headquarters would also be a source of jobs for non-officer grade positions. Most crucially, hosting the alliance opened new avenues for soft power and influence. Officials from the national delegations and international staff would be living in the country, read the local press, eat the local food and become more culturally aware of the interests, priorities and concerns of the hosting nation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, not surprisingly, several nations expressed their interest. The British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden argued the case for London. He explained that NATO was already based there and that the site currently occupied in Belgrave Square could be adapted.

<sup>12</sup> 'Record of a Meeting' 5 Feb. 1952, NATO, DR(52)5 (Final). Ismay, *Five Years*. Final Communiqué of the Ninth Session of the North Atlantic Council ('The Lisbon Decisions'), 25 Feb. 1952.

<sup>13</sup> Final Communiqué of the Ninth Session of the North Atlantic Council ('The Lisbon Decisions'), 25 Feb. 1952. And Telegram 740.5/2–2552. The United States Delegation to the Department of State. Lisbon, 25 Feb. 1952 – midnight. *Foreign Relations of the United States* (henceforward *FRUS*), 1952–1954, vol. V, part 1. See also, Ismay, *Five Years*, Chapter 6: 'The Civil Structure'.

<sup>14</sup> See 'NATO Reorganization. Memo by the US Deputy', 14 Jan. 1952, NATO, DD(52)17 and 'Re-organization of NATO. Memorandum of the UK Deputy', 15 Jan. 1952, NATO, DD(52)19; Linda Risso, 'A Difficult Compromise: American and European plans for NATO Anti-Communist Propaganda and Intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security*, 26, 2–3 (2011), 330–54.

<sup>15</sup> Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council of Deputies, held at 13 Belgrave Square, London, SW1, on Mon., 21 Jan. 1952, 5 Feb. 1952, NATO, DR(52)5 (Final); and Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council of Deputies, held at 13 Belgrave Square, London, SW1, on Wed. 23 Jan. 1952, 5 Feb. 1952, NATO, D-R(52)6-FINAL.

The other Europeans, however, wanted the headquarters on the Continent as a sign of permanent commitment of the 'Anglo-Saxons' to the defence of Western Europe.

Paris became a strong contender. The French government argued that given that the military headquarters (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe; SHAPE) were going to be located in Rocquencourt, near Paris, it was only logical for the political side of the alliance to be based in Paris, too. Paris also capitalised on the presence of other international organisations, including the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, suggested the Palais de Chaillot. Refurbished in 1950 to host the General Assembly of United Nations, the Palais would be the perfect home for NATO: central, close to SHAPE and opposite the Eiffel Tower. By locating the headquarters in such an iconic location, Schuman argued, the member countries would give a clear sign of their commitment and resolve. Eventually, Schuman won the argument.<sup>16</sup>

Given that London had lost at the last stage of the discussion, it was felt that there was a case for the first Secretary General to be British, as a way of compensating for what could otherwise be seen as an embarrassing refusal. In addition, a British Secretary General and an American Supreme Allied Commander at SHAPE would be incontrovertible signs of the Anglo-American commitment to the defence of Western Europe.

Initially, Eden put forward the name of Sir Oliver Franks, the UK ambassador in Washington. Yet, when asked, Sir Oliver asked for forty-eight hours to think about the offer, which suggested that the British Government had not sounded out its own candidate.<sup>17</sup> The situation became even more embarrassing when Sir Oliver eventually declined. Eden later explained that he had not had time to contact Sir Oliver in advance as he and his team had been absorbed by the strenuous negotiations regarding the European Defence Community and the German rearmament question.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the reason, the refusal created international embarrassment and an impasse. Other names were canvassed, including Lester Pearson, the Canadian Foreign Minister, and Dr Dirk Stikker, the Dutch Foreign Minister, but to no avail.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, Churchill suggested Lord Hastings Ismael Ismay, who at the time was Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.<sup>20</sup> Ismay was a respected military leader and was known as a competent civil servant, with well-established connections in London and Washington. His military record was impeccable, too. After having fought in the First World War in Somaliland, Ismay had been posted to India on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Ismay was made Deputy Secretary of the British War Cabinet and as such served as Secretary of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. This position gave him an overview of all military matters, including the preparation and conduct of military operations. As part of his role, Ismay attended the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the American allies, where he established strong professional relationships.<sup>21</sup> In particular, Ismay assisted General Dwight Eisenhower in the

<sup>16</sup> Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council of Deputies, held at 13 Belgrave Square, London, SW1, on Mon., 21 Jan. 1952. 5 Feb. 1952, NATO, DR(52)5 (Final); and Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council of Deputies, held at 13 Belgrave Square, London, SW1, on Wed. 23 Jan. 1952, 5 Feb. 1952, NATO, D-R(52)6-FINAL. For interesting comments on the choice of Paris see, D.U. Stikker, *Men of Responsibility: A Memoir* (New York: John Murray, 1966), 309–10.

<sup>17</sup> The United States Delegation to the Department of State. Telegram. Lisbon, 25 Feb. 1952. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. V, Part I, doc. 740.5/2–2552.

<sup>18</sup> 'Sir O. Franks Declines' *The Times*, 27 Feb. 1952. See also Daniel Clifton, 'Franks Rejection of Post Confirmed', *The New York Times*, 28 Feb. 1952. Stikker, *Men of Responsibility*, 309.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Edwin Plowden, Chief Planning Officer at the Treasury and chairman of the Economic Planning Board, had also been asked. 'Proposed Appointment of Dr Stikker as Secretary-General', The National Archives, Kew (henceforward TNA), PREM 11/160. 'NATO Secretary General. Post Accepted by Lord Ismay' *The Times*, 13 Mar. 1952.

<sup>20</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversations, by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State (Battle). 740.5/3–1052. Washington, 10 Mar. 1952. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. V, Part 1.

<sup>21</sup> The Combined Chief of Staff was established in 1942 by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as the supreme military body to offer strategic direction to the combined war effort of the United States and the British Empire.

coordinating UK and US military efforts. The two developed a close working relationship, which both Eisenhower and Ismay recalled fondly in their memoirs.<sup>22</sup> This relationship proved to be crucial when years later the two led NATO together, Ismay as Secretary General and Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).<sup>23</sup> During the war Ismay also liaised effectively between the military and civilian authorities at home, and his collaborators thought that Ismay's 'tact, patience, and skill in promoting compromise' were essential 'to keep the war running smoothly'.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, when Eden approached Ismay, he received 'an immediate and emphatic' negative response.<sup>25</sup> To understand Ismay's refusal, it is necessary to look back at the months preceding his appointment. Initially, Ismay had welcomed the signing of the Washington Treaty, but later he had become increasingly sceptical about the alliance's effectiveness. In January 1952, only a month before he was asked to become Secretary General, Ismay had accompanied Churchill on a visit to President Truman to discuss the implementation of the North Atlantic Treaty. At the meeting Ismay became concerned by the slow pace of progress and by rifts within the alliance. He saw NATO as an 'overly bureaucratic and inefficient' set-up.<sup>26</sup>

A few weeks later Ismay attended the Lisbon Conference as acting Minister of Defence along with Eden and, if anything, the experience made him even more sceptical. He wrote in his memoirs that: 'I thought it unlikely that any useful results would be achieved in a milling mob of this kind. . . . This is the first that I have seen of NATO, and thanks heavens it's the last'.<sup>27</sup> In his view, the Lisbon summit had showed 'divided and ill-defined authority', and he described the meeting as 'a mixture of Tower of Babel and Bedlam'.<sup>28</sup> In a speech in the House of Lords a few days later, Ismay argued that NATO's:

co-ordinating machinery . . . seems to me a little unwieldy and complicated; it seems to be rather a lot of harness and not much horse. . . . Unless this gap is filled we shall not get that coherent direction or unity of purpose and action, which did so much to win the last war.<sup>29</sup>

It was only when Churchill intervened directly, putting pressure on his sense of duty, that Ismay reluctantly accepted.

On 12 March 1952 the Deputies officially appointed Ismay Secretary General of NATO.<sup>30</sup> A couple of days after his appointment he wrote to John W. Snyder, US Secretary of the Treasury: 'I cannot pretend I accepted with alacrity, but will do my best'.<sup>31</sup> Relief among government leaders was palpable. It was the end of an embarrassing impasse in which the alliance seemed unable to attract enough support to find a leader among its own member states. One official from the US Embassy in London wrote to thank him for accepting the role: 'you are a saint to have accepted the job and I should really congratulate NATO and not you! . . . It is a matter of very great relief and satisfaction to know that you have agreed to captain the all-important implementation of NATO plans'.<sup>32</sup> According to William

<sup>22</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (3rd ed.) (London: William Heinemann, 1944), 487; Hastings Ismay, *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 259–60.

<sup>23</sup> Volney D. Hurd, 'NATO's Lord Ismay: An Intimate Message from France', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 Apr. 1957.

<sup>24</sup> John Colville, *Winston Churchill and His Inner Circle* (New York: Wyndham Books, 1981), 161.

<sup>25</sup> Ismay, *Memoirs*, 462. Resolution on the Appointment of Lord Ismay as Vice Chairman of the North Atlantic Council and Secretary General of NATO. 13 Mar. 1952. NATO, DD(52)67.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State of a Dinner Meeting Aboard the S.S. 'Williamsburg' on the Evening of 5 Jan. 1952, 8 Jan. 1952, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, Vol VI, Part I, Doc. 329. Ismay, *Memoirs*, 458–60.

<sup>27</sup> Ismay, *Memoirs*, 458–60.

<sup>28</sup> Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, 190 and 192.

<sup>29</sup> Hansard, House of Lords, Deb 22 Feb. 1951 vol. 170, cc521–524.

<sup>30</sup> Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council of Deputies, held at 13 Belgrave Square, London, SW1, on Wed. 12 Mar. 1952. NATO, DR(52)22 (Final).

<sup>31</sup> Letter of Lord Ismay to John W. Snyder, 18 Mar. 1952, LHCMA, Ismay 5/19/525/2.

<sup>32</sup> Letter of N.A. Bogan to Ismay, Thursday [no date], Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College London (henceforward LHCMA), Ismay 5/B25/1.

Averall Harriman, the chair of the Temporary Council Committee, Ismay 'had an excellent sense of balance as between political, military and economic considerations' and his 'appointment would give NATO a lift'.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to explain that before taking up the role Ismay demanded the right to appoint his own team and to decide the size of the International Staff. These conditions were essential to his taking up the post as he argued that if he did not have sole control over appointments things would soon grind to a halt as nations would compete to have their men close to the Secretary General. Ismay did not want to be put in the position of having to negotiate the appointment of each senior member of staff. It would be time-consuming, frustrating and ultimately undermine the effectiveness of his team. 'You might as well get fourteen people to choose your wife for you', he argued.<sup>34</sup> Given the sound reasoning with which Ismay argued his points, as well as the fact that the national governments were eager to make the appointment without further delay, they agreed to Ismay's demands. It could therefore be argued that Ismay shaped the role of Secretary General even before taking up his post.

### The Secretary General, Impartial and Independent

Having accepted the role, Ismay had little choice but to show commitment to the alliance and its ability to fulfil its mission effectively. In his first public appearance, Ismay spoke of himself as a 'reformed sceptic'. He noted the 'splendid progress' that had been made in recent months and spoke candidly of his initial concerns. He explained that 'now the mantle has fallen on my shoulders, I am immensely uplifted by the prospect of being allowed to try to make a contribution towards so vital a task'.<sup>35</sup>

The Secretary General was – and still is – the head of the International Secretariat and the Chairman of the North Atlantic Council. As such, he is responsible to the NAC and is not a member of a national delegation. He ensures that all papers and evidence are prepared for the NAC's attention and that appropriate steps are taken to follow up on the NAC's decisions. As the head of the International Staff and as the Chairman of the Council, the Secretary General gathers in his person both political and administrative functions at the top of the alliance. In *The First Five Years*, Ismay goes at great length to explain that the Secretary General had 'unique opportunities to make proposals not only about the technical aspects of NATO but also about the current and future affairs of the alliance'.<sup>36</sup>

In interviews and private conversations Ismay often talked of himself as 'servant of the Council' and described his function as 'stewardship'. He was fond of representing himself as the 'old soldier'.<sup>37</sup> At no point did Ismay assume the attitude of a full member of the Council. He cultivated his image as an impartial leader and never intervened in domestic affairs of the member states. Ismay was acutely aware of the fragility of the political context he was navigating and was determined not to undermine the precarious balance that was being established within the Council by imposing his own views. Not only that, Ismay was also mindful of the fact that the Washington Treaty had been signed by twelve fully sovereign nations and that membership of the alliance did not put any constraints on national sovereignty. Even if, as Secretary General, he intervened in the member's domestic decision, or if he had demanded that specific measures were adopted, he would not have any tool or leverage to push the members to comply. He would ultimately run the risk of being ignored, which would undermine his role and jeopardise the political consensus within the alliance. Ismay was conscious that he had to tread carefully. When asked about why as Secretary General he did not demand more from the

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversations, by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State (Battle). 740.5/3–1052. Washington, 10 Mar. 1952. *FRUS, 1952–1954*, Vol. V, Part 1. The Temporary Council Committee was established in September 1951 to examine how to reconcile the requirements of external security with the real ability of the member nations to fulfil them.

<sup>34</sup> Wingate, 92 and 'Lord Ismay on his plans reorganization of NATO staff', *The Times*, 19 Apr. 1952.

<sup>35</sup> 'New Structure of NATO. Lord Ismay Takes Office' *The Times*, 5 Apr. 1952.

<sup>36</sup> Ismay, *Five Years*, Chapter 6: 'The Civil Structure'.

<sup>37</sup> Loris Ismay's speech to Abernethian Society, St Bartholomew's Hospital, 22 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/33a.

national governments, Ismay replied: 'what would you expect? The first thing I would do would be to demand that France should increase its conscription term to twenty-four months. The next thing I would do would be to tell the British they must cut the expensive burden of social services. Neither country would do this. I cannot get tough.'<sup>38</sup>

However, this does not mean that he did not work behind the scenes. The examination of NATO documents along with Ismay's papers reveals that while he kept within the limits of his official role during the most formal meetings (Heads of Government Summits, Foreign and Defence Ministers meetings), he was proactive during the weekly sessions with Permanent Representatives. Here, he adopted a rather informal tone and invited opinions from all parties, making sure that all views were brought to the table. His tone was friendly, with touches of humour at times. He led the Council 'with charm and great skill'.<sup>39</sup> At the same time he established some simple, yet unbending, rules. No Permanent Representative was allowed to walk out of meetings, and if somebody was not present the decision was to be postponed until everybody was in the room.

Unfortunately there are no official records of the Restricted Sessions. These are meetings called at short notice to discuss confidential matters, in which Permanent Representatives can take one, or possibly two, advisers. We know even less about the numerous informal meetings that took place on a daily basis in the offices of the headquarters. Informal meetings were crucial for monitoring the pulse of the alliance. They allowed the Permanent Representatives to inform their respective governments of the mood of the Council and of the direction in which things moved before decisions were made. Possible disagreements or potential disputes could be solved before they reached a formal stage in the NAC. In an article he wrote for the *NATO Letter*, Ismay recalled that he found informal meetings extremely helpful and that they increased considerably in number over the years, from seventeen in 1952 to sixty-six in 1956.<sup>40</sup>

Once a month Ismay also held informal luncheons with all Permanent Delegates at his residence. The luncheons became so popular that his successor, Paul-Henri Spaak, continued them and they became a NATO tradition during the Cold War. Considering the vibrant cultural scene of Paris in the 1950s, Ronald Wingate's claim that 'Villa Said was now becoming one of the important houses of Paris' may be an overstretch. However, it is undeniable that Ismay used his hospitality to foster good working relations and trust within the NAC. Through social events and informal meetings at the headquarters and in his own home, Ismay promoted the creation of personal relations among members of the Permanent Delegations, which contributed to the fostering of mutual trust. According to one observer: 'it is hard at times to reject a compromise which Lord Ismay considers reasonable; after an hour or two of his hospitality, it becomes almost impossible'.<sup>41</sup>

Ismay was committed to preserving the appearance as well as the substance of impartiality. He even refused to travel in the liner *Queen Elizabeth* on his way to an official visit to Canada and the United States because Anthony Eden, who at the time was Foreign Secretary, was travelling on the same vessel and it could appear as too cosy a trip. Ismay's official visit to London caused a major headache for the Foreign Office as he insisted on being received formally as a Head of State to stress his impartial role. Yet, in the eyes of the Foreign Office he was first and foremost a British subject. There was no precedent for the protocol to be followed when Ismay had to meet the Queen. Hectic communication followed. The Foreign Office argued that Ismay could not be given the honour of a state visit, as he was a Queen's subject. Ismay insisted that he was NATO Secretary General first and British subject second. Ismay argued that he was travelling to Britain as NATO Secretary General and should be received as such. Eventually, the Foreign Office conceded and a full state visit was organised.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> C. L. Sulzberger, 'Foreign Affairs: Epitaph for a Very Lively Man', *The New York Times*, 22 May 1957.

<sup>39</sup> Stikker, *Men of Responsibilities*, 310.

<sup>40</sup> *NATO Letter*, Vol. 5, special supplement to n. 6.

<sup>41</sup> As quoted in Jordan, *Leadership*, 5. See also Wingate, 198.

<sup>42</sup> Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, 197; Jordan, *NATO International Staff*, 53.



Yet, Ismay's Britishness did, in fact, affect his period as Secretary General. After his retirement Ismay himself admitted that in his attempt not to give the impression that he was privileging his own, he often ended up being unfair towards the British. 'The only people I was beastly to were the British', he admitted. According to his biographer, relations with the British Permanent Delegation were 'a continuous source of anxiety' for Ismay, as he wanted to avoid any possible misunderstanding.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, however, he remained the ultimate Englishman. In Paris Ismay continued to observe English manners and dress code. He chaired the NAC meetings in his diplomatic black coat and striped trousers and on official visits sported a bowler hat, a black suit and an umbrella.<sup>44</sup>

### The Secretariat

Archival documents suggest that when he was laying the foundation of the NATO Secretariat Ismay did not look at the work of Eric Drummon on the League of Nations. Similarly, there is no evidence in the official archival documents or in his private correspondence that he liaised with diplomats and policy makers outside NATO who were setting up similar operations. There is no recorded contact with Jean Monnet, who at the time was setting up the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community in Luxembourg, or with Jacques Camille, the first Secretary General of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. There was not contact with Trigve Lie, the United Nations Secretary General, or with anybody on his team.

Interestingly, Ismay did not have any meaningful conversations about the challenges in setting up NATO international Staff with Lord Gladwyn either. Gladwyn had been heavily involved in the creation of the first administrative structure of the United Nations and was Acting United Nations Secretary General before the appointment of Trigve Lie. As a fellow Brit with similar prior experience in the Foreign Office and in Westminster, Gladwyn could have certainly been able to offer plenty of advice. The two also knew each other well as they sat in the House of Lords and had frequent contacts during the war when Gladwyn was appointed to the Ministry of Economic Warfare and later was Executive Officer of for Special Operations. Along with Ismay, Gladwyn had also participated in the Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam conferences at the end of the War.<sup>45</sup> Yet there is no indication in Ismay's and Gladwyn's papers and correspondence that the two ever discussed the how to establish an international staff and how to shape the role of Secretary General.

Instead, it appears that Ismay looked back at his own experience as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the war and as Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations for inspiration. On his arrival in Paris Ismay appointed two assistants: a Private Secretary, Peter Scott from the Foreign Office, and a Deputy Private Secretary, Gilles de Boisgelin from the Quay d'Orsay.<sup>46</sup> Initially de Boisgelin had no clear role except for maintaining contact with the French Government and for finding a suitable official residence for the Secretary General in Paris.<sup>47</sup> It is likely that the primary aim of creating this role was to have a Frenchman at the highest level, to be paired with Scott. Ismay was aware of the need to make sure that the two official languages of the alliance were represented at the top of the International Staff. At the same time, it was also important to mitigate the overly 'Anglo-Saxon' outlook of his team.

At his first meeting with the press in Paris Ismay gave an outline of the administrative framework that he proposed to set up. He envisaged appointing three Assistant Secretaries General, each at the

<sup>43</sup> Speech to Abernethian Society, St Bartholomew's Hospital, 22 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/33a. See also Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, 200.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, photographs published on *NATO Declassified*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified\\_137930.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_137930.htm) (Last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Lord Gladwyn, *The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972); Sean Greenwood, *Titan at the Foreign Office: Gladwyn Jebb and the Shaping of the Modern World* (Leiden, Brill, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> It should be pointed out that in this case the Private Secretary did not have the same role as the chef-de-cabinet and was far less powerful. Scott's role was akin to the Foreign Office's position of private secretary. Spaak's Private Secretary, M. Saint-Mleux, assumed the proper functions of chef de cabinet, which continue to this day.

<sup>47</sup> Ismay spent five months at the Hotel Bristol until NATO purchased a house in Villa Said, a private street.

head of one of the three principal branches of NATO: politics, economics and production.<sup>48</sup> Ismay also created the post of Deputy Secretary General (DSG) to give smaller nations the chance to be in the top echelon of the alliance.<sup>49</sup>

The Office of the Secretary General was directed by the Executive Secretary, who was also Secretary to the Council, Captain Richard (later Lord) Coleridge. The Executive Secretary was responsible for supervising the general processing of the work of the NAC, including provision of all secretarial and administrative assistance performed by the International Staff. The Executive Secretary also dealt with personnel matters and provided interpretation of all staff regulations. Finally, he would pick up anything that was not official responsibility of the Secretary General and Assistant Secretaries General.<sup>50</sup> The Secretariat provided support to all the Council's principal committees and working groups and ensured co-ordination between them.

### The International Staff

As the head of the International Staff, Ismay was keen to instil the need for impartiality and commitment into his team. He believed that 'every single member of the Staff regarded himself, not as a national of his own country, but as a member of an international team dedicated to the cause of world peace'.<sup>51</sup> An experienced military leader, Ismay knew that such ethos could not be imposed but had to be embraced voluntarily by his staff. To encourage this process he worked actively to create a vibrant *esprit de corps*. Shortly after his move to Paris Ismay launched the NATO Staff Association to protect 'the professional interest of the members of staff as a whole, and to further proposals to further the well-being of the staff and for bringing the staff together in social activities'.<sup>52</sup> Other initiatives followed: the *NATO Staff Association Bulletin* started to be circulated from 1955. Sponsored language courses, clubs, holiday camps for employees' children and social events were designed to help people get to know each other socially.<sup>53</sup>

Smaller – yet symbolic – steps helped to create a sense of community and shared ethos. One of them was the way in which members of International staff were expected to dress. Ismay recalled that: 'I used to get very angry with my flock if they did not wear NATO ties on all important occasions'.<sup>54</sup> Upon his retirement Ismay was pleased with what he achieved in this regard: 'it was extraordinary to see how quickly most of them came to regard themselves not as nationals of their own countries but as member of a team dedicated to the cause of world peace. Some of them, indeed, used to lean backwards not to help their own countries'.<sup>55</sup>

As in many other international organisations, the NATO International Staff was – and still is – recruited in a variety of ways: seconded by the national governments, transferred permanently or recruited directly via open calls. In the case of secondments, the national authorities put forward their candidate and the Secretary General had little or no influence on whom the national government proposed. The candidates were not always the best people for the job or not necessarily at the right level or rank. In addition, at the time, some countries struggled to put forward names for secondments. Smaller members, such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, were pressed to provide staff to the several international organisations that were being launched in the early post-war years. On

<sup>48</sup> Lord Ismay on his Planned Reorganization of NATO Staff, *The Times*, 19 Apr. 1952. Ambassador Sergio Fenoaltea (Italy) headed the Political Affairs Division, M. Rene Sergent (France) the Economics and Finance Division and Mr. Lowell P. Weicker (United States) the Production and Logistics Division.

<sup>49</sup> The first Deputy Secretary General was the Dutch Jonkheer Henri van Vredenburg.

<sup>50</sup> 'Lord Ismay on his Planned Reorganization of NATO staff, *The Times*, 19 Apr. 1952. This arrangement, sometimes known as the 'Cabinet System', was introduced into NATO by Charles Spofford in 1951.

<sup>51</sup> 'Vote of thanks to Chairman and Board of Directors of Shell at the annual general meeting', 20 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/32/a.

<sup>52</sup> The Association was officially recognised in the *NATO Staff Manual*, 2 Feb. 1953, item 3,000.

<sup>53</sup> NATO, CP/54-N/26(Final).

<sup>54</sup> Speech to Abernethian Society, St Bartholomew's Hospital, 22 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/33a

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

the other hand, countries that experienced rapid economic take off, like Italy and later the Federal Republic of Germany, saw government positions become less attractive. As it has been explained elsewhere, the problem re-emerged when two decades later several international organisations, including NATO, launched subsidiary bodies to engage with environmental issues. Several member countries complained that they could not respond to all the sudden request for experts.<sup>56</sup>

For these reasons, in his first progress report Ismay drew the governments attention to ‘the fact that the emoluments and conditions of service of the staff were insufficiently attractive’. Despite increases, five years later Ismay still found them ‘demonstrably inadequate’.<sup>57</sup> This meant that for most of the Cold War, much needed experts often continued to opt for the private sector rather than pursuing a career within NATO.

Ismay noted tensions within the International Staff between those who were at the headquarters on secondments and those who were permanent members of the International Staff. Not only were some of the people on secondments – particularly the North Americans – considerably better paid but they could also have disruptive effects if their posting was too short. Quick turnarounds could undermine the unity and morale of the International Staff and could also jeopardise the build-up of much needed internal expertise and a strong institutional culture. There were of course also advantages in having a recruitment system that included secondments. They brought fresh thinking and helped keep abreast with national viewpoints. It also allowed national governments to gain valuable insights into the problems and workings of NATO. There was a mutual feedback loop that could support cooperation between members of the International and of the national staff given that people tend to move roles and to know each other. The problem was therefore not either/or but instead finding the right balance between the two.<sup>58</sup>

Another issue faced by Ismay in laying the foundation of the International Staff was that of national quotas. On the one hand, it was important that all member nations were represented at all levels of the organisation. It was particularly important to dispel the impression of a predominance of British and Americans at senior level. However, on the other hand, national quotas clashed with the principle of meritocracy, according to which each position should be filled by the most qualified and experienced person for the job. Ismay was against the creation of official quotas as they could become a straitjacket and undermine meritocracy. Yet he was aware of the need for all members to be equally represented, particularly at the top level. He explained that:

There is no hard and fast rule as to the proportion of appointments to be held by each country, but every effort is made to ensure an equitable distribution. This principle to some extent restricts the choice of candidates for any particular post, but there is no question of any one country having a permanent claim on any particular appointment. It is generally recognised as undesirable that an international organisation should be frozen into a rigid pattern.<sup>59</sup>

### Political Cohesion

The Secretary General was and is pivotal in ensuring that members work well together, have a mutual understanding of each other’s concerns and interests and that any problem is solved at an early stage through diplomatic dialogue and cooperation.<sup>60</sup> Political cohesion was – and still is – essential for the

<sup>56</sup> Linda Risso, ‘NATO and the Environment: The Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society’, *Contemporary European History*, 25, 3 (Aug. 2016), 505–35.

<sup>57</sup> Text of Lord Ismay’s report to the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bonn, May 1957. [www.nato.int/archives/ismayrep/text.htm](http://www.nato.int/archives/ismayrep/text.htm) (last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018). See also Mouritzen, *The International Civil Service*.

<sup>58</sup> Marcussen, Larsson and Veggeland, *Unpacking International Organisations*; Mouritzen, *The International Civil Service*; Weiss ‘International Bureaucracy’.

<sup>59</sup> Ismay, *Five Years*, Chapter 6: ‘The Civil Structure’.

<sup>60</sup> There is a rich debate on the nature and limits of political cooperation within NATO. See, for example, Linda Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War: The NATO Information Service* (London: Routledge, 2014).

credibility of NATO as a defensive alliance. Members need to have a shared assessment of the challenges they face and support the same strategic and operational posture. If the alliance becomes politically divided, it would not have the resolve necessary to carry out a full-scale military response or to stand firmly together behind the use of nuclear weapons.

Yet, despite his efforts to foster political dialogue, Ismay was faced with criticism that the NAC was breaking down just five months after his appointment. The excessive use of bilateral contacts and the tendency of many members to make unilateral decisions were heavily criticised. For example, several NATO members criticised Britain's unilateral announcement of a stretch-out of its rearmament programme; Churchill simply replied that the United Kingdom remained sovereign and that it did not need NATO's approval. Soon after that the French Prime Minister Antoine Pinay snubbed the NAC and dealt directly with Washington concerning French financial problems arising from rearmament. At the same time, smaller countries complained about not being kept informed of what was being discussed by France, the United Kingdom and the United States with the Soviet Union at the Geneva summit of 1955. In these cases, there was nothing the Secretary General could do other than reiterating the need to cooperate and to share information with the alliance's partners. He had no tools to force the members to follow suit.

In an internal memorandum to the Secretary of State, Livingston T. Merchant spoke of a 'serious situation in North Atlantic Council', which he described as 'an extremely disquieting sense of depression and concern among the members of the Council' about perceived US disengagement and lack of leadership. In Merchant's view this was due to the problems connected with the appointment of the new US Permanent Representative and was compounded by Lord Ismay's caution and the fact that 'his Deputy, Van Vredenburg, lapses increasingly into cynical discouragement'.<sup>61</sup>

In 1956 the Suez crisis exposed the fragile political consensus within the NAC and dealt a heavy blow to the alliance's image and internal cohesion.<sup>62</sup> To Ismay it was a blow both as the Secretary General as well as a British civil servant. Neither him nor – more worryingly – Sir Christopher Steel, the UK Permanent Representative, had been informed by London about the planned military action. Great embarrassment was palpable at the emergency Council meeting called the day after the invasion. According to Ismay's biographer, Ismay was close to resigning but was persuaded otherwise at the last minute.<sup>63</sup> The Suez crisis showed that general principles of political consultation and foreign policy alignment did not always fit with the reality of international life, particularly given that many NATO members had competing interests beyond the European theatre. To ensure progressive realignment of defence and foreign policies, it would have been necessary to establish permanent and structured channels for discussion to promote a cooperation on a broad range of issues – well beyond the strictly defined defence and security fields – that could impact on NATO as a whole.

The Three Wise Men Report, which was published soon after the Suez crisis, tried to address the need for structured political cooperation among the members.<sup>64</sup> The Report condemned the narrow definition of 'political consultation' adopted by the national governments up to that point and argued the case for a more open and frequent exchange of views. The Report put forward several important recommendations. One of the most important was the suggestion to enhance the role of the Secretary General to ensure that he could intervene at an earlier stage when differences among two or more

<sup>61</sup> Draft of Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant) to the Secretary of State, Washington, 7 July 1953, *FRUS, Western European Security, 1952–1954*, Vol. V, Part 1.

<sup>62</sup> Winfried Heinemann, '“Learning by Doing”: Disintegrating Factors and the Development of Political Cooperation in Early NATO', in May Anny Heiss and S. Victor Papacosma, eds., *NATO and the Warsaw Pact: Intra-bloc Conflicts* (Kent OH: The Kent State University Press, 2008); Dionysos Chourchoulis, *The Southern Flank of NATO, 1951–1959* (New York, London: Lexington Books, 2014). W.S. Lucas, 'NATO, 'Alliance' and the Suez Crisis', in Beatrice Heuser and Rober O'Neil, eds., *Securing Peace in Europe, 1945–1962: Thoughts for the Post-Cold War Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1992), 260–76.

<sup>63</sup> Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, 209.

<sup>64</sup> 'Report of the Committee of the Three on Non-Military Cooperation in NATO', 13 Dec. 1953, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_65237.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_65237.htm) (Last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018).

members started to emerge. The Secretary General was to be given the right to bring to the Council's attention any matter that threatened the political solidarity and military preparedness of the alliance. For this purpose the Secretary General was to be asked to prepare regular progress reports for ministers about the state of political consultation, along with the analysis of key political problems and the examination of the extent to which members cooperated. The Political Affairs Division was to be strengthened, with the creation of the Committee of Political Advisers to foster cooperation among the members and to promote a shared strategic assessment of common challenges. Most crucially, the Report conferred onto the Secretary General new powers and more latitude to intervene in emerging disputes. He could, for example, initiate a process of mediation, enquiry, consultation or arbitration. This means that the Secretary General was allowed a considerable degree of discretion. He could decide independently when and how to act and, crucially, which members should assist him in resolving the disputes amicably. Interestingly, the Report also noted that 'the effective functioning of NATO depended in large measure upon the efficiency, devotion and morale of its Secretariat' and recommended that the governments should be prepared to give the International Staff 'all necessary support both in terms of finance and personnel'.<sup>65</sup>

The Three Wise Men Report effectively raised the status of the Secretary General within the Council. The member states became more like his colleagues than his masters. However, it should not be forgotten that the member states continued to retain full control over their policies, budgets and freedom of action, and the Secretary General could not force any decision on to the members or on to the Council.<sup>66</sup>

### Shaping the Alliance in the Long Term

The decisions Ismay took in his first few years at NATO shaped the alliance in the long term. First, he raised the status of the Permanent Delegations. In Ismay's view the Permanent Representatives had to be respected figures in their own country and to have the full support of their governments. This was the only way to allow the NAC to make effective decisions. If this was not the case, the Council would be doing little more than circulating memoranda. Hence, Ismay insisted that all Permanent Representatives had to be of high ambassadorial rank. As Secretary General, he hardly ever wrote or communicated directly with the governments and always spoke to national leaders via their Permanent Representative, thus raising their status within their own governments.

Ismay also raised the international status of the Secretary General as much as he could within the still fragile structure of the alliance. Ismay saw himself as the representative of the members on the world stage. As such, he represented the alliance's views as well as the will of all its members, including – most crucially – the smaller ones. Only a few months after his appointment, Ismay insisted, via Churchill and the US Permanent Representative, that he should be present at the Bermuda Conference in December 1953. The conference brought together the leaders of the 'Big Three' (the United States, the United Kingdom and France) to discuss the continuing threat posed by the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin. In Ismay's view it was essential that NATO was present at this high profile meeting as the views and concerns of the smaller members of the alliance had to be represented.<sup>67</sup> The Americans saw the invitation to Ismay as a way to 'sustain and increase the prestige of the Council and the International Staff', which they believed was essential for cementing political cohesion among the members.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. See also, 'The Evolution of NATO Political Consultation, 1949–1962', 3 May 1963, NATO, NHO/63/1. There is a rich historiographical debate on the impact of the Suez Crisis on the political cohesion of the West and on NATO in particular. Among the most important contributions are: Heinemann, "Learning by doing"; W. Scott Lucas, *Divided we Stand. Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991).

<sup>66</sup> 'The Evolution of NATO Political Consultation, 1949–1962', 3 May 1963, NATO, NHO/63/1.

<sup>67</sup> Invitation to Secretary-General of NATO, Lord Ismay, to attend the Tripartite Bermuda Conference in Dec. 1953. TNA, FO 371/107911

<sup>68</sup> Draft of Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant) to the Secretary of State, Washington, 7 July 1953, *FRUS, Western European Security, 1952–1954*, Vol. V, Part 1.

In the end Ismay did take part in the Bermuda Conference. Although he did not have a say in what was decided, he brought an alliance-wide perspective and made sure that the concerns of all members were taken into account.<sup>69</sup> In particular, Ismay argued that it would have been counterproductive to demand stronger defence effort from the smaller countries given that any increase would have negligible impact on the overall strength of the alliance but it would come at a great cost in terms of domestic political strain. Ismay also argued that the military requirements that were being discussed at Bermuda ‘cannot be attained on the basis of peace-time economies’ and that any pressure would probably backfire by creating internal turmoil.<sup>70</sup>

As Secretary General Ismay also submitted an Annual Review on the status of the alliance to the NAC. The Review was based on questionnaires sent to all member countries, on military and economic reports produced by the International staff of all available data and on the examination of each country’s defence plans. The Annual Review included recommendations by the NATO military authorities and by the International Staff to make the alliance more resilient and effective. Crucially, the Annual Review offered the Secretary General to promote a shared security vision during both the consultation process and in his recommendations. In Ismay’s own words: ‘mutual confidence and respect between civil and military staffs, though a basic condition of sound defence planning, is not easily or rapidly brought about in a new setting, with new men and new problems, even on the national plane’.<sup>71</sup> The Annual Review exercise did much to ameliorate relations between NATO and member states and to establish the role of the Secretary General and the international Staff as impartial, competent and reliable.

Additionally, Ismay introduced British-style memoranda and documents as well as shaping the structure of the discussion within the Council.<sup>72</sup> All NATO documents start with the presentation of the problem, followed by alternative points and views, possible solution and recommendations. This format is typical of British administration and differs substantially from the continental style, which is organised around clear-cut recommendations and contains a more straightforward top-down approach.

Finally, Ismay was aware of the need to foster public support for the alliance. At the time, particularly in continental Europe, there was widespread criticism of NATO. Indeed, the organisation was accused of undermining national sovereignty and of diverting crucial resources towards rearmament when they were badly needed for reconstruction and economic development. Such concerns were aptly exploited by the communist parties. After the death of Stalin the peaceful coexistence rhetoric promoted by Moscow strengthened the anti-NATO feeling among sectors of the public in continental Europe. Calls for disarmament and an increased diplomatic dialogue increased and put pressure on the national governments.

As argued elsewhere, Ismay’s view was that the rhetoric of ‘peaceful coexistence’ posed an existential threat for NATO as it undermined support for the alliance. Large sectors of the public became more sensitive to the arguments calling for disarmament and diplomatic dialogue with Moscow.<sup>73</sup> According to Ismay, NATO had ‘secured the front door’ by blocking the military advance of the Soviet Union. ‘Communism’, he explained, ‘has a great appeal to the have-nots of this world and our position is being dangerously undermined. The nations of NATO have got to understand that

<sup>69</sup> For an account of the discussions held at Bermuda, see *FRUS, 1952–1954*, Vol. V, Part 2, 385–8 and 413–4; Milloy, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, 114–7.

<sup>70</sup> Telegraphic summary, by the United States Delegation. Bermuda, 7 Dec. 1953. *FRUS, 1952–1954*, Vol. V, Part 2, Doc. 396.1/12–753.

<sup>71</sup> ‘The Lisbon Reorganisation. Lord Ismay’s Report to the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bonn, May 1957’. <http://www.nato.int/archives/ismayrep/text.htm> (last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018).

<sup>72</sup> For the importance of the ‘Foreign Office’ model in shaping international bureaucracy, see also the work of N. Piers Ludlow on Roy Jenkins and the European Commission. N. Piers Ludlow, *Roy Jenkins and the European Commission Presidency, 1976–1980: At the Heart of Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 2 in Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence*. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *NATO and Western Perceptions of the Soviet Bloc: Alliance Analysis and Reporting, 1951–1969* (London: Routledge, 2014).

foreign policy and strategy cannot be conducted in watertight compartments and that they must have common policies in the NATO areas and stick to them'.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, Ismay recognised the 'widespread feeling that it will become increasingly difficult to sustain popular support for defence expenditures as now planned unless governments can explain more clearly why the money is needed'.<sup>75</sup> In Ismay's view, the answer was to invest more on the provisions of Article 2 and to launch a more confident information campaign to inform the public about the benefits of being part of NATO. He argued forcefully in favour of an increase in the information budget but with little result; the national governments did not see that it as a priority and often feared the creation of a strong Information Service that could speak directly to their own public.<sup>76</sup> Progress remained slow and at the end of his term Ismay lamented that alliance has 'not done nearly as much as we should have liked' about Article 2 and fostering public support for NATO.<sup>77</sup>

One thing Ismay could do to promote NATO was to be active himself and to use his role as the symbol of the alliance. As soon as he arrived in Paris Ismay engaged with the media, released interviews, toured the members states and invited journalists to the headquarters. He also supported the creation of an Information Service that could work in partnership with the national governments to this effect.<sup>78</sup> Ismay made a point of making frequent official visits to all member governments, something that his successors soon lost appetite for, with many, Josef Luns in particular, focusing exclusively on the key allies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. During his official visits Ismay met with the ministers primarily concerned with NATO affairs, but he also addressed the press and met members of the public, like veterans associations, university students, and trade union leaders.<sup>79</sup> Yet, as argued elsewhere, Ismay's plans for an effective Information Service were hampered by the need to coordinate action with reluctant national agencies and by endemic lack of funding.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

Ismay retired in April 1957. He was approaching seventy and his health was declining. Many of his colleagues regretted the departure of a much-loved Secretary General, who had worked effectively with all members.<sup>81</sup> William Batt summarised well the felling at the headquarters:

This five-year stretch is, in some ways, most unique and outstanding. Here you have had entirely new ground to cover, with no pattern of past practice to guide you – everything new, strange and untried. . . . In this uncertain and vacillating time, really I doubt if any single person could have accomplished any more than you have and, I dare say, most of them would have failed to equal your record.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Speech to Abernethian Society, St Bartholomew's Hospital, 22 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/33a.

<sup>75</sup> See for example: 'The Implementation of Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Note by the Secretary General and Vice-Chair of the Council', NATO, CM(56)5, 13 Jan. 1956. NATO Defence Planning. Note by the Secretary General, 8 Dec. 1955, NATO, CM(55)113 (Revised). On the implications of Article 2, Milloy, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*.

<sup>76</sup> This point is discussed in detail in Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence*.

<sup>77</sup> Ismay made this point at length upon his retirement in a speech to Abernethian Society, St Bartholomew's Hospital, 22 May 1958, LHCMA, Ismay 1/7/33a.

<sup>78</sup> Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence*, Chapter 2, and Linda Risso "'Enlightening Public Opinion": A Study of NATO's Information Policies between 1949 and 1959 Based on Recently Declassified Documents', *Cold War History*, 7, 1 (2007), 45–74. In the hierarchy of NATO at the time, there was an ASG for Political Affairs under whom was a Director of Information that also acted as Chief Press Officer. The first person to occupy the post was Geoffrey Parsons, an experienced American journalist.

<sup>79</sup> A list of the visits is available in 'Text of Lord Ismay's Report to the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bonn', May 1957. Available at [www.nato.int/archives/ismayrep/text.htm](http://www.nato.int/archives/ismayrep/text.htm) (last accessed on 20 Nov. 2018).

<sup>80</sup> Linda Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence: The NATO Information Service* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Ismay was offered honours and public recognitions, including The Most Noble Order of the Garter. Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, 212–4.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from William L. Batt, 27 Apr. 1957, LHCMA, Ismay 5/B6A/1.

Indeed, Ismay had laid the foundation of the NATO administrative framework with hardly any precedent to guide him. The most obvious reference point would have been the work of Eric Drummond at the League of Nations. Drummond had been an effective Secretary General and had created an extensive administrative machinery to support the numerous agencies linked to the League. Drummond had also published extensively on the nature of the international civil service.<sup>83</sup> Yet there is no evidence in Ismay's private papers and in the records of his conversations with his collaborators that he did refer to Drummond for inspiration. Instead, archival documents suggest that the model Ismay referred to was the Foreign Office. As argued in this article, this is evident in the way in which he structured the Secretariat and the role of Private Secretary, which reflected the same functions and structures of the Foreign Office. The style of memorandums and record keeping also mirrored what Ismay learnt during his time as Secretary for Commonwealth Relations.<sup>84</sup>

As a military alliance, NATO has a specific focus and mission. Since its foundation, the Secretary General has faced the challenge of bringing together partners with different security concerns, views and interests. He or she has to foster consensus and give equal voice to all members, although of course key members – particularly the nuclear states – feel as *primus inter pares*. It is a delicate balance and a continuous bargain.

The appointment of Paul-Henri Spaak as Ismay's successor was a sign of new phase in the history of the alliance. Spaak was a politician, an ardent federalist and had been appointed precisely because at that point the alliance wanted a strong voice. Yet, Spaak could have not been in a position to act as he did, had not Ismay established precise features and boundaries for the Secretary General's role. When Ismay took up his role as Secretary General, it would have been unthinkable for him to assume such a proactive, and often almost castigating, role as Spaak. Ismay cautiously led NATO at a time of great uncertainty about its future. He did not overstep the boundaries of his role and never challenged the member states. However, he demanded that the Secretary General be recognised as the embodiment of the alliance. After his retirement, Ismay jokingly characterised himself as the wet nurse and Spaak as the governess.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomidou, 'The Construction'; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>84</sup> Ludlow, *Roy Jenkins*.

<sup>85</sup> As quoted in Jordan, *NATO International Staff*, 101.

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