

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The arming of Europe and the making of the First World War. By David G. Herrmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. Pp. xiii + 307. ISBN 0-691-03374-9. £29.50.

Armaments and the coming of war: Europe 1904–1914. By David Stevenson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. xi + 463. ISBN 0-19-820208-3. £48.00.

Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War. Edited by Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee. Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995. Pp. xxii + 362. ISBN 1-57181-017-X. £40.

Dismembering the male: men's bodies, Britain and the Great War. By Joanna Bourke. London: Reaktion Books, 1996. Pp. 336. ISBN 0-948462825. £19.95.

Passchendaele: the untold story. By Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. Pp. xv + 237. ISBN 0-300-066292-9. £19.95.

Battle tactics of the western front: the British army's art of attack, 1916–1918. By Paddy Griffith. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996 (paperback edition). Pp. xvi + 286. ISBN 0-300-06663-5. No price given.

Government and the armed forces in Britain, 1856–1990. Edited by Paul Smith. London, Hambledon Press, 1996. Pp. xviii + 324. ISBN 1-85285-144-9. £35.

I

Whether or not arms races cause wars was a historiographical preoccupation of the Cold War era. The issue was then of more than academic concern. Those opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons saw previous arms races as having destabilized the international system at best and as having led ineluctably to war at worst. Their critics countered that arms races possessed the capacity to increase terror and so promote more effective deterrence.

The evidence from the past was, as any sensible historian could have anticipated, ambiguous. But that ambiguity seemed less and less to apply to the First World War. The obvious arms race before July 1914 was that between the British and German navies. By the 1980s the idea that it was a factor in prompting hostilities – however distinguished its earlier devotees – seemed absurd. The war broke out over a Balkan issue which drew in the central European powers before it affected those on Europe's maritime peripheries. In 1914 naval relations between Germany and Britain were, as even Winston Churchill acknowledged, freer of tension than for many years.

Historians of the German navy emphasized the distinction between capabilities and intentions. The operational purposes of the High Seas Fleet were less clear than its propaganda suggested. Volker Berghahn, in *Der Tirpitz-Plan* (Dusseldorf, 1971), stressed the primacy of domestic policy in the Reichsmarineamt's building programmes,

and Ivo Lambi, in *The navy and German power politics, 1862–1914* (Boston and London, 1984), showed the lack of any considered German plan for a naval war with Britain. This shift in historiographical focus was less evident on the other side of the North Sea. The war plans of the Royal Navy continued to receive less attention than its building programmes. True, Jon Tetsuro Sumida's critique of Arthur Marder's work, by highlighting the construction of the battle-cruiser, showed that the fleet which Fisher planned was global and oceanic, and therefore designed to face all-comers, not just Germany.¹ But in the decade before 1914 it was Germany's navy, not Russia's or France's, which provided the public rationale for the fleet's expansion. A systematic analysis of what the Royal Navy intended to do to the Germans remains one of the more extraordinary gaps in the massive literature on the origins of the First World War. Nicholas Lambert has provided some provocative ideas but, as yet, not a full explanation.²

John Gooch, in his stimulating essay on servicemen and politicians in Britain between 1899 and 1914, to be found in *Government and the armed forces in Britain, 1856–1990*, suggests that we may wait in vain. At the beginning of the twentieth century the board of admiralty confined itself to the broad outlines of policy and devolved planning to its fleet and station commanders. This changed, not least because of pressure from the committee of imperial defence. But, as is well known, the navy did not follow the army in creating a general staff until 1912 and even then its effect on admiralty cultures was limited. Churchill, who had been appointed first lord specifically to effect the change, himself deprived the new body of operational control in 1914.

Gooch's attention to the naval side of the story enables him to recast what he has written in the past about the army's move to a continental commitment. In 1903 the committee of imperial defence deemed the prospect of a successful invasion to be slight, and freed the army to focus on offensive action overseas rather than on home defence. Thus the key issue for the army's general staff in its dealings with the navy was no longer whether the army would be engaged in operations on the continent or not. Instead the debate was whether such a commitment would be shaped by the needs and characteristics of the navy or whether it would involve land operations independent of naval control. Imperial defence therefore bulked less large than might be expected, not least from a reading of Gooch's own *Plans of war* (London, 1974). The idea of a two-track army – one centred on London and thinking about the German threat to the Low Countries from 1906 onwards, and the other scattered throughout the colonies and not focused on Germany until August 1914 – looks increasingly persuasive. It is one to which both David Herrmann and David Stevenson subscribe. Its effect is to play down the second Moroccan crisis, and the meeting of the committee of imperial defence of 23 August 1911, as a caesura in the evolution of British strategy.

The naval arms race which preoccupied Britain in the last two years of peace was not so much that located in the North Sea but that of the Mediterranean, and the eastern Mediterranean in particular. Formally speaking, the British hold on the Suez route to

¹ Jon Tetsuro Sumida, 'British capital ship design and fire control in the dreadnought era: Sir John Fisher, Arthur Hungerford Pollen, and the battle cruiser', *Journal of Modern History*, 51 (1979), pp. 205–30; Sumida, *In defence of naval supremacy: finance, technology and British naval policy, 1899–1914* (Boston, 1989).

² Nicholas A. Lambert, 'British naval policy, 1913–1914: financial limitation and strategic revolution', *Journal of Modern History*, 67 (1995), pp. 595–626; Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the concept of flotilla defence, 1904–1909', *Journal of Military History*, 59 (1995), pp. 639–60.

India, made increasingly dependent on the French by the 1912 Anglo-French division of maritime responsibilities, could be threatened if Italy honoured its obligations to the Triple Alliance. Any calculations were, however, complicated by the fact that Italy was building against its nominal ally, Austria-Hungary, and vice versa.

Therefore, what dulled the profile of the pre-1914 Anglo-German naval arms race was the realization that there were several regional maritime arms races going on at the same time. Neither that between Austria-Hungary and Italy nor that between Greece and Turkey resulted in war between the participating powers in July 1914. But regional races still had important effects. First, the addition of these lesser fleets affected the balance of forces in areas where major powers had interests. Secondly, it was principally through navalism, rather than through land forces, that the private arms firms formed their relationships with the state. And, thirdly, the money and materials committed to dreadnoughts reduced the resources available for armies. Paul Smith, in his essay on the genesis of Britain's building programmes between 1885 and 1899 in *Government and the armed forces in Britain*, quotes Sir William Harcourt, the chancellor of the exchequer in 1894: 'We are actually in the condition of a householder whose weekly bills are at the mercy of a French *chef*, over whom he has no control'.³ Moreover, this was more than metaphor. Before 1904, the French (and the Russians), not the Germans, were the putative enemy: here was another arms race that did not lead to war.

The effect of naval appropriations is one reason why the land arms race assumed a lower profile in the calculations of contemporaries as well as in the subsequent writing of historians. Navies, being more equipment-dependent than armies, were less capable of improvisation, and had a proportionately higher profile in peacetime than manpower-dependent armies. Both David Herrmann and David Stevenson begin their books in 1904, but both argue that the land arms race did not get into its stride until the 1912 German army bill. Stevenson is as concerned to discuss navies as armies, unlike Herrmann, but the two join in aiming to reinvigorate the debate on the role of arms races in the causes of the war by arguing that we have been looking at the wrong race. That the race at sea did not have a specific role in the origins of the First World War is accepted by both; that arms races should therefore be discounted as a precipitant of the First World War in more general terms is accepted by neither. The challenge is to go beyond the obvious conclusion, that armaments created the preconditions for war – that they were what David Stevenson calls 'the wheels and pistons of the locomotive of history'.⁴ This puts the weight so firmly on the war's long-term origins that it treats the outcome of the July crisis as in some senses predetermined. Those who focus on the frailties and ambitions of the principal actors in 1914 itself will not be persuaded. Given that the steam for Stevenson's engine came from elsewhere, that people not weapons cause wars, can the existence of an arms race help explain the onset of the First World War in ways that are contingent as well as structural?

Each rises differently to this challenge. The motor to David Stevenson's scholarly and substantial volume is budgetary. He calculates that the total expenditure on arms of the six powers of the two alliance blocs rose 50 per cent in money terms between 1908 and 1913. What this process did was iron out differences in capability. War did not occur over the first Moroccan crisis because both France and Germany were aware of their military weaknesses and pursued objectives through diplomatic means. But thereafter, having corrected their deficiencies, the powers were able to use armed diplomacy. The

³ Smith, *Government and the armed forces in Britain*, p. 48.

⁴ Stevenson, *Armaments and the coming of war*, p. 421.

'steam' for Stevenson's locomotive was the 'the militarization of men's minds'. Its effect was paradoxical: deterrence worked when the military situation was not balanced, and failed when it was.

David Herrmann's evidence is less numerical and more conceptual. His is a general staff view of the world, rather than the world's view of the general staff. Unlike Stevenson, he eschews the international relations vocabulary of the late twentieth century, and focuses on the contemporary idea of preventive war. Conrad von Hötzendorff's predecessor as chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff, Friedrich Beck, is credited with fostering the notion that war might rally the dual monarchy. In 1907 Conrad himself saw an early war with Italy as not only exploiting the empire's regional military advantage but also as breaking the deadlock in the military budget created by Hungarian intransigence. In other words, in Austria-Hungary military experts were letting their technical calculations concerning the comparative strength of armies form the basis for starting wars in order both to adjust a regional balance of power and even to solve domestic problems. Thus, to the notion of armed diplomacy, Hermann adds a mechanism which gives a more satisfactory explanation as to how the threat of war could lose its deterrent value. By 1914 war was no longer the worst option, and the urgency for a preventive war grew as 'windows of opportunity' were closed.

Herrmann's argument gets round one of the principal difficulties in Stevenson's thesis. Most explanations for the First World War's outbreak concentrate on the role of the Central Powers, and yet in the material terms which Stevenson uses to make his case Germany and Austria-Hungary were inferior to the Entente. Stevenson moderates the significance of this observation by seeing Germany as the driving force in July 1914: individually, even if not collectively, Germany did have the measure of *either* France *or* Russia. But the war began in the Balkans, and Herrmann rightly stresses that the Bosnian crisis of 1908–9 was a formative influence for the dual monarchy. Conrad believed that it presented an ideal opportunity for a preventive war; his frustration helps explain why Vienna took the chance presented in July 1914, although the circumstances of the Sarajevo crisis actually made the moment far less favourable.

The journey from Bosnia to Sarajevo may have been comparatively direct for Austria-Hungary, but it was not so for Germany – or for Britain and France. The step change in the land arms race occurred not after the Bosnian crisis but after the 1911 Moroccan crisis. Both Herrmann and Stevenson are agreed that during the crisis the two alliances pursued aims that were limited and diplomatic. But Herrmann stresses the significance of the Entente's cohesion, and its readiness to respond to Germany's actions with measures that were clearly designed to improve its members' military preparedness, in fostering Germany's own reaction. Stevenson accepts that by December 1912 Moltke's call for men was driven by his estimate of France, and the needs of a campaign in the west. But by then the Balkans had again intruded. Moreover, what made the 1912 German army law possible was a combination of domestic circumstances. Tirpitz's naval programme was discredited, and Bethmann Hollweg saw increases to the army as a way to outflank the Reichsmarineamt. Thus the husbandry of Adolf Wermuth, the finance minister, was as much the victim of Bethmann Hollweg's search for authority at home as of Germany's perception of its international standing. Thereafter the effects between nations were reciprocal. The German increases of 1912 justified the adoption of the three-year service law in France, and the combination of that and of the Russian 'great' programme fed back into the 1913 German army bill. The land arms race which followed, Stevenson and Herrmann agree, was quantitative.

This is perhaps a further reason for its previous neglect. The naval arms race was qualitative, the product of new technologies, of big guns and armour plate. The qualitative race on land, the introduction of the machine gun, of the aircraft and airship, and, above all, the advent of quick-firing artillery, served to dampen down the quantitative, and thus temporarily obscured rather than elevated the competition between armies. This process of re-equipment was largely complete by 1908, and certainly by 1911, albeit with significant exceptions (the French had still not decided about their heavy artillery, and the bulk of Austria-Hungary's field artillery was unmodernized). Thereafter the principal driving force was manpower. By 1913 Germany was even ready to consider the adoption of the true nation in arms, for all its democratic implications, rather than persist with more selective forms of military service.

Such increases had deleterious effects on quality, as Herrmann recognizes. After 1912 equipment levels did not keep pace with the growth in new formations: there were not enough officers to cope with the influx of recruits; and training standards (already a source of worry) fell. But both Herrmann and Stevenson fail to draw out the implications for their central argument about arms races. In August 1914 none of the major European armies had digested the massive additions to their strengths, and none expected to have done so before 1916–17. These were arguments against war, not for it. The connections between the specifics of the arms races and the cause of the war remain tenuous.

Moreover, neither account, for all its manifold strengths, addresses the issues of long-term supply and production, of weapons replacement and munitions stocks. The naval arms races, centred on the advent of the dreadnought and her big guns, put shell consumption reasonably near the centre of their logistic concerns. Navies also worried about fuel stocks, and bunkering at sea. It is not sufficient to say that the armies neglected supply because they anticipated a short war; not only is it not true, but it also denies the impact of the quick-firing gun, which meant that even a comparatively brief campaign (say six months) would be sure to exhaust pre-war munition stocks. A more plausible explanation may be the institutionalized division between the ministries of war, responsible for equipment, and the general staffs, charged with operations: supply – by virtue of bridging both – could fall into the gap between the two.

For all these criticisms, both books are significant scholarly achievements, albeit in differing ways. Indeed they are immediate proof of an adage well known to historians but less often appreciated by market-driven publishers: that the simultaneous appearance of two books on apparently similar themes deepens our knowledge rather than duplicates it. Not only does their approach differ, but so does their material; they are genuinely complementary.

David Stevenson's culling of the archives in a wide range of languages is particularly impressive. The fresh detail is invaluable. The effect can be dense, not least because of the centrality of budgets to his analysis. But he gives shape to his labours with an introduction and a conclusion that have a strong interpretative thrust. David Herrmann's book stands comparison less with Stevenson's than with Dieter Storz's comparatively overlooked but wide-ranging study, *Kriegsbild und Rüstung vor 1914: Europäische Landstreitkräfte vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Herford, 1992). Storz is stronger on Germany than on the other powers, and explores the relationship between new technology and doctrine. Herrmann also has much to say about tactics, but he then relates this lower level to war plans. For Herrmann arms races are a seamless web, where

capabilities and intentions are linked rather than contrasted, and where changes in doctrine are as important as new technologies.

Stevenson is stronger on Russia than Herrmann, but neither has used Russian archives. John W. Steinberg's chapter in *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War* does, or at least those in the national archives of Finland. His essay on the Russian general staff and the approach of war highlights how unsettled even the broad outlines of pre-1914 military developments in Russia remain. Next to the Balkans, Manchuria provided the most recent available battlefield experience for the armies of 1914, and yet many of what in hindsight would be its most obvious tactical lessons were not digested by the Russians themselves. Steinberg rejects Norman Stone's portrayal of an officer corps divided into two camps, centred on the Grand Duke Nicholas and on Sukhomlinov. But he still regards the role of personalities and of the royal family as important. For Steinberg the significance of the Russo-Japanese war was that it disgraced Kuropatkin, who as minister of war between 1898 and 1904 had improved training standards, not least for the general staff. The conservatives, with the imperial household at their centre, were able to discredit Kuropatkin's reforms, and officer training turned from his focus on operational matters to Dragomirov's on social. The army saw its principal task as that of converting peasants into soldiers. The instruction at the general staff academy put the weight on administration rather than command. Although by 1914 82 per cent of Russia's full generals had received a general staff training, they were little prepared for the exercise of higher command.

The German general staff's fear of Russia from 1912 onwards is itself, therefore, a reflection of the tendency in arms races to elevate quantitative achievements over qualitative. As Herrmann shows, the Germans were as aware as everybody else of the probable weaknesses of the Russian army in the event of major war.⁵ In itself the Russian army had not reached the equivalence which David Stevenson's argument suggests. However, the fact that it aspired to do so enhanced the case for preventive war. If the arms race had a role in causing the war, it lay in its ability to create a sense of definite but temporary advantage. A true equilibrium ought to have stabilized deterrence, not undermined it.

II

Steinberg's essay is a contribution to military history traditionally defined. It is therefore somewhat at odds with the remainder of *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War*, whose editors make clear in their cliché-ridden introduction that they are anxious to get away from the war as an event in the history of international relations. The essays which Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee have assembled are concerned less with the mobilization of armies and more with the mobilization of societies. But, like so many collections, the value of the whole is less than the sum of its parts. None of the chapters is weak, but most of the topics considered – ranging from film censorship to religion, from police control to compulsory savings – are treated for a single country in isolation. Only three contributors – L. L. Farrar, jr, on nationalism, J. H. Morrow on air aces, and J. M. Winter on communities in mourning – address their themes comparatively. To add to the reader's frustrations, misprints are frequent.

The chapter that will be consulted with the greatest regularity is that by Giovanna

⁵ Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, p. 135.

Procacci on Italy's social and economic mobilization. This provides an authoritative and full survey in English of the war's paradoxical effects on its most obvious 'latecomer'. Procacci's use of the term refers not just to the fact that Italy's entry to the war was more obviously the consequence of calculation than that of any of the 1914 'originals'. It also reflects the implications of the war for Italian backwardness: state orders promoted heavy industry, and the capital of all limited companies rose 56 per cent between 1913 and 1918, and that of engineering businesses 252 per cent. Fiat's workforce grew tenfold. None the less the effect of the war was not to unite the government and people, but to divide them. The failure to achieve the objectives of the declaration of London was not the principal reason. More important were food shortages and socialism.

In Italy in 1917, as elsewhere, women were among the first to protest about falling living standards. From the onset of hostilities the departure of the males of military age for the front meant that the burden of production in peasant societies fell even more heavily on to wives and mothers, as well as on to sons and grandfathers. The economic unit, the family, endeavoured to fill the gap created by the army's mobilization. But in its industrializing effects the war also drafted women into munitions production, and they were freer to strike than their male counterparts (because they could not be conscripted) and than other women in other forms of employment (because they were central to the war effort). To that extent the adoption of political activism was evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

The state set out to appease women rather than to provoke them. As J. M. Winter points out, widows' pensions extended the idea of welfare as a right rather than as a privilege. Francesca Lagorio discusses the provision available to women in Italy, and its recipients included unmarried partners as well as wives. In Germany the range of benefits was so extensive that, according to Eve Rosenhaft, it prompted male resentment and even misogyny. In practice, however, a family would have had to be very poor indeed for wartime state welfare to have been anything more than a barrier against destitution. In 1916, Winter states, the widow of a German private received a monthly pension that was at best a quarter of the wage of a skilled worker in 1914; it was of course much less in real terms. Lagorio quotes the guidance issued by the Italian ministry for war relief and pensions to make this policy clear: 'war pensions do not fulfil either the state's duties or those of society: they represent the minimum necessary to live on and must be integrated with subsidiary forms of assistance'.⁶

Susan Kingsley Kent, discussing war and gender in Britain, argues that initially the war refeminized women. Belgium was cast as a woman, the reports of atrocities focused on rapes, and recruiting literature stressed the idea of the soldier as the protector of home and hearth. Most refugees, and Marsha L. Rozenblit discusses the plight of Jews from Galicia and Bukovina fleeing to Austria, were women. In 1914–15 war re-established the notion of separate spheres for the two sexes. But the associations of passivity with women, as recipients and as victims, are doubly inadequate – first because many women acted and reacted, and secondly because war constrained men too. During 1915 women began to make direct contributions to the war effort, as nurses and munitions workers. Those close to the front saw that men were the victims, particularly of wounds but arguably of war more generally. Soldiers themselves performed roles that were traditionally female: they cooked, they cleaned, and they

⁶ Coetzee and Shevin-Coetzee, *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War*, p. 183.

cared for each other. They even cried and succumbed to hysteria, hitherto seen as a specifically female malady.

Thus, if *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War* has a theme, it is that of gender, of sexual difference determined not by biology but by law, culture, and practice. This too is the unifying concept of another somewhat inchoate book, Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the male*.

Bourke has consulted a wide range of extraordinarily diverse material, some of which is used to striking effect in the book's excellent illustrations. She provides telling dissections of many aspects of front-line experience, including mutilation and disability, malingering and shell shock, and male bonding and masculinity. But the male body does not prove a sufficiently robust device with which to give all this unity. It is hard to say what the book as a whole is about. In tackling both the psychological aspects of masculinity and the physical side of maleness it does not deal satisfactorily with either. The extensive discussion of physical education in Britain between 1870 and the 1930s reads as a digression, and is incorporated in a chapter called 'inspecting', which in the context of wartime recruitment means something else. The final chapter, with its punning title 're-membering', has some interesting things to say about mourning and commemoration but also serves to take the book off in yet another direction.

This sense of ill-digestion is confirmed by the frequent slips in the handling of material. Bourke can put her pictures in the wrong context. That meant to illustrate the desertion of individuals (p. 79) refers to South Africa's rebellion at the war's outbreak and its subsequent hesitant commitment to the western front. On the following page, Bourke's text suggests that she has not realized that the figure reclining on a chaise longue and shirking his duty is an officer rather than an other rank. We are introduced to a number of formations that never existed – 11th Border Regiment 97th Infantry Battalion (p. 93), the South African Army Corps (as opposed to brigade, p. 98), the London Household Artillery Company (p. 131 – presumably the Honourable Artillery Company), and the British Royal Army Corps (p. 148). Bourke does not always realize when she is having her leg pulled. She seems to think, for example, that the 33rd battalion Midshire Regiment (Kaiser's Own) really existed (p. 143). And the failure to distinguish fact from fiction leads her to repeat Stephen Graham's second-hand account of an execution in the Scots Guards, and so to misconstrue it as to allege that the sergeant-major at the centre of the story had himself passed the death sentence (p. 97). Finally, otherwise sensible discussions are marred by hyperbole: 'A bomber could decimate his own legs' (p. 83); 'war was murder' (p. 97).

One theme that Bourke does sustain is that of the continuing relationship between home and front. In part this is a corollary of her discussion of masculinity, and its moderation. As one unidentified soldier (although confusingly the footnote refers to a woman) wrote: 'You may get used to seeing wounded men, but not to seeing men wounded'.⁷ Bourke is entirely persuasive in her contention that for most men the war was not a brutalizing experience. The real world remained the world at home not the world at the front. When the war ended most soldiers returned to domesticity. Bourke is careful not to exaggerate what this meant: the household chores which the men undertook were 'manly', gardening and household repairs. But they had learnt patience and they saw marriage less as a rite of passage and more as an ongoing commitment.

⁷ Bourke, *Dismembering the male*, p. 137.

The obvious exceptions to Bourke's generalizations are well known. The Freikorps, the Black and Tans, the Palestine police – these were the routes for those who wanted, metaphorically, to stay at the front. J. H. Morrow's chapter on 'the knights of the air' in *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War* links the aces of the war to sport and to traditional notions of heroism. Fascism's fascination with flight provides a link to those veterans who could not return to domesticity. Leonard Smith, in discussing Barbusse and Dorgelès, suggests two other routes to 'retooling' masculinity – Barbusse in the renewal of his socialism and Dorgelès in his heroization of himself as writer.

Both Bourke's *Dismembering the male* and the essays collected by Coetzee and Shevin-Coetzee serve to support what has now become a clear trend in the historiography of the First World War. The division between front and rear to which the war literature bore testimony needs reworking. The sense of alienation which those returning on leave expressed was a manifestation not of a determination to continue only in the company of men and soldiers, but of a desire for reintegration. Even more than leave, letters were the means that kept the links between dug-out and home in place. John Horne, in his contribution to *Authority, identity and the social history of the Great War*, sees the crisis in French civilian morale in June 1917 as a response to soldiers' reports from the front. Guy Pedroncini's account of the mutinies as a self-contained 'military strike' or Wilhelm Deist's handling of the same theme for the Germans in 1918 look increasingly dated.⁸

Of course there is a danger in swinging too far in the other direction. Procacci provides such a warning. Most Italian civilians remained extraordinarily ignorant of conditions on a front tucked up into the country's north-eastern corner. Leave was not given and many soldiers were illiterate. But exceptions can prove rules. Australia was even further away from the front, and yet its citizens had a grasp on war's realities. Winter uses the evidence of the Australian Red Cross office to show how the search for information about the fates of their relatives meant that families were spared little in terms of detail. Eric Schneider has recently drawn similar conclusions from the files of the British Red Cross.⁹ Both these examples serve to make another point. In the case of the French in 1917 or the Germans in 1918 the connections between front and rear help explain how each could erode the morale of the other. But in the case of Australia and Britain there was no obvious collapse – either at the front or in the rear. Truthful reporting did not, apparently, need to be the enemy of resolve.

III

The fact that the British army escaped a serious mutiny in 1917–18, when the French, Italian, Russian, and – arguably – German armies did not, has long proved a potent magnet for counter-factual analysis. If the 1917 mutinies are to be explained solely in military terms, by reference to poor commanders and deficient disciplinary systems, then there were at least some reasons why the British army ought to have mutinied at the end of 1917. There was little sense of victory after the third battle of Ypres. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson calculate that 110,000 men were lost in October alone, when

⁸ Guy Pedroncini, *Les mutineries de 1917* (Paris, 1967); Wilhelm Deist, 'Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918', in Wolfram Wette, ed., *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: eine Militärgeschichte von unten* (Munich, 1992).

⁹ Eric F. Schneider, 'The British Red Cross wounded and missing enquiry bureau: a case of truth-telling in the Great War', *War in history*, 4 (1997), pp. 296–315.

'normal' monthly 'wastage' was reckoned to be 35,000. On 15 November the commander-in-chief, Douglas Haig, acknowledged to William Robertson, the chief of the imperial general staff, that he might not be able to hold if he was seriously attacked. At the same time the French were demanding that the British take over more of the western front. To some the year 1918 promised defeat; certainly there seemed little prospect of the war's end. Henry Rawlinson, who took over the 2nd army from Plumer at the close of the Passchendaele battle, forecast that, 'we shall have to fight for our lives as we did at first Ypres'.¹⁰

Passchendaele, not least because of the connotations of Easter in its name, carries an emotional baggage probably greater than that of any other battle in British military history, including the Somme. And yet neither was a defeat. Some would claim them as victories. Whether they were pyrrhic is arguable. The casualties at the third battle of Ypres (to give its formal name) were, despite those of October, less than those of the Somme. But the army of 1917 was the nation in arms; it was, unlike that of 1916, a conscript army. Moreover, there was the mud, which made such ground as was gained seem worthless. The debate as to who was responsible has never been satisfactorily resolved, partly because the battle has, amazingly, lacked a proper scholarly account. The composition of the 1917 volumes of the official history presented Sir James Edmonds and his colleagues with more grief than those of any other year.¹¹ Leon Wolff's popular history, *In Flanders fields* (London, 1959) appeared before the records were open, and bore the stamp of indignation more than of reflection. John Terraine's riposte, *The road to Passchendaele: the Flanders offensive of 1917: a study in inevitability* (London, 1977), was a collection of quotations, 'marred' (in the words of Paddy Griffith's idiosyncratic, entertaining, and frequently vicious bibliographical comments) 'by its failure to look lower than Army HQs'.¹² Wolff blamed the generals, and Terraine explained why the generals had no other option.

Until 1986 nobody thought to blame Lloyd George. After all, his memoirs made clear that he preferred to fight the war on other fronts, in Italy if in Europe and in Palestine if not. The 'easterner' versus 'westerner' debates, the 'frocks' versus the 'brass hats', the polarities drawn more clearly after the war than they ever were during it, provided him with protection. But then Trevor Wilson, in his marvellous account of Britain between 1914 and 1918, *The myriad faces of war* (Cambridge, 1986), shifted the focus of the debate. Lloyd George wanted victory in short order. At the beginning of 1917 he was prepared to back a French general, Nivelle, who promised to deliver that on the western front. When Nivelle failed, Lloyd George could hardly deny Haig. In *Passchendaele* Wilson and Robin Prior develop this line of attack. At the vital war policy committee on 11 June 1917 the discussion was, in Wilson and Prior's words, 'random and without consistency': none of the committee's members 'succeeded in offering clear-headed advice leading to a policy different from that proposed by Haig'. The war policy committee did not meet in August or for most of September. When, on the 24th of that month, Lloyd George raised the option of attacking Turkey, he suggested it as something to do in the winter months, when the fighting in Flanders would have to close down. Haig had insisted at the outset of the battle that it could be broken off at any stage; Prior and Wilson say that he was right, and accuse both the prime minister and

¹⁰ Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele*, p. 180.

¹¹ Tim Travers, *The killing ground: the British army, the western front and the emergence of modern warfare, 1900–1918* (London, 1987), ch. 8.

¹² Griffith, *Battle tactics of the western front*, p. 272.

the war cabinet of not exercising that option. In late October the French demand that the British take over more of the line gave them a perfect reason for doing so, but they still did not grasp it.

The comparative failure of the war cabinet to provide coherent strategic direction, and the multiplicity of committees which it spawned, is a theme of David French's essay on civil–military relations in the First World War in *Government and the armed forces in Britain*. Like John Turner, French sees the key steps in the evolution of cabinet government as occurring in 1915 under Asquith; 'the Lloyd George war cabinet was only a marginal improvement on its successor'. It increasingly became a supervisory body, with important decisions being taken elsewhere. Such consistency as there was came from its secretary, Maurice Hankey.

Perhaps, therefore, Prior and Wilson overestimate Lloyd George's hold on power in 1917. They imply that he could exercise a choice. But he was not the leader of his own party, and he was dependent on the support of the Conservatives. His decision to back Nivelle could have proved politically far more costly than it did. The subordination of the British army to the French high command alienated the king. Although David French stresses that the monarch had no influence when it mattered, George V was close to Haig. Moreover, after the Nivelle affair, both Haig and Robertson enjoyed renewed Conservative support. The significance of Passchendaele for the government of the country was that it dented the Conservatives' faith in the generals and it split the Haig–Robertson axis. At the outset of the battle Robertson was not as bullish as Haig. At its end, the German counter-attack at Cambrai confirmed his fears: it suggested that GHQ's intelligence estimates of incipient German collapse were exaggerated, and that the War Office's more cautious assessments (which Haig had pooh-poohed) were right. Robertson was the dominant figure in British strategy between late 1915 and early 1918, but he did not enjoy the command authority that would be vouchsafed his Second World War equivalent, Alan Brooke. With Haig unwilling to protect Robertson, Lloyd George was able to isolate and dominate the commander-in-chief. David French is surely right to see 1918, rather than 1917, as the year in which Lloyd George's control of policy direction was established on more secure foundations.

Prior and Wilson do not just push the blame for the third battle of Ypres up the command chain; they also send it downwards. Previous accounts have tended to portray Plumer, who had responsibility for the key stages of the later battle, as a soldier's soldier; a man who staged his advances according to the limitations of his artillery. Paddy Griffith, in *Battle tactics of the western front*, states that casualties fell from 32,000 in the three days starting on 31 July 1917 to 36,000 a week in Plumer's phase of the attack.¹³ The implication is that in choosing Gough to lead off the offensive, Haig backed the wrong army commander. He did so because, like Haig, Gough was a cavalryman, setting distant objectives in his desire to find a means of breaking through the enemy's lines. Prior and Wilson, in defence of Gough, point out that his 5th army headquarters was only established in June 1917, giving him little time to prepare his attack. They accept that, in aiming to gain 4,000 to 5,000 yards, Gough was being unrealistic, but point out that such an advance would still have been far short of breakthrough. Prior and Wilson concede that in August Gough was guilty of pushing ahead with offensives that were ill-prepared, which failed to establish artillery supremacy, and which took scant account of the sensible advice being proffered by

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Haig's director of operations, Sir John Davidson. When they failed, Gough, rather than acknowledge these imperfections, blamed the courage and resolution of his infantry. But, Prior and Wilson go on, Plumer was not much better. For a start he supported Gough. His more limited advances were not as tactically effective as appearances suggested. Since they failed to reach the German gun-line, they did little to erode the enemy's defences. They seemed to be successful because their ambitions were so restricted, and the losses they incurred per square mile gained were actually greater. Contrary to legend, neither Plumer nor Gough counselled the closing down of the battle in October.

However much Lloyd George on the one hand, and Gough and Plumer on the other, must take their share of responsibility, Haig remains at the fulcrum. He chose the area of operations, and he backed breakthrough over attrition. Both Paddy Griffith and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson are agreed that Haig's relationship with his army commanders left much to be desired. Prior and Wilson attribute the delay between the Messines battle and the launching of the third battle of Ypres proper to Haig's vacillation, not least over who was to command his armies. Both Plumer and Rawlinson favoured limited and staged attacks. At the Somme, as Griffith points out, Haig had restricted Rawlinson's role by introducing Gough's reserve army. At third Ypres, the commander-in-chief did much the same thing, playing one army commander off against the other, taking the credit when it was available, and passing the blame when it was not.

Prior and Wilson's exculpation of Haig is therefore relative rather than absolute. Its account of British decision-making in relation to the battle is judicious and definitive. But *Passchendaele* is still not a full account of the third battle of Ypres. It suffers from a defect common throughout military history, the tendency to write from the perspective of one side only. All the primary source material is British. The only German published account cited is *Flanders 1917*, Beumelburg's contribution to the variable series, *Schlachten des Weltkrieges*. The relevant volume of *Der Weltkrieg* is cited only via a translation in the Royal Artillery Institution library, and so unfamiliar are the key German memoirs that Lossberg regularly becomes Lossburg.

Bibliographies can be almost as emotive as texts themselves. Paddy Griffith prefaces his with an appendix on 'some limitations in the university approach to military history', a couple of pages which owe more to his own experiences of Oxford in the 1960s than to the current academic state of the subject. Like that of Prior and Wilson, his understanding of German tactics is largely derived from the writings of Timothy Lupfer and G. C. Wynne, although unlike Prior and Wilson he has also read Bruce Gudmundsson and Martin Samuels on the subject. From these he sets up an Aunt Sally, in the shape of a perfected system of German tactics, which earlier writers have argued the British failed to match. Griffith sets out to show that the British army was ahead of the German in its tactical evolution, and, thus, implicitly if not explicitly, to explain how it bounced back from moral defeat in 1917 to victory in 1918. In doing so, he frequently eschews the sort of balance which characterizes the judgements of Prior and Wilson, but he contributes much on tactics that they neglect. In particular he provides a corrective to their emphasis on artillery.

Griffith (rightly) admires Prior's and Wilson's *Command on the western front* (Oxford, 1992), as well as that truly pioneering text, Shelford Bidwell's and Dominick Graham's *Fire-power* (London, 1982). These works showed that by 1918 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was able virtually to guarantee a limited victory provided its artillery

preparation was right. This was a triumph for applied science (in the shape of signalling, sound ranging, aerial observation, meteorology, cartography, and surveying) and of mass production (in the shape of heavy artillery and high explosive); it was also the fruit of a systematic approach to the development and implementation of tactics. The key was to recognize the limitations of what has now been dubbed 'the deep battle'¹⁴ (in anticipation of Soviet operational doctrine in the 1930s and afterwards). Break-in and even break-through could not yet, in the conditions of 1918, become break-out. As Griffith points out, the tank of 1918 was designed for the first phase; the cavalry still remained the arm best adapted for the third.

The contrast with the tactics of the German army, at least in the version provided by the recent English-language literature, was that the Germans' answer to the conundrums of trench warfare was built more around the infantry. They reunited fire and movement by giving the infantry section its own integrated firepower. Griffith, in discussing the distribution and use of grenades, heavy and light machine-guns, trench mortars, and gas, makes similar points for the British. But he goes further. He says that Britain had developed infiltration tactics, bypassing strong points and thrusting deep into the enemy's positions, by May 1916. He also points out that infiltration tactics were not the all-embracing solution which the German victories of late March 1918 suggested.

German stormtroopers could not bypass a strong and continuous defence. Moreover, even if the enemy's positions left gaps, they frequently did so precisely in order to create fire zones, by taking the passing attack in the flank and rear. Griffith attributes the Germans' success on 21 March less to tactical innovation than to low-lying mist and to the incompleteness of the British 5th army's defensive systems.

Two issues arise here. The first is one of chronology. Any discussion of the evolution either of the artillery battle or of the infantry's response to the trench stalemate has to begin in 1915 – whether the country at issue is Britain or Germany. Britain prepared its artillery-dominated battle from that year, and Willy Rohr began his experiments with stormtroopers at much the same time. The second is whether the British were as self-knowing in relation to their flexible infantry formations as Griffith implies. Was innovation the product of design (as it seems to have been in the German army, at least by 1917–18) or of accident? Griffith's discussion of lines, 'blobs', and waves as infantry formations is enormously illuminating. Lines, used by the British at the Somme and determined thereafter by the infantry's need to stay close to the creeping barrage, incurred casualties in the supports and reserves, as the latter concentrated in forward positions under enemy artillery fire. 'Blobs' could produce bunching in crossing no man's land and so prove similarly vulnerable. But the patterns of infantry formation actually adopted by the British, at least until the summer of 1918, seem to have been the product of ad hoc creations. Each division had enormous latitude, with GHQ as reluctant to assert itself in tactical terms as Haig was in operational. Maxse was not made inspector of training until after his own failure on 21 March 1918 as commander of XVIII corps necessitated his removal. Griffith's argument that Maxse denigrated what had gone before in order to elevate his own contribution may well be true, but the idea that the British army had a coherent tactical doctrine from 1916 onwards remains unproven on the basis of the evidence which he gives here.

His sources are the SS (Stationery Services) series of pamphlets produced and printed

¹⁴ Jonathan Bailey, 'The First World War and the birth of the modern style of warfare', Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, *Occasional paper*, no. 22, 1996.

by GHQ for the armies in France. Many of these provide abundant evidence of enlightenment and progress, but we do not know who read them, nor how they were applied. Training was the principal means of disseminating doctrine, but we still know too little about how this was organized before Maxse's appointment. Individual divisions undoubtedly put some of the ideas into practice; indeed their successes may have been fed back into further publications. But Prior and Wilson's own analysis of Rawlinson's career in *Command on the western front* shows the difficulty in translating sound concepts into sustainable systems. Rawlinson's tactical notes for the 4th army of May 1916 are a key document in Griffith's case, but Prior and Wilson argue that Rawlinson did not stick to his own ideas with any consistency until 1918.

The argument that the BEF was getting it right by 1916, and that the evidence of progress gained and lessons learnt is to be found at Arras in April 1917, has to cope with the massive stumbling block of the third battle of Ypres. Here again, weather can explain a great deal. The evolution in the artillery was vitiated by rain and low cloud; there was no firm foundation on which or from which to move or fire the guns, and aerial observation was continually impeded. But this was a case either for stopping or (to follow Griffith) for maximizing the infantry's own firepower: neither happened, or at least not sufficiently to make a difference.

Prior's and Wilson's own answer is that the BEF indeed had no option but to attack on the western front. However, in doing so, it had to set itself limited objectives – something which Haig, and probably Lloyd George, seemed congenitally incapable of doing. In other words tactical realities had to shape strategic objectives. But the difficulty here, as the German failure in the spring of 1918 demonstrated, was that tactical successes could become ends in themselves, devoid of strategic coherence. The ability to launch a successful offensive depended on the enemy's willingness to be attacked, and that assumed that he held something worthy of his defence. In February 1917 the German supreme command abandoned the Somme battlefield because it did not meet this criterion. It held the high ground around Ypres because it did. The railway junction at Roulers and the channel ports were worthwhile objectives, whose loss would unhinge Germany's defence of the western front. Limited offensives could only be fought where big gains were on offer, and that fact was in itself an invitation to seek breakthrough. Attrition was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. 'Bite and hold' and breakthrough were not alternatives, but concepts which existed in relationship to each other.

The key variable was time. How long should a limited offensive be sustained in order to pursue a major objective? Hindsight provides easy answers to that sort of question. The irony of the wrong-headedness of Haig's determination in 1917 is that it was justified in 1918 – when few serious strategists expected victory before 1919. This does not make Haig right. The tactical effectiveness which the BEF had achieved by the time of the 'hundred days' had developed from the bottom up rather than the top down. Moreover, Gough had gone, GHQ had been purged, Robertson had been replaced by Henry Wilson, and Haig himself had been subordinated to Foch. None of these changes was necessarily congenial to the commander-in-chief, for all that he acquiesced in, and even implemented, them. But the fact that they were not does not in itself permit us to conclude that the sources of ultimate victory lie elsewhere, with Lloyd George and the war cabinet.

Britain's strategic direction of the war did not come off the rails for two reasons. First, the legacy of the committee of imperial defence, for all that it was in 'suspended

animation' for the duration of the war, enthroned the ideal of civil–military cooperation at the level of what we would now call grand strategy. At bottom Robertson accepted this. Secondly, Lloyd George and Haig, despite their differences of temperament and method, shared objectives that were more convergent than either could readily admit. Britain's civil–military relations may have been fraught in the First World War, but they achieved greater coherence and better balance than did those of any other belligerent.

The evolution to full integration none the less proved slow. The essays by David Boren and Adrian Smith in *Government and the armed forces in Britain* see the process as only completed by Margaret Thatcher and Michael Heseltine between 1979 and 1984. The immediate response to the First World War, as William J. Philpott shows, was the veneration of both the committee of imperial defence and the war cabinet, and the rejection of their alternative, a ministry of defence: this was Hankey's legacy. In the Second World War Churchill, wittily discussed by Alex Danchev, set Hankey's precepts to one side, and divided and ruled his generals and the three services with as much brio as Lloyd George. He was more overtly successful than his predecessor partly for reasons of personality and background, but principally because of Alan Brooke's discretion and determination. *Government and the armed forces in Britain* celebrates a success story – the continued subordination of the services to political control. But its very chronological span, a century and a half, is testimony to the slow pace of change in British governmental institutions, even under the hard hand of world war and global responsibility.

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