

## NOT WAR AS WE KNEW IT

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### *The U-Boat Menace and War in Africa*

D. [David Lloyd George] also saw Gen. Haig, & had a very serious talk with him. He made it quite plain that the time had come when he was going to assert himself, & if necessary let the public know the truth about the soldiers & their strategy.

—Diary of Frances Stevenson, November 5, 1917

ALLIED battlefield frustrations in 1917 led to the creation of new forms of civilian control over the war effort. Before 1917, Allied generals had largely been able to argue that, given their specialized knowledge, they, and only they, could make the military decisions necessary to obtain victory. After the bloodletting of 1915–1916 and the tremendous defeats of 1917, however, the generals lost the monopoly of military decision-making that they had theretofore possessed. In Britain and France, and to a lesser extent in Italy as well, civilians came to share important roles with the military and even began to have an effect on the formerly military preserves of operations and strategy. Although the growth of civilian authority created friction between the “frocks” (politicians) and the “brass hats” (generals), it allowed for the expertise of the civilians to complement that of the military. The result was a dynamic, if occasionally confrontational, relationship that helped the Allies win the war.

In Germany, no such system developed. Instead, the military came to assume greater and greater power over all elements of German society. By late 1917, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had become virtual dictators over Germany and the lands under German occupation. Intelligent and industrious civilians such as Wal-

ter Rathenau, head of the War Materials Department, saw their influence fade. The kaiser played little real role in governing Germany, becoming more of a figurehead as the war developed. In July 1917 Hindenburg and Ludendorff neutralized the office of chancellor as well, when they forced the resignation of influential Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. In his place the two generals chose the pliable Georg Michaelis, a commoner whom the kaiser did not even know. Michaelis thus assumed the chancellorship, "a post," one scholar noted, "to which his subservience to Ludendorff was his only qualification."<sup>1</sup> Germany had become a military dictatorship in everything but name.

The German system, moreover, relied on principles that proved ill suited to the rigors of modern warfare. The first cracks in the German political organization became apparent as early as the period of mobilization. The kaiser had demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of the needs of mobilization and the nature of modern warfare. As the war continued, it became increasingly apparent to the German elite that only the military really understood the issues facing wartime Germany. The German parliament, the Reichstag, was weak; even before the war, it had held significantly less power than its western European counterparts. During the war, it played only a minor role in directing German war efforts. With no other institution capable of controlling the reins of power, the German military, specifically the army, stepped in.

The democratic British and French systems, by contrast, had a flexibility and adaptability that allowed them to change with circumstances. At the outset of the war, both governments yielded much of their authority to the generals. By 1916, however, parliaments in both nations had begun to reassert control, forming committees to oversee various aspects of the war and creating entirely new governmental agencies to solve specific problems. The British creation of a ministry of munitions proved to be especially important, ameliorating the serious problems caused by the shell

crisis and providing British soldiers with the weapons they needed. Civilians such as Sir Eric Geddes in Britain and Albert Thomas in France played critical roles in reorganizing governmental and economic structures to better serve the needs of the war.

#### THE GOAT AND THE TIGER

The most important changes came at the highest executive level. Britain's David Lloyd George (named prime minister in December 1916) and France's Georges Clemenceau (named prime minister in November 1917) provided powerful, energetic civilian leadership that was virtually absent in Germany. Both men held the portfolio of their nation's ministry of war as well, giving them legal authority over the military. Unlike most of their predecessors, these two men did not hesitate to use that power. They remained determined to see the war to its finish, reordering their nations for the total war that had emerged by 1917. Their leadership, controversial at times, became a critical factor in the eventual triumph of the Allies.

Both men had abiding adversarial relationships with their nation's senior military leaders. Lloyd George's opposition to the Boer War, advocacy of Irish Home Rule, and support for increased spending on domestic programs set him at odds with the military in the years before the war. His political background in Welsh mining communities led him to develop to a deep suspicion of the British elite. Known as "the goat" to his detractors, Lloyd George popularized the term "Establishment" as a pejorative. He saw Britain's generals, including Haig, as representatives of the Establishment, wasting the lives of the working-class men under their care.

Similarly Clemenceau, nicknamed "the tiger" for his tenacious and combative political style, had been a vigorous opponent of French army leadership during the infamous Dreyfus Affair. At the height of the scandal, he played a leading role in exposing the

French army's cover-up of evidence that would have cleared Jewish Alsatian Captain Alfred Dreyfus of the charges of espionage that had sent him to the notorious prison on Devil's Island. Clemenceau saw most generals as too conservative, too Catholic (Clemenceau was a leader of the French anticlerical movement), and too unimaginative. He supported an all-out effort to win the war, but he offered scathing criticism of French military leaders, especially Joffre. Unlike many French politicians, Clemenceau was not intimidated by soldiers and was not afraid to take them to task in public if he deemed it necessary to the national defense.

Their suspicions about their own militaries notwithstanding, both prime ministers were ardent patriots and firm supporters of national defense. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1909 Lloyd George consistently found the money to meet and exceed German appropriations during the naval arms race of the prewar years. He was one of the first government officials to understand that the war would last years, not months, and would require a massive change to the Asquith government's "business as usual" philosophy. Clemenceau was the last surviving member of the 1871 National Assembly that had voted to cede Alsace and Lorraine to Germany as a price for ending the Franco-Prussian War. Clemenceau had voted with the minority against the measure, preferring to fight on, whatever the cost. He had played a key role in uniting French public opinion against the kaiser's efforts to increase German influence in Morocco in 1911 and had stood with the army in supporting the 1913 extension of universal service from two years to three.

Perhaps most important, neither man held military officials or military operations inviolate. "War," Clemenceau often said, "is too important a business to be left to generals." Both men had their own ideas about how the war should be waged and did not shirk from making their views known. Clemenceau had been a journalist during the American Civil War and mayor of the Montmartre section of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War and

the Paris Commune. He believed that he had seen more of war than most of the generals had. He frequently reminded them that he held the constitutional responsibility for national defense and, even at age seventy-six, he insisted on going to the front line on an almost weekly basis, talking to the men of both the British and French armies to get their views unfiltered by the military chain of command and earning the soldiers' respect by entering positions so far forward that he occasionally came under fire.

Despite their controversial political postures and their often unpopular decisions, Lloyd George and Clemenceau were the men for the hour. British General Charles Grant thought Lloyd George had an air of "unsavoury intrigue," but noted that this trait could be forgiven "if the ends justify the means." Lloyd George, Grant knew, enjoyed tremendous popularity among the British rank and file. "Soldiers who did nothing but abuse Lloyd George in 1912 or 1913," Grant wrote to his father-in-law, "now look upon him as the saviour of his country, a part I imagine he is not unwilling to play."<sup>2</sup> Another British general noted that after the "muddle of the Asquith government, it was time a strong man should rule the country and all felt that in Lloyd George we had the right man."<sup>3</sup> Neither of these generals would likely have supported Lloyd George before 1914; the national emergency of the war, however, led them to overlook partisan and personal preferences in the name of the needs of the nation.

Clemenceau might have had more domestic political enemies than any politician in Europe. Over the years he had been responsible for bringing down one French cabinet after another. Like Lloyd George, however, he had charisma and the leadership skills to make people forget their grievances in the face of a national crisis. In words strikingly reminiscent of those of Winston Churchill twenty-two years later, Clemenceau told the French people during the crisis of spring 1918 that even the loss of Paris would not force France out of the war. "After Paris, we will fight on the Loire; after the Loire, on the Garonne, and after the Garonne, in the Pyre-

nees; finally, if there is no more earth, we will fight on the water.<sup>34</sup> His most famous speech came in the French parliament in March 1918 in response to a pacifist proposal to end the war:

The first importance is freedom. The second is war. Therefore we must sacrifice everything to the war in order to assure the triumph of France. . . . You want peace? Me, too. It would be criminal to have any other thought. But it is not by bleating the word "Peace" that one can silence Prussian militarism. . . . My formula is the same everywhere. Domestic politics? I make war. Foreign affairs? I make war. I always make war.<sup>5</sup>

Although both Lloyd George and Clemenceau made mistakes, their strategic judgment proved to be no worse than that of most of their generals. Both men were ardent nationalists and saw the alliance as primarily a means to serve state and national interests. They enjoyed a cordial professional relationship, although they disagreed on many issues, especially on matters pertaining to their visions of the postwar peace. Still, together they energized the British and French governments, maintained morale by demonstrating their determination to see the war to a successful finish, and formed important linkages between the allied nations. The goat and the tiger thus ensured the viability of their nations and played critical roles in the final victory.

Informed by their shared suspicion of Allied generals, Lloyd George and Clemenceau worked together to create an overarching governing body to run the war. The Italian disaster at Caporetto and the dispatch of British and French troops to stop the resulting Italian collapse underscored the need for some sort of inter-Allied organizing body. Lloyd George took the lead in planning a meeting at the Italian city of Rapallo in November 1917 to discuss the formation of such a body. The Rapallo meeting resulted in the formation of a Supreme War Council with inter-Allied committees to govern finance, food, munitions, transportation, and naval (particularly antisubmarine) warfare. Its official mission was to

“watch over the general conduct of the War” and to prepare “recommendations for the decisions of the Governments.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, the Supreme War Council would serve as an alternative to the French and British general staffs, which both Lloyd George and Clemenceau distrusted.

The real goal of the Supreme War Council, therefore, was to re-establish civilian control over the military by creating a body above the traditional general staffs. The Supreme War Council included the head of government, one other politician, and a Permanent Military Representative from Britain, France, the United States, and Italy. Politicians thereby outnumbered generals by two to one. Lloyd George and Clemenceau naturally selected their nation’s political representative from among their most trusted political allies. The generals were on the Supreme War Council to provide advice on “technical matters” only.

Haig and Pétain, occupied with the daily needs of running their armies, had no direct voice on the Supreme War Council, which met far from the front lines at Versailles. As Permanent Military Representative for France, Clemenceau chose the French army’s chief of staff, Ferdinand Foch, a man whose personality and temperament had often set him at odds with Pétain. Clemenceau quickly moved to ensure that Foch would not play a major role in the Supreme War Council. Upon Foch’s first contribution to the Supreme War Council’s deliberations, Clemenceau leaned toward him and said, “Be quiet. I am the representative of France.”<sup>77</sup> Lloyd George moved in a similar direction. He chose Field Marshal Henry Wilson as Britain’s Permanent Military Representative, a man who had heavily criticized both Haig and the British general staff. Haig had expected Lloyd George to name Haig’s close ally, William Robertson; the appointment of Wilson thereby isolated Haig from the deliberations of the Supreme War Council—as, of course, Lloyd George had intended.

The generals of the Supreme War Council, however, had no intention of sitting idle while politicians decided their fate. Wil-

son and Foch were old friends and had been discussing possible Franco-British wartime cooperation for more than a decade. Both men agreed on the need for greater coordination between the French and British armies. They also agreed on the importance of creating a general reserve of men from all of the Allied nations, to be dispatched to any point where their presence was needed, either to hold off a German attack or to reinforce an Allied one. The concept received the Supreme War Council's approval, but both Haig and Pétain vigorously opposed the idea. Haig had even threatened to resign if troops under his command were placed under the general reserve and commanded by anyone but him. As a result, the general reserve existed only on paper.

Wilson and Lloyd George also used the Supreme War Council to argue for a redirection of Allied efforts away from the western front. Both men believed that greater results might be obtained by forcing a decision against Turkey or by pressing through the Balkans against the dying Austro-Hungarian empire. Wilson had concluded that the Germans would attack east toward the Black Sea in 1918 before attacking in France, an idea that Haig called "laughable but for the seriousness of it."<sup>8</sup> Foch, whose own intelligence reports suggested that the Germans were preparing a massive western front operation for 1918, agreed with Haig and staunchly opposed any operations outside of France. The Americans, who were not officially at war with the Ottoman Empire, also opposed any eastern operations.

Although the Supreme War Council created much acrimony and demonstrated the fault lines between nations and between frocks and brass hats, it served several important roles. Even though they disagreed more often than not, the various national representatives had a chance to work through their divergence and toward compromise. The Supreme War Council also helped to initiate the Americans into the complex issues of running a multinational war on a massive scale. America's delegation was led by President Wilson's most trusted adviser, Edward House, and the United



States Army's intelligent and capable chief of staff, General Tasker Howard Bliss. The Supreme War Council thus gave the Europeans and the Americans a chance to get to know each other and to work on joint solutions to common problems.

The Supreme War Council represented a step toward the creation of a single Allied war effort, although Haig and others argued that this particular step might have been worse than none at all. The true value of the Supreme War Council became obvious in spring 1918, when the German offensive Foch and others had foreseen began. The personal relationships that had developed and the professional discussions that had taken place in the meetings of the Supreme War Council laid the groundwork that allowed the Allies to meet the challenge of German offensive as a single entity. It also allowed the United States to integrate itself rapidly into the Allied war effort, despite continued disagreements over the exact role the Americans should play.

#### BREAKING THE SUBMARINE MENACE

Before the Americans could hope to play a decisive role on the battlefield, the Allied navies had to find a way to neutralize the German submarine threat. In the third quarter of 1916, the German navy had sunk 600,000 tons of Allied shipping; the Allies and the Americans together had built only 450,000 tons of merchant shipping in that same period. Sinkings of Allied shipping rose dramatically as German submarine officers became more aggressive at the end of 1916. Allied shipping losses for the first quarter of 1917 climbed to 1.65 million tons while new construction only rose to 600,000 tons. On February 1, 1917, the Germans officially resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, leading Allied shipping losses to reach a wartime high of 2.2 million tons in the second quarter of 1917.

The admirals may have overstated the seriousness of the U-boat menace to Allied war efforts, but given the need to transport

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

*Germany's prosecution of unrestricted submarine warfare caused supply problems for the Allies, but it also led to American belligerency. Despite the claims of some of its senior leaders, the German U-boat fleet could not stop the Americans from arriving in France at the rate of as many as 20,000 men per day. (National Archives)*

American soldiers safely across the Atlantic, their concern was understandable. The American naval mission to Great Britain had been following the problem for months before American belligerency. Upon American entry into the war, American Admiral William Sims asked British Admiral John Jellicoe what solution could solve the U-boat problem. "Absolutely none that we can see now," Jellicoe replied.<sup>9</sup> Jellicoe grew increasingly despondent about Britain's chances to survive past November 1917 if the submarine menace did not end quickly. Great Britain's near-total dependence on secure shipping lanes for food, fuel, and raw materials concerned him even more than the need to secure the safe transportation of American troopships across the Atlantic.

Fortunately for Jellicoe and the Allied war effort, Sims had

a solution. He urged the British to adopt the convoy system, whereby merchant vessels were, as the system's name implied, escorted across the ocean by warships to protect them from submarines. The British had considered convoys for years, but the system posed several problems. Ships traveling in convoy obviously moved at the same speed, limiting the entire convoy to the speed of the slowest ship. Once they arrived at a port en masse, they overwhelmed the unloading and docking facilities, meaning that some ships were forced to sit idle with their needed, and sometimes perishable, cargo on board while other ships unloaded. Most important, the pride and strength of the Royal Navy was in its battleships, and most of them were too slow for escort duties.

Sims worked with the Allied Naval Council, an arm of the Supreme War Council, to solve all of these problems. He dedicated America's fleet of destroyers to escort missions. Fast and powerful enough to deal with submarines, the destroyers proved to be reliable escort vessels. Sims and the Allied navies then created convoys in three speeds to accommodate different types of vessels and to ease port congestion. By May 1918 the Allies had gained enough faith in the Canadian-born Sims to name him commander of all Allied escort and antisubmarine vessels in European waters. The system produced immediate results. During an experimental convoy in the last two weeks of May, losses of merchant vessels on the Gibraltar-to-Britain route (normally 33 percent when unescorted) fell to just 1.5 percent when escorted. The experiment convinced the remaining doubters and led to the immediate use of convoys on a larger scale.

The escort system grew increasingly complex as its experimental success led naval leaders to dedicate more resources to it. Large convoys included as many as fifty merchant ships and troop transports escorted by one cruiser, six destroyers, eleven trawlers, two torpedo boats, and aerial balloons to look for the telltale wakes caused by submarine periscopes. Eventually, eight separate escort stations were developed in far-flung places: Hampton Roads, Vir-

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*Despite an inconsistent performance at Jutland, Admiral David Beatty replaced John Jellicoe as commander of the Grand Fleet. Along with American Admiral William Sims, he endorsed the convoy system that protected Allied shipping and helped to end the submarine menace.*  
(Imperial War Museum, Q19570)

ginia; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Panama; Rio de Janeiro; Murmansk; Port Said; Gibraltar; and Dakar.<sup>10</sup> Better than almost any other single factor, the convoy system reveals the truly global nature of World War I.

Working closely with Jellicoe, Grand Fleet Commander Admiral David Beatty, and the French naval staff, Sims used these bases to extend the convoy system across the entire Atlantic Ocean. From the high of 2.2 million tons lost in the second quarter of 1917, shipping losses for the third quarter fell for the first time in a year to 1.5 million tons. In the fourth quarter they fell again, to 1.24 million tons and again the following quarter to 1.1 million tons. In the spring of 1918 Allied shipbuilding exceeded losses for the first time since early 1915. Between the time of the first convoy and the signing of the armistice, allied navies escorted 88,000 ships across the Atlantic and lost just 436. Of the 1.1 million American soldiers sent across the Atlantic, only 637 were lost to German submarines.

Offensive warfare against submarines matured as well. By 1916, the British had developed and deployed the first successful depth charge. Destroyers equipped with depth-charge projectors could lay down a ring of charges set to different depths. If one of the charges exploded within forty feet of a submarine, it would damage the vessel; if the charge exploded within fifteen feet it would destroy its target. Depth charges accounted for twenty-eight U-boat sinkings, more than any other cause for sinkings between 1916 and 1918. The mere presence of destroyers laden with depth charges often sufficed to keep a submarine harmlessly submerged. The British also worked on a system (known as asdic to the British and sonar to the Americans) to make depth charges more accurate by determining the depth and bearing of an enemy craft. The system, not operational until 1919, had no significant outcome on the antisubmarine campaign of World War I, but had a critical effect on that of World War II.

Allied efforts did not end the German U-boat problem, but

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the print version of this title.]

*The American declaration of war provided a morale boost to the French and British, but the Americans had to turn their desire to fight into an ability to fight. These American soldiers keep a watch for U-boats during their crossing of the Atlantic. (United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)*

they succeeded in keeping losses to a manageable level. Allied mastery of the war at sea meant that the German underwater blockade had been broken while the Allied surface blockade of Germany continued, effectively shutting off all imports from overseas and adding to the misery of the German people. Jellicoe's fears of Britain being starved out before the end of November faded as quickly as German Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff's pledge to the kaiser in January 1917 that the U-boats could assure that "not one American will land on the continent."<sup>11</sup> Two planks of German strategy, starving Britain and stopping the Americans from landing in force in Europe, had thus failed.

So had a third plank, that of inciting a rebellion in Ireland.

The First World War began at a critical time for British-Irish relations. In the weeks before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the controversy over Irish Home Rule had assumed center stage in British politics. Home Rule would transfer domestic Irish governance to the Irish parliament based in Dublin. Upon the implementation of Home Rule, the Dublin parliament would have control over Ulster as well, where the majority of the population were Protestants. Home Rule would thus give effective control over all of Ireland to Irish Catholics, although foreign affairs and military policy would continue to be governed from London. As a compromise solution it had much to recommend it, mostly because it offered the best hope of heading off another round of violence.

Many Irish nationalists saw Home Rule as the first logical and peaceful step on the road toward total independence from England. For this reason, Ulster unionists, including many of the army's most senior generals, feared that Home Rule would lead to the beginning of bloody reprisals against Ireland's Protestant population and, eventually, the end of a Protestant presence in Ireland. In order to resist what they often derided as "Rome Rule," Protestant groups, many with close ties to the army, began to arm themselves. These groups, known as the Ulster Volunteers, were illegal, but had tremendous sympathy among the Protestant population as a whole and among many people in key governmental positions.

John French, Hubert Gough, and Henry Wilson were among those generals of Anglo-Irish stock who saw Home Rule as dangerous. Other senior generals, while not Anglo-Irish, saw Home Rule as an ominous omen for the future of the British Empire. Gough and Wilson made it clear to the government that Home Rule could create a potential powder keg if the government asked Anglo-Irish officers to disarm their fellow Protestants in order to give power to Catholics.

A Home Rule bill had already passed Parliament in 1913 and

was scheduled to go into effect in June 1914. In April 1914 Gough, then commander of a cavalry brigade at Curragh barracks in County Kildare, announced to his officers that he would resign if the government ordered him north into Ulster to disarm the Ulster Volunteers. Fifty-eight of his brigade's seventy officers agreed to stand with him. Gough's younger brother was then serving as Haig's chief of staff. He told Haig that he would resign if his brother did. The "Curragh mutiny" sent shock waves through the British army. Haig warned the government that any attempt to punish Gough for his actions might be met with massive resignations across the British officer corps. The king, furious over the incident, nevertheless urged Parliament to suspend Home Rule pending further investigation.

The July crisis and the start of World War I pushed Irish issues to the back burner. The war temporarily rallied Irish opinion to British colors as Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, volunteered for the British army. The Irish nationalist group Sinn Fein initially supported Catholic participation in the war in the hope that the British government would see Ireland as an ally and therefore be more inclined to enact Home Rule once the war had ended. A number of Irishmen, however, saw the war not as a chance to be granted Home Rule by a reluctant government in London, but to seize independence with their own hands. Led by Roger Casement, Irish separatists raised money among the Irish community in the United States, gathered arms, and opened up channels of communications to Germany.

Like the 1917 insertion of Lenin into Russia, Germany hoped to insert Casement into Ireland at a time when such a move might produce important results. Inciting a rebellion in Ireland promised many benefits. A rebellion could tie down thousands of British soldiers and deny Britain the services of thousands more Irish volunteers. It might also serve as a source of inspiration to nationalists across the British Empire, most notably in India. Given the tensions of the Curragh mutiny, a rebellion in Ireland might also



set the British army's senior leaders in opposition to their own government. The Germans therefore pledged support and weapons to Irish nationalists. In April 1916 British warships captured a German ship laden with arms destined for Ireland, raising British concern about a rebellion.

Two other events in 1916 added fuel to the already tense situation in Ireland. Early in the year, the British government granted a more limited version of Home Rule to the Dublin parliament, but did not extend that rule to Ulster. Sensing that they had been betrayed, Irish nationalists saw the move as the beginning of a permanent division of their island and reacted with anger. Shortly thereafter, Britain introduced conscription to meet the enormous manpower needs of Haig's attrition strategy. While Irish nationalists acquiesced in the voluntary service of Irishmen into the British army, they were aghast at the prospect of the British government's compelling such service. Britain did not attempt to conscript men from southern Ireland until 1918, but the introduction of conscription elsewhere nevertheless increased tensions dramatically.

These issues came to a head in April 1916, when police arrested Casement and two others after they were discovered landing in Ireland with the assistance of a German U-boat. Casement claimed that he had had grown disenchanted with the Germans and was coming to warn the authorities of the German plan to foment rebellion. The British naturally suspected him of treachery and presumed that a German-induced rebellion was imminent. The British army began preparations to meet such a rebellion in force. Three days later, on April 24, Irish nationalists seized the Dublin General Post Office and declared Ireland independent of the British Empire. Already on alert, British units responded in force, clearing Dublin block by block and using gunfire from riverboats to destroy nationalist strongpoints. The British quickly executed the rebellion's leaders by firing squad. By August, they had tried, convicted, and hanged Casement as well.